

WHEN WORDS BECOME WEAPONS:

The Unprecedented Risks to
Civilians from the Spread of
Disinformation in Ukraine



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CIVILIANS IN CONFLICT**
SINCE 2003

RECOGNIZE. PREVENT. PROTECT. AMEND.

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Cover: *Buildings in Borodyanka
damaged by Russian troops during their
offensive in Ukraine, June 2022.
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ORGANIZATIONAL MISSION AND VISION

Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) is an international organization dedicated to promoting the protection of civilians in conflict. CIVIC envisions a world in which no civilian is harmed in conflict. Our mission is to support communities affected by conflict in their quest for protection and strengthen the resolve and capacity of armed actors to prevent and respond to civilian harm. CIVIC was established in 2003 by Marla Ruzicka, a young humanitarian who advocated on behalf of civilians affected by the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Honoring Marla's legacy, CIVIC has kept an unflinching focus on the protection of civilians in conflict. Today, CIVIC has a presence in conflict zones and key capitals throughout the world where it collaborates with civilians to bring their protection concerns directly to those in power, engages with armed actors to reduce the harm they cause to civilian populations, and advises governments and multinational bodies on how to make life-saving and lasting policy changes. CIVIC's strength is its proven approach and record of improving protection outcomes for civilians by working directly with conflict-affected communities and armed actors. At CIVIC, we believe civilians are not "collateral damage" and civilian harm is not an unavoidable consequence of conflict—civilian harm can and must be prevented.

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GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

AFU: Armed Forces of Ukraine

CIMIC: Civil-Military Cooperation

CIR: Center for Information Resilience

IDPs: Internally Displaced Persons

ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross

IHL: International Humanitarian Law

IHRL: International Human Rights Law

ISPs: Internet Service Providers

KIIS: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology

LGBTIQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer

NGOs: Nongovernmental Organizations

SMAT: Social Media Analysis Toolkit

UN OHCHR: United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia has weaponized information as part of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022. It has used information operations and disinformation, in particular, on a massive scale to serve its strategic, operational, and tactical aims. Much of the disinformation that Russian-affiliated actors have spread has been targeted directly at Ukrainian civilians with the goal of influencing their behavior—and it has often done so in ways that endanger civilian lives. Civilians deciding whether and how to flee from frontline areas riddled with mines and under bombardment, for example, encountered disinformation spread by Russian-affiliated and pro-Russian actors. This included disinformation regarding the times, locations, and existence of organized evacuation efforts, as well as false claims that the Ukrainian military was blocking certain evacuation routes or attacking civilians attempting to evacuate through them. The scale of these disinformation efforts was significant. Of the approximately 6,300 Telegram messages shared by known pro-Russian Telegram channels that CIVIC analyzed for this research project, about 5,400 posts included evacuation-related material. Of these, CIVIC identified four case studies that demonstrate how disinformation narratives spread through Telegram in Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Zaporizhzhia.

Russian authorities and military in occupied areas of Ukraine also used disinformation and propaganda to convince Ukrainians to send their children to Russian camps and to relocate to Russia before the Ukrainian military liberated occupied territories. They did so by spreading false information and fear—including fear that Ukrainian soldiers would indiscriminately bomb, rape, kill, and imprison civilians as they recaptured occupied territory. Such narratives have almost certainly endangered civilians and led them to make decisions that are counter to their well-being. Civilians searching online for information about Russia's military offensive in order to make decisions about their safety and security also encountered false information about frontline military developments spread by Russian-affiliated actors, such as constant warnings about imminent attacks that did not materialize and disinformation about which areas of the country Russian troops controlled.

CIVIC looked for, but did not identify, widespread efforts by pro-Russian actors to undermine humanitarian service delivery through disinformation or to spread disinformation about the availability and location of life-saving services. However, CIVIC did identify several narratives intended to undermine trust in the Ukrainian government that could have the effect of disrupting civilian access to critical goods and services. These narratives included, for example, social media messages falsely claiming that ambulances were unavailable and that hospitals were overwhelmed and canceling routine procedures because of the war effort. Such narratives could have discouraged civilians from seeking needed healthcare or pushed them to look for healthcare further away from their

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Ruined residential building in Kyiv after a drone attack, 2022.

homes, possibly delaying treatment or putting them at additional risk if they had to move through insecure areas. Russian authorities also blocked non-governmental organizations from delivering humanitarian assistance in occupied territories and misled civilians about the nature of some Russian registration sites in occupied areas. The latter were marketed as access points for aid but were also used to screen civilians for filtration and sometimes forced deportation in violation of international law.¹

Russian information operations to undermine Ukrainian social cohesion have been present in the Ukrainian information space since before the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity in 2014. However, Russian operations of this nature have proliferated throughout 2022 and 2023. These efforts have tried to drive a wedge between areas with primarily Russian-speaking populations and areas with primarily Ukrainian-speaking communities by suggesting that Russian-speaking Ukrainians face societal oppression. According to some survey data, only a very small percentage of Ukrainians feel that Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine are subjected to systematic oppression and persecution because of their language.² However, CIVIC's research indicates that there are some societal tensions around the use of the Russian language in Ukraine. Disinformation on this issue could feed resentments and foster societal fault lines, making future efforts at a reconciled society more difficult.

At the time of CIVIC's research, stakeholders were unable to pinpoint information operations in newly liberated areas that were intended to undermine trust between civilians who stayed in Russian-occupied areas and those who evacuated. However, CIVIC identified simmering resentments between those who stayed in their homes and those who fled the Russian offensive. These resentments could easily be amplified through a targeted disinformation campaign. Such information operations, if not already underway, are likely to emerge in the future and have the

potential to provoke violence between community members. The Ukrainian authorities and other protection actors in Ukraine should anticipate and try to prevent such fraying of community ties, which could result in serious protection concerns for civilians.

While not the primary focus of CIVIC's research, Ukrainian interlocutors also warned about the potential for some more strategic and political Russian narratives to cause indirect harm over time. For example, Russian information operations have repeatedly tried to undermine civilian confidence in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), including by falsely claiming that Ukrainian soldiers are responsible for non-existent atrocities or atrocities that, in all likelihood, were committed by Russian soldiers. At the time of CIVIC's research, Ukrainians were reporting extremely high levels of trust in the AFU. However, disinformation narratives deriding the AFU could undermine civil–military relations—which are extremely important for ensuring the safety of civilians—over time and in communities that are particularly susceptible to this messaging.

The purpose of many information operations is to have a psychological impact on its targets. In Ukraine, civilians overwhelmingly conveyed not only the physical toll of disinformation, but the mental toll that Russian disinformation tactics and narratives have had on them. Sixty-nine percent of the survey respondents said that disinformation affected their emotional well-being—almost all of whom described disinformation as evoking negative feelings such as anger, vulnerability, stress or anxiety, a constant state of being alert, panic, and despair.

CIVIC's findings are based on surveys with 103 civilians across Ukraine, semi-structured interviews with 91 key stakeholders within and outside Ukraine, and analysis of Telegram posts shared locally in 5 oblasts during highly insecure time periods. Our research was conducted between July 2022 and March 2023. The research assessed how civilian use of and trust in different information sources has shifted since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the impact that malign information operations directed at Ukrainian civilians has had on civilian security and well-being, and the challenges and lessons learned from the Ukrainian response to Russia's information operations. CIVIC did not attempt to assess how Russian information operations or information manipulation within Russia may have contributed to atrocities committed by Russian soldiers in Ukraine, as this is a separate—although equally important—issue.

