



Ukraine Insider, Part 3

Russia against Ukraine on the Informational Front: Channels, Narratives and Ukrainian Lessons for Counteraction

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This article was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.



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Summary and key points of the article:

- The Russian propaganda machine accelerated its attacks on the Ukrainian informational environment already in 2014, aiming to dehumanize the Ukrainians and present them as “fascists”, who pose a threat to the world.
- Pro-Kremlin politicians and other influential individuals in Ukraine collaborated with Moscow in manipulating the media especially before the full-scale war of 2022. Russian disinformation focused in particular on sowing tension among the different ethnic groups in Ukraine, including the Bulgarian diaspora.
- Russia creates an information vacuum and media isolation in the occupied Ukrainian territories.
- Russian propaganda about Ukraine in the West continues to deploy local agents of influence, cultural centers, intensifies disinformation on social media and invents new false narratives targeting Ukrainian refugees, the Ukrainian nuclear energy sector, the export of grain.
- Ukraine has successfully resisted Russian disinformation through a plethora of legislative and educational initiatives for building media literacy and active communication policy on the part of the authorities.
- Ukrainians’ trust in official institutions, as well as fellow citizens, has risen significantly since the start of the 2022 war.

For observers of Russian disinformation, the large-scale attack of the Russian Federation (RF) against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was no surprise. Kremlin propaganda had for many years created a demonic image of Ukraine, and it was only a matter of time before the “peacemaker”-Russia would “do the world a favor” and “save” it from the “Nazi,” “artificially created failed state.”

The active phase of the information war against Ukraine began with Vladimir Putin’s rise to power. But he did not have to invent anything radically new – active measures carried out through the media were widely used already during Soviet times as a way to amplify influence and realize the interests of the regime. The same patterns of distortion, manipulation, ridicule, exaggeration, use of euphemisms and dissemination of outright falsehoods formerly utilized by the USSR are still present today. The Kremlin has also consistently taken advantage of liberal Western values, such as the promotion of free speech, and has pushed the narratives it needs in the form of an “alternative point of view”. One new tool that was unknown in the USSR and is widely used by the current Putin regime, are social media networks, which provide unlimited opportunities for the dissemination of the most absurd theories, uncritically accepted and shared by a multimillion audience.

This article presents the main Russian channels, methods and messages for influencing the Ukrainian, as well as Western media environment aimed at distorting perceptions of Russian aggression. It also analyzes Kyiv’s progress and experience in a number of areas – such as media education and legislative initiatives, in the fight against Kremlin disinformation.

The Russian informational attack against Ukraine before and after 2022

During the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, and especially during the occupation of Crimea, Ukrainians felt upon themselves the deluge of Russian propaganda. The information space of the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Western countries started to be flooded with unverified reports of Russian and pro-Russian media, which wrote about an “unconstitutional coup in Ukraine”, that a “junta” had come to power, the revolution was carried out through the incitement of the US and the EU, the country was a “training ground for terrorists”, there are “American laboratories” on its territory where “dangerous biological weapons are being developed” and its nuclear power plants “could lead to a new Chernobyl”.¹

The main purpose of these messages was to dehumanize Ukraine and Ukrainians, to create an impression of emergency around the “Ukrainian crisis” and a sense of imminent danger coming from Ukraine. Russian propaganda makes use of values-based and ethical inversion that attempts to frame

¹ Fedchenko, Y., 2016. [‘Kremlin Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures by Other Means’](#), *Estonian Journal of Military Studies*, Vol. 2, 2016, pp. 140–169

images and perceptions in such a way that the criminal is presented as the victim and the victim is accused of non-existent crimes.²

As a counterpoint to the “Nazi Ukraine” ruled by a “junta”, propagandists impart pride on the Russian Federation, which “helps fraternal peoples”, “defends/liberates”, “the Russian army is noble and peace-keeping”, and Russian weapons are “unique/impressive”. No less important are the narratives of Kremlin propaganda, whose aim is to reinforce Moscow’s so-called “civilizing mission” – to protect the “Russian world” (the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics) from “genocide” and the world from the “brown plague of Nazism”.

The report *Putin. War*,³ produced by the Russian opposition, explains why it was important for the Kremlin to use the fascist narrative to justify its attack on Ukraine: for many years Russian propaganda paid exclusive attention to the Great Patriotic War, and Putin made this theme central to his own ideological system. New traditions were created – such as wearing the ribbon of St. George (which commemorate the victims of World War II) and the Immortal Regiment procession. The rhetoric of the war years began to be projected onto current political events. The Ukrainian authorities were thus presented as “Banderites” and “Nazis”, and Russia found itself engaged in the same struggle as in 1941-45 – the fight against the fascists, the report says.

