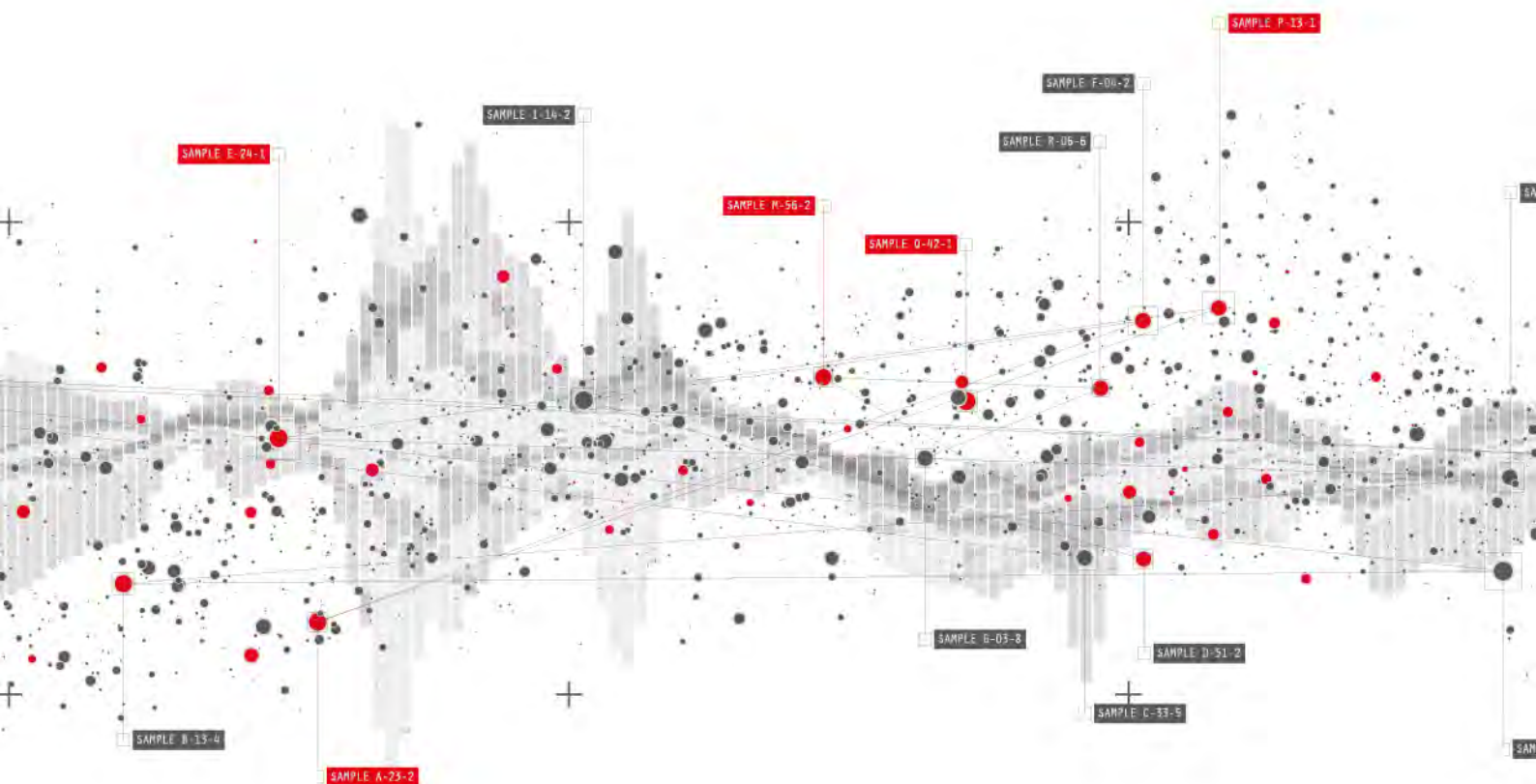


November 2023

Anti-EU Narratives through the Russian-Ukrainian War in the Light of **StopFake.org's** debunks.

Recommendations to strengthen the capacity of fact-checkers combating disinformation



The research and recommendations were developed by a working group of experts from the leading Ukrainian fact-checking organisation StopFake (run by the Ukrainian non-governmental organisation Media Reforms Centre) and the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (Mohyla School of Journalism) as part of the project “Building the Resilience of Ukrainian Fact-checkers in Combating Disinformation about the EU”.

This project is implemented in partnership with Madrid University Carlos III – Medialab research group and with the financial support of the European Media and Information Fund, sponsored by the European University Institute and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, as well as by Google.

StopFake refutes disinformation and misinformation about the war against Ukraine by debunking false news in Russian media, as well as informing journalists and audiences about ways and means to combat propaganda. The purpose of the project is to monitor, verify, fact-check and debunk fake stories as a part of disinformation coming from state and non-state actors.

StopFake.org was created in 2014 when Russia’s war against Ukraine began and the propaganda war between Russia and the West has intensified dramatically. StopFake team was among the first to adapt already existing fact-checking instruments to tackle disinformation and build resilience against disinformation through what we call MAD (monitoring, archiving and debunking). Since 2020, StopFake.org has been a member of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN).

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Anti-EU Narratives through the Russian-Ukrainian War in the Light of StopFake.org's debunks

Introduction

Disinformation as a tool of warfare was actively used in the Soviet Union and then by the Russian Federation. The conduct of Russia's hybrid war in Ukraine since 2014 has been accompanied by various information operations whose aim is to introduce harmful malign ideas and views into collective and individual consciousness; to disorient and misinform the public; to undermine certain beliefs and stability; to instill fear about one's neighbor through the portrayal of an enemy (Horban, 2015). Russia constantly disseminated a series of disinformation narratives to distort Ukraine's image in the eyes of both Western allies and Ukrainians themselves. Russia actively employs reflexive control to influence the opinions of the majority and the decisions made by stakeholders (Fedchenko, 2016; Media Aijr & Vaillant, 2018). Reflexive control compels a stronger opponent to voluntarily choose a particular action to benefit Russia and shapes the necessary perception of the situation around the opponent (Makukhin, 2018; Snegovaya, 2015). To this end, Russia creates the necessary images, visualizations, fake statements and fake studies, including fake and manipulative news, all of which work in concert and in one direction – to make the adversary think and make decisions in a way that benefits Russia.

The Russian-Ukrainian War that started in 2014 set a new stage for complex hybrid warfare where not only new types of traditional weapons are being used, but all types of information weapons are tested and deployed as well. A cornerstone and the main topic targeted in this information war is the relationship between Ukraine and the EU, which Russia is trying to manipulate and ruin in different ways.