Information operations have been a part of both Ukraine and Russia's military strategies. In our surveys and interviews, CIVIC asked broadly about how misinformation and disinformation has affected civilian well-being since February 2022, without specifying the source of the false information. Respondents largely identified Russian-affiliated actors as the source of harmful disinformation narratives in Ukraine, while also identifying some potential negative outcomes of Ukrainian information control. These findings are reflected in the content of CIVIC's report, which focuses on the harmful narratives of Russian-affiliated actors but also includes civilian perspectives on Ukraine's strategic communications—including concerns that downplaying the likelihood of an invasion or the likely duration of hostilities endangered civilians.

The manipulation of information is a common tactic in war across geographies and history, and it can serve military strategy with military aims. However, some information operations can violate international humanitarian law (IHL). Whether and how modern disinformation campaigns violate IHL is still a developing area of legal analysis. Some of the disinformation narratives that CIVIC identified through our research might constitute IHL violations. For example, Russian and Russian-affiliated disinformation efforts aimed at manipulating population movements could be interpreted as an element of forced population transfer. The forced transfer of a population is not restricted to the use of physical force to move civilians; it also includes the use of fear, coercion, and psychological oppression to force civilian movements.³ Moreover, some disinformation campaigns have been

targeted primarily at civilians rather than at military actors, with the apparent intent and effect of creating panic and confusion among civilians. Such efforts could, in some cases, amount to terrorizing the civilian population. However, rather than focusing on whether disinformation efforts in Ukraine are in violation of IHL, CIVIC chose to focus on identifying narratives that appear to be or are likely to cause civilian harm.

In addition to highlighting some of the pathways between disinformation and civilian harm in Ukraine, CIVIC's data shows that, since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, civilians have increasingly turned to social media as a key component of their efforts to stay safe during the war and obtain critical information. However, as this shift has occurred, the volume of disinformation on these platforms has been increasing as well.⁴ Telegram remains the most popular social media platform among Ukrainians, despite having some of the weakest policies and practices to prevent the spread of harmful information on it.

Using new government institutions that were established in 2021 with critical foresight, the Ukrainian authorities have rapidly identified strategic and political disinformation narratives and made considerable efforts to counter them. Ukraine also possesses a robust and deeply capable array of civil society organizations and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that work on identifying, de-bunking, and countering disinformation. Critically, government officials and civil society organizations in Ukraine have multiplied their efforts to counter disinformation by collaborating effectively.

Due to years of experience combatting lower levels of disinformation in the context of Russia's invasion of Crimea, Ukrainian government and civil society organizations were more prepared than many other countries would have been to deal with an onslaught of disinformation when Russia launched its full-scale invasion. However, they have still faced many challenges. Their efforts to identify, monitor, and counter disinformation have primarily focused on widespread political and strategic narratives with the potential to undermine Ukraine's capacity to wage war. Russian-affiliated actors have infiltrated community messaging and social media groups to launch disinformation campaigns at a hyper-local level, and have launched localized disinformation campaigns that coincide with military offensives. At the time of CIVIC's research, Ukrainian authorities and civil society were not well positioned to rapidly identify and counteract many of the local narratives at the village, town, city, and oblast level that are the most likely to undermine civilian protection. And while journalists used to have a stronger presence at the oblast level, the capacity of local media actors has been deeply depleted by the war. Additionally, while government authorities have somewhat diversified their means of communication in efforts to overcome Russian information warfare tactics

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and counter disinformation, stakeholders raised concerns to CIVIC that more efforts are needed to reach Ukraine's most vulnerable and isolated civilians, including older persons and persons with disabilities. Ukrainian telecommunications infrastructure has also been massively damaged, and despite government efforts to repair it, some liberated areas were still only receiving Russian telecommunications signals at the time of CIVIC's research. Significant work remained to be done in this area.

Technology and social media companies have a role to play in ensuring their platforms and algorithms are not used to spread harmful information. In Ukraine, some technology companies—such as the parent companies for Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter—have engaged in dialogue with the Ukrainian government and have worked with civil society organizations to identify, label, and discourage the spread of harmful content. However, even in the best cases, the responsiveness of these companies and their ability to contextualize their moderation practices has been inadequate.

This report includes recommendations for some key actors involved in spreading and curtailing the spread of disinformation in Ukraine. The majority of CIVIC's recommendations are targeted toward the Ukrainian government because they are the primary actor with the capability, mandate, and political will to protect civilians from these information operations. Although no recommendations are directed specifically at governments other than Russia and Ukraine, other governments, militaries, and military alliances have many lessons to learn from how the parties to the conflict in Ukraine are waging kinetic and information warfare and from Ukraine's successes in combatting it. Among these lessons is the need to ensure that doctrine, policy, and planning include analyzing and mitigating the impact that information warfare will have—not only on the capacity of the military to wage and win war, but also on civilian security and well-being.

Following the report's high-level recommendations, CIVIC's methodology for this research is explained in detail. A background section of the report then briefly discusses how information operations feature in Russian military doctrine and how Russia has used them in other conflicts and contexts. This background section also highlights how disinformation relates to IHL and international human rights law, as well as pathways that have been identified between disinformation and civilian harm in other contexts. Section V of the report shares high-level conclusions on how the information ecosystem has changed in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion, including how trust in and use of different platforms and sources appears to have shifted. These conclusions help build a foundation for better understanding the potential impact of harmful disinformation narratives and tactics being used in the current Ukraine conflict, which is covered in Section VI. Finally, Section VII discusses how critical stakeholders have responded to the spread of harmful disinformation in Ukraine, including actions taken by Ukrainian authorities, Ukrainian civil society, international and national non-governmental organizations, and social media and technology companies.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

To the government of Russia:

- Immediately cease targeting of telecommunications and electricity infrastructure that is solely used for civilian purposes and halt targeting of dual-use telecommunications and electricity infrastructure that is likely to cause disproportional harm to civilians;
- Cease information operations that are targeted at civilians, are designed to cause panic, and that can reasonably be expected to undermine civilian access to life-saving services and cause civilians to act counter to their own interests, such as disinformation about evacuation routes and opportunities as well as disinformation about humanitarian interventions;
- Revise military policy on information operations to restrict direct targeting of disinformation at civilians that is likely to lead to harm disproportional to the military advantage anticipated or that could violate other aspects of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, including information operations whose primary purpose is to spread terror among civilians or that has the effect of inciting discrimination, hostility, or violence.

To the government of Ukraine:

- Ensure the operational objectives of government bodies tasked with countering disinformation include efforts to monitor for and identify localized narratives undermining civilian protection and well-being, including by incorporating this objective into institutional strategies, military directives, and plans;
- Strengthen existing efforts to ensure that government communications are accessible to older persons, persons with disabilities, and civilians cut off from online information sources by Russian information warfare tactics;
- To counter Russian disinformation on evacuation and help civilians overcome the uncertainty they face in abandoning their homes in frontline areas, increase communication around evacuation options when it poses no significant risks to civilians to do so, including information about the services and assistance that will be available to evacuees;
- To maintain the credibility of the platform and its potential to counter disinformation and provide civilians with critical updates on security dynamics, ensure public television broadcasting such as the United News telethon is an apolitical source of information for civilians;
- As part of the government's efforts to manage information, regularly review public messaging and restrictions placed on information-sharing to ensure that they remain warranted and that they are not undermining government credibility, the ability of local authorities to rapidly communicate information to civilians, or civilian protection;
- Promote accountability, transparency, and clarity around possible cases of corruption, conscription, and violations or lawful civilian harm caused by the AFU in order to both undercut the ability of Russian-affiliated actors to exploit these issues through information operations and maintain high levels of trust in civilian and military officials;

- Ensure government policy and practice counters Russian attempts at creating societal divisions, including around the use of the Russian language and collaboration under Russian occupation. Try to identify potential flashpoints early to pre-bunk disinformation efforts, and work with international and national non-governmental organizations to help address existing social cohesion issues;
- Extend training on media literacy and disinformation to local government officials and some members of the AFU, such as civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) officers, to facilitate their ability to identify and counter disinformation. Ensure that strategies and policies outline a clear role for these individuals in the government's counter-disinformation efforts and that structures exist to link local and national authorities in efforts to detect disinformation;
- Work with INGOs, Ukrainian civil society organizations, and directly with affected grass-roots communities to expand media literacy training for Ukrainian civilians, as resources and capacity allow;
- Continue prioritizing funds for the restoration and extension of telecommunications networks to ensure all liberated areas of Ukraine have ready access to Ukrainian Internet, cellular networks, television, and radio broadcasting;
- Consider proposing legislation similar to what is contained in the Digital Services Act adopted by the European Union, which could place additional requirements on social media companies for monitoring their content and help limit the harmful practices of social media platforms operating in Ukraine;
- Include analysis of civilian harm incidents from mis- and disinformation in Ukraine's efforts to track and minimize civilian harm.

