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How to Stop Disinformation
Lessons from Ukraine for the Wider World

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Information war and next-generation propaganda are among the most important challenges facing the world today. They manifest themselves in different forms in different places. Among them are the far right's deliberate spread of conspiracy thinking in the US and Europe; China's use of disinformation to extend its power in the South China Sea; and the online activities of violent extremists such as ISIS. The challenges are far different from those of the Cold War. Thanks to the globalisation of information, media and messages move easily across borders and into smartphones. Movements and interests join and separate in constantly shifting trans-border alliances, making talk of "offence" and "defence" outdated. Inside democracies, the continued rise of political PR and candidates who reinvent reality at whim has led some commentators to claim we are living in a 'post-fact' world.

Ukraine has been at the cutting edge of these challenges since Russia's annexation of Crimea, described by the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO as the greatest "information blitzkrieg" in history. Domestically, Ukraine's information space is deeply distorted by oligarch-controlled media with scant respect for accuracy or objectivity. What can we learn from Ukraine's responses? Did any of the strategies created in Ukraine succeed? Did others backfire? This paper looks at Ukraine as a laboratory of information war, examining initiatives undertaken by the government, media, and civil society and seeking to identify techniques that can help other democracies counter new forms of disinformation.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Tactical Aims: Direct Confrontation of Disinformation

During the Cold War, government agencies such as the US Interagency Working Group on Active Measures swiftly analysed and rebutted Kremlin disinformation. What should today's approach involve?

» **Government and multinational bodies to step up their strategic communication activities:** The EU and other such bodies need to give timely responses to disinformation and to provide fact-based narratives. Both the EU and NATO have begun, modestly, to co-ordinate their responses to information attacks. A similar US initiative, perhaps an inter-agency co-ordinating body, should be welcomed. However, governments will never be wholly trusted as messengers. To become more effective, they will have to work in an open and transparent way with information activists, civil society, and media.

» **An OCCRP/Global Witness to combat disinformation:** The Panama Papers leak shows that an international consortium of journalists and activists can be extremely effective in confronting international corruption. A similar approach is needed in combating contemporary disinformation campaigns and active measures. Instead of sporadic and disjointed research,

we need international, linked investigations and campaigns which seek to understand how the Kremlin's "soft power" toolkit fits into Moscow's broader strategic aims.

» **Targeted myth-busting:** Myth-busting and fact-checking have to be targeted at relevant audiences, media, and policy-makers. Current efforts rarely have a clear aim. International myth-busting projects need to be united and co-ordinated for maximum impact. They should be aimed at informing policy debates and correcting mainstream media inaccuracies. Broader "lecture tours" on Kremlin or other forms of disinformation can be aimed at educating important audiences such as international journalists.

» **A European network of media and social network analysis centres:** Kremlin propaganda aims different messages at different audiences. Funding should therefore be directed at creating a network of analytical centres which will, among other things, conduct targeted audience analyses in order to understand local needs; map the media environment in particular countries in order to detect disinformation and measure its impact; examine social media; and identify trends and personalities who are popular among polarised social groups and who could serve as a point of contact.

2. Strategic Aims: Rebuild Trust in Fractured Societies

Kremlin disinformation campaigns are aimed at fostering divisions in democracies, undermining trust and destabilising countries by increasing polarisation. This is increasingly easy in media spaces that are growing ever more fractured and which are flooded with a deluge of disinformation from many sources. Initiatives that could rebuild trust and improve the information space include:

» **Reinventing public broadcasting for the 21st century:** Support for the development of public broadcasting is included in the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine and is a high priority for other Association countries. The challenge facing public broadcasters in fractured countries such as Ukraine and Moldova, as well as in many Western European countries, is not merely to "set standards" but to actively unite and build trust in the country, perhaps by improving people's daily lives and involving disparate groups in common activities. For a public broadcaster this will mean campaigning around social causes. Whether it is improving roads and healthcare or confronting corruption in the judiciary, such "solutions-oriented" journalism will have to highlight issues through investigations and help build campaigns to lobby for change. It will also need to employ the latest in social media analysis to ensure its relevance online.

» **Using public broadcasting and entertainment to attract and include alienated parts of society:** Kremlin propaganda is powerful because it mixes entertainment, emotions, and current affairs. For alternative broadcasters to flourish, they need support in purchasing and creating entertainment content which inspires democratic values. They also need to reach out to disenfranchised communities, such as Russian-speakers in the Baltic states, and to represent them and their concerns.

» **A "Venice Commission" for media:** A strong regulator is key to ensuring broadcasters maintain journalistic standards. To be effective, regulators need clear guidelines about when to sanction channels for violating laws on "hate speech", "incitement to violence", and inaccuracy. Regulators in both EU and Association countries are often weak or captured by vested interests, and have little experience in imposing sanctions. This risks creating an environment in which censorship becomes normal and Association countries lose the moral high ground. A broader discussion of these issues, and an international body dedicated to thinking about them, could help. An international "Venice Commission" for media, under the auspices of the Council of Europe, would be able to:

a) advise fledgling regulators, ensure their independence, and help communicate their decisions;

b) act as a badge of quality for broadcasters, allowing donors to guide support for the creation of new content to broadcasters who have high journalistic standards. Aid to Association countries and others in this area is a unique opportunity to use Western leverage to improve the overall quality of media.

