

## HOW TO COUNTERACT RUSSIA'S INFORMATION INFLUENCE ON UKRAINIANS IN THE EU?

### Author:

Mykhailo Drapak

### Contributors to the research:

Sofia Huk, Daryna Korzh, Yaroslava Mukha

*Citizens of Ukraine living abroad can either be agents of advocacy and representation of their country in the international arena or objects of negative influence of Russian disinformation and propaganda. Given the number of Ukrainians who left for EU countries after the outbreak of the great war in 2022, the United Europe is the place that is most likely to be the focus of the authors and disseminators of the Kremlin's agenda. At the same time, identifying Russian information influences on and against Ukrainian citizens is quite a challenge due to the countless and ever-changing message flows. In this case, it is still possible to successfully combat the consequences of such malignant activities. But effective counteraction to Kremlin disinformation in the EU also requires prevention of negative narratives and false messages on a particular topic.*

### Introduction

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as of the beginning of June 2023, more than 6.3 million Ukrainian citizens who fled the Russian invasion were recorded worldwide (in the first months of the great war, the number was higher, but many people returned home), of whom almost 4.1 million ended up in EU countries. At the same time, the number of those who applied for asylum or other protection mechanisms in the countries of the United Europe amounted to more than 4.8 million people. Most Ukrainian refugees were registered in Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic<sup>1</sup>. It is also worth noting that even before the Great War, the EU was a popular migration destination for Ukrainians. As of the end of 2021, more than 1.5 million Ukrainian citizens had residence permits in the EU, ranking them as the third largest national group in the United Europe.

Such indicators demonstrate that the EU is the space that Ukrainians primarily sought to enter in pursuit of safety. This can be explained by both geographical and cultural proximity and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

the previous level of partnership between the Ukrainian state and EU countries, which resulted in simpler mechanisms for refugees' adaptation. In this context, it is worth mentioning that European countries were the most popular destination for Ukrainian labor migrants<sup>2</sup> and tourists<sup>3</sup> as of 2021. Another important factor that contributed to the choice of Ukrainian citizens in favor of the EU countries as a place of temporary residence was the willingness of the bloc's leadership and these countries to support Ukrainian partners. This applies to both refugee protection programs and political, economic, military, and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine since the first days of the full-scale war<sup>4</sup>. These conditions could have had a positive impact on the choice of Ukrainian citizens.

Meanwhile, the described possible reasons why refugees from Ukraine chose EU countries for temporary residence, along with the number of Ukrainian citizens there, make these people a desirable target for Russian malignant information influence. First, this is a vulnerable social category whose representatives are outside the information field of their homeland and are often experiencing difficult life circumstances. In this case, these people may not be adequately protected from disinformation, and may not have sufficient data/resources to check messages. One of the consequences of this may be discrediting their own country based on false information. Second, Ukrainian citizens abroad, while maintaining ties with their home country, can act as repeaters of messages and narratives received in their host countries. Thus, they can become an alternative channel of influence on the information field of Ukraine. Third, disinformation aimed at and against Ukrainians in Europe can indirectly sway social attitudes in EU countries. In this case, the goal may be to reduce the level of support for Ukraine by societies and political leaders in the EU. In this context, it should be recalled that the EU as a whole and its member states together are the second key providers of military, economic and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine after February 24, 2022, after the United States<sup>5</sup>.

The combination of these factors can also create long-term negative consequences from Russia's detrimental information impact on Ukrainians in the EU. The systematic discrediting of Ukraine in messages to these people can lead to disillusionment with their country and, as a result, to their reluctance to return after the war, to their further spreading of anti-Ukrainian narratives that are harmful to external support for post-war recovery. Moreover, in the long run, such negative information influence could have adverse consequences for the EU as a whole and individual member states, as by building trust in its disinformation among Ukrainians (or certain groups of Ukrainians) in the United Europe, the Kremlin will have loyal communities capable of undermining the stability and unity of European countries and the bloc as a whole.

