

# SHIELDING DEMOCRACY

CIVIL SOCIETY ADAPTATIONS TO KREMLIN  
DISINFORMATION ABOUT UKRAINE

|| ADAM FIVENSON / GALYNA PETRENKO / VERONIKA VÍCHOVÁ & ANDREJ POLEŠČUK



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, competition in the information space has intensified, and Russian propagandists have been hard at work depicting the unprovoked attack as a grave necessity. In spite of pervasive efforts to spread malign narratives about Ukraine, it appears that Ukraine and its allies are—in key respects—winning the war in the information space across most of the transatlantic community. Public opinion polling from late 2022 supports the case that Moscow's information efforts have failed to undermine Ukrainians' desire for self-determination, sow division in Europe using Ukrainian refugees and the threat to energy supplies, and undermine support for economic and military assistance to Ukraine.

This report highlights adaptations and innovations by Ukrainians in their struggle against Moscow's disinformation machine. As part of the project, the International Forum on Democratic Studies conducted more than fifty expert interviews and hosted a series of convenings with experts from Ukraine and across Europe which inform the analysis. Companion essays—one from Ukraine, the other from Central Europe—provide more context and details on the ways in which locally based organizations are learning to meet the challenge.

The research identified three advantages—**deep preparation, open networks of cooperation, and active utilization of new technology**—that have allowed civil society organizations and governments in Ukraine and Central and Eastern Europe to build trust and tell Ukraine's story, unite Ukrainians and their allies, and ensure resilience in the face of authoritarian disinformation campaigns:

- **Deep preparation:** There is no substitute for preparation in the struggle against disinformation. Since Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity in 2014, when Kremlin disinformation campaigns smeared the Euromaidan's pro-Europe protesters as fascists and neo-Nazis in order to justify Russia's annexation of Crimea and rolling invasion of eastern Ukraine, multiple civil society organizations have been formed whose experience with Russian disinformation has been vitally important to informing current responses. **Since many of the narratives deployed in 2014 have been recycled to rationalize the full-scale invasion in February 2022, most Ukrainians were well-prepared and able to obtain trusted information** by the time the invasion began.

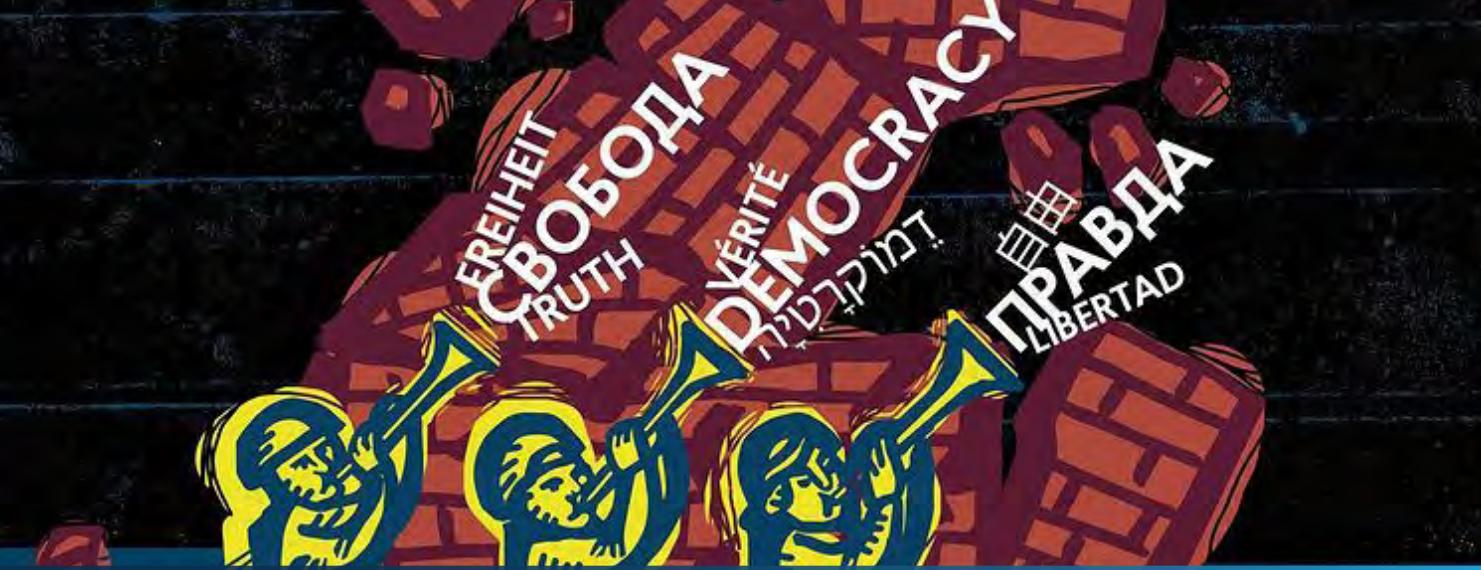
In spite of pervasive efforts to spread malign narratives about Ukraine, it appears that Ukraine and its allies are—in key respects—winning the war in the information space across most of the transatlantic community.

- **Open networks of cooperation:** Civil society organizations have leveraged common values and diverse skill sets to form cooperative networks that have the sophistication and speed necessary to combat the scale of the Kremlin's propaganda machine. These networks have developed multidisciplinary approaches to the challenge across governmental, nongovernmental, and private sector entities. **Through such cross-sector collaboration, these networks can identify disinformation narratives, illuminate their underlying messages and target audiences, and design timely, effective responses.** Cooperative networks have also provided a forum for disinformation researchers to share lessons and highlight best practices, limit potential duplication of efforts among resource-limited civil society organizations, and encourage citizen-led efforts to participate in counter-disinformation efforts.
- **Active utilization of new technology:** Even the most well-staffed civil society organizations struggle to monitor emergent disinformation narratives across the vast global media ecosystem. **However, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine-learning tools have empowered disinformation researchers to identify new Russian narratives more quickly and to design effective responses before these narratives can cross channels, platforms, and outlets to reach larger audiences.** By facilitating analysis of the behavior of purveyors of Russian disinformation over time, AI and machine-learning tools have also enabled counter-disinformation specialists to predict future campaigns.

The democratic world has much to learn from Ukraine, which has been on the front lines of the struggle between democracy and autocracy—literally and in the information space—since Russian forces seized Crimea nine years ago. Naturally, not all lessons learned in Ukraine's context of active conflict will apply to other, non-conflict settings. The shared threat of a full-scale military assault creates unique incentives for cooperation. **Yet across Central and Eastern Europe, which is not in conflict but is still a target of Russian malign narratives, networked approaches have been critical to designing effective responses to the Kremlin's own networked disinformation activities.**

The threat Moscow's disinformation machine poses is clear. While its claims about Ukraine may defy observable reality, they are a critical component of the Kremlin's information space strategy, which aims to unmoor societal perceptions from fact-based reporting and experience, undermining the very concept of knowable truth. Given the high stakes, it is critical that democratic societies learn from the experiences in Ukraine and work together to affirmatively and purposefully confront this global challenge.