» **International information activists united by a "Bloggers' Charter":** Information activists are a new breed of actor transforming the information space. In order to create international networks while simultaneously encouraging best practice, they should sign up to ethics charters, with donor funding withheld from those who use disinformation, break the law, and encourage violence.

» **Foster a community of international information activists, journalists, academia, and NGOs:** Governments and foundations should create regular exchange programmes between journalists, NGOs, and academics, operating between core Western and frontline states, to create transnational communities of trust and critical inquiry. Currently, the information about Ukraine or the Baltic states in a country such as Spain is usually seen by domestic audiences through the distorted lens of Russian propaganda. Bringing academics, journalists, and activists to and from the Baltics, the Caucasus, or Ukraine will help build networks that are able to withstand disinformation attacks. This is what analyst Ben Nimmo calls "information defence".

BACKGROUND:
UKRAINE'S MEDIA AT THE TIME OF THE RUSSIAN INVASION

Russian military theory views information-psychological war as a key ingredient of contemporary warfare and calls for the use of "strategic communications", exploiting broadcast and social media as tools to destabilise, distract, and undermine the enemy.[1] The Russian war against Ukraine, described as the greatest "information blitzkrieg in history" by the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO,[2] put these ideas into action, with a range of media used to disguise Russian military intervention, seed disinformation, and divide Ukraine to the point of civil war.

All through 2014, Ukraine faced a barrage of hateful media attacks which aimed to create distrust towards its government and institutions and to encourage violence.[3] The country was ill prepared. At the time, Ukrainian information space was dominated by Russian-made media products. TV is the most widespread source of information for Ukrainians, with 89 percent of the population receiving their news primarily from television.[4] Russian TV channels were widely available in Ukraine before 2014 and, according to a poll conducted by the Razumkov Center in 2011, half of Ukrainians trusted them.[5] In addition, many Ukrainian TV channels were heavily reliant on rebroadcasting Russian TV content, especially dramas and TV series, which promoted a positive image of Russian security forces and reinforced nostalgia for the Soviet Union. This emotional pull helped engender trust towards Russian news and current affairs.[6] Russian books, film, pop music, and celebrities dominated the Ukrainian market.

Russian social media and email companies host millions of Ukrainian users. VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, and mail.ru are in Ukraine's top five most-visited sites and, according to the Ukrainian media watchdog Telekritika, they all feature "a range of propaganda content controlled by pro-Russian groups".[7] The VKontakte network passes on users' personal data and traffic to the Russian security services, the FSB, in accordance with a law adopted in Russia in 2015.[8]

Given this dominance in Ukrainian broadcasting and social media, Russia was in a strong position to push agendas and narratives that were integral to its cause. Since then, Ukraine has been forced to revise its whole approach to information. **In this paper we look at how the Ukrainian government, media, and civil society responded in six areas, ranging from legal responses to attempts to create a new public broadcaster. We then extrapolate from these experiences to make broader recommendations relevant to the whole of Europe and beyond.**

1. GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

1.1   ADJUSTING THE LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

Legislation in democratic societies struggles to guarantee freedom of speech on the one hand and to prop up national security, legislate against hate speech, and criminalise incitement to violence on the other. In Ukraine the Constitution stipulates: "Everyone is guaranteed the right to freedom of thought and speech", but "the exercise of these rights may be restricted by law in the interests of national security." [9] Article 6 of the Broadcasting Law of Ukraine lists "propaganda and incitement to war, acts of aggression" as abuses of broadcasters' freedoms.[10] If the broadcasting law has been violated, the national broadcasting regulator may submit a case for the "annulment of the broadcasting license".

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Kremlin-controlled media were openly trying to provoke civil war in the rest of the country. In response, the Ukrainian television and broadcasting regulator (the National Council for TV and Radio) appealed to the Ukrainian courts to suspend the broadcasting of seven Russian channels in the country.[11]

The courts agreed to the suspension while they considered the evidence presented by the regulator regarding hate speech, war propaganda, and other alleged infringements by Russian broadcasters. Two years later, the evidence has been presented regarding three of the channels. Four more are still under scrutiny. According to members of the National Council and others close to the process, the main difficulty has been defining "hate speech", "war propaganda", and "threats to national security". Ukraine has no previous case history to rely on. The process of examining the cases is slow.[12]

Without "solid grounds and arguments in the national courts to stop, block and ban propaganda", the Ukrainian government has resorted to a more "familiar instrument—drafting restrictive legislation targeting, under different pretexts, Russian media and journalists as a class".[13] On December 31, 2014 the popular INTER channel broadcast the annual New Year celebrations from Moscow, featuring the well-known Russian crooner and politician Iosif Kobzon. Kobzon has been an outspoken supporter of Russia's annexation of Crimea and has given politically charged concerts in the separatist-held region of Donbas. A wave of public outrage followed the broadcast.[14] In its wake, an amendment to the Law on Cinematography created a list of people who are deemed a "threat to national security" and banned from Ukrainian television.[15]