The above reasons make it essential to study the existing channels of influence of Russian disinformation on Ukrainian citizens in the EU. Currently, counteraction to this process is more of a response to individual messages and already popular narratives that have partially or fully achieved their goals. Undoubtedly, in the face of the lies spread by Russia, this method

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-ukraintsi-robot-a-v-rosii/31631852.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tourism.gov.ua/blog/4-2-mln-inozemciv-ta-14-7-mln-ukrayinciv-dani-pro-peretin-derzhavnogo-kordonu-za-2021-rik>

<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/fs\\_22\\_3862](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/fs_22_3862)

<sup>5</sup> [https://app.23degrees.io/view/5V9AdDpw1pmLxo1e-bar-stacked-horizontal-figure-1\\_csv](https://app.23degrees.io/view/5V9AdDpw1pmLxo1e-bar-stacked-horizontal-figure-1_csv)

is the most accessible and justified for promoters of truth. Yet, the issue of building mechanisms that would prevent the spread of disinformation and malignant narratives favorable to the Kremlin remains unresolved.

## Channels of Russian Information Influence in the EU

Russia is constantly using information as a weapon to exert influence on other states, regardless of whether these actions coincide with kinetic aggressive actions. This process has been evident for at least the last ten years. It is based on the doctrine formulated by the current Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, the man responsible for the war crimes of the Russian military in Ukraine, Valery Gerasimov. According to him, information impact (which includes both cyber operations and propaganda) on other states can be more successful in implementing nefarious plans than traditional military operations. The doctrine also stipulates that such activities do not depend on whether the background is peacetime or wartime—they are carried out at all times<sup>6</sup>. The purpose of such actions is to undermine objective truth, eliminate the ability to respond to the lies being spread, and destabilize societies by weakening the morale and confidence of citizens<sup>7</sup>. In a broad sense, the Russian information influence machine seeks to establish reflexive control over other states, i.e., the ability to direct and predict the actions of various national actors, transform and undermine their decision-making systems<sup>8</sup>.

Globally, Ukraine has been the main target of the Kremlin’s information campaign in recent years. This is evidenced by the number and intensity of cyberattacks<sup>9</sup> perpetrated by Russian hackers, as well as the developed media network and the logic of message dissemination<sup>10</sup>. This circumstance can be explained by the fact that in recent decades, the Kremlin has viewed Ukraine as a key outpost for expanding and strengthening its geopolitical positions and has tried to subjugate the state with less cost than direct military action (even the full-scale invasion of 2022 was primarily based on the hypothesis that the key “occupation work” would be done by preliminary information influence and loyal local actors<sup>11</sup>).

Meanwhile, Western states—primarily the United States and EU member states—have also been constantly targeted of Russian malignant information influence over the past decade, although it differed from the Ukrainian case in terms of intensity and limitations of available resources (number of loyal actors, language barrier and lower popularity of Russian media, existing problems for exploitation, etc.) In particular, Kremlin propaganda in Europe consistently played on the themes of migration, terrorism, social protests (such as the Yellow

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Bagge, *Unmasking Maskirovka: Russia’s Cyber Influence Operations* (New York, New York: Defense Press, 2019)

<sup>7</sup> Keir Giles, *The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare* (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016); Keir Giles, *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare*, Research Division (NATO Defense College, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Samantha Mullaney, *Everything Flows: Russian Information Warfare Forms and Tactics*. *The Cyber Defense Review*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (FALL 2022), pp. 193-212

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.csis.org/programs/strategic-technologies-program/significant-cyber-incidents>

<sup>10</sup> <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/02/24/how-western-democracies-can-combat-russia-s-ukraine-disinformation-pub-86523/> Samantha Mullaney, *Everything Flows: Russian Information Warfare Forms and Tactics*. *The Cyber Defense Review*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (FALL 2022), pp. 193-212

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/interactive/2022/ukraine-road-to-war/?itid=hp-top-table-main>

Vest protests in France)<sup>12</sup>, and intensified during the elections in the United States and the EU, undermining social trust and democratic procedures<sup>13</sup>. At the same time, Russian information influence in the countries that were under Soviet control in the twentieth century was more powerful and generally successful, as it relied on the exploitation of loyal local actors and established cultural ties<sup>14</sup>. This does not diminish the importance of developing mechanisms to counter such influence in other EU countries, but it does point to weaker links in the information security system and potential targets for more intense malignant operations.