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# SHIELDING DEMOCRACY: CIVIL SOCIETY ADAPTATIONS TO KREMLIN DISINFORMATION ABOUT UKRAINE

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## ONE YEAR LATER, UKRAINE IS WINNING IN THE INFORMATION SPACE

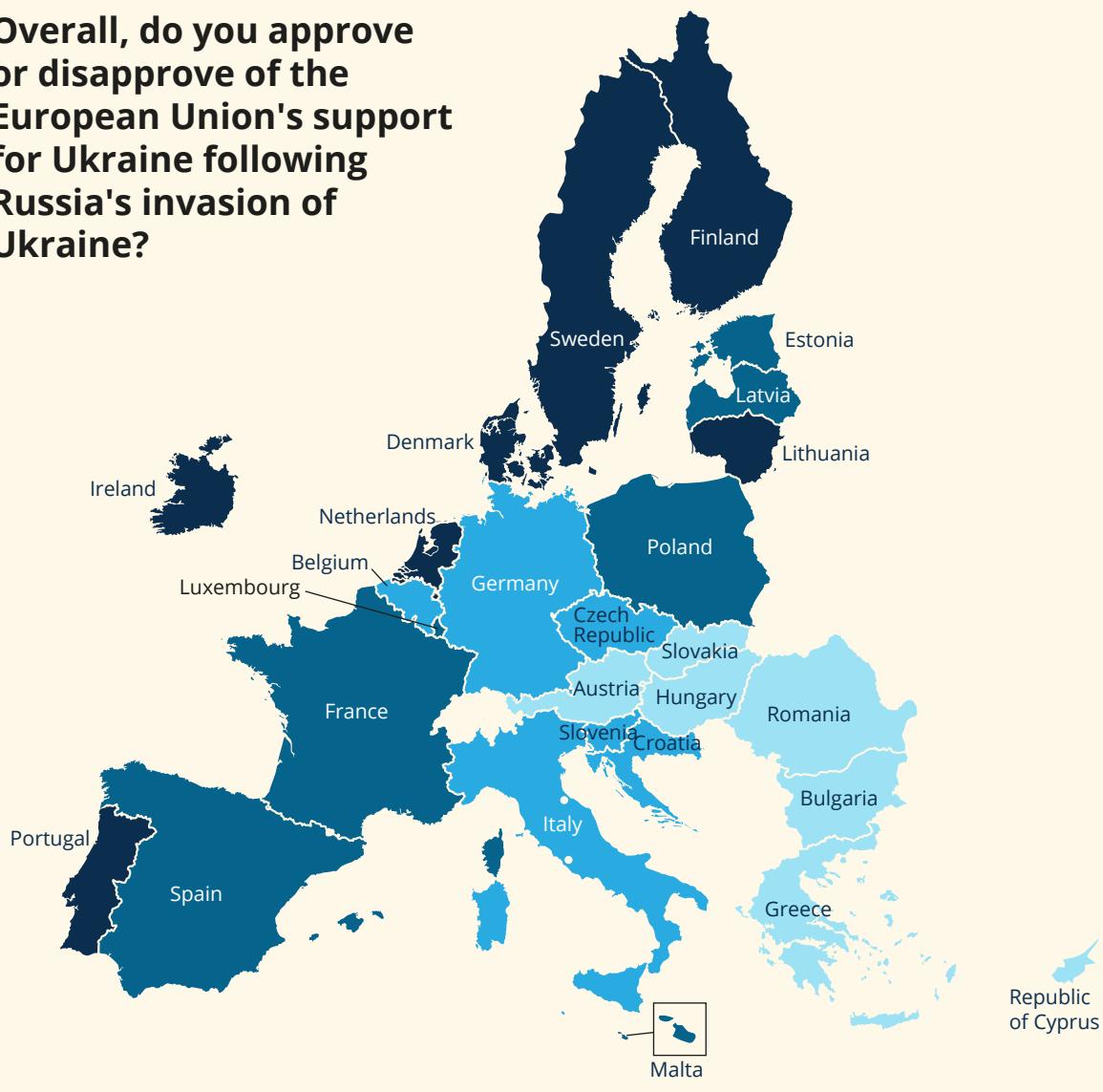
Since the onset of Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine last year, competition in the information space has intensified. By the time the first volleys of missiles rained down on Kyiv in late February 2022, Russian propagandists had already been hard at work depicting the unprovoked attack as a grave necessity. In the Kremlin's utterly distorted portrayal, Ukraine was under the control of neo-Nazis who were repressing Russian speakers, and a Ukrainian invasion of Russian territory was imminent. During the subsequent year of fighting, Moscow's hydra-like rationalization of its violence has sprouted additional narratives, with features including purported Ukrainian satanists and bioweapon labs.

Yet despite these pervasive mythmaking efforts, **it appears that Ukraine and its allies are—in key respects—winning the war in the information space across most of the transatlantic community.<sup>1</sup>** Public opinion polling from late 2022 supports this impression:

- A December 2022 survey on Ukrainians' desire for self-determination and victory on the battlefield showed that more than 85 percent of respondents had a strong preference for no territorial concessions to Russia.<sup>2</sup> This figure has been fairly consistent since the beginning of the war.
- In the European Union (EU), the Kremlin has aimed to sow division over the hosting of Ukrainian refugees and the threat to energy supplies. Nevertheless, a Eurobarometer survey of European citizens released in December 2022 found that 74 percent approved of EU support for Ukraine, with particularly strong rates of approval among those from the Baltic states and Central Europe.<sup>3</sup>

**FIGURE**

**Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the European Union's support for Ukraine following Russia's invasion of Ukraine?**



Eurobarometer data showing public support for EU aid to Ukraine in December 2022<sup>6</sup>

- Nearly two-thirds of Americans support the continuation of U.S. military and economic assistance to Ukraine, according to a December 2022 report by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs,<sup>4</sup> though that support is increasingly conditioned by partisan political affiliation.<sup>5</sup>

As in Greek myth, when Perseus uses a mirrored shield to see and defeat the snake-haired Gorgon Medusa, Ukrainians have employed critical strategic and tactical adaptations in the information space. These adaptations have served to identify and overcome the Kremlin's simultaneous efforts to delegitimize the idea of Ukraine as a sovereign and democratic state, legitimize and obscure the violence and depredations of the Russian invasion, demoralize the Ukrainian people, hollow out support for Ukraine across the transatlantic community, and ultimately fracture the democratic alliance.

