

Written Representation 78

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Dear Sirs,

I would like to submit my report on phenomenon of using digital technology to deliberately spread falsehoods. Please find a document in the attachment to this letter. Thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts.

A brief description of the organisation (if any) that the submission is made on behalf of;

On March 2, 2014 Kyiv Mohyla Journalism School lecturers, graduates and students along with the KMA Digital Future of Journalism project launched the Stopfake.org fact checking site. Journalists, editors, IT specialists, translators, all those who cared about the future of Ukraine during this dangerous time of the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine joined the project. Initially the goal of the project was to verify and refute disinformation and propaganda about events in Ukraine being circulated in the media. Eventually the project grew into an information hub where we examine and analyze all aspects of Kremlin propaganda.

If you have any question regarding this document please do not hesitate to contact me.

Best regards,

Ruslan Deynychenko

Stopfake was founded in March of 2014, as a volunteer project of a small group of Ukrainian journalists. The main goal of the project was to stop the spread of foreign propaganda and minimize its influence on Ukrainian society. Within four years of its activity, StopFake has become one of the leading and most recognizable organizations in the field of countering propaganda.

Since the time of our formation, we have expanded our activities significantly. The StopFake team is currently focused on the following areas:

- Monitoring and refuting fakes and manipulations
- Investigating the influence of propaganda
- Creating projects aimed at improvement of media literacy and conducting campaigns aimed at increasing people's resilience to the effects of propaganda
- Developing and lobbying of measures to counter propaganda in Ukraine and internationally

The StopFake team continues to publish materials on its website in 11 languages, publishes a monthly Russian-language newspaper, a weekly television show in 3 languages, as well as a Russian-language radio program.

Does Propaganda Work?

We must admit that unfortunately, due to a lack of counteraction, propaganda is effective and is capable of causing serious harm. No matter how illogical Russian propaganda has been throughout history, it still can have a great effect on the average citizen. Members of the StopFake team were especially intrigued by interviews by Russian media, of Russian citizens who fought against Ukrainian government forces in Donbas. Most of them stated that their main motivator to leave their families and job in Russia to fight in Eastern Ukraine was the Russian television coverage of supposed Ukrainian atrocities against Russian speaking citizens. These reports were broadly broadcast by the largest news organizations in Russia, reaching nearly the entire Russian population. Their plots were mostly emotional, discussing in detail the murders of children, pregnant women, and torture and rape of the civilian population. Most of these reports by the Russian press were proven to be false Russian press, which has been proven by members of the StopFake team.

Of course, it would be an untruthful to say that Russian propaganda merely invents false narratives. In the case of Ukraine, Russian propaganda has made considerable progress in instigating existing conflicts, hyperbolizing human fears, and masterfully manipulating the mass consciousness of citizens. During one observation period, we identified at least 18 topics that Russian propaganda tries to promote, in one form or another. The primary goal when spreading propaganda is to weaken a country, reduce its ability to resist Russian aggression, change its foreign policy and create conditions for its inclusion in its sphere of influence. The example of Ukraine has played a decisive role in the proliferation of propaganda, creating true armed conflict, which has killed over 10,000 people and forced millions to become refugees.

Why is Countering Propaganda Important?

Identifying and refuting falsehoods in popular Russian media, television and websites has been a priority of StopFake since its inception. We have primarily focused on Russian mass media, which has been directly or indirectly controlled by the Russian government or its subdivisions. In this sense, it is very easy to say that this type of propaganda comes straight from the state.