The EU institutions, followed by the member states, imposed the most visible and decisive restriction against Russian harmful information activities immediately after the start of Russia's major invasion of Ukraine. In early March 2022, the EU Council suspended the operation of two groups of Russian state-owned media outlets, RT and Sputnik, on the grounds that these media outlets had been spreading disinformation and manipulation against the EU and its member states<sup>15</sup>. Previously, the United Europe, although recognizing the danger of consistent negative information influence from the Kremlin, limited itself to reactive steps to counteract it, e.g. by launching the East StratCom Task Force under the umbrella of the European External Action Service<sup>16</sup>. This was a circumstance that, according to the Gerasimov Doctrine, was exploited by Russia, acting against peaceful opponents using wartime logic and using procedural restrictions on societies that care about democracy, the rule of law, freedom, and human rights. In March 2022, the EU took a step typical of crisis times and recognized Russia's sustained information aggression against it.

The suspension of RT and Sputnik in the EU has yielded results. The first report of the European External Action Service on the threats of foreign information manipulation and interference, published in February 2023, shows that in March-September 2022, the volume of Russian disinformation operations against the EU dropped to a minimum, but revived in October and continued to grow<sup>17</sup>. In other words, the bloc failed to solve the problem by suspending the broadcast of certain media outlets. Obviously, the fight against Russian malignant information influence requires constant refinement of countermeasures. First, the two media holdings mentioned above are not the only centralized means of Kremlin propaganda abroad directly linked to the Russian state. Of course, the distinguishing feature of all RT and Sputnik resources is that they could produce content in languages that people in different European countries understand and about issues that are close to them. However, there are still conditions for broadcasting other Russian channels in the EU, for example, Perviy and NTV Mir are still included in the packages of cable networks of some operators in the states (although they produce content in Russian)<sup>18</sup>. Second, after the shock of the first half of 2022, Russian information influence in the EU was able to adapt and reconfigure its distribution network. A number of "media clones"—new legal entities—were registered in the EU countries, and part of the RT and Sputnik teams were transferred to them. Also, some

<sup>12</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/key-narratives-in-pro-kremlin-disinformation/>

<sup>13</sup> Bilyana Lilly. Russian Information Warfare. Assault on Democracies in the Cyber Wild West. Naval Institute Press, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/about/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/EEAS-DataTeam-ThreatReport-2023..pdf>

<sup>18</sup> [http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Octopus\\_Bulgaria.pdf](http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Octopus_Bulgaria.pdf) and [http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Octopus\\_RO\\_.pdf](http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Octopus_RO_.pdf)

of the employees of these media outlets joined related media outlets whose activities were not banned (particularly in Germany). Added to this is the opening and consolidation of RT's broadcasting capabilities in Latin America and Africa, which, with Spanish and French-language content, can also reach European audiences<sup>19</sup>. Besides, the network of directly affiliated and loyal to Russian state media profiles and communities on social media, primarily on Facebook and Telegram, was barely affected by the EU blockade<sup>20</sup>.

Monitoring data from Microsoft's Digital Threat Analysis Center shows that the ecosystem of Russian information influence actors in the EU remains intact and active. At its core are Russian state media (some of which are directly linked to law enforcement agencies) and private (oligarchic) media outlets loyal to the Kremlin (broadcasting in Russian). Some publications are directly related to them or their content is constantly used by individual publications that work with English, Spanish, and French-speaking audiences, among others<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, the above-mentioned report of the European External Action Service on the threats of foreign information manipulation and interference indicates that the activities of this media system are based on an extensive network of accounts on various social networks and content platforms—Telegram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, RuTube, Odysee, TikTok, Vimeo, etc. This system features both profiles directly affiliated with Russian media (or their personnel) and those not explicitly linked to them. Russian diplomatic missions in the EU are also active in spreading disinformation and manipulation on social media, and were particularly active in this regard in the first months of Russia's major invasion of Ukraine due to the blocking of Kremlin media in Europe<sup>22</sup>. Finally, as the authors of the study "Major pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives and their transmitters in Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia" point out, there are also local political and civic actors loyal to the Kremlin in the EU who help maintain Russian information influence<sup>23</sup>.