To humanitarian actors and donors supporting activities in Ukraine:

- Provide financial support to the restoration and extension of telecommunications infrastructure in Ukraine;
- Support independent journalism in Ukraine to help repair damage done to the industry by the war, and continue supporting civil society organizations working to identify and counter harmful disinformation;
- When providing resources and services for mental health, consider the likely impact that disinformation is having on the mental well-being of civilians;
- Alongside Ukrainian government efforts, invest in media literacy training for Ukrainian civilians and, to reduce the impact of disinformation, ensure older persons are a target group for some of these trainings;
- Ensure clear and frequent communication with communities who are receiving humanitarian assistance, track how information is understood and received by communities, and monitor the information space for false information about humanitarian services or humanitarian organizations;
- Consider whether and how protection monitoring by humanitarian organizations can be expanded to include monitoring for protection concerns arising from disinformation, such as through the protection cluster system;
- Strengthen existing community efforts to identify and mitigate risks from mis- and disinformation by including capacity building on recognizing and dealing with mis- and disinformation in community-based activities.

To social media platforms and their parent technology companies:

- For those organizations, like Telegram, that have not yet taken significant steps to moderate harmful content, rapidly invest in the capacity to do so;
- Increase efforts to ensure that content moderation is contextualized, including through engagement with civil society and government officials when possible, and increase the timeliness of response to concerns raised by civil society and government officials about labelling or removing harmful content and accounts violating community guidelines;
- Invest additional resources in human rights, ethics, and security teams to improve company responsiveness to harmful disinformation on social media platforms and reduce the burden placed on non-profit and civil society organizations to monitor for this content;
- Consider adopting models or policies for crisis response that direct an influx of human and financial resources to high-risk contexts to support identification of harmful disinformation and content that violates platform policies.

III. METHODOLOGY

This report is based on four different methodological components: a literature review, a survey completed by 103 individuals, semi-structured interviews with 91 individuals, and social media analysis of Telegram posts to identify relevant case studies and support interview findings. The structured survey included both open-ended and close-ended multiple-choice questions. CIVIC consultant researchers administered the survey to participants by telephone in the Ukrainian and Russian languages (depending on participant preference) between October and November 2022. Those administering the survey provided participants with definitions of the terms “misinformation” and “disinformation” and clarified issues as needed throughout the interviews. Participants for the survey were identified using purposive sampling techniques. Because CIVIC expected that age, gender, and location (e.g., urban versus rural and exposure to effects of the conflict) would be important factors affecting participant responses, we sought to interview roughly equal numbers of men and women, set quotas for different age brackets, and selected an equal number of rural and urban locations for interviews. Interview locations included: one rural and one urban location in western Ukraine not directly targeted by Russian security forces (Kalush and Rivne); two rural and two urban locations in central and eastern Ukraine with limited targeting and damage by Russian security forces (Ovruch, Sloviansk, Kyiv, and Kryvyi Rih); and two rural and two urban areas in central and eastern Ukraine with significant targeting and damage by Russian security forces (Novhorod-Siverskyi, Okhtyrka, Chernihiv, and Kharkiv). Ten to eleven participants were interviewed in each of these ten locations. CIVIC obtained verbal informed consent from all participants to analyze and cite their responses in this report.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were carried out remotely via telephone and in person by CIVIC staff and consultants between July 2022 and March 2023, with the majority completed in February and March 2023. The sample of 91 individuals included: 22 civilians (13 women and 9 men, all over 18 years old); 17 representatives of Ukrainian non-governmental and civil society organizations; 12 journalists and other media officials; 12 Ukrainian government officials; 6 former and current Ukrainian military officials; 10 representatives of international think tanks and international subject matter experts; 7 international humanitarian actors; 1 representative of a social media company; and 4 officials of intergovernmental organizations. Most participants were located in Bucha, Chernihiv, Irpin, Kharkiv, and Kyiv. Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, and verbal consent was obtained from all participants to cite information they shared in this report. Participants were identified through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English and Ukrainian, depending on participants’ preferences.

We have withheld the names and other potentially identifying information of our sources for their own protection but provided other information in our citations that will be relevant for readers, including the month and year interviews took place, the vocation of participants or their status as civilians, and, in most cases, the geographic area where the interview participant was located. Each survey and semi-structured interview was assigned a unique survey or interview number, which is also included in the citations.

The analysis of Telegram posts was performed for CIVIC by the Centre for Information Resilience (CIR). CIR used the Kibana Social Media Analysis Toolkit (SMAT) and analyzed approximately 6,300 posts from 250 Telegram channels classified by CIR as pro-Russian media channels based on their history of systematically promoting information in line with the messaging of Russian authorities or Russian state-sponsored media outlets. CIR analyzed posts linked to five different geographic locations at time periods that were expected to be particularly salient for the protection and security



People search for information on their phones as they shelter in a subway station in Kyiv during an air raid alert. Fighting in Ukraine has largely concentrated in the east and south of the country, but the capital remains the target of regular air strikes. Kyiv, Ukraine, February 10, 2023.

of civilians. These locations and time periods were: Chernihiv from February 24 to March 15, 2022; Mariupol from February 24 to May 15, 2022; Kharkiv from February 24 to April 30, 2022; Kherson from February 24 to May 15, 2022; and Zaporizhzhia from March 1 to March 31, 2022 and June 28 to September 15, 2022.

There are many limitations in our research. Our survey sample size is relatively small, and the use of purposive sampling limits our ability to draw conclusions across Ukraine. However, our survey findings align in many areas with much larger surveys, which we also cite in the text when relevant. Moreover, the situation in Ukraine is rapidly evolving and the tactics and narratives used to wage information warfare may have evolved between the time the research was completed and the publication of this report. Identifying the owners of social media accounts and definitively linking them with official entities in the Russian government or military was beyond CIVIC's capabilities. Therefore, we have defaulted to identifying disinformation actors only as pro-Russian or Russian-affiliated actors unless a narrative was clearly shared by members of the Russian government, military, or state-controlled media establishment through their official accounts. In most cases, we relied on the expertise of specialists working in the field of misinformation and disinformation who analyze and track social media content rather than primary network analysis to determine that narratives were being promoted by pro-Russian and Russian-affiliated actors. The exception to this method is in the analysis conducted by CIR for CIVIC of approximately 6,300 Telegram posts.

Where CIVIC refers to information as false or as disinformation, our standard was whether any credible information supporting the narrative was publicly available, as well as the weight of contradictory evidence when it was available. It is very difficult to draw causal relationships between disinformation that civilians read and the decision-making or subsequent harm that can result. CIVIC has primarily tried to highlight the risks disinformation can create and cited participant opinions on the link between disinformation and harm. Participants were not always able to distinguish clearly between misinformation and disinformation, and even though CIVIC provided definitions and clarification on these terms as needed, there was sometimes continued confusion among stakeholders about the difference between the two. To help resolve this concern, CIVIC verified information across multiple stakeholder groups, including those performing specialized roles analyzing and monitoring for disinformation. Finally, our research is focused only on information operations targeted at Ukrainian stakeholders, inside Ukraine. It does not include substantial analysis of information operations about Ukraine being targeted at Russian citizens or other civilians and governments around the world.