In the crucible of conflict, Ukrainians have also galvanized and accelerated their responses to the increasing complexity and global scale of Russian disinformation about the invasion. While Kyiv's early efforts—starting in 2014—to counter Kremlin disinformation focused on defending its domestic information space, Ukrainian authorities have since recognized the importance of competing with Russian government influence in information spaces around the world and have begun to expand their diplomatic representation.<sup>7</sup> Nongovernmental initiatives have likewise started to reach farther afield and communicate with a more diverse range of audiences relevant to public support for Ukraine.

This report examines such adaptations and innovations by Ukrainians in their struggle against Moscow's propaganda machine. Companion essays—one from Ukraine, the other from Central Europe—provide more context and details on the ways in which locally based organizations are working to meet the challenge. As part of the project, the International Forum on Democratic Studies conducted more than fifty expert interviews and hosted a series of convenings with counter-disinformation experts from Ukraine and across Europe, all of which informed the following analysis.

The research identified three advantages—**deep preparation, networks of cooperation, and active utilization of new technology**—that have allowed civil society organizations and governments in Ukraine and Central and Eastern Europe to build trust and tell Ukraine's story, unite Ukrainians and their allies, and ensure resilience in the face of pervasive authoritarian disinformation campaigns. These efforts have fortified public support across much of Europe and the United States—support which has been critical to Ukrainians' ability to maintain the integrity of their state and defend themselves on the battlefield during Moscow's brutal assault.

Ukrainians have also galvanized and accelerated their responses to the increasing complexity and global scale of Russian disinformation about the invasion.

# 1. THE PROFOUND URGENCY OF PREPARATION

Ukrainian experts and civil society leaders have argued that there is no substitute for preparation in the struggle against disinformation. According to Jakub Kalenský of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, “the work of civil society between 2014 and 2022 paid significant dividends in many ways, including how it inspired governments in Ukraine and around the region to ramp up their research and efforts to counter Russian narratives about the war.”

Ukrainians have learned to mitigate risks in the information space through hard-won experience. Moscow’s use of disinformation in Ukraine goes back to Soviet times and extends to Russian influence activities in the aftermath of the union’s 1991 collapse, often taking the form of historical revisionism. As the Kremlin’s encroachments have intensified since 2014, Ukraine’s civil society, news media, and activist community have built their capacity, working with democratic partners to counter malign authoritarian narratives.

Ukrainians trace the origins of this response to the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, when Kremlin disinformation campaigns smeared the Euromaidan’s pro-Europe protesters as fascists and neo-Nazis in order to justify Russia’s annexation of Crimea and rolling invasion of eastern Ukraine. Many of the same narratives were notably redeployed to rationalize the full-scale invasion in February 2022.<sup>8</sup> As Galyna Petrenko of Detector Media notes in her accompanying essay, the period between 2014 and 2022 represented a crucial stage of development for the counter-disinformation community in Ukraine, during which its ability to coordinate and build essential response mechanisms matured. **Reacting to the rising intensity, prevalence, and reach of Moscow’s information activities about Ukraine within the country and across Europe, new civil society organizations were formed specifically to address the problem, while established organizations reoriented themselves to meet the challenge** and expanded their research, analysis, outreach, and public education capabilities.

The emerging critical mass of counter-disinformation activity has greatly improved the Ukrainian public’s knowledge and awareness of Russian disinformation narratives and tactics. For example, according to national survey data, the percentage of Ukrainians who understood the war in Donbas to be the result of Russian aggression increased from 49 percent in February 2019 to 65 percent in December 2021.<sup>9</sup> During this time, Ukrainian organizations began experimenting with new tools to fact-check and counter Kremlin-backed narratives more effectively, improving collaboration and information sharing to build a community of trust, and educating the Ukrainian public about Moscow’s goals in the information space and methods to strengthen citizens’ resilience and media literacy.

“The work of civil society between 2014 and 2022 paid significant dividends in many ways, including how it inspired governments in Ukraine and around the region to ramp up their research and efforts to counter Russian narratives about the war.”

— Jakub Kalenský

## FIGURE

### Choose one statement about the events in Ukraine that reflects your personal opinion the most

Data sourced from two Detector Media studies (one in [Ukrainian](#) and the other in [English](#)).



These civil society-led efforts, combined with the Ukrainian government's 2021 decision to limit access to Russian state-controlled media,<sup>10</sup> meant that **by the time the full-scale invasion began in February 2022, most Ukrainians were able to obtain trusted information and understood, on at least a basic level, the nature of Russian disinformation and the distinct threat it posed**, as Galyna Petrenko argues in her essay.

The advance work by civil society groups also had an important impact on many of the democratic governments in the region whose support would later be critical, by providing a model approach for raising awareness and building societal resilience in the face of false Kremlin narratives and actors. For instance, the Baltic states, which also have historical experience in dealing with Moscow's malign influence and disinformation, have accelerated critical whole-of-society responses. As Veronika Víchová and Andrej Poleščuk of the European Values Center for Security Policy describe in their accompanying essay, the Baltic countries provide a complementary example of the type of early-stage risk-mitigation measures that are necessary to secure an information space from authoritarian disinformation efforts, such as close collaboration between and across civil society and government, and significant initiatives to educate the public.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. COOPERATION IS KEY

In an increasingly complex information space, civil society organizations have leveraged common values and diverse skill sets to form cooperative networks that have the scale, sophistication, and speed necessary to stay ahead of the adaptations in messaging strategy churned out by the Kremlin's multiheaded propaganda machine.

Such civil society collaboration may include the efforts of data scientists, narrative researchers, web-traffic analysts, marketers and audience-segmentation specialists, sociologists who focus on public polling, and investigative journalists. **Through dedicated information sharing across sectors, these networks can identify disinformation narratives, illuminate their underlying messages and target audiences, and design timely, effective responses.** They also help civil society organizations achieve valuable economies of scale that would otherwise be out of reach.

Cooperative networks provide a crucial forum for disinformation researchers to exchange findings and highlight best practices. Building trust and strategizing on outreach to amplify public advocacy are other crucial elements of such a collaborative approach. For example, the Disinformation Coordination Hub in Ukraine, launched in late 2019 by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), created a platform for roughly 25 local civil society groups, media organizations, and international organizations to share research and outreach efforts, as well as technical knowledge on how to detect, monitor, and communicate their findings about disinformation. **According to NDI's Tamta Otiashvili, the Hub's "meetings are needs-based and convene when Hub members want to share research and analysis, start a conversation, or develop a joint strategy related to a particular topic."** This flexible structure was especially important during the early days of the 2022 invasion, when most organizations had to slow their work to focus on ensuring the safety and security of their staff and families, but it has continued to characterize the Hub's approach to fostering collaboration.