Data from the EEAS's monitoring of Kremlin disinformation in 2022 indicate that Russian information influence agents in the EU use a variety of languages (at least 16 official EU languages and the use of Ukrainian were recorded). However, in more than two-thirds of the cases, the messages disseminated were in Russian and English. Along with that, the authors of this study pointed out that Russia's information influence on EU countries does not necessarily seek to achieve quick results. In other words, Russian media operations are not isolated from each other, they do not fully end with the spread of messages and the emergence of certain reactions in the targeted groups. In general, these actions are aimed at exempting [Russia] from criticism and accusations, confusing citizens, dividing social groups, distorting facts and diverting attention [from messages unpleasant for the Kremlin]<sup>24</sup>. This tactic is consistent with the logic of establishing reflexive control over countries. Accordingly, Russian information influence requires constant monitoring and counteraction. Therefore, the European External Action Service proposes to consider not just cases of [Russian and other] disinformation, but a holistic and ongoing process of foreign information manipulation and

<sup>19</sup> <https://jam-news.net/russian-media-clones-in-europe/>

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/AMO\\_Pro-Russian-Narratives-in-Czech-Republic-Slovakia-and-Poland.pdf](https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/AMO_Pro-Russian-Narratives-in-Czech-Republic-Slovakia-and-Poland.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> <https://miburo.substack.com/p/russias-propaganda-and-disinformation>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/EEAS-DataTeam-ThreatReport-2023..pdf>

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/AMO\\_Pro-Russian-Narratives-in-Czech-Republic-Slovakia-and-Poland.pdf](https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/AMO_Pro-Russian-Narratives-in-Czech-Republic-Slovakia-and-Poland.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/EEAS-DataTeam-ThreatReport-2023..pdf>

interference (FIMI), consisting of individual disinformation operations<sup>25</sup>.

## Russian Information Influence on Ukrainians in the EU

In terms of potential Russian malignant information influence against Ukrainians in the EU, one should pay attention to the topic of Ukrainian refugees as the most accessible for exploitation by the Kremlin. Monitoring data on Kremlin propaganda in 2022 by the European External Action Service<sup>26</sup>, Ukraine Crisis Media Center<sup>27</sup>, and the Center for Strategic Communications of the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine<sup>28</sup> show that Russian disinformation was often focused on the issue of Ukrainian citizens' stay in the United Europe. At the same time, narratives and messages on this topic were far from being the most popular and widely used over the past year. This is also evidenced by the East StratCom Task Force's sample of Russian disinformation targeting Ukrainian refugees from February 2022 to June 2023: out of 1,432 recorded messages related to Ukraine, only 11 were about Ukrainian refugees.

The most widespread narratives of Russian propaganda about Ukrainians who have found temporary refuge in the EU were that they pose a threat to the national security and order of European states (in terms of social problems, security, and healthcare), that they are neo-Nazis and Russophobes, that they profit from social assistance or ungratefully neglect the conditions created for them. Such reports were most common in Poland and, to a lesser extent, in Germany and Bulgaria<sup>29</sup>. The latter circumstance can be explained by both the number of Ukrainians in these countries and the well-established system of Russian information influence tools in them. It should be noted that such narratives can be viewed as seeking to complicate the stay of Ukrainian citizens in the EU and split European societies on the issue of their protection, and their goal can be seen as undermining the support of Ukraine by the EU states.

Meanwhile, Russia's malignant information influence on Ukrainians in the EU can be viewed from another perspective. For this, it is worth recalling the data presented in the previous section: more than two-thirds of Kremlin disinformation messages in the EU are in Russian and English, the languages in which most Ukrainian citizens abroad can consume content without barriers. Accordingly, the recipients of such influence can be not only citizens of European countries, but also Ukrainians. The East StratCom Task Force's observations of Russian propaganda in recent years show that before 2022, negative narratives about Ukraine were an important part of the Kremlin's information activities in the EU, but not the dominant or key one—the target of aggression was the bloc itself and the West in general (allegedly, Western states and values are on the verge of decline, the EU is under U.S. control, Europe is torn apart by contradictions, terrorism and hidden evil intentions of local elites). Still, in 2022, most of these narratives centered on Ukraine, the circumstances of Russia's war against it, and the assistance to Kyiv from Western countries. However, it should be noted that the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/EEAS-DataTeam-ThreatReport-2023..pdf>

<sup>27</sup> <https://uacrisis.org/en/a-year-of-russian-propaganda-key-narratives-and-tactics-of-2022>

<sup>28</sup> <https://spravdi.gov.ua/en/narratives-of-russian-propaganda-common-in-neighbouring-countries-of-ukraine/>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

broadcasting of previous eschatological predictions and fictional problems about the EU has not stopped, as they have been incorporated into new information occasions related to Ukraine<sup>30</sup>. The quantitative results of the European External Action Service’s monitoring of threats of foreign information manipulation and interference also show that Russia’s invasion was the topic of most Russian nefarious information campaigns in the EU, leaving far behind speculation on energy challenges, campaigns against top officials, the food crisis, war crimes and the potential use of nuclear weapons<sup>31</sup>.