StopFake⁴ has highlighted the main disseminators of Russian propaganda against Ukraine. The largest number of fake news stories was generated by the Russian Defense Ministry’s media holding company Zvezda (79 stories), with the Ukraine.ru website in second place (73 stories) and the RIA Novosti news agency in third place (62 stories). Among the sources of a large number of fake news are also the TV channel Rossiya 24 (48 materials), RT (38 materials), LIFE (38 materials), NTV (32 materials), the news agency TASS (31 materials), Lenta.ru (30 materials), First Channel (25 materials), Komsomolskaya Pravda (20 materials). The study found that Russian propaganda is purposefully disseminated through a wide network of media, including both Russian state news agencies (RIA Novosti, TASS) and TV channels (Rossiya 24, RT), as well as private media (LIFE, NTV, etc.); both television and print (e.g. Komsomolskaya Pravda, Izvestiya), and online media (Lenta.ru, Vzglyad.ru, etc.).

² Polulyakh, O., 2022. , ‘[От „да се унищожат нацистите“ до „да се унищожат украинството“: как се промени кремълската пропаганда за два месеца война](#)’ (‘From “to destroy the Nazis” to “to destroy Ukrainianness”: how Kremlin propaganda has changed in two months of war’, *Stopfake*, 3 May 2022).

³ Nemtsov, V. 2015. ‘[«Задача оппозиции сейчас — просвещение и правда. А правда в том, что Путин — это война и кризис»](#)’, в Яшин, И., Шорина, О., (редактори), 2015, *Путин. Война* (‘The task of the opposition now is enlightenment and truth. And the truth is that Putin is war and crisis,’ in Yashin, I., Shorina, O., (eds.), *Putin. War*, 2015)

⁴ Orlova, D., Makar, O. Romaniuk, V., Zhdanova, M., ‘[Фейковете, които проектът StopFake опроверга през 2014-2017: наративи и източници](#)’ (‘The fakes that the Stopfake project debunked in 2014-2017: narratives and sources,’ *Stopfake*, 20 September 2018)

In 2020, StopFake⁵ also conducted a thematic analysis of the fakes during the presidential election. The research shows that **Ukrainian opposition channels linked to pro-Kremlin politician Viktor Medvedchuk implemented an agenda in line with Russian propaganda.**

The main narratives they disseminated pursued the goal of presenting Ukraine as a poor country that was rapidly approaching total ruin, with the main cause of “widespread poverty” being the Ukrainian government itself. The most frequently repeated narrative was that “Ukraine has been brought to complete decline, all reforms have failed”, which was accompanied by various emotionally charged falsehoods, e.g. “many Ukrainians are committing suicide because of poverty and hunger”, “people will soon be eating dogs”, “people have no money to buy bread and salt”, “Ukrainians are fleeing the country because of poverty”. Interestingly, the Russian invasion and war were not mentioned in these narratives, and the Russian Federation was referred to only in such contexts: “Ukraine is heavily dependent on Russia”, “Ukraine will not be able to cope without Russia”, “Ukraine must negotiate with Russia”. Other fake narratives disseminated by opposition channels aimed to legitimize the annexation of Crimea and promoted the idea that Russia was not an aggressor – “Russia has not attacked Ukraine”, “Crimea is not occupied”.

In 2020, these opposition channels, which for years carried out the Russian agenda, were among the four most popular TV channels in Ukraine,⁶ but in February 2021 they were closed down after their formal owner, Taras Kozak, was accused of financing terrorism.⁷ After the start of the full-scale war, the real owner of the channels, Viktor Medvedchuk, was arrested and subsequently handed over to the Russian Federation in exchange for 200 Ukrainian prisoners of war.

An insider’s view of the activities of the pro-Kremlin propaganda machine in Ukraine was obtained by the fact that **Ukrainian hackers managed to gain access to the email correspondence of one of the curators of the Ukrainian media arm of the Kremlin – Sargis Mirzakhian.** The correspondence spans the years 2014-2017 and demonstrates how propagandists manipulated Ukrainian public opinion, created or took control of local separatist organizations, created news stories and placed them in Ukrainian and later Russian media.⁸ Mirzakhian is responsible for cooperating with the Kremlin’s Western backers and has been involved in projects for the

⁵ Grinko, A., 2019. [‘Тематика фейков во времена президентских выборов: Как гибридная война меняет повестку украинского телевидения’](#) (‘The subject of fakes during the presidential elections: How hybrid war changes the agenda of Ukrainian television’, *Stopfake*, 21 February 2021)