There are many related and overlapping terms used to describe the ways information can be manipulated as part of military strategy or to inflict harm on consumers. War historians, analysts, and strategists often refer to information operations, psychological operations, propaganda, and gray zone confrontations, which can include either false or true information that is used by state or non-state actors to achieve military and political objectives. Hybrid warfare is the terminology regularly used to describe the phenomenon of militaries or militia pairing information operations and cyberattacks with kinetic activities. Humanitarian actors and NGOs often reference misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech in their work. Misinformation is generally understood to be false information that is not shared with a malicious intent, while disinformation is false information that is shared intentionally with malicious intent. Propaganda can be true or false, but it is usually biased or presented in a misleading way to serve particular interests—often political or military. To promote clarity, CIVIC has outlined definitions for these common terms in Annex A of this report. Our research broadly considered the impact of information operations on civilians with a special focus on disinformation. However, throughout the report, we use terminology that seems to most accurately describe how information is being manipulated in each case. Where we directly cite stakeholders, we have maintained rather than adjusted their choice of terminology to describe different aspects of information operations.

IV. BACKGROUND

Russia's military doctrine and statements by prominent military leaders outline a critical role for information warfare as part of the country's broader defense and military activity. They do not distinguish between cyberwarfare and disinformation efforts. Instead, both tactics are included within Russia's concept of information warfare, which also incorporates efforts to extract information and isolate targets from information sources that are not Russian. Russian government officials have framed information warfare as a constant effort and, within Russian military doctrine, targeting disinformation at civilians to discredit another government or to undermine the solidarity and resistance of the population is one recognized strategy.⁵ Like Russia, many other militaries around the world consider targeting civilians with disinformation to be a valid military strategy.

Over the last decade, Russia has utilized and honed a variety of information warfare methods. Digital information attacks are usually anonymous and, by design, difficult to attribute. But the Russian government has been credibly implicated in hacking attacks on the websites and e-mail addresses of major media agencies and government officials to plant and send fake information. It has also been credibly implicated in using deep fakes, creating websites based on fake identities or institutions to share false or misleading information, and using trolls and bots to spread and lend credibility to disinformation.⁶

These attacks have targeted a broad range of countries, including countries throughout eastern Europe, the Baltic Region, Latin America, and Africa. In 2007, Russian hackers launched a series of cyberattacks against Estonian economic and political actors, including media outlets, government websites, banks, and Internet service providers (ISPs). Additionally, when Russian troops moved into the South Ossetia region of Georgia in 2008, denial-of-service attacks were coordinated with the invasion to cut off government communication and disrupt the functioning of banks, private telecommunications companies, and transportation companies. While attacking Crimea in 2014, Russia took control over all print media, broadcast media, and Internet access—effectively isolating the region from any media messaging aside from what Russian authorities shared. Since well before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian-affiliated actors have been launching low-level cyber and disinformation campaigns in Ukraine in response to political events like protests and elections, including by launching cyberattacks on power distribution centers to provoke power outages.⁷

Russia has employed this entire slate of information warfare tools in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. One information warfare tactic Russia has employed since the early days of the invasion has been to sever frontline and occupied areas from all non-Russian sources of information. As Russian troops have advanced, they have attempted to jam and hijack Ukrainian telecommunications infrastructure. When they have been unable to utilize this infrastructure to

One information warfare tactic Russia has employed since the early days of the invasion has been to sever frontline and occupied areas from all non-Russian sources of information.

broadcast Russian channels, they have destroyed it.⁸ Russian soldiers searched homes specifically looking for telephones and computers, confiscating and destroying these devices when they found them. They also targeted journalists in frontline areas.⁹ In many areas, after blocking Ukrainian telecommunications, Russia actively sought to replace it with propaganda delivered through social media, television, newspapers, billboards, and leaflets.¹⁰

Russian-affiliated actors have also deployed a number of tactics devised to increase the effectiveness of disinformation campaigns, including building disinformation narratives around kernels of truth and selecting issues that are already highly sensitive for communities. These strategies make fake narratives more believable and more likely to find a sympathetic audience.¹¹ In addition to spreading disinformation through channels and actors who clearly identify as Russian and pro-Russian, some Russian-affiliated individuals disguise themselves as Ukrainian in the hopes of misleading Ukrainian civilians who would not readily read, follow, or believe information that is clearly from a Russian source.¹² Additionally, Russian information operations often build credibility by cross-posting and re-posting false information across different platforms and over time. This tactic makes it seem like there is supporting evidence for claims being made, even though each source is fake. To further add confusion in the information space, many Russian-affiliated websites and social media channels that spread disinformation have styled themselves as debunking outlets, while others have impersonated legitimate media outlets.¹³

Since February 2022, some of Russia's strategic-level disinformation efforts online have focused on justifying its invasion. Examples include falsely claiming that Ukraine was building biological weapons to target Russia, that Ukrainian troops have committed genocide against Russian-speaking people in the Donbas, and that the goal of the invasion was or is the "denazification" of the country. Strategic narratives have also concentrated on undermining western military and financial support to Ukraine by claiming that Ukraine has sold and otherwise misused military equipment obtained from the US and Europe, as well as by suggesting that western support to Ukraine is undermining the economic well-being of donor countries. Narratives have also sought to discredit reports of human rights violations by Russian troops, claiming, for example, that women testifying about their experience in a maternity ward bombed by Russian aircraft were hired actors.¹⁴

Posts spread by Russian-affiliated actors on social media platforms have also extensively used misogynistic language and tropes. They have attempted to discredit sexual violence perpetrated against Ukrainian women during Russia's invasion, for example, and portray Ukrainian women who have fled to Europe as frequently engaging in prostitution.¹⁵ Widespread use of such language and narratives can create an enabling environment for additional violence against women in or from Ukraine and make it more difficult for survivors of sexual violence to report this harm. Pro-Russian actors have also employed derogatory language against lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) people as part of their efforts to weaken ties between Ukraine and European or NATO Member State countries. Such posts demean LGBTIQ+ individuals, claim that Europe embraces this diversity, and encourage Ukrainians to reject such ideals.¹⁶ These efforts, like the pervasive use of misogynistic themes, has the potential to spur violence against members of the LGBTIQ+ community.

Posts spread by Russian-affiliated actors on social media platforms have also extensively used misogynistic language and tropes.



A couple walk past a billboard with Russian propaganda posters in Kherson. Kherson was the only regional capital occupied by Russia since its February 24 full-scale invasion. On November 11, 2022 the Ukrainian military entered and liberated Kherson from Russian occupation. Kherson, Ukraine, November 14, 2022.

Many of these more strategic and global narratives have been targeted at citizens of Ukraine as well as foreign countries. Often, the pro-Russian actors spreading disinformation on media and social media platforms will adjust broader narratives to the political and social dynamics within an individual target country and create social media accounts that mimic the major news organizations of those countries to distribute this information.¹⁷ As is discussed extensively in Section VI of this report, other Russian disinformation efforts have infiltrated Ukrainian society at a hyper-local level in addition to these more global and strategic narratives, with the potential to disrupt Ukrainian security and well-being.