When it comes to the content of the prevalent Russian disinformation narratives in the EU since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the following have been the most popular in the context of Russia’s war: insistence that all military operations of the Ukrainian defense forces are directed from NATO countries, that the Ukrainian state is staging massacres and burials of its citizens and accusing Russian troops of them, that Ukrainian society does not really support the current government, that Ukraine is run by Nazis, that civilians are suffering from the actions of the Ukrainian armed forces, that Russia is a victim of Western and Ukrainian aggression, and that Western elites and states are oppressing their citizens<sup>32</sup>. Other major narratives of Russian propaganda in the EU during this period were messages and stories about external governance in the Ukrainian state, the black market for Western weapons in Ukraine, the futility of sanctions against Russia, which allegedly harm the EU itself, and the downplaying of the success and professionalism of the Ukrainian Defense Forces in the fight against the aggressor<sup>33</sup>. It should be added that this set of narratives has been used by Russian disinformation over the past year in all of Ukraine’s neighboring EU member states. Yet, in each case, we can observe unique accents based on the socio-political characteristics of the states. In Hungary, for example, Russian information influence insisted that the struggle of the Ukrainian state and the European sanctions were meaningless, accusing the West of war; in Poland, it was about the risks of importing Ukrainian agricultural products, Western elites using the war to their advantage, and threats of accepting Ukrainians as refugees; in Slovakia, it was about the “falsehood” of Western media, the risks of involving the Slovak state in the war, and the EU and NATO representatives fueling the armed confrontation<sup>34</sup>.

Finally, it can be argued that Russian propaganda in the United Europe also relies on loyal local media and political actors who consciously or unconsciously disseminate messages favorable to it. Although the support and effectiveness of these actions varies, depending on the duration and context of their use. Yet, Ukrainians in the EU may be the targets and consumers of such narratives. To identify them, the authors of this study conducted a search for relevant messages broadcast by media and actors in the EU over the past six months.

First of all, it should be noted that disinformation aimed exclusively at or against Ukrainians abroad in the media, well-known politicians or media personalities in the EU at that time was

<sup>30</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/key-narratives-in-pro-kremlin-disinformation/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/EEAS-DataTeam-ThreatReport-2023..pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> <https://uacrisis.org/en/a-year-of-russian-propaganda-key-narratives-and-tactics-of-2022>

<sup>34</sup> <https://spravdi.gov.ua/en/narratives-of-russian-propaganda-common-in-neighbouring-countries-of-ukraine/>

the exception rather than the rule. In the case of Poland alone, we can talk about the persistent and systematic use of malignant narratives about Ukrainian refugees, primarily in social media<sup>35</sup>, but also in the rhetoric of politicians Grzegorz Braun<sup>36</sup> and Janusz Korwin-Mikke<sup>37</sup>. Also noteworthy is the work of Alexandre Guerreiro, an adviser to Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa. In particular, he claims that Ukrainians in his countries deliberately hold public actions (for example, after the explosion of the Kakhovka hydroelectric power plant by Russian troops) to provoke protests among other groups and in other countries, that they instrumentalize the participation of children in these events to achieve political goals, and that they receive “Western funding” to hold such pickets<sup>38</sup>. At the same time, we cannot help but mention the statements of the Russian representative to the UN, who claimed that the Portuguese, as well as German and Spanish juvenile justice systems were taking children away from Ukrainian refugees. These reports have not been confirmed<sup>39</sup>.