⁶ Dankova, N., 2021 [‘«Детектор телерейтингов»: хто став №1 у 2020 році? \(ВИПРАВЛЄНО\)’](#) (“‘Telering detector”: who became #1 in 2020? (FIXED)’, *Detektor Media*, 19 January 2021)

⁷ Zubchenko, Y., 2021. [‘Напіврозпад Медведчука. Як тричі за рік закривали канали кума Путіна’](#) (‘Half-life of Medvedchuk. How the channels of Putin’s godfather were closed three times a year’, *Detektor Media*, 29 December 2021)

⁸ Schur, M., 2020, [‘Пропагандисти Кремля використовують українські ЗМІ у боротьбі з Україною – експерти’](#) (‘Kremlin propagandists use Ukrainian mass media in the fight against Ukraine – experts’, *Radio Liberty*, 19 December 2020)

federalization of Ukraine, for example, promoting the idea of the autonomization of the Zakarpattia region along ethnic lines. The leaked correspondence shows that as far back as the Maidan, Mirzakhaniyan was promoting the launch and funding of media and public projects in Ukraine that would form a narrative favorable to the Kremlin in the information space. Among the messages that Kremlin propagandists deployed were the impeachment of then Ukrainian President Poroshenko, restoration of economic ties with the Russian Federation, accusations of the ostensible suppression of freedom of speech, of the Russian language, of the rights of Polish, Hungarian and other minorities, persecution of the opposition.

The many years of subversive Russian propaganda in Ukraine bore fruit, and **a few months before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, sociological agencies registered extremely low confidence in the Ukrainian authorities.** A survey conducted by Razumkov Center from July 29 to August 4, 2021, reported an extremely low level of trust – 76% of respondents said they did not trust the state apparatus (officials), 75% of interviewees did not trust the Ukrainian parliament (Verkhovna Rada), 74% did not trust the courts and the judiciary as a whole, 72% did not trust the Ukrainian government, and the same percentage did not trust political parties. The incumbent President Zelensky was trusted by only 33% of respondents, while 61% did not have confidence in him. It should be noted that in the presidential elections of 2019, 73% of voters supported Volodymyr Zelensky. Among state and public institutions, the most trusted were the Armed Forces of Ukraine (68% of respondents registered trust in them), voluntary organizations (64%), the Church (63.5%).⁹

Russian propaganda has also tried to incite discord between different ethnic groups in Ukraine.

For example, for the Bulgarian audience in Ukraine and in Bulgaria, the Kremlin propaganda disseminates the narratives that “the Bulgarian language is banned in Ukraine”,¹⁰ “Bulgarian monuments are desecrated”, and “representatives of the Bulgarian minority are mistreated because of their national origin”. Vivid and memorable pictures are created, for example, in Odessa and the Odessa region as staged protests were organized by people posing as Bulgarians.

The Security Service of Ukraine has revealed that the same people, following the Kremlin’s instructions, have been organizing provocations in different regions of Ukraine. The propagandists do not cease in their attempts to drive a wedge between Ukraine and its allies by artificially creating

⁹ Razumkov Center, 2021. ‘[Довіра до інститутів суспільства та політиків, електоральні орієнтації громадян України \(липень–серпень 2021 р.\)](#)’ (‘Trust in the institutions of society and politicians, electoral orientations of citizens of Ukraine (July–August 2021)’), 10 August 2021)

¹⁰ Stopfake, 2019, ‘[Фейковете на български медии за езиковия закон в Украйна](#)’ (‘Bulgarian media fakes about the language law in Ukraine’, 23 May 2019)

inter-ethnic conflicts and speculating on the suppression of national minorities.¹¹ **The main goal of the Russian Federation in such cases is to destabilize the socio-political situation in Ukraine and discredit the Ukrainian authorities in the eyes of the world.** During the first days of the Russian invasion, the Bulgarian segment of social media networks actively shared the disinformation that Bulgarians were among the victims of the burnt down House of Trade Unions in Odessa. Although this fake has been repeatedly refuted,¹² it still circulates among social media users with the main message being that because of this crime against a Bulgarian, Ukrainians do not deserve compassion and help.