The use of disinformation or propaganda by parties to a conflict during warfare is not, by itself, prohibited under IHL. Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions permits “ruses of war,” which “are intended to mislead an adversary or induce him to act recklessly....”¹⁸ However, disinformation could be an IHL violation if it is committed by someone directly participating in hostilities and breaches other protections in IHL. For example, IHL prohibits “acts or threats of violence, the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population.”¹⁹ International human rights law (IHRL) is also applicable in times of conflict and would pertain not only to authorities directly participating in hostilities, but to a variety of other state actors as well. Some provisions of IHRL can offer protections against malign information operations, such as Article 20 of the International Covenant on Political and Civil Rights, which prohibits “any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence.”²⁰

Although updated commentary and legal interpretations of IHL and IHRL have helped to ensure the enduring relevance of these instruments in the face of evolving battlespaces, the use of information operations has shifted significantly since these instruments were designed. Civilians are now more often the target of disinformation and other types of malign information operations than are military adversaries. Additionally, as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has acknowledged, “While these phenomena are not new, the use of technologies in their dissemination has a considerable impact on the *scale* and *speed* at which such information reaches multiple target audiences and the *effect* it has on them.”²¹

As malign actors increasingly wield digital information operations to reach large audiences, evidence is mounting of the many ways in which it can harm civilians. Access to information can, itself, be understood as a right that, when undermined, exacerbates vulnerabilities, inhibits the decision-making capacity of civilians, and undermines the ability of civilians to protect themselves.²² Research has also identified pathways between disinformation and harm that can involve physical, psychological, and social damage. These pathways can include disrupting civilians’ access to vital services or leading them to act in ways counter to their own interests, encouraging or legitimizing acts of violence, and arousing extreme fear, grief, or other painful emotions in a way that affects mental well-being.²³ CIVIC identified several of these pathways between disinformation and civilian harm in Ukraine.

V. INFORMATION NEEDS AND PRACTICES OF UKRAINIANS

One component of assessing the impact of malign information operations and how to limit their impact is understanding the surrounding information ecosystem, especially how civilians are accessing and using information and which information sources they rely on and trust. Such information can indicate areas of high risk where civilians are heavily reliant on forms of communication rife with disinformation. It can also help identify the best avenues for protection actors to communicate transparently with civilians—an effort that itself can help to dampen the impact of disinformation—and to focus more targeted counter-disinformation efforts. Comprehensive media consumption surveys and assessments have tracked changes in the information ecosystem in Ukraine over recent years. CIVIC’s survey data and semi-structured interviews provide additional insights into how use of and trust in different media platforms shifted in the initial stages of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and later in 2022 and 2023.

Near Total Preoccupation with Information

Before February 2022, Ukrainians were extremely well connected to a variety of information sources. According to polling, 94 percent of Ukrainians had access to Ukrainian television in 2020,²⁴ while 79 percent of people over the age of 15 had access to Internet in 2021.²⁵ In 2022, an estimated 76.6 percent of Ukrainians owned smartphones.²⁶ So, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of the country, Ukrainians quickly turned to their screens for critical information about developments in the political and security situation. A media official summarized this experience, saying: “The information flow has become extremely important for Ukrainians. ... We panicked and didn’t understand what was happening, and we tried to subside fear with information. ... People didn’t sleep, didn’t eat. They were all in the information space, consuming information.”²⁷

The vast majority of civilians surveyed and interviewed by CIVIC reported drastically increasing their media consumption in the first few weeks of the 2022 Russian invasion—to the point where they spent most of their waking hours checking for updates on the situation. Before February 24, 2022, most Ukrainians CIVIC surveyed were viewing less than two hours of television and less than two hours of online material per day to monitor political and security developments. In the first two weeks after the full-scale invasion, however, many people were spending more than six hours per day reading online news about the crisis and watching more than six hours of television per day (see Annex B for full survey results). Describing how many hours per day she spent searching for information about developments in the offensive, one woman told CIVIC, “In the beginning, in February and March, it was probably 24 hours a day—well, excluding sleeping.”²⁸

Most Ukrainians reported that they scaled back their media consumption after the initial phase of the Russian invasion to levels lower than during the most acute phase of violence but still higher than before February 2022. As one woman living in Kharkiv observed, “At the beginning of the war, of course, we were a little confused, restricted, and scared. Yes, we constantly sat with our phones in our hands, listened to the TV with our mouths open. But now in any case, during the war, life goes on. We must understand what is happening and where, [but] in such a situation, we need to continue living.”²⁹

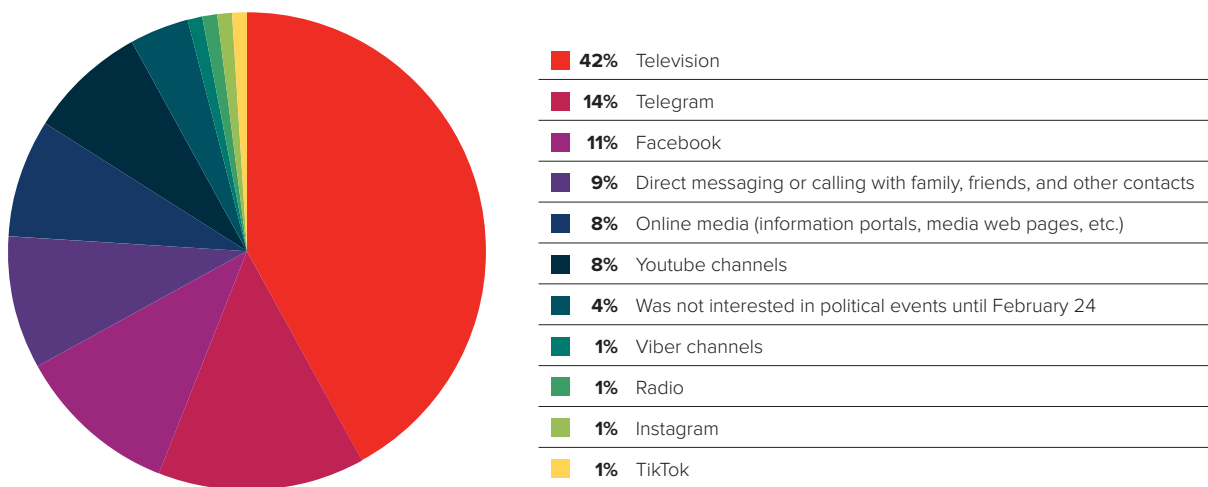
Shifting Use of and Trust in Information Platforms

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, use of social media by Ukrainians as a source of news was already on the rise. Annual polling by USAID and Internews showed an upward

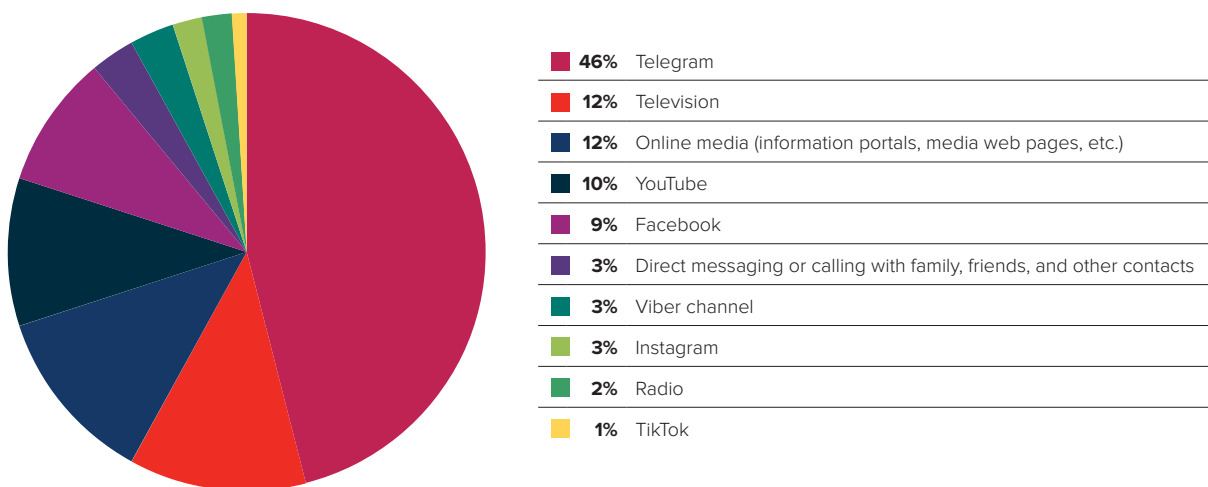
trend from 2017 to 2021. Over the same period, use of television, news websites, and radio all declined.³⁰ This trend escalated in 2022 as a result of Russia's offensive.³¹ Among those CIVIC surveyed, 42 percent were using television as their primary source of information about the political and security situation before Russia's full-scale invasion, while 36 percent reported primarily using some form of social media. When our survey was conducted between October and November of 2022, only 12 percent of the same people reported using television as their primary source of information, with close to 72 percent using social media for this purpose. Although use of different media platforms varies by age—with older people more likely to rely on television and radio while younger people rely more widely and exclusively on social media—older people have also increasingly adopted social media platforms for conflict and political updates.