The study of disinformation narratives against European countries and the European Union in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war has significant importance. The desire of Ukraine to move towards Europe, to aspire to a better standard of living, was the catalyst for the Euromaidan Revolution, to which Russia responded with war. Today, during the full-scale war, the European Union stands as one of Ukraine's largest and most important allies. Russia's information aggression towards such allies is in line with Russia's information strategy.

The selection of fact-checking materials for this research, focuses on narratives and their evolution during the full-scale war, but not only. The analysis reveals the reason fake news is used (the intent of the disinformation) and that debunking the most widely spread, emblematic, or the most dangerously influential material shows potentially future hot spots with which policy makers will have to contend.

Thus, within this framework, the following research questions were posed:

- What disinformation narratives about the EU and European countries were prop-

agated from 2014 to 2023, and did this landscape change with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

- Which European countries are most frequently featured in disinformation narratives, and in what context?
- Can a database of the fact-checking project serve as a basis for research and analysis of information operations?

Defining Disinformation and “Fake News”

According to David Lazer, disinformation is false information that is purposely spread to deceive people (Lazer, 2018).

In this context, it is worth considering the definition of fake news that researchers have developed by Allcott and Gentzkow as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers” (Allcott, Gentzkow, 2017).

In official EU documents and reports by research organizations, analysts often refuse to use the term “fake news” because they consider it to be politicized. However, fact-checkers use this term in the sense of a “unit of content” – a text, photo, or video that is presented in the form of a news story or as a post on social media.

In this context we should also address the concepts of fake source as a false source/ attribution of information to a known source and fake context – incorrect interpretation or fictitious context.

Narrative Paradigm Theory and Narrative

Narratives are a form of storytelling that helps to explain and shape perceptions of an issue. They are stories designed to influence a target audience. (Pamment, 2021). Narratives are broadcast for a long time and reflect generalized ideas and stereotypical approaches in a way that is favorable to certain groups.

In analyzing narratives in the context of the state and ideology, it is important to consider the concept of a strategic narrative. Strategic narratives are understood here as a set of media discourses built to reinforce, subvert, undermine, overwhelm, or replace a preexisting discourse on a subject significant to both the audience and the “speaker,” often a representative of the political elite (Price, 2015).

The theoretical framework of this study is the Narrative Paradigm Theory. Narrative theory assumes that people perceive information about life and processes around them as a series of stories, and plots that are broadcast for a long time in their information space (Fisher, 1984). According to Fisher, individual facts and representations of events do not reach the audience as single packages, but rather as stories and narratives that give abstract concepts their forms. The Russian government understands the importance of narrative and is not afraid to advance a propaganda storyline masked as news (Wilbur, 2022).

Methods

The purpose of this study is to analyze disinformation narratives directed against the EU and European countries, disseminated by Russian media from 2014 to 2023. The selection and analysis of Russian propaganda narratives were based on the work of the fact-checking project StopFake.org.

StopFake.org is a Ukrainian fact-checking project that was established in March 2014 at the Mohyla School of Journalism. Initially, the project's primary goal was to fact-check and debunk unreliable information and propaganda related to events in Ukraine but evolved into an information hub that analyzes the phenomenon of Kremlin propaganda in all its aspects and manifestations.

The StopFake database includes 5391 fact-checked and debunked articles from 2014 to 2023.

Content analysis was chosen as the primary research method here, as it is an ideal approach for the systematic study of narratives, the categorization of specific themes, the measurement of volume and their dissemination, and understanding which elements or themes are most emphasized and whether they change over time.

Materials consisting of mentions about the EU, and European countries were chosen for analysis. During the selection process, 664 selected debunked claims were categorized by the specific set of narratives and divided over time into two categories: narratives circulated before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and those after February 2022. To categorize and analyze the transformation of disinformation narratives, we divided a series of narratives by topic and noticed the emergence of new narratives after the full-scale invasion, a decrease in the use of certain themes, and an increase in the use of other themes as well.

Key findings

Anti-EU disinformation narratives before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine

The study of narratives through fact-checking by StopFake.org has helped reconstruct a certain image of Europe in its relations with Ukraine that Russia presents to its audience – all those it seeks to target in its disinformation campaigns. According to the Russian propaganda machine, European countries disregard Ukraine, consider it an unreliable ally ready to steal all aid for personal gain, doubting the effectiveness of its reforms and the weak moral values of its people. European countries are allegedly willing to engage in active warfare against Russia and constantly fuel the fire, as war suits their interests. Furthermore, they purportedly believe Ukraine is inhabited by aggressive radicals, unruly refugees, and a multitude of Nazis. European partners are also portrayed as eagerly waiting for Ukraine to disintegrate as a country so they can occupy its territories and use them as a resource asset. Additionally, certain countries are periodically ready to profess their love for Russia, knowing that Russia did not bring down MH17 and that sanctions against Russia make no sense.

The analysis of the most frequently used narratives, the countries most commonly mentioned in the debunked claims, and a review of data over the years reveal how the use of anti-EU narratives has evolved during the years of Russian-Ukrainian war beginning with the illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

If we analyze the most widespread themes that were debunked by StopFake and were related to the EU and European countries, we can formulate the following categories of narratives.

