Ukraine joins the information war with Russia

Ukraine's current policies and developments on the information front are characterised by the on-going crisis in eastern Ukraine and a massive Russian disinformation campaign. Kyiv is responding to Moscow's information measures with a top-down information policy approach, entering a game of competing narratives in which Russia has set the tone. However, recent independent grassroots media initiatives are gaining popularity among the population in Ukraine.

Can competing narratives use different tools?

'This is war. You're part of it'. The appeal of 'Ukrainian Civil Society to International Journalists' on the website euromaydanSOS – originally a Facebook group providing aid to 'people who suffered during the revolution in Ukraine' – warns international journalists against using official Russian media outlets such as the popular RT television channel as factual sources, especially for information on developments on the ground in Ukraine. Freedom of speech, the appeal cautions, can be used 'against the truth' by 'filling the information space with lies'.

Kyiv's information measures in the face of the Kremlin's media attacks

The definition of lies and truth can vary according to the narrative, and Russia's and Ukraine's competing narratives are mutually exclusive. The World War II-inspired Russian media narrative on Ukraine – according to which the Maidan revolution in Kyiv in February 2015 was a Nazi revolution, and the democratically elected government in Kyiv an ultra-nationalist, fascist 'junta' – is actively promoted by a well-funded and professional Russian information network of officials, journalists, internet trolls and pro-Russia commentators. In contrast, Kyiv has limited state resources for information measures.

However, Kyiv has taken several political steps to counter the Kremlin's mounting information attacks. The country's Ministry of the Interior banned 14 Russian television channels, including RT, in August 2014. Explaining the decision, a Ministry official said that 'as an independent sovereign state, Ukraine can and should protect its media space from aggression from Russia', adding that Kyiv's decision followed a similar move by Russia in 2014, when Ukrainian TV channels in Crimea were turned off.

In spring 2015, Kyiv also banned public screenings of films that 'popularise state organisations occupying [Ukraine] and popularise the values of a criminal underclass'. The legislative text states that 'Ukraine has suffered for years from the Russian Federation's crushing aggression in the information sphere'.

Ukraine's 'Ministry of Truth'

In another move to fight the mounting Russian information pressure, Ukraine's government voted in December 2014 to set up an Information Ministry. The Ministry is led by the head of the Information Security Department of the National Guard of Ukraine, Yuriy Stets, a close ally of President Petro Poroshenko and former chief producer of Poroshenko's Channel 5. The new ministry received a mixed response, and critics soon dubbed it the 'ministry of truth' in reference to the propaganda ministry in George Orwell's '1984'.

Reporters Without Borders said it 'firmly opposes' the Ukrainian Information Ministry. The media watchdog's secretary-general, Christophe Deloire, argued that 'putting the government in charge of "information policy" would be a major retrograde step that would open the way to grave excesses'. Ukrainian journalists demonstrated against the new ministry, and Tatyana Nikolaenko, chief editor at Ukraine's Insider magazine, argued that 'the creation of the Ministry (will) give Russian propaganda endless references to [Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph] Goebbels and Orwell.'

Ukraine's information army

In February 2015, Ukraine's Information Ministry reacted to the continued attacks from Russia's 'army of trolls' – online information staff allegedly paid by Moscow to criticise Ukraine and the West on social media, and promote the official Russian narrative – by establishing its own information army. The information army's website states that there are 'a lot [of] fronts opened against us and the information front is one of the most important. In a year we have created a strong army which courageously protects us in Donbass. Now is [the] time to fight back Russian occupants on the information front'. Some 35 000 'information warriors' reportedly signed up on the day the website was launched. Information Minister, Yuriy Stets defended his army, arguing that 'Trust or distrust depends on credible information. My task is to make sure ours is credible. If we spread the truth and journalists confirm it, there will be a rebirth of trust, something the authorities currently lack'.

New information tools

Soon after his appointment as Information Minister, Stets announced the launch of a new English-language TV channel, Ukraine Tomorrow, partially funded by US and European sources. 'The channel should be high-quality and broadcast all over the world,' Stets explained. The channel's name seems to be inspired by RT (formerly Russia Today), which is one of Russia's most successful and far-reaching international information vehicles. An existing private English-language channel, Ukraine Today, was launched in August 2014 by Ukrainian oligarch, Igor Kolomoisky.

President Poroshenko's call for a Ukrainian Facebook office

The information conflict in Ukraine, and in particular the increasing use of social media trolls, has highlighted the role of – mostly US-based – social media in hybrid conflicts as in Ukraine. In May 2014, deputy head of the Presidential administration, Dmytro Shymkiv, accused Facebook of political bias in favour of Russia, claiming that there is 'pro-Russian influence and pressure on the Facebook office in Russia'. Shymkiv argued that Russian Facebook moderators, who are allegedly influenced by the Kremlin's official narrative regarding the conflict in eastern Ukraine, are overseeing Ukrainian users. An AFP news report said that Ukrainians had flooded Facebook with allegations of pro-Russian political bias. Posts about Russia's alleged involvement in the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine in July 2014 have been blocked by Russian-language Facebook. Responding to the development, Poroshenko, on his own Facebook account, asked Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg to open a separate office in Ukraine, saying that 'Ukraine does need a Ukrainian Facebook office!'. Facebook has previously argued that its Russian-language version – which has a Russian director – is managed from Ireland and does not have a physical office in Russia.

Grass root media gaining popularity

Trust in traditional news channels – in particular the oligarch-funded TV channels – is decreasing, while new, independent media outlets without massive funding from major business players are increasingly popular. A particularly successful example is Hromadske TV; an independent online TV station founded by a group of journalists in 2013 amid the budding Maidan protest against then-President, Viktor Yanukovich. Hromadske TV is funded by NGOs, crowd-funding campaigns and foreign grants, including from the US and EU Member States, and is reportedly one of the only Ukrainian channels reporting from eastern Ukraine from the point of view of people on the ground. With more than 300 000 subscribers, it is one of the most popular Ukrainian news channels on YouTube.

StopFake.org is a fact-checking website in Russian and English. It was launched in March 2014 by current and former students of Mohyla School of Journalism and focuses on deconstructing fabricated stories about Ukraine-related events. The website features a 'Report a fake'-button, with which users can report suspected fabricated reports, and it publishes daily updates on stories that have been disproved; for example, a story about a 3-year-old boy, who Russian media claimed had been tortured and crucified by the Ukrainian military. The website's immediate popularity – 1.5 million visitors in its first few weeks of operation – illustrates that it met a significant need for fact-checking and dismantling of disinformation.

The European Parliament, in its January 2015 resolution on the situation in Ukraine, 'strongly condemns' Russia's 'undeclared hybrid war against Ukraine, including information war' and 'elements of propaganda'. In its July 2014 resolution on Ukraine, the EP emphasised 'the importance of ... avoiding propaganda, hate speech and rhetoric including from Russia which may further aggravate the conflict'.