Since the start of the war, Telegram's popularity as a convenient tool for receiving news has increased dramatically. Therefore, it was no surprise that Russian propaganda actively began to use this platform, especially because of the ability to work anonymously. Ukraine's Security Service has continuously drawn attention to the network of Telegram channels,¹³ which, under the guise of "Ukrainian" sources, spread Kremlin disinformation and wage an aggressive information war against Ukraine. Among them are such frequently cited "Ukrainian" channels as Legitimny, Resident, Sheptun, Politikniy raspklad, Anatoly Sharyy, Dnipro live and others. No less dangerous are Telegram channels such as NachShtaba, whose main target audience are military circles – servicemen, reservists and people interested in military topics. Fake Russian-language Telegram channels, including the 14th ombr Prince Roman the Great¹⁴ and the 93rd brigade Kholodniy Yar were also created. **These and similar channels masquerade as Ukrainian, but regularly promote propaganda narratives** aimed at demoralizing Ukraine's defenders, diluting the image of the enemy, and directing discontent and rage at Kyiv's military-political leadership.

In addition, **there is an information vacuum, particularly in the occupied territories.** Among the first things the occupiers do is to shut down Ukrainian TV channels, the network of mobile operators, and internet providers. Access to all Ukrainian sources of information is cut off, the information space is isolated and filled exclusively with propaganda.

In an article from August 2022, the New York Times describes how the Russian Federation imposes censorship in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.¹⁵ The Russian authorities are routing

¹¹ Dym, N., 2017, '[СБУ викрила ще одну спробу влаштувати фейковий національний протест через Дульського, тепер в Одесі. ВІДЕО](#)' ('The SBU exposed another attempt to organize a fake national protest through Dul'skyi, now in Odesa. VIDEO,' *Novynarnia*, 19 April 2017)

¹² Kirkova, M., 2022. '[Няма доказателства за убити българи в сблъсъците в Одеса на 2 май 2014 г.](#)' (There is no evidence of Bulgarians killed in the clashes in Odessa on May 2, 2014,' *Mediapool*, 21 April 2022)

¹³ <https://t.me/SBUkr/3958>

¹⁴ Ukrinform, 2022, '[У Телеграмі з'явився фейковий канал бригади ЗСУ імені князя Романа Великого](#)' ('A fake channel of the ZSU brigade named after Prince Roman the Great appeared in Telegram', 29 March 2022)

¹⁵ Satariano, A., 2022, '[How Russia Took Over Ukraine's Internet in Occupied Territories](#)', *The New York Times*, 9 August 2022.

mobile and internet data from Kherson through Russian networks, blocking access to Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, as well as Ukrainian news sites and other sources of independent information. They then shut down Ukrainian mobile networks, forcing Kherson residents to use Russian mobile service providers.

What is happening in Kherson is playing out in other parts of Russian-occupied Ukraine. Ukrainians in these regions only have access to Russian state television and radio. Digital tactics put these Ukrainian regions in the grip of a vast digital censorship and surveillance apparatus, with Russia able to track web traffic and digital communications, spread propaganda, and manage what news reaches the people, the US publication noted.

But the limitations on the internet are not new – the key infrastructure was built years ago. **In 2014, after the Russian Federation occupied Crimea, a submarine cable and other infrastructure was laid across the Kerch Strait to redirect internet traffic from Crimea to Russia.** In some Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine, digital censorship is even more severe than in Russia, as Google, YouTube and messaging app Viber are blocked.

Russian authorities require Ukrainians to have a passport to buy a SIM card with a Russian phone number. This makes it easier for Russian troops to track people and their mobile devices, including location and internet browsing. According to reports from another occupied city, Berdyansk, local residents can be fined for reading “Kyiv regime media”. Such threats sound, for example, on the radio. In Zaporizhzhia region, the invaders search Ukrainians’ phones to find out which information sources they subscribe to; Ukrainian channels are subject to fines, and repeated “violations” lead to criminal liability.¹⁶

Russian propaganda about Ukraine in the West

After the start of the full-scale war, a number of countries banned the broadcasting of the main mouthpieces of Russian propaganda such as RT, Sputnik and others. Social networks have restricted the distribution of their material and flagged them as a “Russian state publication” or a publisher that Facebook believes is fully or partially under the editorial control of the Russian government. But these measures are not enough to reduce the influence of Russian propaganda in the EU. Russian propagandists continue to be frequent guests on many European political shows, and discredited Russian news agencies are increasing their presence on social media.