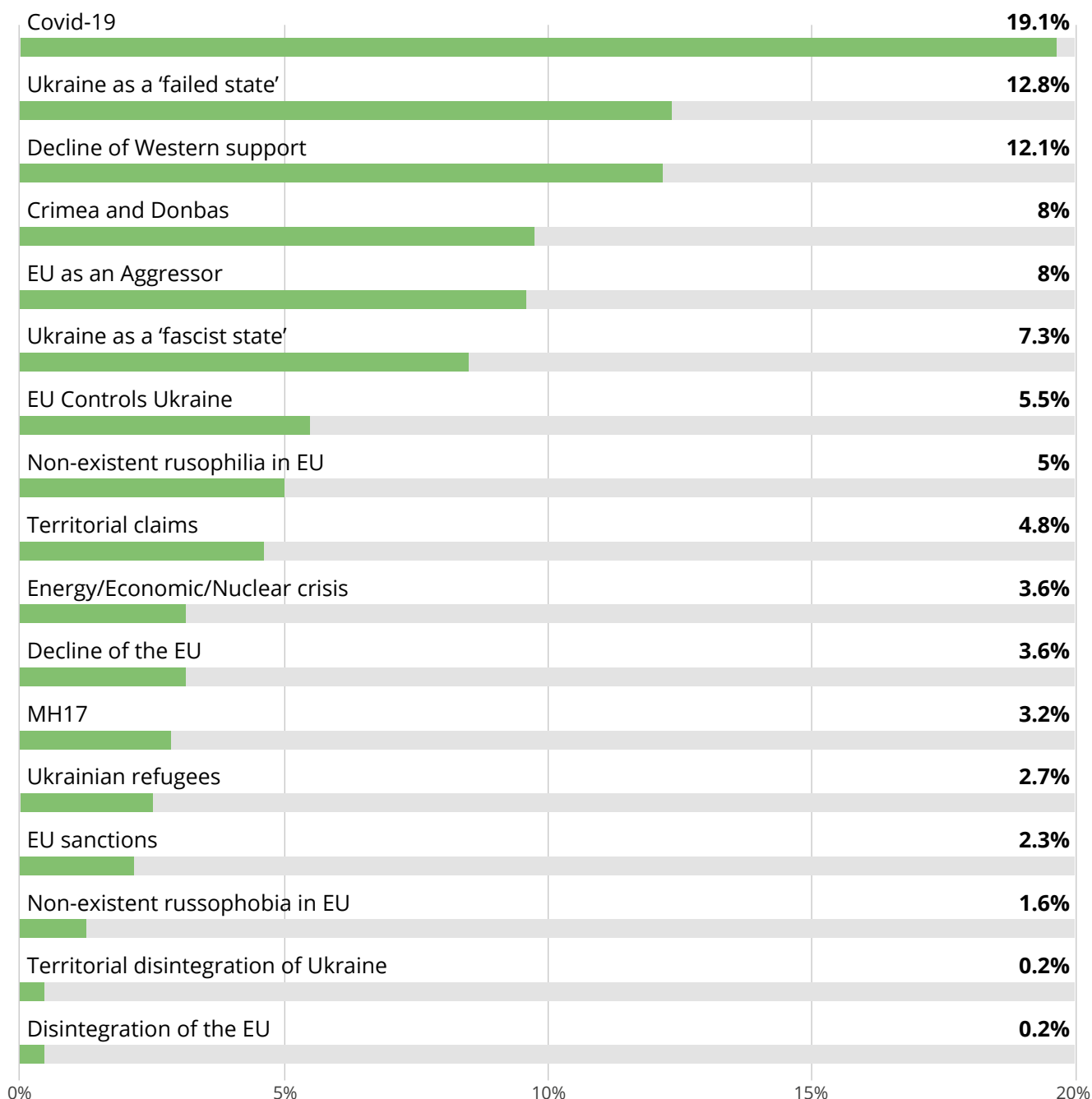


Figure 1. Anti-EU Narratives in StopFake's debunked claims before the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation.

The theme of the **COVID-19 group of narratives** was the most popular one – **19,1%** from all selected materials which can be explained by the incredible growth of disinformation featuring European countries and used by the Kremlin to demonstrate the European Union's inability to handle a crisis and to propagate various conspiracy theories, including those against vaccination and evidence-based medicine. Furthermore, Russian propaganda leveraged the theme of the pandemic to cast doubt on the relationships between European countries and Ukraine and to spread the narrative that Ukraine would receive no support during challenging times.

The second most popular theme is one of the main and central messages of Kremlin propaganda regarding Ukraine – that **Ukraine is a failed state**, a country that should not exist (**12,8%**). A significant increase in the use of the “failed state” narrative occurred in 2016, precisely when the Association Agreement with the EU was ratified, and a disinformation campaign targeting several European countries aimed to hinder its success. Ukraine is depicted in such fakes as a country with incompetent and unskilled leadership, whose residents are not interested in EU integration. It is portrayed as the poorest and most corrupt country with dangerous cities.

The third most widely spread group of narratives is dedicated to **declining Western support for Ukraine (12,1%)**. These narratives were actively used during the ratification of the Association Agreement with the EU, the beginning of visa-free travel. Also noteworthy, this group of narrative fakes circulated messaging that Europe was ready to accept Russia’s conflict resolution plan and take Russia’s side of the story as well.

During the period from 2014 to 2022 themes related to the **fake legalization of the annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula and the occupation of Ukraine’s Donbas** were prevalent (**8%**). Under this category, the Kremlin promoted fabricated evidence that the Crimean Peninsula was recognized as part of Russia, or evidence of the recognition of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics.

The category of narratives **“EU as an Aggressor” (8%)** depicts European countries as those who benefit from war, who are inclined to attack neighboring countries, and so on. Such countries are presented as active participants in the Russian-Ukrainian war or contributors to its escalation in Ukraine.

The category of narratives **“Ukraine as a fascist state” (7,3%)** contains fake stories aim to create and confirm the perception of Ukraine by Europe as a country of Nazis, people with anti-Semitic views who incite unrest in other countries, or engage in radical actions threatening Europeans, and do not share European values at all.

The other group of debunked claims fell under the narrative of **“The EU controls Ukraine” (5,5%** of all selected materials). In addition to narratives portraying Ukraine as a failed country, the Kremlin portrays Ukraine as an incomplete entity with a puppet government that is controlled from the outside. For example, this group includes fakes such as the claim the European Union is supposedly planning to bring Ukraine to its knees, that Britain itself plans to bring a pro-Russian president to power in Ukraine, that the EU is granting Ukraine a loan solely in exchange for sovereignty, that poverty in Ukraine is increasing due to the EU.

A separate category includes materials that describe an alleged admiration of Russia by Europe – **non-existent Rusophilia in the EU (5%)**. Among fakes in this category are

debunked claims that Italians allegedly asked Putin to save the world, that the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs allegedly declared unity between the West and Russia, and that the UK supposedly adopted the Soviet education system because it was 'better'.

The narratives categorized as **"territorial claims" (4,8%)** are those aimed at creating the perception that European countries constantly seek to take parts of Ukraine for themselves, deploy their military forces, and do not consider Ukraine to be a separate and independent country.

A separate category of narratives is dedicated to **energy, economic, and nuclear crises (3,6%)**, encompassing fake stories that falsely claim Ukraine is turning into a nuclear wasteland in Europe, consistently running out of gas in the winter and freezing, and more.

The **"Decline and failure of the EU" category of narratives (3,6%)** is dedicated to various examples of failed policies in EU countries that led to a deterioration of the economic situation, sparked protests, and increased misunderstandings among allies.