One of the ways in which Russian narratives reach audiences in the EU through local actors is by inviting Russian officials to comment on current events. For instance, the French television channel BFMTV regularly invites Alexander Makogonov<sup>40</sup>, spokesman for the Russian Embassy in France, and Pyotr Tolstoy<sup>41</sup>, vice speaker of the Russian State Duma, to comment on events on the frontline of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The media motivates such actions by the desire to “hear different sides” and to adhere to professional standards. In addition, there are media outlets in France that use mostly Russian sources or whose management has ties to Russia. In particular, these are Réseau International and Omerta (the latter was founded by entrepreneur Charles d’Anjou, who worked in Russia for a long time and did not abandon his connections in 2022). Also noteworthy in this context is the activity of the popular Italian publication *il Fatto Quotidiano*, which, in particular, aims to “debunk the position of the mainstream media” on the issues of Italy’s and the EU’s support for Ukraine<sup>42</sup>.

In a string of EU countries, there are influential political forces that sympathize with Russia and/or spread Kremlin propaganda. Their position shapes the views of their voters, who, in turn, can influence Ukrainians abroad or express negative attitudes toward them based on propaganda messages. In particular, these are representatives of the German party *Alternative für Deutschland*, whose supporters are the most likely (among voters of all parties) to trust Russian narratives and conspiracy theories about the war in Ukraine<sup>43</sup>. Other active disseminators of Kremlin propaganda include the President of Croatia, who opposes military aid to Ukraine because it allegedly prolongs the war and systematically advocates viewing

<sup>35</sup> [https://demagog.org.pl/fake\\_news/najzdz-ukraincow-na-polske-falszywa-narracja-o-uchodzcach/](https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/najzdz-ukraincow-na-polske-falszywa-narracja-o-uchodzcach/)

<sup>36</sup> [https://twitter.com/GrzegorzBraun\\_/status/1646831859815391232](https://twitter.com/GrzegorzBraun_/status/1646831859815391232)

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.rp.pl/spoleczenstwo/art38084481-antyukrainski-hejt-w-internecie-niesie-sie-szeroko-rozpowszechnia-go-m-in-janusz-korwin-mikke>

<sup>38</sup> <https://twitter.com/ATGuerreiro/status/1667918178339504128?s=20>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.theportuguese.com/news/2023-04-06/russia-accuses-portugal-of-stealing-ukrainian-children/76459>

<sup>40</sup> [https://www.bfmtv.com/international/asia/russie/l-interview-en-integralite-d-alexander-makogonov-porte-parole-de-l-ambassade-de-russie-en-france\\_VN-202305030916.html](https://www.bfmtv.com/international/asia/russie/l-interview-en-integralite-d-alexander-makogonov-porte-parole-de-l-ambassade-de-russie-en-france_VN-202305030916.html)

<sup>41</sup> [https://www.bfmtv.com/international/asia/russie/l-interview-en-integralite-de-piotr-tolstoi-vice-president-de-la-douma\\_VN-202306140998.html](https://www.bfmtv.com/international/asia/russie/l-interview-en-integralite-de-piotr-tolstoi-vice-president-de-la-douma_VN-202306140998.html)

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/in-edicola/articoli/2023/05/16/disinformazione-la-russia-e-forte-o-debole-a-seconda-del-tornaconto/7162264/>

<sup>43</sup> [https://cemas.io/en/publications/pro-russian-disinformation-and-propaganda-in-germany/2023-02-24\\_ProRussianDisinformationAndPropagandaInGermanyRussiasFullScaleInvasionInUkraine.pdf](https://cemas.io/en/publications/pro-russian-disinformation-and-propaganda-in-germany/2023-02-24_ProRussianDisinformationAndPropagandaInGermanyRussiasFullScaleInvasionInUkraine.pdf)



