

Disinformation as a form of aggression: Ukraine and its partners amidst the Russian fake news (early 2021)

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Abstract

The various disinformation-related issues are now of the greatest relevance, as evidenced not only by the emergence (especially over the past few years) of a number of basic scientific studies on the analysis of the phenomenon, but also the development by both Western countries and Ukraine (in the conditions of daily struggle against hybrid Russian aggression) of the strategies that provide not only resistance (detection and refutation) of Russian disinformation, but also an adequate response – punishing Russia for the damage done to democracy by relentless “dispersal” of the fake news, in particular – in early 2021.

Taking into account the differences in the interpretation of the concept of “disinformation” and using the guidelines of the European Commission on its content, we conducted the analysis of data, concentrated in the “Disinfo Database” (created by East StratCom Task Force within the project “EUvsDiSiNFO”), according to the following algorithm:

- the languages were established, in which Russia disseminated disinformation about Ukraine and its support by European states, the United States, etc.;
- calculations were made of both the number of Russian fake news created and disseminated in the world information space (in the period from 01.01.2021 to 30.04.2021) regarding Ukraine and the states that provide it support (to a greater or lesser extent) in the fight against the aggressor, and the number of information resources used in disseminating disinformation;
- there were identified and analyzed the dominant issues of Russian disinformation, the peculiarities of the construction of fake news by the aggressor state (in particular, by returning to imperial and Soviet propaganda narratives, distortion or fabrication of facts, insinuations, etc.) and it was proved that Russia carefully carried out “disinformation support” of the states and their leaders, actions of international organizations aimed at supporting Ukraine; in addition, it disinformed the international community about Ukraine’s domestic policy.

The opinion was justified that the development and dissemination of disinformation is one of Russia’s course of action on the international arena, a form of its aggression (in the context of hybrid wars) against Ukraine and Western democracies and their leaders, as well as international democratic organizations, a means of discrediting and defamation of opponents and adversaries.

Key words: disinformation, Russia, news, fake.

Introduction

In today’s circumstances, the problem of spreading disinformation (in the context of information wars, propaganda, development and use of malicious technologies in cyberspace, etc.) and, accordingly, protection from it – is one

of the most pressing in the civilized world. This can be confirmed by facts of different order. For example, the recognition (in 2017) by Collins publishing house of the term *fake news* as “the word of the year”. Noting that *fake news* –

“false, often sensational information disseminated under the guise of news reporting”, Collins noted that during the year the use of the term increased by 365%: “the word of the year” appeared not only in the mass media headlines, but it was actively used in speeches by US President D. Trump, British Prime Minister T. May, British liberal politician J. Corbin (BBC News, 2017).

Another indication of the growing attention to the problem of disinformation (at least in the last five years) became the research of a number of authors devoted to the analysis of a range of issues related in one way or another to the “production” of disinformation, as well as to countering it. Researchers of the phenomenon were, in particular: H. Allcott and M. Gentzkow (2017), C. Wardle and H. Derekshan (2017), L. Xiaofan and AB Whinston (2020), J. Nelson and H. Taneja (2018), Y. Benkler, R. Faris and H. Roberts (2018), PW Singer and T. Emerson (2019), R. Stengel (2020), S. Wolley (2020), and in addition to them – the authors of studies, editors of one of which was K. Shu, S. Wang, D. Lee and H. Liu (Disinformation ..., 2020) and of the other – R. Luttrell, L. Xiao, J. Glass (Democracy .., 2021).

Due to the strong deployment of “disinformation aggression” by the Russian Federation (RF), the problem of debunking / neutralizing disinformation has become relevant in practice. First of all, for democratic countries: in 2015, the East StratCom Task Force established the EUvsDisInfo project “to better forecast, address, and respond to the Russian Federation’s ongoing disinformation campaigns affecting the European Union, its Member States, and countries in the shared neighborhood. EUvsDisInfo’s core objective is to increase public awareness and understanding of the Kremlin’s disinformation operations, and to help citizens in Europe and beyond develop resistance to digital information and media manipulation” (EUvsDisInfo, 2015).

It is noteworthy that now the problem of countering disinformation has become relevant for the United States, as evidenced by the document published on March 3, 2021 by the

administration of President J. R. Biden “Renewing America's Advantages. Interim National Security Strategic Guidance” (Interim ..., 2021). The document notes that “we face a world of rising nationalism, receding democracy, growing rivalry with China, Russia, and other authoritarian states, and a technological revolution that is reshaping every aspect of our lives”. In addition, it is noted that under such conditions, “anti-democratic forces use misinformation, disinformation, and weaponized corruption to exploit perceived weaknesses and sow division within and among free nations, erode existing international rules, and promote alternative models of authoritarian governance”.