A separate category of debunking is dedicated to the topic of the **MH17 tragedy (3,2%)**, including fake stories that falsely claim that Europeans believe Ukraine shot down the Malaysian airliner, or that there is supposedly evidence proving Ukraine's guilt, and more.

The category of debunking related to **Ukrainian refugees** wasn't as popular before the full-scale invasion **(2,7%)**. Nevertheless, this narrative was still used to emphasize the level of domestic hatred towards Ukrainians who were leaving for the EU, working there, and trying to build a life.

A certain portion of fake news advanced a narrative related to **EU sanctions (2,3%)** against Russia in response to its actions in the Crimea and the Donbas. The Kremlin used this theme to emphasize that Europe allegedly actively opposes the imposition of anti-Russian sanctions and that it is primarily Europeans who suffer from these sanctions.

The narrative that alleges **Russophobia in Europe (1,6%)** was utilized by Russian media to create the false impression the EU is doing everything it can to eradicate the Russian language and oppress the rights of Russian-speaking people.

The least used narrative categories are dedicated to the **alleged territorial disintegration of Ukraine (0,2%)** and the **disintegration of the EU (0,2%)**. Narratives of these categories aim to show that neither Ukraine nor the EU could stay within one's borders.

Indeed, from 2014 to 2022, Russian propaganda disseminated a range of disinfor-

mation narratives related to the EU, European countries, and Ukraine, with the aim of creating a negative image of both sides. The most widespread disinformation narratives, as illustrated in the graph (Figure 1.), essentially served as arguments for Russia to launch a full-scale aggression against Ukraine. These narratives continue to be utilized by the Kremlin in its rhetoric.

Anti-EU disinformation narratives after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine

Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the map of narratives has been changing somewhat. It is obvious that military and political events have influenced the semantic emphasis of previous topics and added new meanings to them.

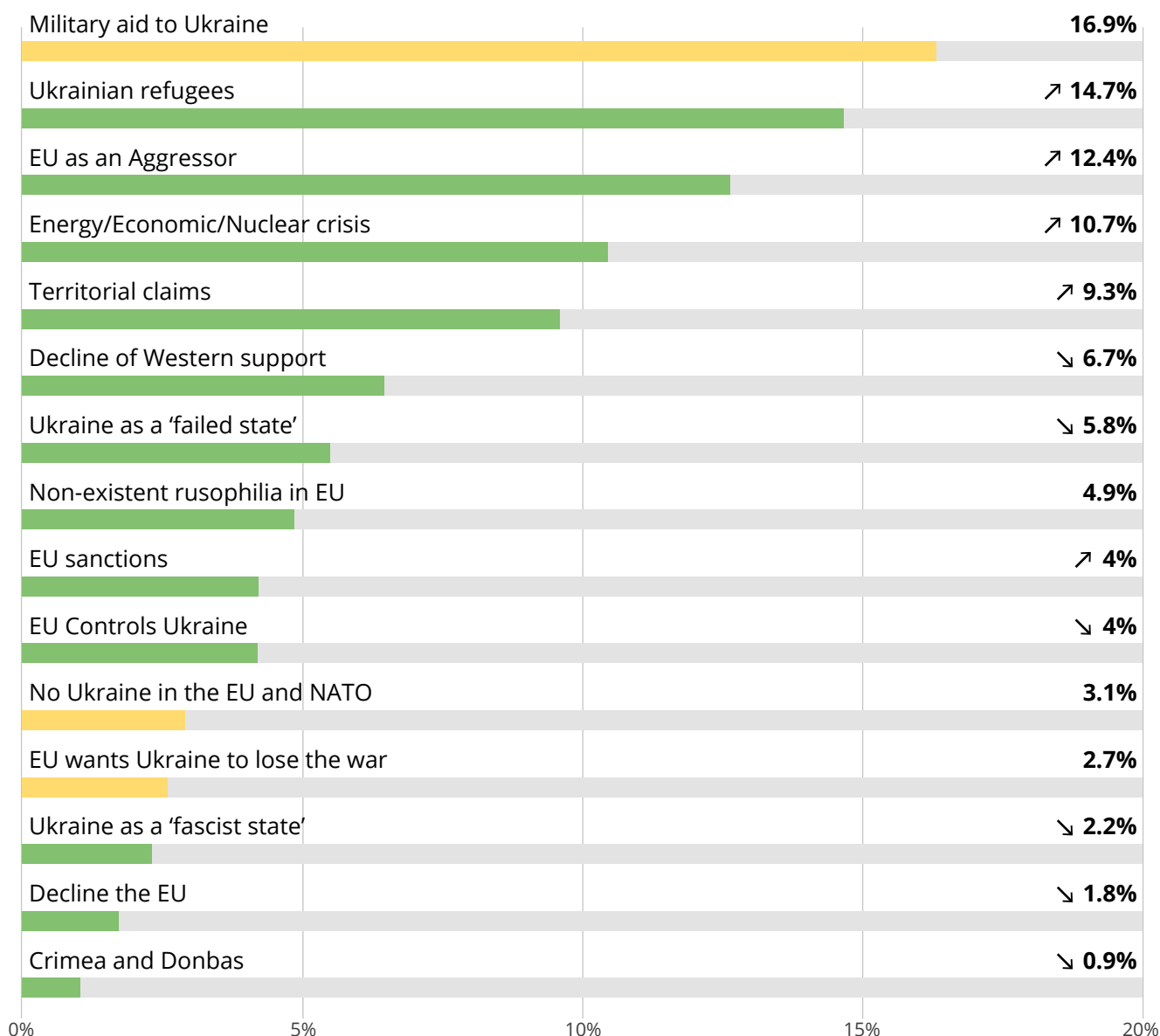


Figure 2. Anti-EU Narratives in StopFake’s debunked claims after the Russian Federation’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

For example, the topic of **Ukrainian refugees in the EU** is the most represented in the refutation database compiled by fact-checkers – (14,7%). Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the refugee narrative has become the main topic targeting European humanitarian support for Ukrainians and is aimed at both Western audiences as well as Ukrainians themselves.