The list of 83 people was compiled by the secret services (SBU) and handed to the Ministry of Culture, which placed it on its website. No detailed explanation for inclusion on the list was given; the list itself caused much confusion among broadcasters. One of the Soviet Union's most popular movies, *The Irony of Fate,* could theoretically be banned, for example, since one of its lead actors is on the SBU list, having signed a letter in support of the annexation of Crimea. Yet the director of the movie and its other lead actor have been publicly supportive of Ukraine and critical of the policies of Vladimir Putin. It is thus unclear whether the film should be banned under the new rules.[16] Members of the National Council believe the SBU simply passed on their in-house list of individuals with

travel bans, without thinking through the consequences for broadcasting. The Ministry of Culture, which might have been expected to provide the rationale and analysis, simply copy-and-pasted the list. Confusion has ensued.

Similar disarray followed the decision to ban entry into Ukraine for 44 foreign journalists, mainly from Russia but also from the BBC and other international media. The list was developed by the National Security Council and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and signed off by the president. It resulted in a strongly worded condemnation from the BBC.[17] It also emerged that some Ukrainian state agencies, such as the Ministry of Information Policy, were not involved in the decision-making process and disapproved of it.[18]

Amendments to the Law on Cinematography banned films that "create a positive image of Russian law enforcement and security agencies" (in other words, films that offer a favourable view of Russian soldiers and spies), as well as "any films of any thematic character produced with the participation of physical and legal entities of the aggressor state since 1 January 2014".[19] This blanket law means that some films critical of the Putin regime, such as Andrey Zvyagintsev's award-winning *Leviathan* (2014), are now officially banned in Ukraine. Some members of the National Council believe that such a blanket ban on Russian products is counterproductive and argue that the regulator should have freedom to make its own decisions about various films and programmes.[20] Other experts called the ban a necessary step, dictated by the extraordinary situation Ukraine found itself in.[21]

Ukrainian authorities have also used technical issues to restrict Russian broadcasts. For example, Ukraine banned 13 broadcasters from countries which have not ratified the EU Convention on Transborder Broadcasting, a treaty which Russia has not ratified. In practice, only Russian channels are pursued; channels from other countries which have not ratified the convention have not been banned. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) High Representative for Media has condemned the trend towards censorship, arguing that "limits on media freedom for the sake of political expediency lead to censorship and, when begun, censorship never stops".[22]

In a separate effort to create clearer guidelines, the Ukrainian government attempted to develop a "Concept of Information Security".[23] The first draft was heavily criticised by media NGOs and the OSCE, which were invited to participate in the analysis of the document.[24] At its core was the concept of "information sovereignty", an idea which also featured in official Russian and Chinese arguments for censorship.[25] "Although the desire to take action against propaganda is well understood and legitimate, the adoption and implementation of new rules is nevertheless problematic," wrote the OSCE. The OSCE noted that use of terms such as protection of "information sovereignty", "national sovereignty", "territorial integrity of Ukraine", and the "construction of Ukrainian identity in the information space" could be

> interpreted to limit foreign content or foreign or minority subjects in Ukrainian media, as well as to prescribe a certain interpretation of what is Ukrainian identity. Provisions banning discrediting authorities are worrying as this could have a chilling effect and restrict the possibility of media to exercise its watchdog role. … There is a danger that legitimate discussions in media (for example about what Ukrainian identity is), pluralistic Ukrainian voices (including those of national minorities) and relevant international content are blocked. … Existing human rights and freedoms allow for some limitations and it is better to emphasize the proper and proportional application of these.[26]

At the time of writing, the proposal for "information sovereignty" was under reconsideration. Beyond the many justified criticisms, the proposal initiated a broader debate about how to stimulate domestic media content. One idea was to grant special "national product" status to media content through a complex system of points which would be granted for a domestically produced screenplay, music, visuals, and performers. Such a product would enjoy certain perks from the state, including funding. This approach was used in Canada, helping the country withstand the dominance of US media products in the Canadian media market.[27]

Meanwhile Ukraine will try to improve its regulatory framework through a new Audiovisual Law, which is currently under development. The proposed law would try to give clearer definitions of such terms as "hate speech" and "war propaganda", and would give the regulator more powers to act swiftly and forcefully if there were breaches. It would also have the power to enforce short-term bans and would publish clear rules for what constituted proportional measures. In theory, the new regulator would monitor Ukrainian channels according to the same standards as foreign ones, and thus help improve a domestic media which regularly strays from accepted international journalistic standards.

In a first attempt to flex its muscles, the regulator issued a strongly worded warning to the "Ukraina" TV channel, owned by Ukraine's richest oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, for "inciting inter-ethnic hatred" in one of its TV dramas about the conflict in the east of Ukraine.[28] It remains to be seen if the channel will abide by the warning. Although the regulator has tried to introduce an ethics charter for channels, they have resisted, arguing that they are already swamped by regulation.

