



## Oleksii Kovalenko

Research Fellow  
of the EAST Center,  
journalist

# Kremlin to continue destabilizing Ukraine with disinformation

A year ago, Ukrainian Stopfake reported analyzing almost 1,000 of pro-Kremlin disinformation cases since 2014, most of them targeting Ukraine. Anti-Ukrainian propagandistic and disinformation attacks do not seem to fade away. EUvsDisinfo website [reports](#) on hundreds of new cases of repeated, reinvented, and reproduced anti-Ukrainian lies. EAST Center's research fellow Oleksii Kovalenko looks into the question, what Kremlin attempts to achieve by directing at least a third of its disinformation machine's capacities against Ukraine, and how Kremlin's destabilizing attacks changed over the last five years.

The Kremlin started a full-fledged disinformation campaign against Ukraine in early 2014 when Russia took advantage of political instability in Ukraine and sent its military to annex Crimea. A month after the annexation of Crimea, Moscow started backing armed rebels in Ukraine's east, pretending to support the so-called local uprising of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians against allegedly illegal government, oftentimes called "pro-Nazi" or "junta" by pro-Kremlin media.

Disinformation was a powerful weapon for the Russian military invasion and a hybrid war against Ukraine, which has killed over 13,000 people and displaced millions. The disinformation campaign included propagandistic and misleading narratives spread by Kremlin-controlled media, dissemination of anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western content by troll farms in social media, and cyber-attacks on Ukraine's banks, ministries, and other organizations. All of these were aimed at creating an atmosphere of mistrust and confrontation in the Ukrainian society. Even though many Ukrainian media resisted disinformation by debunking false stories, propagandistic narratives and fake news stories about Ukraine and ongoing conflict in Donbas continue to be numerous both on Russian TV channels and in the online media.

## A crucified boy and an undercover Belarusian

Russian state media were very popular in Ukraine long before 2014. Their presence was especially noticeable in Crimea and [south-eastern Ukraine](#), which was instrumental for the Kremlin's portrayal of 2014 Ukrainian revolution as a "fascist coup." Multiple damages caused by the war in Donbas were presented by Russian media as a fulfillment of Ukraine's plans to intentionally destroy the region's infrastructure and industry. Although a number of Russian federal TV channels are currently banned in Ukraine, their past negative impact continues to affect the Ukrainian society, especially on the territories not controlled by Kyiv.

The quality and methods of anti-Ukrainian disinformation change over time. In 2014-2015 pro-Kremlin media outlets centered their fake news stories and propagandistic narratives around MH17 downing, the Ukraine's army and authorities. Back then most of disinformation claims were rather simple and very emotional, just like the infamous fake news [story about a crucified boy](#). The Kremlin's disinformation machine also continues disseminating stories about neo-Nazis with "[outsized influence on Ukrainian politics](#)" and [secret virology laboratories](#) that are testing viruses and chemicals on Ukrainian citizens.

Nowadays anti-Ukrainian fake stories are becoming more complicated and original, albeit they continue to fit into the same old narratives. In late 2018, Russia's state-owned Channel One broadcast a fake story dedicated to the fifth anniversary of Ukraine's Euromaidan. The story was about disgruntled "Ukrainian" who identified himself as Kirill Chubenko and complained about Euromaidan's failure to bring any tangible results to Ukraine. It turned out soon that unhappy Ukrainian in reality [was a national of Belarus](#) who had nothing to do with Ukraine or Euromaidan.

Wrong and misleading interpretations is another kind of fake news stories, which are lately gaining traction. In mid-November Moscow returned three naval ships captured from Ukraine last year in the Kerch Strait. Pro-Kremlin media described this development as an act of goodwill from a "peaceful country," although the return of the Ukrainian naval ships was [enforced](#) by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.

Virtually no socio-political issue in Ukraine has gone unnoticed by pro-Kremlin media. The Ukrainian church lately became yet another target

of disinformation attacks. In the last two months EUvsDisinfo identified eight different propagandistic narratives about the Ukrainian Orthodox Church spread by pro-Kremlin media sources. Conspiracy theories regarding the tomos of autocephaly granted by Constantinople included the claims that Ukrainian autocephaly is [a tool to split the Orthodox world](#) and that [the Greek Church recognized Ukrainian autocephaly under pressure](#). One of the most popular narratives [calls](#) the Ukrainian Orthodox Church a US/Western project.

## The old new tools in the Russian arsenal

The Kremlin's disinformation machine bombards Ukrainian internet users with anti-Ukrainian content through controlled farms of trolls. Originally, most of anti-Ukrainian narratives were produced by trolls in the Russian social networking website VKontakte, which in 2014 was completely taken over by Mail.Ru Group, whose owner Alisher Usmanov [has close ties to the Kremlin](#). Given that the VKontakte has been banned in Ukraine since May 2017, pro-Kremlin's trolls largely moved to other social networking platforms, [including](#) YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook.

In early 2019, Facebook pushed new rules for political advertising, promising to introduce better transparency measures. Soon afterwards nearly 2,000 Russia-linked pages, groups and accounts were [removed](#) by Facebook. Many of those used to target Ukraine on a daily basis. Over the last eight years, Ukrainian media VoxUkraine [identified](#) almost 800,000 Ukraine-related tweets that were generated by 1,369 Kremlin-backed accounts. When a need arises, the Kremlin uses Facebook and Twitter bots from Russian "troll factories" to create information storms and publish many thousands of messages to spread propagandistic narratives and hatred in the online space.

Cyber attacks on Ukraine's banks, government and power grid are yet another important dimension of Kremlin's hostile actions. They create an atmosphere of post-truth by building up the image of [chaos](#) in Ukraine. In 2016, the then Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko claimed that 6,500 cyber attacks had hit Ukraine within two months. *Politico* named Ukraine [«a test bed for cyberweaponry»](#).

One of the latest cyber operations against Ukraine was [carried](#) out by Russian hackers during Ukraine's presidential elections. They bought personal data of state election commission officials in the dark web, an internet segment which is not indexed by conventional search engines. In addition to this, according to the head of Ukraine's cyber police, Russian hackers were

spreading malicious “phishing” content to steal passwords and personal information of election staff to disrupt Ukraine’s presidential elections.

Furthermore, pro-Kremlin sources spread [manipulations](#) about the candidates and international organizations’ reports on elections. Channel One Russia, for instance, [stated](#) that “an ‘atmosphere of intimidation’ reigns in Ukraine, which does not allow people to openly express their disagreement with the policies of the authorities,” making a reference to the [UN report](#). In fact, the mentioned UN report is mostly focused on the human rights situation on the territories not controlled by Kyiv. The ultimate goal of these attacks was to destabilize Ukraine and demoralize Ukrainians.

The Kremlin continues using propaganda and disinformation as a powerful tool of its aggressive foreign policy towards Ukraine. It sponsors disinformation campaigns, troll farms’ activities, and cyber attacks against Ukraine. While propagandistic narratives largely remained the same as they were five years ago, the disinformation methods have become more sophisticated. They continuously pursue the aim of painting Ukraine’s image as an unstable, disintegrated country under external control and excessive influence of Nazi / fascist groupings. Virtually any segment of Ukraine’s socio-political life turns into a target of disinformation attacks with the goal to exacerbate the splits and to create an atmosphere of mistrust and confusion in the Ukrainian society.