Participation in cooperative networks can also limit potential duplication of efforts among resource-limited civil society organizations. For example, the "one voice" policy adopted by the Strategic Communication Center within Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Information Policy seeks to unify the voices of civil society and the Ukrainian government when addressing disinformation content found on technology platforms. It has been described as critical to the clarity and success of Ukraine's communications with private-sector technology firms and social media companies, which have solicited platform support in taking down posts and accounts engaged in amplifying disinformation narratives about the full-scale invasion.<sup>12</sup>

Given the tendency of disinformation narratives to cross platforms and outlets to reach diverse audiences, cooperation across and between sectors is critical to building the capacity to resist and counter disinformation. The Hub was notably

Civil society organizations have leveraged diverse skill sets to form cooperative networks that have the scale, sophistication, and speed necessary to stay ahead of messages churned out by the Kremlin's multiheaded propaganda machine.

helpful to Ukrainian civil society organizations as they sought to react to Moscow's recent pivot to "hyperlocal" disinformation campaigns, wherein Russian state-controlled outlets have attempted to reach Ukrainians through content-sharing agreements with cash-strapped local news outlets and localized channels on the popular messaging application, Telegram. The Hub connected Ukrainian civil society organizations to local journalists across the country—many of whom are operating in active conflict zones—to better understand the dynamics of Russian disinformation operations in each context and design localized messaging in response.

In addition to nongovernmental organization (NGO) networks, **numerous citizen-driven initiatives have arisen to apply even more flexible, less formalized methods of collaboration in the struggle against Russian disinformation.** Examples include the "Elves" movements in Finland, Czechia, the Baltic states, and beyond, as well as the North Atlantic Fellas Organization (#NAFO). The Elves are a loose grouping of data experts, journalists, students, and interested citizens working together to expose and counter Kremlin narratives online.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, #NAFO is a Twitter-based counter-disinformation group that trolls the Russian government and the broader network of pro-Russian accounts, using provocative and sometimes absurd memes to highlight and expose—or "bonk"—the ridiculous falsehood of many Russian narratives.<sup>14</sup>

← Thread

 svbl 🇺🇦  
@svblxyz

⚡ Breaking: #Germany considers sending their entire fleet of Haunebu II to #Ukraine. According to a government spokesperson, there are no concerns about potential escalation over the supply of Rundflugzeuge and #NAFO troops will start training as soon as possible.

#WeAreNAFO



6:04 AM · Jan 24, 2023 · 9,958 Views

46 Retweets 7 Quote Tweets 327 Likes

A #NAFO Twitter post responding to Kremlin reaction to German decision to supply Ukraine with tanks.<sup>15</sup>

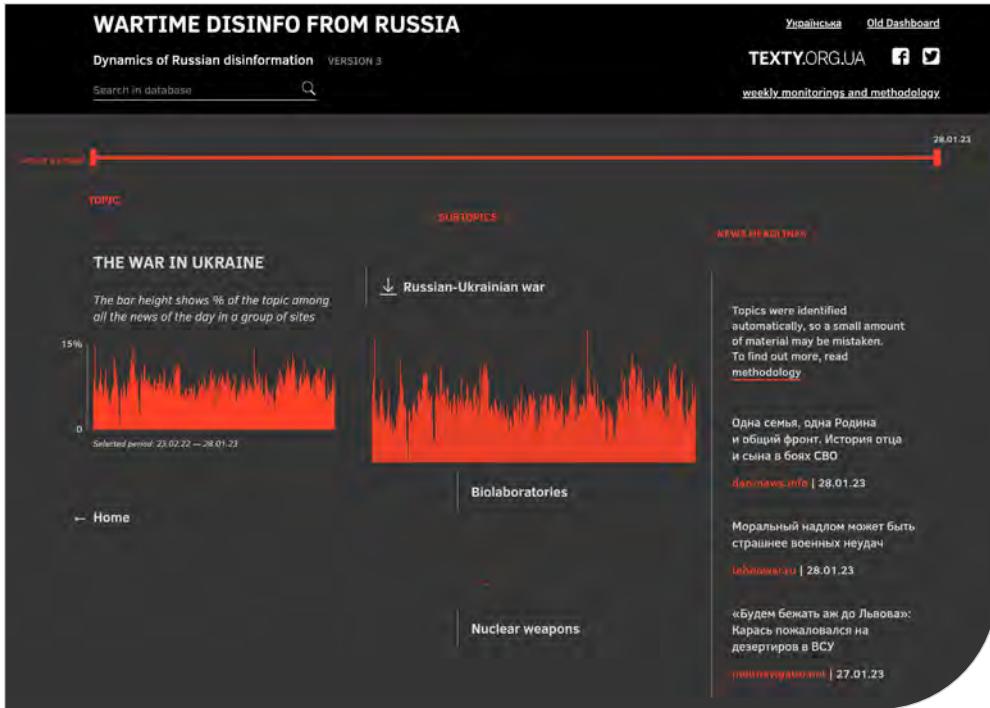
Due to their decentralized nature and considerable size, these informal groups represent a powerful extension of European efforts to counter Russian disinformation about the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. **They are also a clear expression of democratic values by a cross-border community that is determined to marginalize those who would rationalize or disseminate on behalf of authoritarian regimes.**

### 3. LEVERAGING NEW TECHNOLOGIES

It would be difficult—if not impossible—for even the most well-staffed civil society organizations to directly monitor emergent disinformation narratives across the global media ecosystem. However, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine-learning tools make it easier to rapidly detect patterns across massive data sets. **These tools are empowering disinformation researchers to pick up on new Russian narratives more quickly and giving outreach specialists more time to design an effective response before the narratives can cross channels, platforms, and outlets to reach larger audiences.** Furthermore, by facilitating analysis of the behavior of purveyors of Russian disinformation over time, AI and machine-learning tools enable counter-disinformation specialists to predict future campaigns on the basis of societal fault lines, cultural tropes, annual events, and historical knowledge. Such analysis has led to the proactive design of counter-messaging and the preparation of new democratic narratives and campaigns to address societal vulnerabilities.

For example, Texty (based in Ukraine) uses AI and machine-learning tools to identify new pro-Kremlin narratives across a number of platforms, including Telegram (an encrypted messaging application whose popularity has grown rapidly in Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion). Moscow has used Telegram at the local level to spread confusion in small communities near the front lines in advance of military assaults. Texty has used its advanced technology to rapidly perform analyses of information environments where narratives may be salient and impactful but otherwise difficult to identify and counter, and to compare the prevalence of narratives across platforms. Few other organizations have developed this capability to date, due to the technical challenges inherent in scraping data from thousands of Telegram channels and websites as well as the specialized—and at times expensive—human expertise this activity requires.