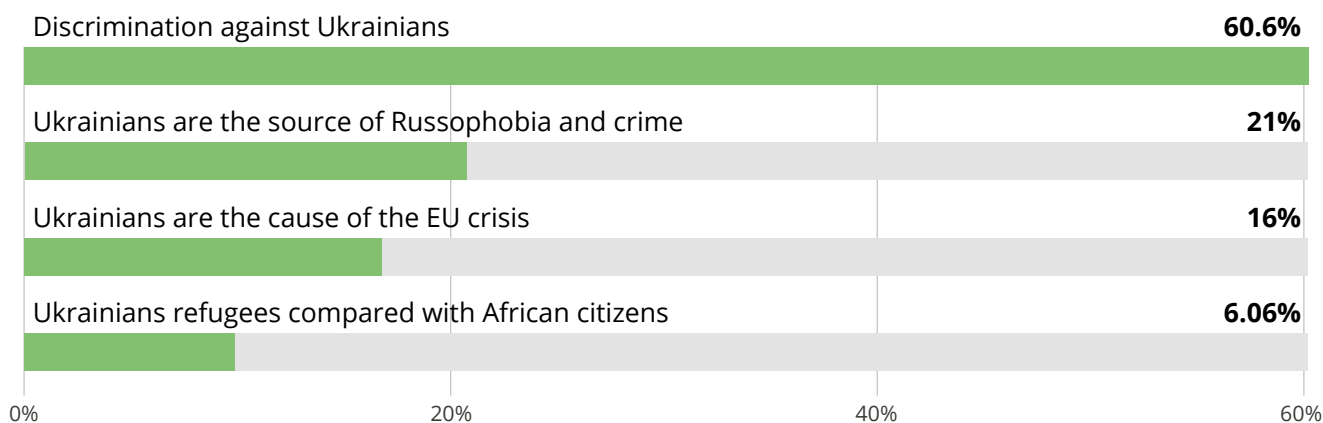


Figure 3. Subtopics of the narrative of “Ukrainian refugees in the EU”.

The refugee narrative can be divided into the following subtopics: **“The EU despises and discriminates against Ukrainians” (60,6%)**, **“Ukrainian refugees are the source of Russophobia and crime in the EU” (21%)**, **“Ukrainians are the cause of the crisis in the EU” (12%)**, and **comparing Ukrainian refugees with African citizens (6,06%)**.

The narrative **“The EU despises and discredits”** comprised 60,6% of narratives regarding this topic in the period from 2022 to 2023 and portrays European countries as hostile to Ukrainians, and/or presenting Ukrainians as a physical and moral danger. Such examples can be seen in the materials under the headings “Fake: KFC and Booking.com placed an advert offensive to Ukrainian women in Munich”, “Fake: Ukrainian refugees offered to live in the former Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany”.

The other largest subtopic **“Russophobia and the crime of Ukrainian refugees”**, is aimed at a Western audience and presents Ukrainians as a source of aggression and crime against the background of Russophobia, accounting for **21%** of refutations in the fact-checker database on the topic “Ukrainian refugees.” Examples demonstrating this subtopic can be found in the materials “Fake: A crowd of Ukrainians beat a “Russian boy” to death in Germany”, “Manipulation: Ukrainian refugees in Italy beat the granddaughter of Russian poet Joseph Brodsky”, “Fake: Ukrainian refugees wanted to burn the Russian flag, but destroyed 31 hectares of Spanish forest.” Indeed, there are reports with identical storylines, in which only the names of people and countries have been changed. For example, “Ukrainian refugees wanted to burn the Russian flag, but destroyed 31 hectares of Spanish forest” was spread in July 2022 during which real forest fires were burning in Spain.

Of all fact-checked materials in the refutation database, **Military aid to Ukraine** is the most represented narrative in the information space following the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine (**16,9%**).

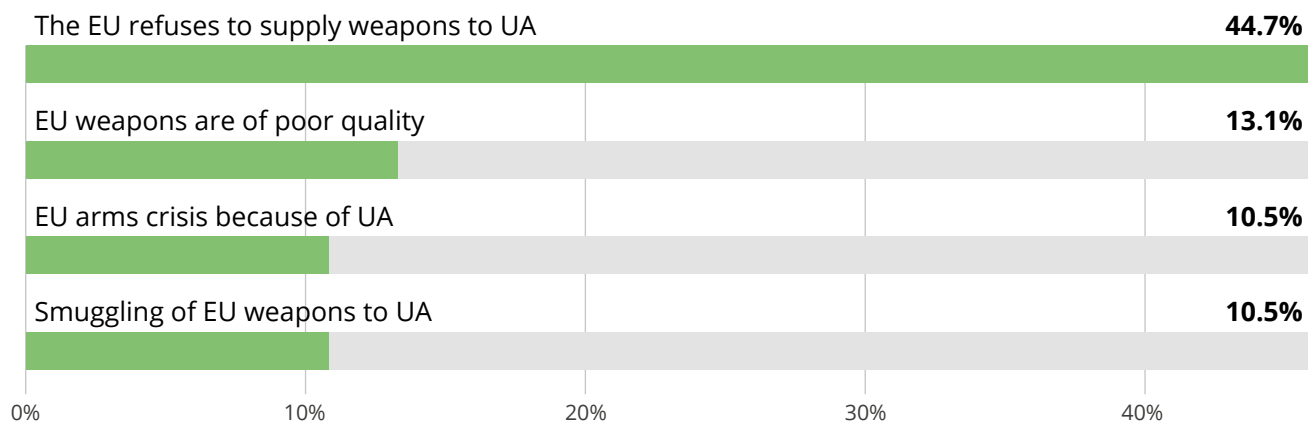


Figure 4. Subtopics of the narrative of “Military aid to Ukraine”.

This study identified five sub-themes, including: **“The EU refuses to supply weapons to Ukraine” (44,7%)**, **“EU weapons are of poor quality” (13,1%)**, **“Smuggling of EU weapons to Ukraine” (10,5%)**, and **“EU arms crisis because of Ukraine” (10,5%)**.

News examples under the topic “EU refuses to supply weapons to Ukraine” include: “Fake: Germany will no longer supply weapons to Ukraine”, Manipulation: European countries “refused military promises to Ukraine”, “Fake: France plans to stop military aid to Ukraine because of industrial piracy”, “Manipulation: More than 76% of French people are in favor of stopping military aid to Ukraine”. False reports were designed to demonstrate an allegedly negative attitude and unwillingness of Western partners to provide military support, or to project general fatigue from military events, etc.

To confirm the information about the EU’s alleged reluctance to provide military support, the messages used fake opinion polls, testimonies of fake experts, and fictitious quotes in Western international publications.

The topic **“EU supplies low-quality weapons” (13,1%)** is closely related to the previous one and aims to demonstrate the EU’s reluctance and, at the same time, inability to provide high-quality military support. The key accents that appear in fake news on this topic promote the idea that European countries are weak, lack sufficient military resources, or are not interested in providing modern weapons. Examples of refutations include: “Fake: Berlin will supply Ukraine with outdated weapons....”, “Fake: France “handed over broken Caesar air defense systems to Ukraine” – Le Figaro”, “Manipulation: Ukrainian Air Force claims MiG-29s from Poland and Slovakia are “ineffective”.”