¹⁶ Lozovenko, T., 2022, ‘[Россияне наказывают за подписку на украинские СМИ жителей оккупированных территорий](#)’ (‘Russians punish residents of occupied territories for subscribing to Ukrainian media,’ *Ukrainskaya Pravda*, 27 October 2022)

There has also been a serious increase in the quotation of Russian news sources in foreign media. One explanation for this exponential growth in citations is the notorious search for alternative opinions when reporting on the Russian-Ukrainian war. The balance of opinion in practice looks like this: military events in Ukraine are presented a) from the point of view of the victim – Ukraine and b) the aggressor – the Russian Federation, and then the summary follows: “the two sides blame each other”. But this balance is artificial, because **the statements of officials of a country with an authoritarian and tyrannical regime can hardly be considered a point of view in democratic journalism.**

In parallel, the Kremlin’s main agents of influence in the West remain far-right and far-left political forces, influencers and opinion leaders – journalists, academics, politicians, experts, various trade unionists and Kremlin-fuelled “world peace campaigners”, as well as Russians who no longer live in Russia but are involved in disseminating disinformation that amplifies Kremlin narratives in the West. **Russian cultural centers are active in many countries, inculcating ideas of “Russian world”.** They repeat word for word the current narratives of Russian propaganda, for example that culture is beyond politics. Before the full-scale war, they were not perceived as a threat, although Russia became increasingly aggressive in instilling ideas of the Russian world after the Orange Revolution in 2004 and especially after the Maidan in 2013-2014.

Social networks remain the main platform for waging information warfare. After the war began, access to Twitter,¹⁷ Facebook and Instagram¹⁸ was banned on the order of the Russian Prosecutor General’s Office, but a vast network of both real users and trolls was deployed on the foreign segment of social networks to conduct special information operations, disseminating pro-Kremlin narratives. Moreover, a few days after the invasion, pseudo-fact-checking projects began to appear en masse on the Russian-language segment of social media – ostensibly to combat Ukrainian propaganda, but in fact to manipulate and deny the facts of Russian military war crimes in Ukraine. Such projects as the “War on Fakes” or the “Graveyard of Fakes” have enjoyed success among foreign audiences – some of their “debunked myths” have gained popularity and spread in many languages.

On the basis of these channels of influence in the West, Russian propaganda builds new narratives about Ukraine or pulls old ones out of the archives. **The new narratives, which the Kremlin propaganda is actively introducing into the information space of democratic countries, are directed against Ukrainian refugees and Western military aid to Ukraine.** It was a great surprise

¹⁷ Interfax, 2022, ‘[Роскомнадзор сообщил о блокировке Twitter в России](#)’ (‘Roskomnadzor announced the blocking of Twitter in Russia,’ 4 March 2022)

¹⁸ RIA Novosti, 2022, ‘[Роскомнадзор заблокирует Instagram в России в полночь 14 марта](#)’ (‘Roskomnadzor will block Instagram in Russia at midnight on March 14,’ 11 March 2022)

to Russia how hospitably Ukrainians fleeing war and destruction were received. Russian propaganda has tried to change the situation by disseminating various, often brutal, fake stories to discredit the Ukrainian refugees. They were portrayed as extremely dangerous – as carriers of AIDS and other contagious diseases, the women were involved in prostitution, they were ungrateful, rude, living on someone else’s back, while the governments of the countries that took them in paid no attention to their own citizens, the men were capable of extreme radical actions, and as a warm-up they painted swastikas everywhere.

Another narrative that was actively exploited by Kremlin propaganda was that of Western weapons exports being destroyed by the Russian military 24 hours after arriving on Ukrainian territory, and those that survived ending up on the black market. And the weapons weren’t going to change the situation at all, they were only going to delay the defeat of Ukraine/peaceful settlement of the conflict.

Another fear of the Western audience, which the Kremlin propaganda has exploited, is related to **the safety of Ukrainian nuclear energy**. Russia has long sought to discredit the Ukrainian energy system. The story dates back to the 2000s and intensified in 2014-2016, which was linked to Ukraine’s transition to Westinghouse’s US fuel. The Russian Federation claimed that Ukrainian nuclear power plants could not switch to this fuel as they were designed specifically for Russian fuel. The view was also enforced that the Ukrainian nuclear power system was in a terrible state, posing a danger to the world. Now the perception is being formed that seizing the nuclear power plants is not an occupation, but a salvation for the world. Putin is still using the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant as a trump card to blackmail Western societies, which have not yet forgotten the Chernobyl disaster.