Detector Media also uses AI and machine learning to better understand Moscow's efforts in information ecosystems beyond the transatlantic community. Cooperating closely with LetsData, a Ukrainian private-sector firm that provides AI and machine-learning services, the group engages in real-time discourse monitoring in more than thirty countries. It is possible to do this work manually, but an algorithm can detect in ten seconds what might take an unassisted researcher an hour (or longer) to discover. **By coordinating narrative and audience research, public polling data, and focus groups, counter-disinformation networks can direct their efforts to the specific narratives that are empirically gaining the most traction among crucial audiences and create narrowly tailored responses that reach the right people.**



Example of [Texty's](#) public analytical dashboard showing frequency of topic daily, over time, across a sample of Russian web sites.

Any technological enhancement of empirical research efforts could clearly help counter-disinformation activists to work more efficiently and avoid wasting resources. Ksenia Iliuk, the former head of research at Detector Media and co-founder of LetsData, shared an example of how the group identifies which narratives are actually influencing public opinion and decides on an appropriate response. She noted that according to one common narrative, the autonomous Orthodox Church of Ukraine has no right to exist. "This narrative was very prevalent in terms of likes and shares," she said, "but through surveys and focus groups we learned that people—at least in Eastern Ukraine—did not distinguish between Ukrainian and Russian churches, so there was no reason to fight back on this narrative. However, in Western Ukraine, the situation was the exact opposite, necessitating a response."

The challenge of implementing technology-driven approaches more broadly within Ukraine and beyond hinges on the fact that people with the skills to design and manage such systems tend to gravitate toward the private sector, where compensation is greater and employment may seem more secure. Moreover, digital rights activists are raising valid concerns about the potential threats that AI-driven tools such as ChatGPT pose to the integrity of the information space, as they could be used to automatically generate convincing disinformation at enormous scale. That said, **AI and machine-learning capabilities do offer significant opportunities for those seeking to combat disinformation, as their cost continues to drop and the human ability to deploy them effectively becomes more commonplace** among data scientists and programmers.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT

The democratic world has much to learn from Ukraine, which has been on the front lines of the struggle between democracy and autocracy—literally and in the information space—since Russian forces first seized Crimea nine years ago. While acknowledging the challenge of measurement and attribution in disinformation and counter-disinformation campaigns,<sup>16</sup> this report offers lessons that could help accelerate learning and action as democracies respond to authoritarian efforts to spread disinformation and degrade their alliances.

Naturally, not all lessons learned in an active conflict will apply to other, non-conflict settings. The shared threat of a full-scale military assault creates unique incentives for cooperation. Voices in Ukrainian civil society are already warning that their productive collaboration with the government during the war is an unlikely model for the postwar period, when activists will shift back to a more independent stance to focus on ensuring government transparency and accountability.

That said, the government’s cooperative relationship with civil society is not unique to Ukraine: Czechia, Slovakia, and Romania also offer examples of close collaboration between government and civil society in countering Russian disinformation. Although these countries have not faced open military aggression, they are targets in Moscow’s information war. Across Central and Eastern Europe, networked approaches have been critical to the effectiveness of responses to the Kremlin’s own networked disinformation activities, which tend to focus on stirring up hatred against Ukrainian refugees and fear of reduced energy supplies. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have each crafted long-term, whole-of-society approaches to strengthening democratic institutions, with an emphasis on media-literacy training and coordination among governments, civil society, and the media.

The Beacon project, launched by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in 2016, seeks to facilitate this sort of collaboration for a wider array of civil society organizations from the Baltic to the Black Sea, stimulating joint research and tracking Russian influence activities and toxic narratives throughout the region. Working with this community, Beacon provides researchers with access to data-scraping tools, attempts to standardize research methodologies and share best practices, and fosters cross-sectoral contacts and access to decision makers in government.

As with the other aspects of counter-disinformation work discussed above, the benefits arising from collaboration between governmental and nongovernmental actors can help amplify and accelerate the overall democratic response in an environment where Russian disinformation is operating at significant speed and scale. Yet it is clear that some less democratic and more illiberal governments in the region—such as those in Georgia or Hungary—may reject engagement with or are actively opposed to independent civil society organizations.

Networked approaches have been critical to the effectiveness of responses to the Kremlin’s own networked disinformation activities.

# RUSSIA'S GLOBAL DISINFORMATION MACHINE

Russian authorities have prioritized the development of an elaborate apparatus for the dissemination of disinformation around the globe, delivering Kremlin narratives to ordinary citizens and policymakers alike. Over the past year, its primary aim has been to deflect attention from the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, blame Kyiv or NATO countries for the conflict, and dampen support for Ukraine's cause. Russian government investment in the information space has yielded far greater results in regions—such as Latin America and Africa—where the Kremlin's toxic messaging goes virtually unchallenged as a result of political, economic, and historical ties to Moscow.

In Latin America, the Russian government has continued to intensify its manipulation of public opinion through the use of friendly local influencers on Facebook and Twitter.<sup>17</sup> A national poll in Argentina found that as of March 2022, 43 percent of respondents did not agree with the United States and Europe sending arms to Ukraine, while only 37 percent agreed with this decision.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, the authoritarian regimes in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua have shown consistent support for their Russian partner at the United Nations (UN).<sup>19</sup>

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has visited Africa twice since the February 2022 invasion in order to solidify ties with key governments and opinion makers. Leaders in a number of African countries have declined to voice support for Ukraine, backtracked on earlier critiques of Moscow's actions,<sup>20</sup> or openly sided with Russian diplomats at the UN, despite the war's impact on their food security and world energy prices.<sup>21</sup>

Activists, journalists, and civil society organizations that are focused on the information space in these two regions may find opportunities to draw on the experience of the Ukrainians and their allies in Central and Eastern Europe, where disinformation—whether of Russian or another origin—is being used to undermine democracies.

There is little evidence to suggest that the leadership in Moscow or like-minded authoritarian regimes will change course in their efforts to spread disinformation about the invasion of Ukraine. Given the significant payoff derived from their relatively inexpensive and low-risk disinformation activities to date, these regimes can be expected to continue to exploit asymmetries that enable them to sow confusion in information spaces worldwide.

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## DEMOCRACY REQUIRES A SHARED REALITY

The threat Moscow's disinformation machine poses is clear. While its claims about Ukraine typically defy observable reality, they are a critical component of the Kremlin's information space strategy, which aims to unmoor societal perceptions from fact-based reporting and experience, undermining the very concept of knowable truth. Philippine journalist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa has explained the potential consequences of such campaigns: "Without truth, you can't have trust. Without trust, we have no shared reality, no democracy, and it becomes impossible to deal with our world's existential problems."<sup>22</sup> Given the high stakes, it is critical that democratic societies work together to affirmatively and purposefully confront this challenge.