FIGURE 1

Primary Source of Information About Political and Security Situation Before Full-Scale Invasion



Primary Source of Information About Political and Security Situation, Oct.–Nov. 2022



Among those using social media, a notable shift of occurred in 2022—users moved away from Facebook as the primary platform for information updates and adopted the use of Telegram in droves.³² Stakeholders who spoke to CIVIC explained that Ukrainians turned to Telegram for a number of reasons. Most importantly, Telegram delivers information faster than any traditional

media source can, and it does so in a concise and direct way.³³ “There [on Telegram] the news is posted very quickly and during the fighting, everything changed so quickly—not in hours, literally in minutes,”³⁴ commented one civilian in Kharkiv. Moreover, Telegram is designed for mobile phones and displays well on them. It can therefore be accessed while civilians are on the move or in shelters,³⁵ and at least for a short while, when electricity, television, and broadband Internet are unavailable.³⁶ Although not unique to Telegram, participants also highlighted that social media allows them to share and access information at a very local level while also monitoring relevant political and security developments at the national and international levels.³⁷

TEXTBOX: THE DIFFERENCE AGE CAN MAKE

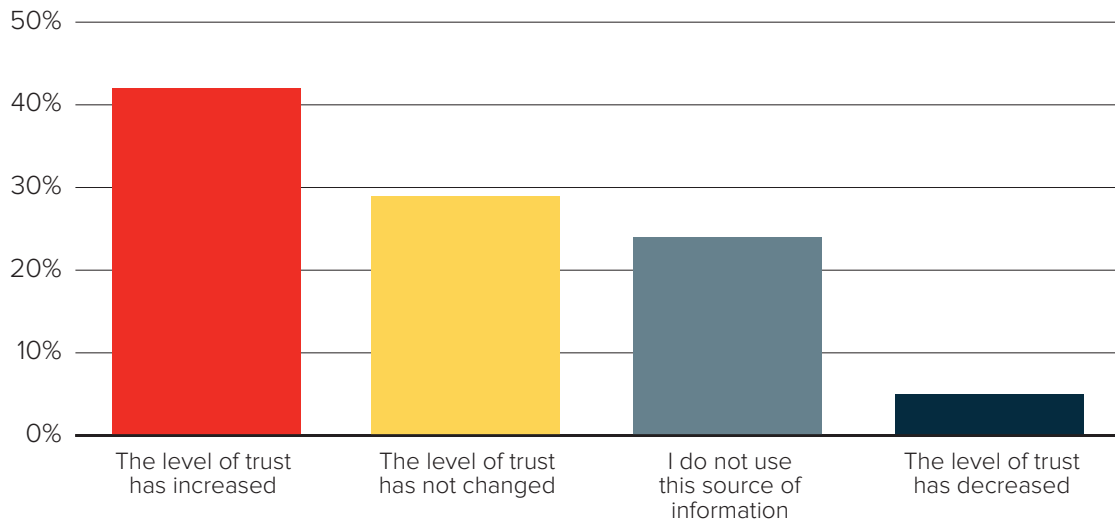
Media consumption habits vary significantly by age in Ukraine. Among the 103 civilians CIVIC surveyed for this research, 21 were over 60 years of age. The media preferences for this group were meaningfully different than the preferences of the civilians CIVIC surveyed overall. Notably, while 30.7 percent of the overall survey population used Telegram as their primary source of information about political and security developments in the first two weeks of Russia’s full-scale invasion, only 4.8 percent of surveyed civilians over the age of 60 were using Telegram as their primary source of information at that time. When CIVIC was carrying out the survey in October and November of 2022, the percentage of participants relying on Telegram as their primary source of information about the political and security events in the country had increased to 46.1. For people over the age of 60, still only 14.3 percent were primarily relying on Telegram. During both time periods, this older age group reported television as their top source of information about the war and were more likely to rely on YouTube, online media webpages and portals, and radio than the general survey population.

These different media consumption habits affect the ability of older persons to access information that might be critical for their protection and decision-making. Older persons and persons with disabilities have also been among those most reluctant and least able to leave frontline and occupied areas—which makes them vulnerable to the information manipulation Russia has employed in these areas. Ukrainian authorities, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and national non-governmental organizations (NNGOs) should be mindful of these differences and ensure they have targeted efforts to reach the most vulnerable populations when they are communicating potentially life-saving information to Ukrainians, as well as when countering disinformation.

Telegram and other social media platforms are undoubtedly an asset for civilians—at times providing them with timely information that is critical to their decision-making and is not available through other forums.³⁸ However, media representatives, government officials, and humanitarian actors all expressed deep concern about the reliability of information shared through social media.³⁹ Since the start of the full-scale invasion, the volume of disinformation being spread by Russian-affiliated actors has increased significantly, with social media being their platform of choice for spreading disinformation.⁴⁰ Thirty percent of the civilians CIVIC surveyed said that some of the information from social media that they used to make critical decisions about their security and protection in 2022 turned out to be false.⁴¹ Most experts who spoke with CIVIC viewed Telegram as the least regulated social media network, characterizing it as rife with disinformation. “It’s millions, tens of millions of Ukrainians that can be affected by Russian propaganda because of the reading of Telegram, and we can do nothing with that because there is no moderation and regulation,” warned one civil society leader.⁴² Another civil society leader speaking about Telegram said, “Most of the content is unattributed, unreferenced, anonymous with the veneer of the real media.”⁴³

FIGURE 2

Since the Russian invasion in February 2022, how has your level of trust in Telegram changed?



Despite these concerns among authorities and experts, 42 percent of the civilians CIVIC surveyed responded that their level of trust in Telegram had increased since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Many civilians seem to simply equate trust with functionality—explaining that they trust it because they need it and use it. One respondent said, “[My] trust probably increased, because I began to use it more, to expect more from Telegram news channels. I can’t even say why. ... There is always information about what is happening in Ukraine. I don’t know if there is complete information, but this is the first channel that I am checking.”⁴⁴ Some participants acknowledged that Telegram contains significant amounts of disinformation but felt that their ability to select and hone the channels they view made Telegram a reliable source of information in times of crisis.