current events as a struggle between the United States and Russia, presenting the Ukrainian state as an object rather than a subject<sup>44</sup>. Similar narratives have been used by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and members of his government since the beginning of the Russian invasion, who insist that sanctions against Russia are futile<sup>45</sup>, call the war a confrontation between “great powers” or a settling of scores between Slavic peoples, and accuse Ukrainian elites of making their citizens victims of the situation<sup>46</sup>. In this context, it is worth mentioning the activities of members of the Estonian right-wing party EKRE, who systematically claim that Ukrainian elites do not respect their people, accuse the Ukrainian authorities of war crimes and spreading lies, and occasionally do not hesitate to incite hatred against Ukrainian refugees, for example, by claiming that they are carriers of infectious diseases<sup>47</sup>. Lastly, it is worth paying attention to an ambiguous initiative launched by the former leader of the Czech Green Party, Matěj Stropnický, who developed a public appeal to his fellow citizens headlined “Peace and Justice.” The document acknowledges that Russia is the aggressor, but also calls for an end to involving the West in resolving the situation and encouraging the “Western arms lobby” with military support for Ukraine, calls sanctions as an ineffective way to influence the Kremlin’s actions, and suggests that the “two sides” (Russia and Ukraine) reach an agreement, share responsibility, and establish peace<sup>48</sup>.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The European Union as a whole and individual EU member states have developed and implemented unprecedented measures to counter Moscow’s malignant information influence since the beginning of Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine. These included both restricting the activities of Kremlin-controlled media and researching changes in Moscow’s propaganda tactics. These actions complemented the tools that the EU has introduced to counter disinformation and destructive narratives from Russia since 2014. It should be noted that in 2022, the EU institutions recognized that Russian information influence poses a direct threat to security, stability and democracy in Europe<sup>49</sup>. The bloc’s decisive response to this problem is in part due to its proactive stance and long-term work to counter Kremlin propaganda by Ukrainian state and non-state actors.

However, over the past year and a half, the system of harmful Russian information influence in the EU has adapted to the established mechanisms for countering it and has received new channels and targets for exploitation. Among the latter, we should mention a significant number of Ukrainian citizens temporarily staying in the EU countries because of the war. Russian propaganda can effectively influence this social group (or social groups in different countries), given its vulnerable social position and isolation from the information context of

<sup>44</sup> <https://euractiv.hr/politika/a780/Predsjednik-Milanovic-ustvrдио-da-je-rat-u-Ukrajini-rat-izmedju-SAD-i-Rusije.html>

<sup>45</sup> <https://voxukraine.org/en/propaganda-diary-2022-2023-voxcheck-presents-the-database-of-russian-propaganda-in-the-european-mass-media>

<sup>46</sup> <https://voxukraine.org/en/to-quote-lies-is-lying-how-hungary-s-government-amplifies-russian-disinformation-on-ukraine>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.populismstudies.org/the-impact-of-the-russia-ukraine-war-on-right-wing-populism-in-estonia/>

<sup>48</sup> <https://voxukraine.org/en/russian-disinformation-narratives-in-czech-republic-in-january-2023-policy-brief-within-kremlin-watchers-movement-project>

<sup>49</sup> [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-ambassadors-annual-conference-2022-opening-speech-high-representative-josep-borrell\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-ambassadors-annual-conference-2022-opening-speech-high-representative-josep-borrell_en)

the homeland. At the same time, it can use narratives against Ukrainians in the EU to shape negative attitudes toward them and the Ukrainian state, as well as to influence the stability of European societies themselves.

Given the adaptation of Russian propaganda to the new operating environment in the EU and the new agenda, the restrictions and mechanisms for countering it imposed by European institutions and states may not be enough. Constant changes in the Kremlin's information influence tactics and an extensive network of controlled/loyal actors also require constant improvement of mechanisms to counter and prevent interference and disinformation actions by the EU. For this purpose, the European External Action Service proposes a five-step mechanism for sustainable countering information influence: continuous data monitoring—prioritization and sorting of data (depending on the context)—analysis of incidents (holistic information operations, not just individual cases of disinformation) and collection of evidence—pooling and dissemination of knowledge among interested and responsible state and non-state actors in a particular socio-political sector—achieving situational awareness of all actors who can detect and respond to disinformation<sup>50</sup>. This mechanism requires further refinement and capacity building, but it represents a seemingly effective framework for further countering and preventing malignant Russian information operations, which, in particular, can include Ukrainian actors in cooperation with the EU.

That said, it is worth noting that European institutions and the bloc's states (even at the level of the bodies responsible for information security) have not yet recognized that Ukrainians in the EU are a potential target of Russian propaganda, which it can effectively influence. Accordingly, responsible Ukrainian government agencies should draw the attention of their European partners to this aspect.

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### Author:

Mykhailo Drapak

### Contributors to the research:

Sofia Huk, Daryna Korzh, Yaroslava Mukha



The information and views set out in this study are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.

## Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”

Phone.: +380935788405

Email: [info@prismua.org](mailto:info@prismua.org)

<http://prismua.org/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/EEAS-DataTeam-ThreatReport-2023..pdf>