Broader Lessons for Europe

Creating a "Venice Commission" for media

While there is much to criticise in Ukraine's response, its situation is exceptional given that the country has been invaded. The situation becomes more complex in countries which have large Russian-speaking minorities, or a tradition of watching Russian television, but are not involved in a direct military conflict with Moscow. Russian content is often rebroadcast from channels registered inside the EU, making it impossible to ban them for technical reasons. When Moldova introduced amendments in 2014 banning programmes from countries outside the European Convention on Transfrontier Television, the OSCE noted that any country wishing to "target Moldova with propaganda" could simply "channel broadcasting via European states".[29]

Technical bans can also backfire. In March 2016 the Latvian government banned the local version of the Russian state's Internet site Sputnik.lv, arguing that—because the head of Sputnik, Dmitry Kyselev, was sanctioned by the EU—his organisation could not have a .lv address. Sputnik simply re-registered the site as .com. Not only was the ban useless in practice, it also gave Moscow a small propaganda victory, allowing it to claim Latvia undermined freedom of speech.[30]

Ultimately, short of a Chinese firewall, there is only so much that government regulation and censorship can achieve in a globalised, multimedia age. Even in Ukraine, despite all the efforts to ban Russian broadcasters, research by the NGO Telekritika shows that in the eastern part of the country approximately 20 percent of the population still watch Russian channels.[31]

Given these factors, it becomes even more important to ensure that any sanctions are enacted in a way that is transparent and in line with democratic standards. Explaining why a channel has been sanctioned is a key part of the "information war". Constructs such as "information sovereignty" or "information security" (as opposed to just "security") often look like dubious attempts to justify new forms of censorship. Existing legislation, such as Article 6 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, already stipulates that "Member States shall ensure by appropriate means … media service providers under their jurisdiction do not contain any incitement to hatred based on race, sex, religion or nationality."[32] This directive informed the 2015 EU decision to support Lithuania's three-month ban on RTR Planeta, on the grounds that the Russian state channel instigated discord and a military climate, demonised Ukrainians, used hate speech, and incited tension and violence between Russians and Ukrainians and also against the EU and NATO states.[33]

The Lithuanian case shows how it is possible to use existing legislation to clamp down on broadcasters. A strong regulator is key. In the UK the regulator Ofcom has repeatedly reprimanded the English-language Russian broadcaster RT, but has focused on specific examples of breaches in impartiality and accuracy, threatening fines without resorting to blanket bans.[34]

To help guide countries where there is no strong regulator, where domestic journalistic broadcasting standards are low, and where Kremlin media are looking to spread hate speech and disinformation, there is a strong case for creating an international commission under the auspices of the Council of Europe that would evaluate channels for hate speech, disinformation, and other faults. The commission would guide weak regulators, help them communicate their findings, and ensure their independence, while setting standards for the whole continent. (In section 2.1 below we explore the idea that such a commission could also be used to help guide donor assistance to channels and strengthen the quality of public broadcasting.)

1.2   TRYING TO BUILD UNIFYING NARRATIVES

Ukraine state institutions started building their capacity to respond to an information war from a very low starting point. An early, high-profile response was the creation of a Ministry of Information Policy. Immediately criticised by civic groups and by independent and international journalists as a potentially Orwellian "Ministry of Truth", the new institution pursued a complex mix of policies: broadcasting Ukrainian TV channels to frontline territories in the east; running outdoor publicity campaigns in support of the army; and establishing procedures for embedded journalism on the frontline. It also tried to launch an online "Information Army". The project initially mobilised the support of 35,000 volunteers,[35] but without any full-time employees they were hard to co-ordinate.[36] Although Ukraine's media community and civil society were sceptical of the Ministry's impact, it did not try to introduce censorship, as was initially feared.

At the same time, over the past two years the Ukrainian state agencies have rebuilt their communication capacity from scratch, in many instances with the help of civic organisations, such as the Ukraine Crisis Media Center (UCMC), which helped place PR professionals in many state bodies.Some elements of a vertical structure have emerged, with input from the President's Office transmitted down to the level of ministries and departments. The UCMC says it is building strategic communications capacity across ministries and key government institutions, helping them to plan long-term and to co-ordinate their messages into a "Single Voice Policy".[37]

Ukraine's experience, however, has shown that a strategic narrative needs to be grounded in a very thorough understanding of local priorities. Ukraine is not divided into "Russian" and "Ukrainian" parts, as some claim, but each region and city has its own, often very distinct, understanding of why it wants to be part of Ukraine. Nineteenth-century Romantic (or even extremist) nationalism might play well in the western city of Lviv, but not in the multicultural metropolises of Kharkiv and Odessa. The key is to find narratives that work with specific audiences. In Odessa, the former head of local information policy, Zoya Kazanzhy, argues that the city's many ethnic groups are not necessarily drawn to a nationalist pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian narrative, but are most concerned with their security and economic interests.[38] In the immediate aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, Odessa split fifty-fifty in its support for Russia and Ukraine, thanks in part to Russian promises to bring peace and stability to the region after the violence of the Maidan revolution. But after Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas brought carnage in the east of Ukraine, the mood in Odessa swung round to support Ukraine. Now Ukraine, rather than Russian-backed separatism, represents security. Public advertising campaigns around the town successfully supported this narrative, with placards contrasting destruction in the Donbas and the peace of "loyal" Ukraine.[39]