The United States pays special attention to the need to punish Russia for its harmful foreign activities, as was reported on April 15 in the “Fact sheet: Imposing Costs for Harmful Foreign Activities by the Russian Government” (Fact sheet, 2021).

Finally, in early May of this year, the President of Ukraine V. Zelensky signed Decree № 187/2021 “Issues of the Center for Counteracting Disinformation (CCD)” (President..., 2021), which approved the “Regulations on the CCD” (Decree..., 2021a).

Taking into account the above, as well as the fact that Ukraine is fighting the hybrid aggression of the Russian Federation for the seventh year, the issue of combating disinformation becomes especially acute and relevant, and in its own way determines the purpose of this research:

- to find out modern approaches to the interpretation of the essence of the concept of “disinformation”;
- to identify the languages through which Russia’s manipulative influence on the consciousness of individuals took place by spreading disinformation about Ukraine and issues of supporting it by the international policy actors;
- to analyze the quantitative parameters of fake news, which were distributed by the Russian aggressor in the information space in the period from 01.01.2021 to 30.04.2021

regarding Ukraine and its supporting states, international organizations, political leaders, and to analyze the features of information resources used by Russia for distribution of disinformation;

– to identify and analyze the dominant subject of disinformation messages disseminated by the Russian Federation regarding Ukraine (or in connection with the Ukrainian state).

Material and methods

Empirical basis for the analysis of the features (time, content, region and resource for publication) of Russian disinformation about Ukraine was the data for the period from 01.01.2021 to 30.04.2021, presented in the “Disinfo Database” (EUvsDiSiNFO, 2021) indicating, in particular, the titles and outlets of Russian fake news.

The database was searched using tags (keywords) developed directly by the creators of the database, in particular, such as: “Abandoned Ukraine”, “Azov Battalion”, “Crimea”, “Crimean Tatars”, “Donbas”, “Novorossiya”, “Ukraine”,

“Ukrainian disintegration”, “Ukrainian statehood”, “Volodymyr Zelensky”, “War in Ukraine”). The extent of cases of Russian disinformation in one language or another was taken into account and analyzed (in each of the 34 languages in which “Disinfo Database” specialists monitored the media).

The comparative method allowed identifying the most relevant for Russia languages of disinformation, outlets, the main topic of fake news about the Ukrainian state and its support by major political players in Europe, America and other regions.

Results and discussion

Examining the disinformation, we pay attention to several points:

– (first) there are some differences in the interpretation of the concept of “disinformation” (see, for example: Oxford living dictionaries, 2021; Merriam-Webster dictionaries, 2021);

– (second) point of view on the problem of the essence of disinformation is constantly becoming more complicated, as evidenced, for example, by a thorough article by S. Lewandowsky and others (2012), devoted to “misinformation”; by the Council of Europe report “Information Disorder. Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking” (Wardle, Derakhshan, 2017), which introduced a new conceptual framework for examining information disorder and identified the three different types: misinformation (“when false information is shared, but no harm is meant”), disinformation (“when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm”), malinformation (“when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere”);

– (third) based on the approaches of the European Commission, we adhere in this research to the thesis that disinformation is “verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public” (Tackling online..., 2021).

The data analysis from “Disinfo Database” for the period from 01.01. to 30.04.2021 (in total – for 120 days of the beginning of the year) allowed to distinguish (note: as of 20.05.2021, since the information in the database is constantly updated) 385 variants (samples) of fake news from Russia, which concerned Ukraine and actions to its support by other states, organizations, leaders.

The Russian disinformation (from 34 languages, in which messages were taken into account by the creators of the “Disinfo Database”) was disseminated, according to our estimates, in seventeen languages. At the same time, the most of the information was provided directly in Russian – 219 cases. In addition, 60 fake news were disseminated by Russia in the information space in Arabic, 26 – in German, 22 – in Hungarian, 18 – in English, 14 – in Polish,

10 – in Bulgarian, 9 messages – in Greek and Spanish, 8 – in Lithuanian, 7 – in Italian, 5 fake news – in in French, 5 – in Ukrainian, 4 – in Czech, 3 – in Georgian, 2 – in Serbian and 2 – in Armenian.