"Without truth, you can't have trust. Without trust, we have no shared reality, no democracy, and it becomes impossible to deal with our world's existential problems."

—Maria Ressa, Philippine journalist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate



# MEETING THE RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION THREAT: UKRAINIAN CIVIL SOCIETY'S ADAPTATIONS DURING FULL-SCALE WAR

// GALYNA PETRENKO, DETECTOR MEDIA

## 2022: ADAPTING TO WAR

A survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in May 2022 showed that the vast majority of Ukrainians do not believe in Russian disinformation narratives. Notably, 96 percent of respondents said that the Kremlin was responsible for the destruction of Ukrainian civilian infrastructure and civilian casualties during its unprovoked full-scale invasion.<sup>1</sup> This response may seem obvious, but past surveys conducted since 2014 have indicated that a significant proportion of Ukrainians have been susceptible to such disinformation. In particular, according to an annual, nationwide survey commissioned in 2019, only roughly fifty percent of Ukrainians understood that Russia started the war in Donbas. Thanks largely to the efforts of civil society organizations working to address Russian information manipulation, this number increased to 68 percent by late 2021.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, Ukrainian civil society has not stopped challenging Kremlin disinformation, which has aimed to justify the invasion, demean Ukrainians, and degrade Ukrainian solidarity. Organizations such as StopFake have continued to fact-check Russian fake news narratives; the Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group at the Ukraine Crisis Media Center has continued to research and publicize key Russian disinformation tactics; Texty has similarly expanded its data-driven journalistic

coverage of disinformation and data security issues in Ukraine; and Internews Ukraine has advanced UkraineWorld—a multi-media project in English that works to familiarize the world with the Ukrainian perspective and highlight the absurdity of Russian narratives.

My organization, Detector Media, monitors and analyzes media content for Russian influence and disinformation, and shares our findings through new public-facing content such as “NewsPalm,” a comedy show on YouTube, a joint program with Ukrainske Radio (the Ukrainian Public Broadcaster) entitled “Russian Fake, F\*\*\* Yourself,” as well as the #DisinfoChronicle,<sup>3</sup> a daily aggregator of disinformation cases being debunked by different civil society organizations.

Given the rapidly increasing usage of Telegram as a source of news for Ukrainians—the platform went from being the eighth most popular messaging service in Ukraine before the war to being *the most* popular since the invasion began<sup>4</sup>—many Ukrainian civil society organizations have begun to track and respond to Russia’s efforts to utilize the platform to spread disinformation, working closely with private sector partners with critical data scraping and machine learning capabilities.<sup>5</sup>

On the whole, since the full-scale invasion began, **Ukrainian organizations that worked to build public awareness about Russian disinformation and its harmful effects on Ukrainians have grown their audiences significantly, as part of the growing demand for Ukrainian-language video content on social networks, including explainers on Ukrainian history and culture.**<sup>6</sup> Thanks to these concerted efforts to engage the public, many Ukrainians are now more aware of civil society’s work in the information space. According to an Internews study conducted from July to September 2022, more than a quarter of respondents were familiar with fact-checking services.<sup>7</sup> Respondents mentioned relying on StopFake, Detector Media, No Lies, On the Other Side of News, Vox Check, and Texty to verify the news media they consumed.



NewsPalm host, Yurko Kosmyna, discusses the protests against the Ukrainian government for banning Viktor Medvedchuk’s TV channels from being broadcast in the country—the latter has been identified as a key spreader of Russian disinformation.

## **2014-2022: DEVELOPING NEW CAPABILITIES AND PARTNERSHIPS**

The foundations for the effectiveness of Ukrainian civil society's efforts to counter Russian disinformation in 2022 were laid during the preceding eight years, as many organizations honed their skills and built their networks. Ukrainian civil society's counter disinformation operations have evolved from journalistic fact-checking to the development of data-driven methods and approaches to identifying and responding to disinformation narratives through new machine learning and data analytics capabilities across a complex and evolving information space.

This evolution took place with the help of coordinating initiatives like the establishment of the National Democratic Institute's Countering Disinformation Hub and the Zinc Network's Open Information Partnership in 2019, as well as through the participation of experts from other, related professions such as journalism, linguistics, and data science. At the same time, the establishment of state-backed institutions to combat disinformation—one of which was led by a former civil society activist—speaks to the important influence Ukrainian civil society has over the evolution of the Ukrainian state's approach to disinformation. For example, the Center for Strategic Communications within Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, has worked to bring civil society and government actors together to jointly monitor and counter Russian narratives. Its existence highlights how vital civil society's role has become in combatting disinformation in Ukraine, and emphasizes how widely acknowledged civil society expertise has become, in contrast to earlier times when the government paid little attention to so-called "third sector" organizations.

The establishment of state-backed institutions to combat disinformation—one of which was led by a former civil society activist—speaks to the important influence Ukrainian civil society has over the evolution of the Ukrainian state's approach to disinformation.

## **THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT**

Government authorities' recognition of Ukrainian civil society's expertise in matters related to the information space did not arise solely from counter-disinformation work; it was also driven by important public policy debates related to media and freedom of speech in Ukraine. In 2019, an anti-disinformation law was drafted for public comment, which instead of defeating disinformation, would have created significant risks for journalists and threats to civil society. Due in large part to civil society resistance, the law was not adopted. In late 2022, a related piece of legislation, "On Media," was passed into law, which expands the purview of the Ukrainian government's media regulator

over online media outlets. This law was supported by the majority of media-related civil society organizations and international donors for its expansion of democratic accountability in the information space. At the same time, it has been criticized by journalistic organizations for its potential to become a tool of incumbent political forces.

Similarly, the onset of martial law in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion, including government-enforced limitations on media operations, has been controversial within and beyond Ukraine, but has clearly helped to rid the Ukrainian information space of harmful Russian disinformation. Although civil society rejoiced at the diminished presence of Russian disinformation narratives in the country's media landscape, there was also an immediate recognition of the importance of tempering the government's efforts to exert excessive control over the media.

Finally, one of the most significant results of joint civil society-government efforts was the establishment of a disinformation narrative database by civil society, which used this resource to advocate for the Ukrainian government's ban on three TV channels in 2020—all of which were closely associated with the Kremlin-aligned oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk—due to their systematic efforts to advance disinformation narratives. This decision was criticized by some in the international community as an attack on freedom of speech, but a broad swathe of Ukrainian society has agreed it was necessary to protect Ukraine's information space during war time.