On the one hand, Russian disinformation creates a sense of disillusion among the Ukrainian audience and European partners by promoting false claims of weak and poor

quality support, while on the other hand, it also creates distrust among the Western audience about the proper use of these weapons and questions the integrity of the Ukrainian side.

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, disinformation has been shaping the narrative that military resources of the EU and NATO countries are being sold on the black market, misused, etc. The narrative **"Smuggling of Western weapons in Ukraine" (10,5%)** can be seen in the following refutations: "Manipulation: EU is afraid of "Ukrainian smuggling" of weapons and drugs", "Fake: In Finland, criminal groups receive weapons from Ukraine."

To reinforce the audience's negative perception of military support, disinformation also talks about the EU's arms crisis due to the war in Ukraine. This message was represented in 10.5% of the topics in the refutation database.

New narratives related to the EU include **No to Ukraine in the EU (3,1%)** and **NATO, The EU wants Ukraine to lose the war (2,7%)**.

In these themes, Russian disinformation discredits European assistance, emphasizing that it is not sincere and intentionally ineffective. In these false stories, Russia says that the EU is not interested in strengthening Ukraine's European integration and does not foresee Ukraine being accepted into the EU. Disinformation also spreads fake information about the total lack of support among European citizens for Ukraine's European integration. The fake news cites examples of fictitious mass rallies and protests against Ukraine and portrays a picture in which Europeans completely reject Ukrainians.

Topics in which this message is represented in the database include: "Manipulation: Some EU leaders believe Ukraine is "waiting for defeat" – Poland's prime minister," "Fake: Ukraine is being "drained" - Scholz said "uncomfortable decisions" are being made," "Fake: EU releases video why Ukraine "should not become a NATO member".

Key countries

An analysis of the data contained in the refutation database shows which countries are most often targeted in the disinformation, in what narratives do they most often figure and how frequently these narratives appear reveals the planned and strategic approach to Russia's disinformation strategy. Most often, the fakes were related to the European Union itself – 27.3% of all selected disinformation cases. However, the top five countries mentioned also clearly illustrate the focus of the Kremlin's attention in its disinformation campaigns:

When analyzing the most used narratives for each of the most often mentioned countries, a certain pattern emerges. Regarding Poland, there is a consistent effort to portray it as a country attempting to occupy Ukraine and seize its territory – the most popular theme of narratives dedicated to Poland refer to “territorial claims” – 28,6% of the selected disinformation topics related to this country. Throughout the years of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Poland is depicted as attempting to “take back” Western Ukraine, demanding that Ukrainians “give land and property to Poles,” and claiming that Poles constantly “support the occupation” of Western Ukrainian regions and demand “military intervention.” The other popular group of narratives dedicated to Poland aims to create an image of Poland as an aggressor (23.5%), with frequent dissemination of falsehoods about Polish military involvement in the conflict in the Donbas, allegations that Poland is provoking Russia, narratives holding Poland responsible for the start of World War II, or that Poland plans to attack Belarus, and more. Another prevalent narrative related to Poland involves Ukrainian refugees (19.4%). Initially, during the early stages of the Russian-Ukrainian war, there were falsehoods about various “statements” from Polish officials regarding Ukrainians being “cheap labor.” However, with the full-scale war and the escape of a large number of Ukrainians into Poland and neighboring countries in search of safety, the number of disinformation cases portraying Ukrainians as “aggressive” or incapable of following rules increased, suggesting that it is the Ukrainians who are responsible for rising crime rates, increased HIV infections, and the disappearance of state assistance to Polish citizens.

The most popular narratives related to Germany includes the category of “Ukraine as a failed state” (11,3%). This category consists of various falsehoods about how then-Chancellor Angela Merkel promised Ukraine a “lack of investments,” that government representatives were allegedly insulted, that Germans refused to honor the heroes of the Heavenly Hundred, and more. With the full-scale war, the number of fake news and manipulations regarding military aid from Germany to Ukraine increased. The group of narratives dedicated to military aid to Ukraine is in third place (10,3%). There was a separate disinformation campaign following the decision to transfer Leopard tanks to Ukraine, accompanied by falsehoods suggesting that Germans were actively opposed to the transfer of heavy weaponry, and that Germans grew tired of supporting Ukraine, and so on. Also, the portrayal of Ukraine as a “fascist state” was a popular topic among the debunked claims mentioning Germany.

Disinformation narratives related to the United Kingdom, (the UK being third place in number of mentions) involve a range of topics. These narratives include claims about COVID-19 (13,7%), portraying the EU as an aggressor (13,7%), depicting Ukraine as a failed country (13,7%), and the notion of a non-existent Russophilia (11,8%). For example, among such fake stories were claims asserting the British apologizing to Russians

for Boris Johnson's behavior, the British denying Russian involvement in the Salisbury poisoning, and the British expressing regret for not inviting Putin to Queen Elizabeth II's funeral. These narratives are likely aimed at sowing discord, undermining trust in the UK's policies, and creating confusion among the public.

Overall, differences in disinformation narratives are observed across different countries depending on their specific characteristics, the nature of their cooperation with Ukraine, the political stance on Ukraine's integration into the EU, and so on. For example, in France, the most frequently mentioned topics are Ukraine as a failed state, the pandemic, and military aid to Ukraine. Italy is most often referenced in fakes related to the pandemic, Ukrainian refugees, and narratives depicting Ukraine as a fascist country and a failed state. Even when examining narratives in fact-checking materials, it is possible to identify separate and coordinated campaigns tailored to each country.

Key sources

It is also important to mention which communication channels are used to spread disinformation narratives against the EU in the context of this research. First and foremost, it is worth highlighting the consistent coordination in promoting a particular disinformation narrative. When it appears in the information space, it is simultaneously promoted through all the major Russian media outlets. Additionally, social media is engaged, and depending on the topic, trolls or bots in special groups, as well as individual users, are mobilized for its dissemination.

One can also note a transformation in the dissemination of disinformation as well as in the use of communication channels. In 2014, Russian mainstream media launched fakes through professionally produced segments on prime-time news channels like Channel One and other national media. However, during the full-scale invasion mostly Telegram channels or groups on other social networks began to be actively used. These channels or accounts may be created specifically for spreading fake information. Once appearing on a Telegram channel, such a fake migrates into the news of a marginal website and eventually reaches a large-audience news site, then transforming into a full-fledged news story. Estimations suggest the reach of such fakes is significantly broader, as they reach different audiences through various channels and groups.