In March of 2014, the StopFake team noticed an unusually large number of news articles coming from the Kremlin-controlled news sources about the presence of Ukrainian refugees. The narrative was that tens of thousands of Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens were seeking asylum in Russia, as they feared persecution from the new government. Russian media showed photos and videos of long lines of refugees at the Ukrainian-Russian border, allegedly fleeing persecution of the radicals who came to power in Kyiv. The paradox was that there were absolutely no repressive steps taken by the new Ukrainian government. In fact, statements from the new government were aimed at reaching an agreement with regions that supported the previous government. Knowing this, the StopFake team researched and reviewed the story. As it turned out, the photographs and videos used by the Russian state media to show fleeing refugees were fake, and were actually filmed elsewhere and at entirely different time, particularly from the Ukrainian-Polish border. When looking further to verify this information, we received official statistics that showed the number of Ukrainian citizens applying for refugee status in Russia has not increased, and that such cases were rare. At the same time, an official representative from the Federal Migration Service of Russia, in an interview with StopFake, said that some time ago, the company received notice from their political leadership to prepare room for thousands of Ukrainian refugees. They even began to do so, by purchasing mattresses, tents, and other equipment. At the time, this information amazed and confused us: why prepare places for refugees that did not exist?

We understood the logic of these actions just a month and a half later, when in a few Russian-speaking cities in the east, armed men in unidentified military uniforms seized police security services, infrastructure facilities, and state authorities. Later, it turned out that most of these groups were thrown out of Russia and consisted of Russian citizens. In response, the Ukrainian government was forced to launch a so called Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO). The fighting began with the use of small arms, artillery and aviation. With the development of this armed opposition, there were victims and many were forced to leave their homes. Some of them asked for asylum in Russia. That is when we realized that the Kremlin was plotting the organization of an armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine and prepared for the appearance of refugees long before they existed.

This story has become an important lesson for the StopFake team – since then, it has been our goal to determine the accuracy of reports from Russian government-controlled media. Quite often, the rhetoric of enemy propaganda makes it possible to predict the true intentions of the enemy. For example, the appearance of a large number of materials involving the historical disputes between Poles and Ukrainians in Russian mass media and social networks provided an opportunity to predict the Kremlin's attempt to instigate conflicts between Ukraine and Poland.

To make matters worse, right-wing extremist groups from both sides became involved and also created provocations; burning flags of the neighboring country, the desecration of monuments and military cemeteries, with active coverage of these events in the controlled press in Poland and Ukraine. An investigation of these special services and activist groups allowed us to uncover evidence that the organization and financing of these groups were carried out with the help of Russia.

Just like when television helps predict the actions of the enemy, there may also be information about an increase in the number of Russian journalists in the occupied Eastern territories just before an intensification of hostilities. On the eve of such events, journalists with previous experiences in areas of military conflicts are almost always included. Regular monitoring of Russian and separatist media helps determine which political forces and politicians are Russia's allies in Ukraine, and whom they consider to be their enemy. Unsurprisingly, the Russian-state media talks about its protégés in Ukraine in a balanced, sympathetic manner. On the other hand, irreconcilable opponents of Ukraine deserve the harshest criticism; their activities are put under investigation, they are accused of corruption, anti-Russian activities and various other crimes. Obviously, the reporters in Russian television follow their boss's orders and do everything possible to show their audience who are supporters and who are enemies of the state. Yet, this type of biased coverage is not only when discussing Ukraine. Kremlin television channels clearly outlines its enemies as the United States and some European countries. Also, as a result of a significant change in Turkey's political leadership, President Erdogan has been called both "the greatest friend of Russia" and a "terrorist collaborator," depending on the attitude of the Kremlin at the time. The Ukrainian political party, "Right Sector," was labeled as "fascists" when its members participated in military operations in Eastern Ukraine and then "activists" when they arranged protests against Russia's greatest opponent, Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko.

Other Effective Methods of Resisting Propaganda

Within 4 years, StopFake has collected thousands of examples of Russia's purposeful dissemination of fakes and manipulations. It is extremely important that

every article includes detailed facts that clearly show why this information is false. We also pay special attention to media organizations who participate in the creation and spread of disinformation. This allows us to firmly accuse specific television channels, radio stations, and newspapers of actively participating in circulating propaganda. For example, based on the data collected by StopFake, the Ukrainian government implemented the Ukrainian court's decision to ban the broadcasting of Russian television channels in Ukraine.