According to our estimates, more than 170 “outlets” were used by Russia to spread disinformation during the period under study. In the analysis of these “outlets” it was found that:

- in some cases, from several to more than 30 information resources were used to disseminate fake news. As, for example, for disinformation from 08.04 “Russia to intervene in Donbas if Ukraine boosts conflict, when Russia, using the strategy of “processing / transformation of the environment / world for itself” (according to its geopolitical interests), tried to expand the audience to impose it the idea that Ukraine was preparing an attack on “Donbass”, so Russia would be forced to intervene to protect “its citizens”;

- for the purpose of disinformation there were used YouTube, numerous Internet sites, television (including satellite) and, in particular, television in the post-Soviet space. Among them are the TV channels that functioned / are functioning on the territory of Ukraine. In particular – *112.ua* (now banned in Ukraine (Decree .., 2021b) which, for example, 12.01 spread Russian fake news – “Refusal to buy Sputnik V leads to the genocide of Ukrainians”), the resource *nash.live*, which, according to “Disinfo Database”, disseminated Russian disinformation on April 20 (“Macron: Ukraine must give water to Crimea and start talks with separatist leaders”). In addition – the information resources of European countries (*snanews.de*, *sputniknews.it*, others).

We should note that the first markers of Russian disinformation about Ukraine and Ukrainians are contained directly in the titles of articles (which were interpreted in the “Disinfo Database” as “disinformation”. This can be stated, for example, according to a number of headlines as “Donbas is part of “Greater Russia” (15.02.2021), where, in particular, the term “Donbas” is used, which does not reflect the real administrative division of Ukraine, and, accordingly, is not enshrined in any legal

documents. However, this term was (at one time) a concept of Russian colonial discourse, and now – of modern Russian propaganda (see: Racibarska, 2021; Dorosh, 2021) and the fake states created by it – “LPR” and “DPR”, which are unrecognized by civilized nations of the world.

It is worth accentuating that the basis of Russian disinformation is not only the narratives of imperial discourse (such as “Ukraine does not exist, it is a Polish Fake”, 01.03), origins of which lay in the nineteenth century, but also the Soviet propaganda stamps that Russia is trying to defend as an indisputable truth in the today’s circumstances, declaring that “Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians are one single nation” (21.01).

The construction of Russian fake news, in addition, was due to:

- distortion of facts (for example: “NATO and the EU inspire Ukraine to continue with Donbas conflict”, 14.04; ‘Merkel ignores the will of Crimeans to return to Russia”, 19.03);

- fictions (“Donbas conflict broke out because of Ukraine nationalism”, 19.04; “European Court of Human Rights demands Sweden to be declared the winner of the battle of Poltava”, 11.04; “Crimea was saved from an armed coup”, 20.03);

- slander (“Ukraine drone killed a child in Donbas”, 03.04; “US prepares Ukrainian army for genocide in Donbas”, 30.03).

The “starting” fake news-2021 was the statement of the Russian media that “Ukraine refusal to register Sputnik V will show criminal intent against its own citizens” (02.01). In the following months of 2021, Russia unrestrainedly filled the world information space with anti-Ukrainian statements: “Modern Ukraine was created as a country for death in the name of American interests” (12.01), “Ukraine is under the complete control of Western countries” (03.02), “Ukraine is West’s bridgehead to export a color revolution to Belarus” (02.02), “Kharkiv is Russian city, Ukrainians live under political repressions” (18.02), “Ukraine is an artificial state created against Russia, it is an anti-Russian project” (06.01).

Declaring its wishes, Russia stressed that it needed to eliminate the Russophobic junta in

Ukraine and contribute to the creation of the Kharkiv Popular Republic (16.04).

By falsifying, disinforming, and propagating, Russia, in addition to announcing plans to dismember Ukraine, produced fake news against the President of Ukraine V. Zelensky (claiming, for example, in the publication of 19.01 that “Zelenskyy discriminates against the Russian language for the sake of the “Right Sector””) and the Ukrainian government, branding it as “Nazi” (“Nazi-like Ukrainian government, along with Poland and the Baltic states, threatens Belarus”, 22.04). Russian disinformation was directed against internal processes in Ukraine, declaring, for example, that “Ukrainisation is about political terror and Russophobia in Ukraine” (20.01), and “The Orthodox Church of Ukraine is a Russophobic US project” (18.01).

The targets for Russian disinformation (except Ukraine, but in connection with it) were:

- “The West” (“The West plans to kill and conquer the post-Soviet countries’ populations just like Nazis”, 05.01; “West pushes Ukraine to the mass destruction of Russians and Ukrainians”, 15.04; “The West forcibly drags Russia into war with Ukraine”, 13.04; “The West established a Russophobic Nazi regime in Ukraine, and now it targets Belarus”, 02.04; “The West needs Ukrainian land and slaves”, 24.03). However, the opposite is also stated: “The west does not need war-torn Ukraine” (26.03), “Ukraine is not welcome in neither Europe, nor Russia” (24.03);

- the USA (“US biolabs have been developing new biological weapons in Ukraine”, 15.04);