The full-scale Russian offensive has led to a worsening of the world food crisis, but the Russian Federation has never admitted that it is the one to blame. **Russia turned grain into a weapon** to blackmail Western countries into lifting sanctions against it, peddling the narratives that “factors beyond the control of Russian policy have led to the sharp rise in food prices”, “the world’s grain and fertilizer supplies have been disrupted because of Western sanctions against the Russian Federation”, “Western sanctions are directed against the Russian agricultural sector in order to undermine the Russian economy”, “Russia is not destroying Ukraine’s agricultural potential and its agricultural infrastructure”, “Ukraine places mines around its ports and blocks commercial ships”.¹⁹

After the first Ukrainian grain ship left the port of Odessa on 1 August, the Kremlin continued to use the issue of food supplies for its propaganda purposes. The Kremlin’s latest manipulation to discredit the Istanbul Accords, which allowed Ukrainian ports to be unblocked for grain exports across the

¹⁹ Stopfake, 2022, “[Развенчаваме митовете на Европейския съюз“: как руското МВНР отново си измисля фейкове – този път за продоволствената криза](#)” (“Debunking the myths of the European Union”: How the Russian MFA is making up fakes again – this time about the food crisis’, 23 June 2022)

Black Sea, was that Ukrainian ships were primarily going to Western ports rather than African countries in need.²⁰

Bucha and the Russian propaganda machine

Perhaps the most cynical and brutal crime, which mobilized all the resources of the Russian propaganda machine – media, social networks, Western pro-Kremlin agents and opinion leaders, **were the atrocities of the Russian army in the town of Bucha.** We have also witnessed the emergence of a new Russian propaganda narrative that Ukraine was conducting a large-scale propaganda effort to discredit Russia. The Kremlin has tried in every way to deny the accusations of war crimes committed on Ukrainian territory. To this end, methods such as diluting the truth and cynical denial were used. Multiple interpretations of an event are disseminated in the information space so that the information consumer comes to the conclusion that “not everything is clear-cut”. By disseminating numerous false messages, propagandists undermine the credibility of the true facts about the atrocities that Russian soldiers have committed and continue to commit in Ukraine.

After the world was rocked on April 3, 2022, by photos and videos from the just-liberated city of Bucha in the Kyiv region, dozens of fake news reports²¹ emerged that the victims of the Russian invasion of Ukraine were actors, and the scenes of violence relayed by the dozens of foreign correspondents from Bucha were staged. Various “experts” explained that the real corpses did not lie like that or smell like that, that the dummies flinched, smoked cigarettes because they did not know they were being filmed, and that the murdered men failed to remove the white rags on their hands when the “Nazis” entered the town. **Parallels were drawn with other, in the opinion of Russian propagandists, supposedly staged events** – “the tactics of video staging ceased to surprise me back in Syria, where the decision was made to launch massive missile strikes based on the White Helmets’ set-ups”, wrote Russian propagandist Alexander Kotz.²²

Frenchman Adrian Boquet was further involved in the campaign to try to rectify the reputation of the Russian army. Adrian Boquet’s candidacy may have seemed to the Kremlin quite suitable for such anti-Ukrainian campaigns – a former French military man with considerable credibility in France who became almost a national hero after publishing a book²³ about his recovery from a serious injury. Adrian Boquet confidently stated on various French media that he personally observed war crimes committed by the Ukrainian army during his time in Ukraine while on a humanitarian mission. The

²⁰ Stopfake, 2022, ‘[Манипуляция: Украинского зърно се изнася „на Запад, а не в нуждаещите се африкански страни“](#)’ (‘Manipulation: Ukrainian grain is exported “to the West, not to needy African countries”,’ 15 August 2022)

²¹ Stopfake, 2022, ‘[Фейк: Тела убитых российскими солдатами мирных жителей — манекены или статисты](#)’ (‘Fake: The bodies of civilians killed by Russian soldiers are dummies or extras,’ 10 April 2022)

²² <https://t.me/sashakots/30759>

²³ Bocquet, A., Wessels, M. 2022, ‘[Lève-toi et marche ! Grâce à la science](#)’ (‘Get up and walk! Thanks to science’)

details he shared about his stay and what he saw in Bucha were confused and contradicted the objective chronology of what had happened in the city in April, and his recollections contained clear signs of Russian propaganda clichés. Boquest said that the crimes in Bucha were not committed by the Russian occupiers at all, but were war crimes of the Azov regiment. American journalists who were in the city with him supposedly shot staged videos, even the Ukrainian military itself used the dead bodies of civilians to stage the Bucha massacre. With his narratives, Adrian Boquet tried to convince the French that Russia was forced to go to war only because of the real threat to the Donbass from the Ukrainian “Nazis” and the Ukrainian authorities, who have been exterminating the pro-Russian population of the region for the past eight years.