In particular, civilians said they viewed information from the Ukrainian authorities as more reliable than information from any other actor.⁴⁵ One civilian from Irpin told CIVIC, “On the very first day, when everything began, I subscribed to all possible official channels....”⁴⁶ Ukrainians reserve the highest level of trust for military authorities, who are viewed as being the most direct and pragmatic in their communications and as being above politics.⁴⁷ As is discussed further in Section VII, such trust in official state channels and in communications from the government and military more broadly can help counteract the negative effects of disinformation from other actors. Moreover, some Ukrainians expressed a preference for, and a higher level of trust in, communications from local authorities than they did for central ones.⁴⁸ This finding mirrors data from recent polling that shows a growing preference for regional media rather than national news sources in 2022. It also provides insights into the important role that local authorities can have in communicating critical information to civilians and countering disinformation.⁴⁹

Finally, Russian efforts to cut off civilians in occupied areas from information flowing from Ukrainian-held territory has increased the importance of communication via word of mouth and the radio—which had all but lost its relevance before the outbreak of the full-scale war. A journalist reflected to CIVIC that, “Over this time, radio has earned back the lost audience, and it might have even found new listeners.”⁵⁰

VI. TACTICS AND NARRATIVES UNDERMINING CIVILIAN SECURITY AND WELL-BEING

Information warfare has been a major component of Russia's military strategy during its offensive, and stakeholders emphasized this in conversations with CIVIC. "Language here played the role of a weapon,"⁵¹ asserted one journalist. A second journalist told CIVIC, "The propaganda war, for Russia it is a full-scale frontline."⁵² The aims of the tactics and narratives deployed as part of Russia's information warfare strategy are diverse. The background section of this report highlighted some of the more strategic-level and political narratives utilized by Russian-affiliated actors as part of Russia's war effort in Ukraine. As is detailed in this section of the report, other narratives have been launched at a more localized level. CIVIC found that these local-level narratives have been some of the most harmful to civilians—obscuring frontline developments, creating panic, complicating civilian efforts to evacuate from conflict-affected areas, and misleading civilians about the availability and nature of some critical services. Efforts to undermine community cohesion could have a growing impact in the future, and civilians broadly reported that the disinformation has had a negative impact on their mental health. While the aim of these Russian tactics and narratives is not necessarily to inflict harm on civilians, they have a strong potential to do so—and, in some cases, they almost certainly have.

The vast majority of stakeholders that CIVIC surveyed and interviewed were primarily concerned with the potential harm arising from Russian disinformation efforts. However, as is detailed below, civilians did raise concerns about the impact of Ukrainian strategic communication efforts and transparency around some war-related issues.

Russian Information Campaigns Linked to Kinetic Activity at a Local Level

In some cases, Russian-affiliated actors launched disinformation campaigns for specific geographic areas at a hyper-local level and timed them to coincide with Russian military offensives. In the few weeks before and after Russia's full-scale invasion, entire networks of profiles and channels were created on Telegram at the community or oblast level for this purpose.⁵³ Pro-Russian actors also joined local Viber groups and sent messages to them with false information.⁵⁴ "There was a Bucha campaign, a Mariupol campaign, the Chernihiv campaign. If we tried to put it on the map, a geographically focused campaign, you would be able to relate that to military operations at the time," explained one international humanitarian actor.⁵⁵

The hyper-local nature of these types of information operations makes it difficult for civil society and Ukrainian government officials to track and respond to them.⁵⁶ Moreover, unlike more strategic narratives that can be easily identified and de-bunked, the nature of some of the local messaging campaigns makes it difficult to distinguish misinformation—resulting from a chaotic information environment in the midst of active fighting—from disinformation spread with malign intent. Describing this challenge, one NNGO official stated, "We are really

The hyper-local nature of these types of information operations makes it difficult for civil society and Ukrainian government officials to track and respond to them.



Photo by saveED charity fund

Corridor in a destroyed school. Bohdanivka, Ukraine. 2022.

in the fog of war. The typical fact-checking work is important, but in many cases, you just can't fact check."⁵⁷ Likewise, a military official observed: "The information space is rapidly developing and there is a lot of information that doesn't correspond to reality, but it's also very difficult to determine if it's intentional or just a mistake, especially if you're just a resident of a town or village."⁵⁸

Finally, the simultaneous nature of locally focused information operations and kinetic activities has the potential to amplify their negative impact on civilians.⁵⁹ It creates greater confusion and panic among civilians at a time when decisions need to be made quickly and, more than ever, life and death hang in the balance.

Narratives Obscuring Frontline Developments

As Russian tanks and troops moved into Ukrainian territory, Russian actors spread disinformation narratives online and in person about which areas were under Russian control, as well as where Russian troops were moving and in what numbers. Russian invaders frequently told civilians that local authorities had fled or surrendered when they had not. They also repeatedly spread news about impending offensives that never materialized, including impending attacks with nuclear weapons and attacks that would supposedly strike nuclear power plants in Ukraine and result in widespread devastation.⁶⁰ Such disinformation campaigns, particularly when directed at military actors, can have legitimate military aims. Indeed, the Ukrainian military and government have also tightly controlled information about some frontline developments and launched information operations to mislead the Russian military about whether and where their offensives will take place.⁶¹ However, many of Russia's disinformation efforts in this area appear to have been targeted widely

at civilians with the intent of confusing them and spreading panic.⁶² Speaking about the goal of these types of disinformation narratives, a woman from Irpin observed, “Why do they keep doing it? Probably to sow panic. To keep people in some kind of fear....”⁶³

These efforts were at least partially successful in spreading panic and, like many of the other Russian information warfare tactics and narratives used in Ukraine, undermining civilians’ decision-making capabilities. Participants described how disinformation about approaching Russian troops or offensives led some civilians to frantically collect supplies or wait in long lines to fuel their vehicles in case they needed to flee, exposing them to additional risk of being hit by incoming shelling. In some instances, people fled unnecessarily from their home areas because they feared attack.⁶⁴ A man from Kharkiv recounted his personal experience dealing with such narratives, explaining: “[there was] lots of fake information from the Russians popping up about where they were and in what force, what areas they had occupied, saying 50 tanks [were coming] when there were four. It made people panic. I panicked every time.”⁶⁵ Journalists and NNGO officials who visited frontline areas shortly after they were liberated from Russian occupation also described how some civilians in newly liberated areas were unsure which military was in control of surrounding territories and even whether Kyiv was still under Ukrainian control.⁶⁶

Narratives spreading disinformation about frontline developments, like many other types of disinformation, were most effective in the first weeks and months of the February 2022 Russian invasion. After the first few months of the conflict, many civilians began to recognize these narratives as disinformation and did not react to them. While this is a potentially necessary and helpful coping mechanism, it could also endanger civilians in the event of a real attack or offensive. Although these disinformation efforts may not rise to the level of terrorizing the civilian population or violate any provisions of IHL, parties to the conflict should avoid the most harmful of such campaigns: those targeted at the civilian population with an intent to create panic and that contribute to civilian harm. Other protection actors, such as NGOs and civil society organizations, should prioritize tracking these narratives and limiting their impact.

Manipulating Population Movements

Russian and Russian-affiliated actors have directed a significant amount of their information operations toward trying to influence and manipulate the movements of Ukrainian civilians in an effort to push them to remain in Russian-occupied areas or evacuate toward Russian-controlled areas. Some of these efforts could contribute to forced displacement, a violation under IHL that does not require the use of physical force; it also includes the use of coercion, fear, and psychological oppression to provoke population movements.⁶⁷ Certain disinformation efforts focused on creating confusion or spreading disinformation about the existence and safety of evacuation routes out of frontline and occupied territories. In negotiations, Russia agreed to green corridors for evacuation, where hostilities would halt to allow civilians the opportunity to safely flee frontline areas. Russia then backed out of some of these agreements after they had already been announced by Ukraine. In addition, Russian military sometimes attacked civilians trying to flee through these routes.⁶⁸ One media official described her personal experience of the chaos that this manipulation created:

“There was information that there would be a green corridor...Telegram channels, Facebook, it was all over them. If your relatives are not responding, you simply send this information somewhere in case it reaches them, and they are able to leave. But you might have also put them in danger because there was information about a green corridor, but when [your relatives] came there, there was no corridor. But there were soldiers—not Ukrainian ones. We know what



Photo by State Emergency Service of Ukraine.