The debunked narratives in the StopFake database, show that when it comes to traditional media, the most common sources to spread fake narratives and serve as primary disseminators include media outlets such as Ukraina.ru, RIA Novosti, RT, Sputnik, Zvezda TV, TASS, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Moskovsky Komsomolets, NTV, REN TV, Tsargrad, Politnavigator, Russkaya Vesna, NewsFront, Lenta.ru, Gazeta.ru, RIA FAN, News.

ru, Vzglyad, Life.ru, Vesti.ru, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Izvestiya, Parliament's Gazette, and others.

Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the dissemination of disinformation was a main characteristic of media outlets under Kremlin control or those outlets closely associated with Putin. However, after February 2022 and following the implementation of a series of laws that essentially introduced military censorship in the country, disinformation narratives began to be propagated by other media outlets that had rarely been associated with spreading propaganda in the past, such as Interfax and RBC.

The usage of social media channels as primary sources for spreading disinformation during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a concerning trend. Telegram channels like Readovka, Mash, Kadyrov_95 (associated with the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov), Rossiya Seychas, Novosti Moskvyy, Ranshe Vsekh, Ostorozhno, novosti, Operatzya Z: Voenkory russkoi vesny, Solovyev, Rybar, and others, along with Russian politicians personal channels (such as Dmitry Medvedev and Vyacheslav Volodin), showcases how these platforms have become significant outlets for disinformation.

These so-called military correspondents, who often operate outside traditional media, have seen a substantial increase in their roles as amplifiers of disinformation narratives. Given people's growing reliance on social media for news and information, the use of these channels for spreading information operations, fakes, and disinformation narratives will be a decisive trend in the coming years. This underscores the importance of critical thinking, fact-checking, and media literacy when navigating the information landscape during times of conflict.

Conclusions


The analysis of narratives in StopFake debunking database has shown that with the escalation of full-scale war, the use of a series of fakes related to European countries and Ukraine has significantly increased.

The StopFake database reveals how the transformation of anti-EU narratives through the Russian-Ukrainian war, shows that Russia mobilized its disinformation resources during the full-scale war and significantly, that it perceives European countries as a threat and as enemies. It clearly shows foreign countries as hostile to its target audience. The narratives known as "Ukraine as a failed state", and the "Decline of Western support" illustrates that Russia seeks by any means to undermine Ukraine's relationships with its allies and justify Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. The use of fakes portraying European countries as aggressors who caused the war and incited

an escalation indicates that Russia aims for its audience to view the Kremlin's leadership solely as peacemakers who were compelled to fight against an aggressive Western world.

Furthermore, the analysis of debunked claims related to specific countries has revealed that Russia is conducting an information war tailored to each country individually. For instance, in the case of Poland, the focus is on the topic of refugees, while for Ukraine, the narrative revolves around the imminent breakup of the country. In the case of the Netherlands, a series of fake stories emerged during public discussions about the Association Agreement with the EU. This tailored approach illustrates Russia's intent to influence each country's perception and exploit specific vulnerabilities or concerns.

The research has demonstrated that the work of a fact-checking organization can reveal the processes of information operations conducted by adversaries and assist in strategic planning for responses to these information operations. Thus, the experience of StopFake.org has revealed the deliberate "zero-sum" nature of the Kremlin's information warfare being waged against Ukraine since 2014. At the same time, it shows that while debunking is necessary, even crucial, it is not sufficient to completely counteract the influence of disinformation. The spread of disinformation narratives is an ongoing process during the war, and countering narratives with facts remains an ongoing challenge.



Recommendations to strengthen the capacity of fact-checkers combating disinformation

Based on the current and continuing research of the StopFake fact-checking project regarding Russian disinformation narrative strategies targeting and surrounding the EU and Ukraine, the research group has developed recommendations for fact-checking organisations and government agencies.

Recommendations for Fact-checking Organisations

Recommendation 1: Employ a narrative map of Russian disinformation surrounding the EU as a basis to identify threats.

The study shows the narrative map of Russian disinformation directed against the EU remains constant and is systematically deployed by Russian state and non-state actors, therefore we recommend fact-checking organisations and think tanks use it to construct markers and criteria important for the identification of fake messages across various media types and social networks.

Recommendation 2: Pay special attention to those EU countries that have been and are systematically targeted by Russian disinformation.

Current research on narratives promoted by Russia during the period from 2014 to 2023, has shown the most targeted countries have become focal points of disinformation (Poland, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy). To effectively establish counter-disinformation campaigns, we recommend fact-checkers pay attention to the geographic factor in fake news and utilise available data for further analysis and information verification. It is crucial to communicate this with governmental institutions in those countries and consider geography in the process of development of communication strategies.

Recommendation 3: Conduct regular analysis of target audiences of Russian disinformation.

The results of the study demonstrate how Russian disinformation narratives are linked to specific countries and communities. Based on the findings of the current study, we recommend fact-checking organisations research audience reactions to certain fake news stories to monitor trends and dynamics of their dissemination so as to inform readers in countries with the highest disinformation threats. Such activities will help to anticipate and pre-empt possible consequences of the Kremlin's information attacks.

Recommendation 4: Conduct systematic monitoring and narrative analysis aimed at identifying new thematic and substantive changes to anticipate new threats.

As disinformation narratives evolve under the influence of various factors such as political processes and events, unforeseen crisis, and epidemics, it is essential to regularly re-assess narrative analyses to anticipate threats and identify key target groups and communities. We recommend utilising various observational and computational tools for monitoring disinformation, while enhancing the capabilities of analysts and fact-checkers regarding threats and the way they are disseminated.

Recommendation 5: Analyse technologies and tools used by disinformation for the production of fake news.

In the process of disinformation campaigns in Ukraine, Russia has used various technologies to reproduce false, manipulative information – deep fakes, fake audio, and photo/video messages. Regular monitoring and analysis allow us to track not only the narrative but also the technological aspects behind disinformation production and distribution, as well as to prepare strategies and methods of verification and refutation.

Recommendation 6: Set up a publicly available repository of disinformation examples.

Based on data assembled by fact-checkers, develop a publicly accessible repository of disinformation examples annotated with narrative features across various types of content to be used by the fact-checking community and other stakeholders.