An investigation by StopFake,²⁴ and then by the French publication Liberation,²⁵ found that Boquet had never been to Bucha. Moreover, French journalists proved that Bocquet is a pathological liar who even invented his military career. The French Air Force told the media that Adrian Bocquet was actually wounded during marksmanship training, so he failed to complete it and never joined the Air Force.²⁶ But even after these compromising facts about Boquet came to light, Russian propaganda did not give up on him and continued to use him to discredit Ukraine and the Ukrainian armed forces. Stories featuring him appeared on the main Russian propaganda show Vremya several more times – in May,²⁷ and in June,²⁸ in which he recounted new “facts” from his “stay in Bucha”.²⁹

In parallel with the dissemination of dozens of different disinformation messages, **Russian diplomats began to paint an image of Russia as a victim on social networks**. They began to write en masse about the global Russophobia that was being stoked by the West in a coordinated way against the backdrop of the “special operation they were forced to launch”. It should be noted that Russia operates a Twitter bot network³⁰ which has significantly boosted the “Stop hating Russians” campaign launched by the accounts of Russian diplomatic representatives.

²⁴ Stopfake, 2022, ‘[Как француз Адриан Боке «отбеливает» российские преступления в Буче](#)’ (‘How the Frenchman Adrian Boke “whitens” Russian crimes in Bucha,’ 14 May 2022)

²⁵ Horn, A., 2022, ‘[Les affabulations d’Adrien Bocquet, ex-militaire français revenu d’Ukraine](#)’ (‘The fabrications of Adrien Bocquet, a former French soldier who returned from Ukraine,’ *Libération*, 24 May 2022)

²⁶ Horn, A., 2022, ‘[L’ex-soldat Adrien Bocquet a aussi menti sur son passé militaire](#)’ (‘Ex-soldier Adrien Bocquet also lied about his military past,’ *Libération*, 7 June 2022)

²⁷ Knyazeva, O., 2022, ‘[Французский писатель, который три недели провел на Украине, пытается рассказать европейцам, что творят неонацисты и о чем молчат западные СМИ](#)’ (‘A French writer who spent three weeks in Ukraine is trying to tell the Europeans what neo-Nazis are doing and what the Western media is silent about,’ *ITV*, 11 May 2022)

²⁸ 1TV, 2022, ‘[Французский волонтер Адриан Боке в Москве рассказал о том, что сам видел на Украине](#)’ (‘French volunteer Adrien Bocquet told in Moscow what he himself had seen in Ukraine’)

²⁹ Stopfake, 2022, ‘[Француз Адриан Боке прибыл в Москву с новой порцией фейков для «Первого канала»](#)’ (‘Frenchman Adrien Boquest arrived in Moscow with a new portion of fakes for Channel One,’ 10 June 2022)

³⁰ Clayton, J., 2022, ‘[How Kremlin accounts manipulate Twitter](#)’, *BBC*, 19 March 2022

Ukraine against Russian disinformation

How are Ukrainians coping with the challenge of the Russian information war? The information front in Ukraine is well developed at the level of society, state and legislative and educational initiatives. Over the past eight years, following the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, many campaigns and projects have emerged to counter Russian disinformation. **Several projects exist to verify and refute Kremlin disinformation, the oldest being StopFake**, established on 2 March 2014. Olha Yurkova, one of the project's founders, recalls³¹ that it was on this day that the “little green men” appeared in Crimea and the Russian media produced an incredible amount of fake news about Ukraine. Olha's friends, with whom she studied together at the Mohyla School of Journalism (MSJ), started thinking about how they could counter this. They got together for a discussion, which resulted in a website disproving fakes through verified information. Among the founders of StopFake are faculty, alumni, and students from MSJ.

StopFake engages in monitoring research and studies the methods of propaganda influence not only in Ukraine, but also in other countries and regions, primarily in the European Union and countries of the former Soviet Union. The journalists gather a base of irrefutable evidence of the existence of a sophisticated Russian disinformation campaign and place the question of Russian disinformation on the European agenda. It was StopFake that was one of the prototypes for the creation of the East StratCom Task Force, the European Union's fact-checking initiative.

In recent years, one of the most important components of the project's work has been **media literacy training** and the development of media competences among journalists, civil society activists, school and university teachers, and even politicians. In 2018, StopFake joined the international organization IREX's project “Learn and Differentiate: Information Media Literacy”.³² The program aims to integrate elements of media literacy into subjects such as history, Ukrainian language and literature, and fine arts to build critical thinking skills and media literacy among secondary school students in Ukraine to counter the influence of disinformation and propaganda. As of early 2021, the project involved 654 schools and around 3,000 teachers and continues to attract and train new teachers to raise a new generation of Ukrainians who will successfully navigate the modern information space.³³

³¹ Stopfake, 2019, ‘[StopFake на 5 години: Еволюция на борбата срещу руската пропаганда в Украйна](#)’ (‘StopFake at 5 years: Evolution of the fight against Russian propaganda in Ukraine,’ 24 March 2019)

