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Ukrainian Journalists at the Forefront of Countering Russian Disinformation

"Russian and Ukrainian media spheres looked like Goliath and David, respectively. And Davids beat Goliaths mostly in fairy tales," Ukrainian journalist Pavel Kazarin, long-time researcher of pro-Kremlin propaganda, says. The biblical account of David and Goliath explains a difficult battle against Russian disinformation in Ukraine. Resisting anti-Ukrainian propaganda has become a daily routine for the Ukrainian journalists in the last five years. EAST Center's research fellow Oleksii Kovalenko looks into how Ukrainian journalists and media professionals are resisting the constant pressure of pro-Kremlin fakes.

Russian disinformation in Ukraine has been persistently used as a tool to exacerbate splits in the Ukrainian society and to feed it with grievances, mistrust, and hatred. Russian disinformation and propaganda prepared the ground for the Kremlin's fully-fledged military invasion in 2014, when the Crimean Peninsula was annexed, and parts of Donbas were taken over by Russia and Russia-backed armed forces. The Kremlin propaganda normalized violations of international law and human rights by undermining Ukrainian democratic institutions and eroding societal values. In 2019, the Kremlin disinformation machine continues to successfully reach out the Ukrainian audience by transforming propaganda narratives, using new ways of their dissemination, and increasing the quality of fakes. To counter anti-Ukrainian propaganda, Kyiv adopted a set of measures on institutional level, and Ukrainian media have done their best to respond.

Media enjoy a high level of trust among Ukrainians

A nationwide sociological research of late 2018, carried out by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, showed that Ukrainian media – the frontliners in combating pro-Kremlin propaganda –

are among most trusted public institutions, following the army, church, and non-governmental organizations. Furthermore, 2018 Media Consumption Survey found out that the level of trust and approval of Ukrainian media is on the rise, which reversed a downward trend since 2015. The internet is increasingly becoming the main source of news for Ukrainians, and the degree of trust in the online media among Ukrainians increased from 48% to 58% in the last year.

Deceiving pro-Kremlin narratives are distributed by Russian media outlets, their affiliates in Ukraine, and pro-Russian Ukrainian media. The re are many websites on the Ukrainian media market which transmit Russian narratives. Occasionally independent Ukrainian media publish pro-Kremlin narratives by mistake or are used by pro-Kremlin propaganda machine as "useful idiots." StopFake's regular monitoring of pro-Kremlin narratives in Ukraine identified 34 Ukrainian media outlets as a source of fake news stories. At the same time, StopFake shows that the number of non-Russian "Ukrainian" media spreading fake news in Ukraine dimmed in comparison to toxic, openly Russian media outlets. Sometimes media outlets like the Kharkiv News Agency pretend to be Ukrainian, in reality being a part of the St. Petersburg's "Troll Factory," well-known for using thousands of bots and fake news stories to influence US election voters.

In October 2019 multiple credible and trustworthy Ukrainian media, including *Ukrainska Pravda, Leviy Bereg*, and *Novoe Vremia* republished the fake news story which was originally posted by Czech media outlet *Denik N.* It cited *Kyrym birligi* ("Crimean Unity"), a pro-Kremlin organization of Crimean Tatars sitting in the occupied Crimea. *Kyrym birligi* was invited to the celebration of the 101st anniversary of the foundation of Czechoslovakia. Following the reception, *Kyrym birligi* members posted in Facebook that the Czech President Miloš Zeman had spoken about Crimea as part of Russia. The Czech authorities later announced that the contact between Zeman and Crimean NGO has never happened.

Gaining the power to resist

In 2014 Ukrainian media largely failed to adequately address disinformation challenges and to reflect on existing divisions in the Ukrainian society. The Kremlin successfully used the absence of adequate pro-Ukrainian narratives in the Eastern Ukraine and Crimea to fill in the information vacuum with its own agenda,

aimed to exacerbate social problems and disseminate hate speech. Ukrainian journalistic community was caught off-guard and often had to discover fact-checking tools and methods on the run. Over time local journalists, experts, civil society activists, and volunteers united in digital debunking groups and made a significant impact in countering the Kremlin disinformation narratives.

Countering disinformation has become an integral part of Ukrainian journalists' daily routine. As *Kyiv Post* journalist Illya Ponomarenko describes, his work changed from "double-checking" to "triple-checking": "By default, we need to be 150% vigilant and triple checking every single sound from the other side of the frontline."

Dozens of such initiatives appeared on Ukrainian media market since 2014, including StopFake, Information Resistance, InformNapalm, Ukraine Crisis Media Centre, Euromaidan Press, UkraineWorld, ЛІКБЕЗ, Historical Front, VoxCheck, Ukrainian Information Front, Ukrainian Cyber Forces. Most of these groups are non-governmental volunteer organizations with the common mission of countering pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign.

Major Ukrainian online media outlets show adherence to professional journalistic standards. According to November 2019 research by the Institute of Mass Information, over 90% of Ukrainian online media follow the journalistic standard of balance, while compliance with the credibility standard amounted to 94%.

Debunking disinformation and a toolkit for credible journalism

Fact-checking and debunking fake news stories is not enough in countering disinformation and gaining a larger audience. Often debunking cases do not reach as sizeable audience as the original fake news stories. The Kremlin disinformation machine has vast financial resources to produce and disseminate fakes. Furthermore, biased and sensational fakes are psychologically more attractive to readers than the stories countering them. Hence more diverse storytelling tools, better-structured reports, and best quality reporting are critical for the media to get larger coverage.

In any case, journalists regularly tackling disinformation believe that specific projects focused on propaganda and disinformation are immensely important to deliver the truth. Projects like StopFake

or VoxUkraine together with various online educational programs increase professionalism of journalistic community and raise media literacy of Ukrainian citizens. According to Viktoria Romaniuk, StopFake's deputy Editor-in-Chief, some progress has already been made: "The level of critical thinking in Ukraine increased. The world is changing. And our perception of disinformation has become more critical."

While disinformation methods change and become more complex and sophisticated, Ukrainian journalistic community remains the main shield for the Ukrainian society from the Kremlin's malign disinformation attacks. Often inadequately resourced and lacking consistent support from the state, Ukrainian journalist community does its best in exposing pro-Kremlin disinformation and remains one of the most trusted public institutions. Though physically unable to conquer the Goliath of fakes and fears, Ukrainian journalists got used to fight with him as equals.