This decision was a formidable blow to impact of Russian propaganda, as it lost one of its main channels of influence in Ukraine. At the same time, it became easier for the Ukrainian government to explain its position on Russian propaganda to its Western allies. Some European officials considered the decision to ban Russian television as undemocratic and labeled it as censorship. However, evidence of the deliberate spread of Russian falsehoods carefully compiled by our team convinced many that this was not about censorship, but rather about countering Russia's informational war in Ukraine.

A similar situation occurred in 2017, when the Ukrainian government decided to limit activity of Russian social media sites and online services. For this decision, however, there was less internal and international criticism because many have started to become aware of Russia's propaganda techniques. In addition, special investigations conducted by StopFake found that most Ukrainian citizens named Russian social media as a main channel of propaganda.

Ukraine's resistance to Russian propaganda is also empowered by international support. Multiple countries around the world began to sympathize with Ukraine, as they also started to face problems with foreign propaganda in their own country. The use of restrictive measures and sanctions, or even the threat of them being implemented, was a powerful stance against Russia's activities, that forced them to change their strategies.

New Challenges

Unfortunately, even after four years of our all of our work, Russian propaganda persists in Ukrainian society, constantly adapting to new measures implemented by Ukraine and its allies. Not only has it not disappeared, but it has become more sophisticated and professional. Here are a few trends that StopFake classifies as the most dangerous:

- Russian television is still attempting to spread its television signal into Ukrainian territory, constantly improving its technical capabilities. In Russia's border regions, there are significantly more powerful television transmitters whose signal covers the border regions of Ukraine. These same transmitters have also been installed in the occupied territories of the Donbass. **How Ukraine is Resisting: Ukrainian authorities have completed testing and have installed special technology in these regions that weakens Russian television signals. From the Ukrainian side, more powerful transmitters**

have been installed that broadcast Ukrainian television and radio signals. In the Ukrainian-controlled territories, where Russian television signals are still strong, StopFake delivers a free newspaper that refutes Russian propaganda and reveals how it operates.

- The spread of Russia's fake news has shifted formats, substituting daily news with political talk shows. In this way, the Kremlin is attempting to restore its damaged journalistic integrity. The number and length of these talk shows have also increased significantly. The guests on these talk shows consistently spread the Russian narrative, and because of this, the channel and talk show are not held accountable for what they say, regardless of how untrue it may be. Typically, these talk shows invite so-called experts and "representatives" of Ukraine, creating the appearance that the show is fair and balanced. In reality, these "experts" are hired actors, whose arguments are always less convincing and weak. For the viewer, this creates the illusion that the Russian political narrative is always true. **How Ukraine is Resisting: Ukraine classifies these talk show narratives as false and refutes them with facts, in order to undermine Russian television as an objective source of information.**
- Russian propaganda continually tries to influence Ukrainian media. Kremlin narratives are popularized through a newspaper, that until recently was free of charge. Pro-Russian forces indirectly own several Ukrainian television networks and media-holding companies. The lack of knowledge about where they receive their funding and editorial policy raises suspicions that they originate from Russia. **How Ukraine is Resisting: Ukrainian parliament is currently developing a bill to combat fake news. If it is passed, the law may simplify the procedure for punishing media organizations for spreading fabrications, including fines and the removal of their right to broadcast.**
- Russian propaganda has significantly increased its activity in the social networks allowed in Ukraine. Researchers have discovered networks of "bots," which call for massive anti-government riots. A distinguishing feature was that they did not speak from a pro-Russian standpoint, but from ultra-patriotic Ukrainian positions. Participants in these networks criticized authorities for not implementing reforms, for ineffective, anti-corruption measures, and lost opportunities. Usually, these problems were exaggerated and any achievements were ignored. StopFake's investigations found that Russian citizens were behind these networks of "bots." **How Ukraine is Resisting: Ukraine is constantly uncovering anti-Ukrainian bot networks, and is creating a positive alternative agenda, including representatives of non-governmental organizations, activists and youth.**