This need to understand the dynamics of local audiences will also be key to winning the war in the east of the country. As one Western military adviser told these authors, the war is currently closer to a counter-insurgency operation. Information operations need to be targeted at building trust in local populations who currently feel disenfranchised and blame the Ukrainian army for having "brought the war" to them: if the Ukrainian army had not fought back against the separatists, many argue, there would be no shooting now. In this analysis, the Ukrainian army is seen as undermining security.

Broader Lessons for Europe

A European-wide network of targeted audience analysis centres

Currently there is no dedicated agency in either eastern or western Europe analysing the impact of Russian (or other) propaganda on different audiences. A pro-Kremlin supporter in Narva, Estonia, might be motivated by something quite different from a pro-Kremlin supporter in Odessa. This means that all response efforts right now are speculative: we simply do not know what works.

As a first priority, funding should be directed at setting up or strengthening existing centres conducting:

» regular, targeted audience analysis;

» analysis of the local media environment to detect disinformation campaigns;

» monitoring of social media, identifying trends and personalities who are popular among different polarised social groups.

These centres would then exchange insights with one another and communicate them to governments, donors, and public broadcasters.

New government institutions

Do the threats posed by 21st-century information war require new government institutions to manage them? The Ukrainian Ministry of Information Policy appears to be a poorly conceived and (perhaps fortunately) badly executed example, but similar discussions have been taking place across the world. In the US, some are calling for the reconstruction of the US Information Agency, an institution abandoned after the end of the Cold War. A bill authored by Senators Chris Murphy and Rob Portman calls for the creation of an inter-agency "Center for Information Analysis and Response", a smaller and more flexible response.[40] Such a centre could analyse Russian information-warfare efforts; establish a framework for the integration of critical data into national strategy; and develop, plan, and synchronise a response across different government bodies which would expose foreign information operations and proactively advance fact-based narratives.[41] In Europe, Jakub Janda of the European Values think-tank has made a strong case for strategic communications departments throughout the EU to rapidly gather and analyse evidence and to respond to disinformation campaigns.[42]

Western governments and international organisations could certainly improve how they communicate their policies (the EU Association Agreement especially comes to mind). However, democratic governments would never be as effective in this area as authoritarian regimes which can dictate to all of their country's media: this is one field where authoritarian regimes have an asymmetrical advantage. Instead, democratic governments should focus on the areas where they do have an advantage. Enacting policies, for example, that clamp down on laundering of corrupt money coming from authoritarian regimes will be more effective than getting involved in "narrative" battles. In the information field, the strength of democracies is their diversity—the rich mix of civil society, media, and individuals all involved in media and communication. Western governments need to find a constructive way to interact with media and NGOs. Former NATO press spokesman Ben Nimmo has suggested that Western governments should invest in exchanges between NGOs and journalists in frontline areas to foster a community of transnational critical inquiry and trust able to withstand disinformation attacks.[43] Governments also have an advantage in obtaining proof of financial crimes, video of covert military operations, and audio intercepts. To date there has been a reluctance to share these. In an age of scepticism towards government, the more open the interaction between government and other players, the more effective it can be.

1.3   HISTORICAL MEMORY AND DE-COMMUNISATION AS COUNTERPROPAGANDA

One of the most powerful and effective Russian narratives in Ukraine revolves around the historical legacy of World War II and the Soviet era. Over and over again, Russian books, films, and television describe the heroism of ordinary soldiers, the triumph of the defeat of Hitler, and the vindication that victory brought to the Soviet system. Most of these stories emphasise Russian leadership, downplay the role of other nationalities, and ignore the less savoury aspects of the war, including major Soviet errors of judgement. Most of all, these stories squarely identify the Ukrainian nationalists of the era—those who refused to fight with the Red Army—as "fascists" and draw a link between them and Ukraine's current government.

By contrast, Ukrainian national memory is more complex. In fact, Ukrainians fought on several sides of the conflict. Most were part of the Red Army, but others did fight for the Ukrainian resistance, believing that to do so would lead to an independent Ukraine. At one point, some joined the Nazis in order to fight against Soviet power. Especially in western Ukraine, which was annexed to the USSR in 1939, the end of the war is remembered by many as the beginning of a new era of repression: one person's May 9 Victory Day is another's May 9 Occupation Day.[44]

To reflect these mixed memories—and also to counter the Russian narrative about the nature of the war—the Ukrainian government has changed the national holiday, celebrating it on both May 8 and May 9 and renaming it "Remembrance Day" instead of Victory Day.[45] The symbol for the holiday has also been changed from the Kremlin's orange-and-black ribbon to the poppy, an international symbol of mourning war dead, thus bringing Ukraine's commemorative celebrations closer to those held in other parts of the world.[46]