- the NATO (“Ukraine cannot become member of NATO because historically it belongs to Russia” 07.04; “NATO threatens Transnistria”, 07.01);

- the EU, Europe (“The EU gives Ukraine carte blanche on repression policy”, 31.03; “Europe will divide Ukraine with Russia”, 08.03); “Europe views the children of Donbas as terrorists”, 11.02);

- the OSCE («OSCE reports on Donbas do not correspond to reality», 07.04);

- the Council of Europe (“The Council of Europe is indifferent to discrimination of

Russian-speaking people in Ukraine and the Baltic states”, 28.02);

- the UN and Germany (“UN and German statements about the “terror” of Crimean Tatars are fiction”, 26.02);

- the UK (“The UK is a provocateur and a warmonger in Donbas”, 15.04; “Anglo-Saxons are pushing Kyiv to full-scale hostilities in Donbas”, 12.04.);

- Poland and Lithuanian (“In Ukraine, Poland implements the strategy of the “Polish World” through labour migration”, 29.04; “Poland successfully involves Ukraine in the project of a “new Greater Poland””, 29.04; “Polish and Lithuanian mercenaries return to Donbas”, 09.03);

- Moldova and Georgia (“Sandy began her visit to Kyiv with a Nazi slogan”, 12.01; “Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to set up anti-Russian military alliance with US assistance”, 05.03);

- Czech Republic and Slovakia, the Baltic states (“Ukraine, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the Baltic states are American puppets”, 24.04; “Ukraine and Baltics use restrictions against Russian media for the achievement of geopolitical goals against Russia”, 17.02);

- Turkey (“150 Turkish troops arrive in Eastern Ukraine”, 15.04).

However, in addition to states and international organizations, the Russian machine for the production and dissemination of disinformation, worked against the leaders of European countries and the United States (“Merkel ignores the will of Crimeans to return to Russia”, 19.03; “Maia Sandy is ready to attack Transnistria with the support of Ukraine”, 10.02; “Biden is pushing Ukraine into an open conflict with Russia”, 06.04).

Russia speaks of itself as an absolutely peaceful country (“Russia poses zero threat to other countries, including Ukraine”, 05.04), which is not a party to the conflict in eastern Ukraine (“Russia cannot ensure full truce in Donbas because it is not party to conflict”, 02.04).

The branding of states and the promotion of theses about their anti-Russian intentions turned out to be a kind of prelude to the use of the latest diplomatic weapons: during 25–29.04,

the Russian media reported on Russia's formation (followed by a demonstration to Russians and the world) of a list of "countries, unfriendly to Russia", which included, after all, 11 states by the end of April. First, among them, are the USA (25.04), as well as (26.04) Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Georgia, Ukraine, Poland, Czech Republic, the UK. The next day, the list was expanded to include Canada and Australia, and on April 29, Bulgaria.

The Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Ackeret, 2021) was one of the first to react to "Putin's

Conclusions

Dissemination by Russia (in January–April 2021) of disinformation against Ukraine, as well as the states, organizations, political leaders who support Ukrainians in the fight against "Putin's aggressor state", the reaction (in one form or another) of the democratic part of the world on Russian fake news, testify to the scale and, accordingly, the relevance of the analysis of the problem of combating disinformation, not only theoretically but also in practical terms.

Created under the authoritarian Putin regime, the mechanism of creation and "dispersal" of disinformation through the world provides, arguably, the implementation of the strategy of "processing / transformation of the environment / world for itself" (according to its geopolitical interests) and is characterized by considerable power. This is confirmed by hundreds of information messages from Russia (which are collected and described in the "Disinfo Database" as "disinformation"), and the fact that they are spread around the world in

list", noting that the new diplomatic weapons primarily affected the United States and the Czech Republic, as (according to Putin's decree) these "unfriendly countries" will not be able to invite Russians to work in their diplomatic and consular missions. In the future, the "list" will be adapted by Russia to the "political situation". And it is clear that in constructing a point of view on the "political situation", Russia will make extensive use of manipulative opportunities for disinformation.

almost two dozen languages with more than 170 "outlets". At the same time, carrying out its "aggression by disinformation", Russia skillfully used both Ukrainian and Western information resources (to the detriment of democracy).

The peculiarity of the construction of fake news by the aggressor state is the use of imperial and Soviet propaganda narratives, distortion or fabrication of facts, insinuations, etc. for the sake of inflicting not only reputational damage on Ukraine (claiming the prosperity of nationalism, Nazism in the country), but also covering up its direct aggression, which resulted in the occupation of part of Ukrainian territory. In addition, it harms Western democracies and their leaders, other opponents and ideological adversaries (including international organizations) by discrediting and defaming democratic governments and organizations and, more broadly, democratic political systems and regimes.

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