³² Stopfake, 2018, ‘[StopFake поможет школьникам изучать медиаграмотность](#)’ (‘StopFake will help students learn media literacy,’ 4 February 2018)

³³ Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2021, ‘[Стартував конкурсний відбір для вчителів у проєкті «Вивчай та розрізняй: інфо-медійна грамотність»](#)’ (‘The competitive selection for teachers in the “Study and discern: info-media literacy” project has started)

Not only teachers, but also **citizens who want to develop their media literacy skills can take various online courses**, for example Fact Check: Trust – Verify,³⁴ and Very Verified by EdEra,³⁵ Media Literacy for Educators by Prometheus.³⁶ The courses provide a foundation for awareness and understanding of all the key media literacy items and skills that everyone needs.

The importance of using information from credible sources is being constantly reminded of in Ukraine through a variety of channels. For example, on the music channel M the messages are being aired “Don’t be fooled by fakes. Trust verified sources”, followed by the names of various official institutions and a QR code with a link to their website that can be scanned.

In addition to the calls to use credible sources of information, the country’s military leadership has also appealed to journalists and residents of the country to **maintain information silence**. Later, it became a requirement – not to photograph or show the places where missiles or artillery shells hit, as such photos or videos can give the Russians the information they need to plan their further actions. The media and official institutions have agreed to respect the embargo: twelve hours for strikes on military targets, three hours for civilian targets.³⁷

The media, bloggers and all citizens were also asked not to write the names of the military units, as well as their location, the number of weapons and equipment, the planned operations, the tactics and methods of action of the military units, unverified information about casualties and deaths – information that, again, could be used by the enemy.

President Zelensky is a constant source of information for the Ukrainians. Every day he records addresses in different formats and in different places – in his office, on the street outside the presidency, or against the backdrop of construction equipment after a massive missile attack on the capital. He has repeatedly visited the front line, on the spot presenting awards to the military, for example for the liberation of Izyum. The main message in the Ukrainian president’s addresses to his fellow citizens is “we are holding on and winning”.

One of the results of the war is that **Ukrainians are starting to trust each other more**. At the end of 2022, 63% of Ukrainians said they trust people in general, up from 45% in October 2021, according to a survey by Gradus Research company.³⁸ Twice as many Ukrainians compared to last year trust the residents of their locality (up from 35% to 62%). Two-thirds of citizens (67%) trust neighbors and

³⁴ Educational Era, [Фактчек: довіряй-перевіряй](#) (Factcheck: trust-check)

³⁵ Educational Era, [VERIFIED: онлайн-курс з медіаграмотності](#) (VERIFIED: online media literacy course)

³⁶ Prometheus, [Медіаграмотність для освітян](#) (Media literacy for educators)

³⁷ Bryzh, E., 2022, ‘[Краще втратити трафік, але не зашкодити Україні. Медійники про «прильоти» в прямому ефірі](#)’ (‘It is better to lose traffic, but not to harm Ukraine. Media people about “arrivals” live,’ *Detektor Media*, 1 November 2022)

³⁸ Texty, 2022, ‘[Українці почали більше довіряти одне одному під час війни – опитування](#)’ (‘Ukrainians began to trust each other more during the war – survey,’ 20 July 2022)

people living nearby. A whole 80% of respondents declared that they trust people they know. The data on the high level of Ukrainians' involvement in helping their fellow citizens, the army and the state also testify to the growing level of trust in society. 43% of respondents have responded to calls for help on social networks, 39% have transferred money to charity funds, and about a third of citizens have given money and help to strangers.

Another opinion poll conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in cooperation with the Razumkov Center's polling agency in August 2022 showed a rise in Ukrainians' confidence in state institutions and in the president, with the Armed Forces of Ukraine retaining the most support. At the same time, Ukrainians continue to distrust the Verkhovna Rada, the Cabinet of Ministers, the courts, the prosecutor's office, banks, etc.³⁹

These results highlight the consolidation process in Ukrainian society, both in terms of increasing confidence in official institutions and building strong horizontal ties between fellow citizens, and in terms of improving the information environment based on greater transparency and media literacy. Russian aggression has intensified Ukrainian initiatives to combat Russian propaganda, which can serve as an example to the rest of the world.

³⁹ Дум, Н., 2022, '[Лідером довіри українців залишаються ЗСУ. Рятувальники й Нацгвардія потіснили волонтерів та церкву. СОЦІОПИТУВАННЯ](#)' ('The Armed Forces of Ukraine remain the leader of Ukrainians' trust. The rescuers and the National Guard crowded out the volunteers and the church. SOCIAL INTERVIEW,' *Novynarnia*, 19 September 2022)