In 2015, the government also launched an advertising campaign featuring well-known Soviet actors of Ukrainian origin as well as iconic films of the period. The advertisements linked Ukraine's victory against Nazi Germany to the ongoing conflict with Russia and turned the Russian narrative on its head: Putin's Russia, not the new Ukraine, is now portrayed as the modern incarnation of the wartime fascists. The campaign was carefully planned: "The 8–9 May 2015 coverage was agreed and co-ordinated between government and key media outlets. There was a will to work out a co-ordinated campaign," says Zurab Alasania, director of the National TV and Radio Company of Ukraine.[47]

Other attempts to use history to make points about the present have been less successful. Ukraine's hasty adoption of de-communisation laws in 2015 showed glaring gaps in its communications strategy. The laws were drafted by the Ukrainian Institute for National Memory and were accused by critics of prescribing criminal penalties for those who criticise the wartime Ukrainian Insurgent Army (a charge the Institute for National Memory denies). The laws received much negative coverage in Western media, and more than 70 Ukrainian and Western scholars published an appeal calling for President Poroshenko to veto them.[48]

This plea failed and the laws were passed, yet they won little domestic support. According to the Kiev Institute of Sociology, 82 percent of people in Kirovohrad were opposed to their city being renamed.[49] In the east of the country the laws have further contributed to the sense that Kiev does not understand or care about the local populations.

Broader Lessons for Europe

A working group on historical and psychological trauma

History as used by the Kremlin is not about facts but about psychological effects. Top-down legislation will not heal the deeper traumas and divisions the Kremlin takes advantage of. The Ukrainian red poppy and war adverts show how to use historical themes to positive effect, helping heal divisions and move on from past traumas. Floriana Fossato, a media researcher who specialises in the post-Soviet space, has suggested the creation of a working group consisting of psychologists, historians, sociologists, and media creatives with the aim of developing a permanent factory of ideas about how to engage with historical and psychological trauma.[50]

2. MEDIA INITIATIVES

2.1 DOMESTIC ENTERTAINMENT CONTENT AS A SECURITY PRIORITY

Private media in Ukraine are not profitable: instead of earning money, they serve as political tools for their owners, luring in viewers through entertainment and then delivering news which fits their owners' interests. Unsurprisingly, most private channels have poor journalistic standards. Telekritika, an independent watchdog, observes frequent bias, failure to use proper evidence, and lack of differentiation between editorial comment and reportage. Much of their entertainment content, meanwhile, was bought from Russia, promoting a positive image of Russian security forces and reinforcing nostalgia for the Soviet Union. This emotional pull helped engender trust towards Russian news and current affairs.

Since the Maidan revolution, however, these television networks have seen it as being in their interests to serve the government's goals. Since the invasion of eastern Ukraine, most channels have backed the government's war narrative. The jargon of "anti-terrorist operation" (ATO), "occupied territories", "our lads" versus the "enemy" and its "terrorist troops" has firmly entered media discourse. Oligarch-controlled TV networks produce "heroic" content,[51] or rebroadcast government-sponsored documentaries.[52]

With respect to entertainment, the amendments in the Law on Cinematography have had an effect. According to interviews with the Ukrainian regulator, there is now approximately 36 percent less Russian content on Ukrainian channels. Channels have started creating some of their own, local content (though they continue to cheat by, for example, claiming Russian content dubbed into Ukrainian is now domestic). To continue producing domestic content, Ukrainian channels want support from the government to make new content, and they want help in obtaining EU TV products at favourable rates.

Broader Lessons for Europe

How to create domestic content while stimulating higher journalistic standards

The need to create locally made entertainment content is becoming a security priority. Beyond Ukraine, populations in the Baltic states and the Caucasus tune into Kremlin TV because it is better made, glossier, and more entertaining. Even Georgian- or Lithuanian-speakers tune in for the serials and talent shows, and often end up staying for the current affairs.[53] Moldovan media is dominated by Russian products. However, making alternative Russian-language or domestic content is expensive and the advertising markets of these

regions do not allow for profit in the foreseeable future. Governments can use laws to help stimulate local production, imitating the French or other models in which a certain percentage of content has to be domestically produced. But for the moment Western governments, NGOs, and other donors need to support this area by helping create content at favourable rates. The British Foreign Office, for example, is currently developing a "content factory" to help EU Association and Baltic countries create new Russian-language content. This should be seen as a unique opportunity to improve journalistic standards in Association countries. Guided by the judgements delivered by the commission for regulating media standards described earlier in this document, Western donors could emphasise support for channels with better journalistic standards, thus creating a virtuous circle of better entertainment TV and better journalism. Donors should of course be allowed to use their discretion when choosing which channels to work with. But the hallmark of a media regulator modelled on the "Venice Commission" could be used as an important compass.