## LEARNING FROM UKRAINE'S EXPERIENCE

The Ukrainian experience may offer the following lessons for civil society in other contexts to prepare for crises and associated authoritarian information threats:

**Expand the target audience of strategic communications:** Observing the efficiency of strategic communications in Ukraine, civil society worldwide can borrow from these approaches and strategies to better lobby state authorities to tackle issues of importance to them—including countering authoritarian disinformation. The Ukrainian approach to international communications was initially designed to solidify support domestically. It has since evolved to focus on generating support among the publics and leaderships of countries across Europe and North America. In addition to expanding geographic focus, Ukrainian civil society organizations are currently engaged in efforts to respond to an evolving information space, developing [tools to monitor TikTok, where Russian disinformation about Ukraine is proliferating](#).

**Strive for greater transparency:** Work to increase the editorial and financial transparency of the media industry in order to discover the malign influence of political and foreign funding. **Civil society should aim to address the economic incentives for spreading disinformation** by stimulating the self-regulation of local advertising industries in order to exclude outlets and bloggers that spread disinformation from their media sectors.

**Be cautious of authoritarian methods of countering disinformation:**

Disinformation can seem unstoppable, especially when long-term methods of building citizen resilience such as media literacy may take years to show results.

**An inability to make headway could lead to a move toward the application of more radical measures that could ultimately violate freedom of speech,** for instance, advocating for laws which may create the risk of criminal liability for journalists or users of social networks. The Kremlin's war of aggression in Ukraine has relied on the same barbaric tactics as wars of the previous century, but the information environment has changed significantly and society derives greater benefit from an open information environment rather than one oriented toward censorship.

**Grappling with authoritarian-aligned media outlets:** Harmful authoritarian, state-backed entities do not produce journalism or news as understood in a democratic context. Instead, they function as components of state propaganda machines that serve the interest of narrow political powers. Politicians, even during war time, may be rightfully concerned that banning such outlets will be seen as an attack on the freedom of speech. In other cases, political decision makers may think that banning a couple of TV channels backed by a hostile, authoritarian regime is a "silver bullet" that can resolve their country's disinformation problem. Neither scenario paints the full picture, and **civil society should aim to explain the difference between propaganda outlets and journalistic organizations to the public and to policymakers in advance of any move to restrict or censor information outlets.**

**Take legal action:** Support Ukraine's efforts to punish Russian propagandists in the International Criminal Court for incitement to war. Hold them accountable.

**If such actors are punished, it may deter other authoritarian regimes from spreading disinformation to generate conflict.**

The Kremlin's war of aggression in Ukraine has relied on the same barbaric tactics as wars of the previous century, but the information environment has changed significantly and society derives greater benefit from an open information environment rather than one oriented toward censorship.



# CIVIL SOCIETY INFORMATION OPERATIONS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE IN THE FACE OF THE RUSSIAN HYBRID THREAT

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## MOSCOW'S HYBRID WAR

February 24, 2022 marks the *official* start of Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since last February, the Russian military has attacked and greatly damaged Ukraine's medical infrastructure,<sup>1</sup> the country's GDP has dropped precipitously,<sup>2</sup> thousands of Ukrainians have been killed in the conflict,<sup>3,4</sup> and equal numbers of children have been forcibly displaced.<sup>5</sup> Despite the world's increased focus on events in Ukraine since the beginning of the invasion, the war actually started in March 2014, when the Kremlin attacked and occupied parts of the Donbas and Crimea. This aggressive military action took place in the wake of Ukraine's *Revolution of Dignity*, which began in November 2013.

In 2014, Moscow also intensified its "hybrid" war—coercion through trade, systematic corruption of elites, and information operations—against Central and Eastern European countries to undermine European support for Ukraine and broadly diminish trust in democratic institutions across the region. In the information space, disinformation campaigns and the use of state propaganda channels served as conduits for the Kremlin to spread hatred and sow division among Western societies. Despite its many vectors, the hybrid threat was not taken seriously by all of the governments in the region—even immediately following

the start of Russian military aggression in 2014. While the Baltic countries and Poland have warned the West consistently about the dangers of Russian malign information influence, some governments considered this issue to be a problem for Eastern European democracies alone and did not adequately acknowledge the threat it posed to their own national security.

Lacking timely action at the government level, civil society organizations led efforts to counter Moscow's information operations and influence more broadly. It is important to consider how a range of organizations in the region reacted to the Russian hybrid threat, focusing on information operations since the 2014 invasion and occupation Crimea and parts of the Donbas. It is also vital to describe what civil society organizations in this part of Europe did in response to this hybrid threat between 2014 and 2022; explain how they reacted to the Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022; and offer recommendations to governments across Central and Eastern Europe on what to do next and what role civil society organizations should play in countering Kremlin-backed malign information operations.

Civil society organizations led efforts to counter Moscow's information operations and influence more broadly.

## **REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' OPERATIONS BETWEEN 2014-2022**

While a number of groups and individual experts raised concerns about the threat of Kremlin-backed military aggression before 2014, it was only after the annexation of Crimea that civil society in Central and Eastern Europe understood the nature and full extent of this threat and began to mobilize against Moscow's information influence and disinformation campaigns. Ukrainian pioneers in fact-checking, such as StopFake, inspired many other civil society organizations in the region to begin public-facing, fact-checking activities to counter emergent disinformation narratives and build societal resilience to them over time. From 2015 through 2016, civil society organizations released reports that described what disinformation campaigns looked like, outlined their methods and channels, and offered ideas on how to combat them.<sup>6</sup>

Regional nongovernmental organizations became the first and most frequent contributors to the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force's EUvsDisinfo database, helping the European Union (EU) to collect examples of Russian disinformation, which had only recently been identified and described adequately. As a result, a large open source and regularly updated database of disinformation campaigns from all over Europe became available for researchers and experts trying to understand the phenomenon, which was still considered rather new. Based on this data, it was also much easier to compare Kremlin disinformation efforts in different regions, countries, and channels.

December 2, 2022  
press conference  
with the Independent  
International  
Commission of  
Inquiry on Ukraine  
in Kyiv.



Civil society organizations across the region have continued to learn from Ukraine's example, where civil society has piloted innovative methods to combat Russian disinformation. Besides StopFake, which served as great inspiration for Central and Eastern Europe-based fact-checkers, the Ukraine Crisis Media Center, another noteworthy organization, has worked diligently to raise awareness about Kremlin disinformation and propaganda, as well as how these malign activities fall into the larger framework of Moscow's hybrid warfare tactics. Detector Media is another exemplary organization. It was among the few that tried to effectively reach out to and counter disinformation in the occupied territories.

Central and Eastern Europe think tanks and civil society organizations have also gleaned best practices from Ukraine to inform their own advocacy in Western capitals. One notable effort to collect such lessons is The Prague Manual.<sup>7</sup> This document analyzed both positive and negative developments across Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, in countering Russian disinformation in various fields, including fact-checking, media literacy, and even state responses.