Also important is the organisation of an ongoing process for updating and analysing this data and to provide a transparent methodology for populating and utilising data from this database.

Recommendation 7: Promote the internationalisation of fact-checking to track and analyse the cross-border spread of disinformation.

Provide translation capabilities to track and analyse the cross-border spread of disinformation. According to the study, in the context of the war in Ukraine, disinformation clearly identifies the main countries involved and makes them the focus of its fake news. Given its international nature, fact-checking organisations should develop language services and translate refutations. This will increase the level of analysis of disinformation in a pan-European context, allow for the demonstration of trends common to different countries, and facilitate data exchange between fact-checking organisations.

Recommendation 8: Establish an extensive monitoring framework.

The monitoring structure should incorporate the most accessible fact-checking databases. To achieve this, it is necessary to establish networking connections and nodes of cooperation between fact-checking organisations, communication companies, social

media platforms, and other stakeholders in the information process.

Recommendation 9: Inform and educate various stakeholders about disinformation trends on a regular basis.

Develop a system for regularly informing all stakeholders. Include the results of systematic analysis of disinformation narrative trends in public reports and discussions, articulate the trends and threats at all levels, and engage a wide audience in this process.

Recommendation 10: Build a network of fact-checkers and researchers.

Given the importance of research development for new approaches to combating disinformation, we recommend fact-checkers establish lasting cooperation with research institutions and universities. This will help to effectively identify and analyse disinformation challenges and develop effective ways to prevent the consequences of dangerous information attacks.

Recommendations for Governments and Policymakers

Recommendation 1. Support independent scientific research and systematic analysis of disinformation.

We urge governments to fund and support independent research in the field of information and disinformation and create the conditions for systematic analytical work by scholars across Europe. In order to study the social impact of disinformation, promote interdisciplinary research that includes IT, social, psychological and humanitarian fields.

Recommendation 2. Encourage cross-disciplinary cooperation between researchers.

To improve the processes of data collection and analysis, encourage professional interaction between fact-checkers, researchers, and representatives of communication companies and social networks. It will be important to create a platform that would combine the capabilities of professionals across Europe, and provide up-to-date information about security threats in the field of information.

Recommendation 3. Include fact-checking in the structure of strategic communications.

In the process of building communication companies and strategies at various levels, take into account the results of fact-checking activities. Take into account trends

and disinformation narratives to formulate strategic messages and explanations for different target audiences.

Recommendation 4. Involve fact-checkers in the policymaking process regarding countering disinformation.

Since the systematic activity of fact-checking organisations allows to identify technological, narrative and behavioural features of the processes related to the transmission and consumption of information by different groups, their experience and observations can be useful in developing policies and formulating legislation in the field of information and countering disinformation.

Recommendation 5. Apply clear frameworks and legal mechanisms for data protection and data usage policies.

As data protection and the right to privacy is a core value of a democratic European society, it is essential to promote the transparency of stakeholder activities in the field of countering disinformation and create opportunities for the exchange of data, reports and research.

Recommendation 6. Strengthen sanctions against agents and sponsors of disinformation.

Since disinformation is changing and actively adapting to new realities and legal prohibitions, the systematic updating of formal approaches to combat disinformation should be addressed. Systematic monitoring by analytical and fact-checking organisations has shown the need to develop and strengthen sanctions against disinformation agents and governments sponsoring destructive information actions. Any new digital processes and deformational influences must have a relevant sanction or legislative response.

Recommendation 7. Collaborate with digital platforms.

Establish close cooperation with civilian platforms to track and block disinformation, messages containing threats to national security, and violent and radical content. Support the best practices of fact-checking programs run by digital platforms and communications companies.

Recommendation 8. Develop criteria to identify agents and sources of disinformation.

Disinformation tends to change dynamically and adapts to bans and sanctions and acquires hybrid features. New allegedly independent, non-state related speakers and

opinion leaders and influencers are acting as actors of disinformation, manipulating the concept of freedom of speech and undermining the foundations of a democratic society. Due to these trends, we recommend that governments, together with fact-checking organisations and academia, work to define wider criteria for disinformation agents, actors, and disruptors of information processes.

Recommendation 9. Promote and support self-regulatory initiatives of media/fact-checkers and other stakeholders in the information process.

To ensure multilateral and effective work of journalistic and fact-checking organisations, we recommend that governments create conditions and support self-regulatory initiatives. EFCSN is one such important example of a pan-European fact-checking organisation. Supporting and strengthening such initiatives should be an important priority for the EU councils and parliaments.

Recommendation 10. Public awareness and Media Literacy.

Include issues related to disinformation and propaganda and information verification in the curricula for different age groups at different stages of national education on a regular basis. Given the potential of fact-checking organisations and their activities in informing different target groups about fake news and promoting critical thinking, the importance of official sources and trusted resources, involve them in national media literacy events. Support media education initiatives that develop and promote information campaigns raising awareness about the role of fact-checking and media literacy and involve various types of media (educational, television, radio, online media) organisations in such campaigns.

Glossary of Terms

Disinformation is false information that is purposely spread to deceive people (Lazer, 2018).

Digital platform: An internet company and/or service on which registered users post information and communicate digitally, including popular social media sites/companies such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and more (The Public Policy Forum (2022). Canadian Citizens' Assembly on Democratic Expression).

Malinformation is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere (Wardle, Derakhshan, 2017).

Misinformation is verifiably false information that is shared without the intent to mislead. The effects of misinformation can still be harmful. People also deliberately spread false or manipulated information (Pamment, 2021).

Narrative is a form of storytelling that helps to explain and shape perceptions of an issue. They are stories that are designed to influence a target audience. (Pamment, 2021).

Propaganda is "conceived of as strategically devised messages that are disseminated to masses of people by an institution for the purpose of generating action benefiting its source" (Parry-Giles, 2002). Russian propaganda is not just the promotion of ideas and messages, it is the systematic imposition of ideology. Indeed, this is the most relevant definition. In essence, propaganda aims to change the attitudes and behaviours of the masses and could potentially act as a tool to spread an ideology (Collison, 2003).

Strategic narratives are a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors (Miskimmon, A., O'Laughlin, B., & Roselle, L, (2013).

Fact-checking is the systematic assessment of online resources, media messages and publication of claims made by organizations or public figures to assess their validity (Walter, Cohen, Holbert, Morag)

Fact-checking organisations are journalistic organisations focused on professional verification of information.

Media literacy is the ability to understand, analyse, evaluate, and create media messages (Austin, E, Chen, Y, Pinkleton, B, Johnson, J.).

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