2.2 PUBLIC BROADCASTING

If Ukraine's private media reflects the views of particular business interests, Ukraine's "public" media had, until its recent transformation, never been more than a propaganda organ. No public broadcaster emerged to set standards or unify the country. Instead, the official public broadcaster was run into the ground by successive governments, with low ratings and no independence. This has now begun to change. The development of a genuine public broadcaster is written into the EU Association Agreement.[54] The network is now under new management and has proved its independence with a series of hard-hitting investigations into senior political figures including the president.[55]

While the public broadcaster was still in the doldrums, Hromadske TV, an online TV and news portal, was set up in November 2013 in an ambitious attempt to build a public broadcaster from scratch. This broadcaster would be free not only of any political and business interests but also of government propaganda influences, and it would be funded through donors and donations from the public. It strove to produce impartial journalism and became especially well known for its live reports from demonstrations on the Maidan. Today it is challenging Ukraine's dominant "patriotic" narrative of "endangered fortress" and strives to find different ways of exploring national identity. It has developed a vocabulary of its own, moving away from "anti-terrorist operation" and "terrorist troops"—terms adopted by government propaganda—to "an armed conflict", and replacing "our heroes" and "our defenders" with "Ukrainian military".[57]

Hromadske's YouTube channel has an average of seven million viewers per month.[58] Its defenders argue the audience is a high-quality one: journalists, bloggers, experts, analysts, and politicians. As Otar Dovzhenko from the UCU School of Journalism argues, "shows can be viewed by a mere 10,000+ viewers, however each of those has got his/her own audience of many more thousands".[59] Currently Hromadske is in talks with the reformed public broadcaster to create a multimedia network to educate, unite, and inform the country.

The challenge ahead facing both Hromadske and the reformed public broadcaster is how to move from being a niche product to a genuine public broadcaster with mass appeal. This is made all the more challenging by a crowded marketplace filled with oligarch-dominated channels, low trust towards any broadcasters, and a fractured media space where each community lives in its own echo chamber.

Broader Lessons for Europe

Public broadcasting for the 21st century: towards activist broadcasting

In a media landscape of limited outlets, a strong, independent public broadcaster could set standards and grow to be the most trusted medium available. In Ukraine, as in much of Europe, audiences dwell in small media bubbles and echo chambers, reinforced by social media. Odessa alone has 44 TV channels (not all of them active). Trust towards any media, whether Russian, Ukrainian, or other, is low. The challenge facing the public broadcaster will be not merely to "set standards" but to actively build trust in the country. The public broadcaster will always be poorer than the oligarch-owned or Kremlin-sponsored channels, and it will not be able to fully compete by reeling in audiences with big-money entertainment shows. But it can be cleverer. A key way to build trust is to prove one's relevance to people's daily lives and to involve disparate groups in common activities. For a public broadcaster this means moving from merely setting journalistic standards to creating activist projects around social causes. Whether it is improving roads and healthcare or confronting corruption in the judiciary, such "solutions-oriented" journalism will highlight issues through investigations and citizen journalism, build campaigns to lobby for change, and win people's trust by effecting change. A 21st-century public broadcaster is an activist broadcaster, providing a public service in the sense of helping to create better public services. The content around these campaigns can include everything from reality shows to comedy and protest actions: the point is that they will help deliver real solutions and "news you can use".

Understanding local networks and social networks

A 21st-century public broadcaster needs to show that it is ready to listen and integrate marginalised communities. Daria Saar, head of the new Russian-language Estonian public broadcaster, explains her mission as "social work", organising town hall-like talk shows and Question Time formats that give marginalised Russian communities a voice.[60] The challenge will be to ensure that the broadcaster does not reinforce polarisation. Grigory Asmolov, an expert on social networks at the London School of Economics, argues that it is possible to understand the impact of such shows on social networks and identify "bridging figures" who are able to communicate between polarised groups.[61] These bridging figures can then be promoted on the new public service network, creating a symbiosis between social networks and more traditional media and helping to decrease polarisation between echo chambers.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES:
THE PEOPLE'S REVOLUTION AND THE PEOPLE'S WAR

The Euromaidan used the Internet as a major tool of mobilisation, organisation, and information support. Live streaming and video blogging allowed people to follow events in real time, while social networks promoted a new breed of opinion-makers, bloggers, and civil society activists and shattered the hierarchy of established media and pundits.

Infosprotyv, a previously little-known Ukrainian NGO, launched a popular blog by its leader, Dmytro Tymchuk, which offered updates on the situation in Crimea. By May 2014 Tymchuk's blog had 50,000 followers.[62]

InformNapalm exposed Russian military intervention in Ukraine through OSINT (open-source intelligence) investigations.

StopFake, a donor-funded project of the Kyiv-Mohyla School of Journalism, exposed fake news about the war in Russian, Ukrainian, and Western media.[63] StopFake played an important role in demonstrating to global audiences the systemic nature of Russian disinformation. Inside Ukraine its impact is limited to media professionals. Its value is as a resource for journalists and policy-makers, and as a tool for improving media literacy by enhancing understanding of how media can be manipulated.