Regional civil society activists were not as surprised by the invasion of Ukraine as many Western governments, which had overlooked increased military posturing by Russian armed forces and accompanying, Kremlin-backed disinformation campaigns. French President Emmanuel Macron<sup>8</sup> and Czech President Miloš Zeman<sup>9</sup> were among the Western leaders who declared publicly that Moscow would not order the invasion of Ukraine up to the last days prior to the beginning of the conflict. **Civil society was able to mobilize existing activist communities and leverage the experience of Ukrainian organizations who had prepared for war-time challenges for several years**, not only by

developing new fact-checking techniques and tools for disinformation analysis, but also by conducting large-scale awareness raising activities and engaging with citizens of the occupied territories of Donbas to counter disinformation on the ground.

As part of this activism, our organization, the European Values Center for Security Policy, started a program called Information Defense Hub (IDH),<sup>10</sup> which was created in response to the invasion. The project has provided Ukrainian experts who have fled the country with a safe environment to use their knowledge and expertise to counter the Kremlin's influence and connect with European counterparts in the security field, as well as policymakers and journalists who write about Russian malign influence in the region. **Ukrainian experts' insight and detailed knowledge of Kremlin's influence operations and operational contacts inside Ukraine helped provide fact-based analytical information about Kremlin aggression, including information warfare.**

Similar initiatives were launched in other Central and Eastern Europe countries. The Poland-based Ukraine Monitor Program,<sup>11</sup> for instance, works in a similar fashion to the IDH project and serves as another example of creating safe spaces of operation for experts countering Russian influence.

Organizations across the [Central and East European] region have built communities of governmental and nongovernmental experts, policymakers, and journalists to raise awareness and establish a shared understanding of Russian disinformation.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF GOVERNMENTAL AND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

In addition to the many advances in civil society operations, **the extent to which civil society across Central and Eastern Europe has been able to collaborate with governments in the region underpins their larger success in countering Kremlin-backed disinformation and interference campaigns**—or at least in not hampering each other's efforts. While this shift is certainly not the only factor that has strengthened regional activism, it highlights the region's openness to use whole-of-society approaches and focus on countering disinformation and malign influence in a comprehensive manner, using all possible capabilities in areas such as strategic communication, cyber-security, media literacy, and support for independent media, among others.

The Baltic countries provide illustrative examples of where this dynamic has yielded results in the long term.<sup>12</sup> Lithuanian civil society organizations such as Res Publica, Civic Resilience Initiative (CRI), and Debunk.org, for instance, have cooperated with the government on matters of civil society information resilience, media literacy, and cyber security to great effect. Of particular note, CRI provides educational materials on media literacy and related topics to different age groups of Lithuanian society with which official institutions fail to consistently engage.<sup>13</sup>

In recent years, organizations across the region have built communities of governmental and nongovernmental experts, policymakers, and journalists, among others, to raise awareness and establish a shared understanding of Russian disinformation. These activist communities have also recommended potential policy responses to this threat and advocated for more proactive government action in response to Moscow's information warfare.

Despite these efforts, there are also cases of Central and Eastern Europe governments that only recently started to take the threat of disinformation seriously—usually due to significant changes in their government.

Consequently, many (dis)information experts from civil society moved into official roles within state government. Slovakia is an instructive example of this phenomenon. The country's security sector is fairly small and interconnected. Now, many former civil society experts work for the civil service, and these connections enable more effective information sharing.

Moreover, some countries have been unsupportive—or even actively hostile—toward civil society. The Hungarian government, for instance, has attempted to shut down and harass civil society to discourage local activism. The closure of civic spaces in Central and Eastern Europe undermines regional civil society efforts to map the Kremlin's information operations, propaganda, and illicit connections to decision makers. Despite this setback, regional organizations, like Political Capital in Hungary, continue their important work.

In such contexts, without the support of local and national policymakers, **it is crucial for civil society organizations to participate in regional and international networks for information and research sharing about Kremlin influence, share findings with international donors, and nurture relationships with civil society organizations from other countries for support, collaboration, and advocacy assistance abroad.** Platforms and organizations like the Open Information Partnership<sup>14</sup> or European Digital Media Observatory<sup>15</sup> can provide civil society organizations with financing, real-time information sharing, and capacity-building. They may also have additional value especially if these organizations are unable to receive any kind of domestic support.

Despite the numerous examples of civil society-government collaboration, democratic governments must take the baton and advance what civil society began in the years before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Governments have more resources and the ability to operate strategically in the long-term. They can also encourage additional investment by focusing all sectors of society on the challenge: public, private, and non-profit. Furthermore, governments must invest in clear and transparent strategic communication about the Kremlin's disinformation and malign influence campaigns—as well as that which originates in other authoritarian regimes—to the broader public to rebuild trust. **Popular trust in state institutions is a critical keystone of a resilient society that can resist the hybrid influence of authoritarian regimes and uphold democratic values and unity.**

The closure of civic spaces in Central and Eastern Europe undermines regional civil society efforts to map the Kremlin's information operations, propaganda, and illicit connections to decision makers.

Governments should not—and cannot—counter Moscow’s malign influence alone. Mutual cooperation of government representatives, civil society organizations, and the private sector should be encouraged, whether through government officials using methods and research championed by counter-disinformation civil society organizations, or the hiring of experts from civil society and the private sector where a country’s civil service lacks the resources to address this challenge efficiently. Such measures benefit both state governments and society writ-large. Smaller countries such as Czechia, Slovakia, and the Baltic states do not have sufficient intelligence operations capacities to monitor Russian disinformation, analyze it across platforms and narratives, and create policies to counter its influence on their own. Thus, regional civil society organizations will and must continue to play a critical and complementary role to fill the gap and advance this important work.

Mutual cooperation of government representatives, civil society organizations, and the private sector should be encouraged.

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## **Meeting the Russian Disinformation Threat: Ukrainian Civil Society's Adaptations during Full-Scale War**

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- 11 For more information, please consult the "Ukraine Monitor" webpage, operated by the Warsaw Institute: <https://warsawinstitute.org/programs/ukraine-monitor/>.
- 12 For more information, please refer to this study on the successes (and challenges) the Baltic countries face in their efforts to counter disinformation: Dmitri Teprik et al., "Resilience Against Disinformation."
- 13 For information, please visit the Civic Resilience Initiative's homepage online: <https://cri.lt/#about>.
- 14 For more information, please see the Open Information Partnership homepage online: <https://openinformationpartnership.org/>.
- 15 For more information, please visit the European Digital Media Observatory's homepage online: <https://edmo.eu/>.

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