Volunteer "information warriors" blew the cover off Kremlin-planted bots disguised as Ukrainian patriots calling for another revolution in Ukraine. When, for example, Lana Samokhvalova, a Ukrainian journalist and volunteer information activist, followed the IP addresses of social media activist Stepan Mazura, supposedly a firebrand Ukrainian patriot, she discovered he was based in Moscow.[64]

Evgeny Dokukin and his "Cyber Army" («Кібервійська») have taken down dozens of separatist-controlled websites, hacked Russian government files, and even threatened to cut off the Internet from the whole of annexed Crimea.[65]

Some of these activities are illegal. Dokukin's DDOS (distributed denial of service) attacks contravene Ukraine's penal code. Gathering and publishing the personal data of Ukrainian citizens implicated in supporting "terrorism" in the east of the country, as pursued by "The Peacekeepers" website, is also illegal. When the website published a list of over 4,000 Ukrainian and international journalists who were accredited with the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, it resulted in death threats against the journalists and the website subsequently closed down.[66]

Social media has also empowered far-right groups such as the Right Sector, a paramilitary formation fighting outside state defence structures in the east of the country, and the "Azov" nationalist battalion, now integrated into state defence structures. The propaganda campaign promoted by these organisations played a major role in shaping a militaristic sub-narrative in Ukraine. Some "patriotic" bloggers and activists began to accuse any critics of the government of "*zrada*" ("betrayal"). «Myrotvortsy» ("The Peacekeepers") publishes personal data of Russian servicemen and Ukrainian rebels engaged into the armed conflict.[67] The website positions itself as a database of "crimes against the National Security of Ukraine, Peace, Humanity, and the International Law"

to be used by "law enforcement authorities and special services". It has published lists of Ukrainian and international journalists accredited in separatist held areas and accused them of "collaboration" with "terrorists". Leading independent journalists condemned this behaviour, and the way it was supported by members of the government, as an attack on free press.[68]

Broader Lessons for Europe

An OCCRP/Global Witness to combat 21st-century disinformation operations

The success of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project's Panama Papers and the efforts of transnational NGOs such as Global Witness show how effective international consortia of researchers can be in the fight against corruption. Similar networks need to be created to combat today's "active measures" and disinformation campaigns. Researchers need to be able to see the broader strategic narrative the Kremlin and other players are trying to create and then to deliver joined-up, transnational investigative journalism and campaigns around overarching themes.

International, targeted myth-busting

Fact-checking and myth-busting work when they are targeted at key audiences who are receptive to fact-based argument. We are now seeing a fact-checking movement emerge around the Ukraine crisis, from the growing presence of StopFake through to the EU External Action Service "Disinformation Review". To be truly effective, this research needs to be targeted at media and policy-makers and made relevant to their agendas. Whether reacting rapidly to disinformation repeated by mainstream media or contributing to policy debates, myth-busting sites battling Kremlin disinformation need to be strengthened and honed to achieve clear aims.

A "Bloggers' Charter"

Information activists are a new breed of actors transforming the information space. In order to create international networks while simultaneously promoting best practice, they could be encouraged to sign up to ethics charters. Such charters could be jointly written and would of course be voluntary.

CONCLUSION

Our understanding of the impact and patterns of Internet echo chambers, information cascades, and social networks remains at a very early stage. Deeper research is needed into the way echo chambers grow and how one can penetrate them, the impact of computerised bots and trolls on audiences, and the ways in which information can be manipulated by different groups with concrete goals. We do not really understand which technical and media literacy tools can be used to combat their influence. Public awareness of these issues is also very low: the vast majority of people using social media do not yet think about how the information they now receive is being altered or manipulated by their own social networks.

In a different sense, the same is true of traditional media—newspapers and television. For decades, we have assumed that private media would be able to thrive and compete in open markets. But in many democracies—in Europe and North America as well as in Ukraine—the business model that once supported quality journalism has collapsed. Much Western journalism is poorly resourced, and the proliferation of information has made it harder for people to judge the accuracy of what they see and read. This too opens up opportunities for Russia—as well as other states with clear information agendas, such as China and Iran—to buy and influence the programmes that people see in Western countries, and the articles that they read, on a scale far greater than any similar efforts during the Cold War.

In some senses, the situation resembles previous moments in history: the 1930s, when the then-new medium of radio was beginning to reach public audiences and change the way they understood politics; and the 1950s, when television first became widely used. But both radio and television proved susceptible to regulation. Rules could be made by the regulators who granted them access to bandwidths. Some of those rules can be used today, as in Ukraine, to block excessive distortion of the news. But as this paper makes plain, the challenges of the present moment are in other ways unprecedented. The Ukrainian experience shows that the impact of government on the Internet is very limited. Civil society groups and media are better poised to battle disinformation online, but they are not able to reach all audiences.

There is no silver bullet available to solve this problem, and the answers will not be the same in every European country. A combination of actions by government, concerned citizens, and journalists will be needed in order to fashion a response that neither promotes censorship nor hampers intellectual freedom. A range of policies will be required in order to help voters and citizens get access to an accurate and balanced understanding of the world. Without better information, democracy will quickly become difficult, if not impossible, not only in Ukraine but all across the Western world.

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