Rescuers from the State Emergency Service of Ukraine assist civilians evacuating from their home areas.

happened in Bucha and Irpin. You sent them a message, and then the evacuation failed, and you pray that your relatives didn't get this message and do something foolish. ... I think there were some arrangements, and it wasn't disinformation on our side, but the other side."⁶⁹

Pro-Russian actors used social media posts to blame the failure of these green corridors on Ukrainian political authorities.⁷⁰ They also often claimed that the Ukrainian military was targeting or turning back people trying to flee toward Ukrainian-held territory, announced false corridors that did not exist, and shared incorrect information about the timing and location for evacuations.⁷¹

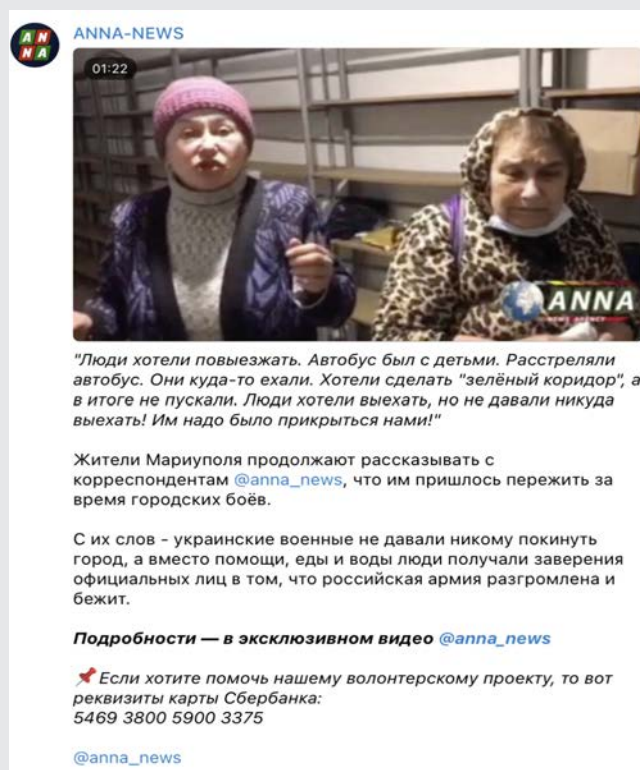
According to interview participants, this information manipulation and disinformation caused civilian casualties. As an NGO official monitoring the information space in Ukraine observed, "The problem with [green] corridors is that very often they are fake [green] corridors, and this goes beyond disinformation. ... This is a propaganda that clearly affects human lives."⁷² Another NGO volunteer echoed this concern, saying, "The information about evacuation corridors was published in random Telegram channels and in reality, those corridors had never existed, and it led to casualties."⁷³ Similarly, a journalist noted the effect of direct attacks on civilians trying to use evacuation corridors and the amount of confusion around the timing and location of them, saying, "I know a lot of people who evacuated through the frontline, not the [green] corridors because it seemed more safe to them. ... That is why a lot of people died during evacuation."⁷⁴

TEXTBOX: PRO-RUSSIAN TELEGRAM POSTS SPREADING DISINFORMATION ON EVACUATION ROUTES

In addition to the evidence CIVIC compiled through interviews, CIVIC worked with the independent non-profit Centre for Information Resilience (CIR) to analyze Telegram posts directed at civilians in frontline cities during critical and insecure time periods. CIR analyzed posts from over 250 Telegram channels classified as pro-Russian based either on their open support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine or on a history of amplifying and spreading messages of the Russian authorities and media. Of these channels, 205 shared information that was locally relevant for the cities of Chernihiv, Mariupol, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. Of the approximately 6,300 posts that CIR reviewed, close to 5,400 posts included evacuation related material, demonstrating what a large focus it was for pro-Russian actors on social media. These posts focused on accusing the Ukrainian military of targeting civilians who tried to evacuate toward Ukrainian-held territory, tried to direct civilians onto specific evacuation routes, and generally portrayed evacuation to Russia as the safest option for civilians.

CIVIC and CIR identified four case studies that demonstrate these tactics. The first case study is a post that was shared on March 17, 2022, by pro-Russian media outlet ANNA News. The post shared a video in which Ukrainian civilians were speaking about having their evacuation bus fired on and blocked from traveling to Ukrainian territory. An older woman in the video can be heard saying, “People wanted to leave. There was a bus with children. The bus was destroyed. They were going somewhere. There was a wish to create a green corridor, and as a result [people] were not let out. People wanted to leave, but they were not allowed to leave anywhere.” The news report blamed this attack on Ukrainian soldiers. ANNA News had over 334,000 subscribers when the message was posted, and it was shared 53,316 times in the first hour.

A second post by the pro-Russian Telegram channel WarGonzo from March 25, 2022, shared a video in which a woman, an older man, and a girl describe being shot at by a sniper who was speaking Ukrainian as they tried to evacuate from Mariupol in a vehicle. The author of the channel claims that the video is evidence of crimes committed by the Azov battalion—a former militia group that originated in 2014 before being incorporated into the Ukrainian National Guard as a regiment. Some of its members espoused nationalist and far-right views.⁷⁵ CIR, who has been actively monitoring open-source data to compile a map of attacks in Ukraine since the start of Russia’s full-scale



Screenshot of the March 17, 2022, post by ANNA News claiming that Ukrainian military forces do not allow evacuations from Mariupol.

invasion, did not find any credible evidence that Ukrainian military or National Guard forces fired on civilian vehicles near Mariupol on the dates either of these attacks supposedly took place.

Earlier that month, at 10:25 a.m. on March 2, 2022, the author of a Telegram channel that translates in English to “Dispatches from the Militia of Novorossiia” posted a message in which he accused Ukrainian military forces and Azov forces of using civilian buildings near the city of Kharkiv as their base. He accused them of firing from these locations at civilians trying to evacuate. The message also claimed that six specific routes out of Kharkiv were being blocked by the Ukrainian military and advised readers not to take them. Instead, he suggested they evacuate through the towns of Zmiiv or Merefa. The message was viewed 99,300 times that day, forwarded 170 times, and shared on another pro-Russian channel marketing itself as a Ukrainian news agency. Then, during the night of March 2, an area near Merefa that was on the post’s recommended evacuation route was hit by Russian artillery.⁷⁶ Three civilians were reportedly killed in the attack, and at least seven wounded.⁷⁷

In a fourth case identified by CIVIC and CIR, the pro-Russian channel “War on Fakes,” which portrays itself as a fact-checking channel, sought to discredit information about Russian attacks on civilians evacuating through the Vasylivka checkpoint near Zaporizhzhia in August 2022. At the time, the Vasylivka checkpoint was a popular route for civilians trying to flee from Russian-occupied to Ukrainian-held territory. On August 29, 2022, the mayor of Melitopol, Ivan Fedorov, reported an attack on the checkpoint. According to him, Russian soldiers let some civilian vehicles through a checkpoint into the gray zone between Russian and Ukrainian-controlled territories. Before they could reach the safety of the Ukrainian side, he reported, Russian munitions hit the area. No civilians were killed in this attack.⁷⁸ Two days later, on August 31, the author of the “War on Fakes” channel—who had a growing following of over 700,000 users—posted a message labeling reports of the attack as fakes.⁷⁹ The original post received over 100,000 views, was forwarded 90 times, and was reposted to two other channels, including the Telegram channel of the popular state-owned Russian media project “Ukraina.ru.”

The same day that the “War on Fakes” post was circulated, Fedorov reported another attack by the Russian military on civilians crossing through the Vasylivka checkpoint. Again, no civilians were killed.⁸⁰ However, on September 30, missiles coming from a Russian-occupied area of Ukraine hit the Vasylivka checkpoint area, killing at least 30 people and wounding 88.⁸¹ After this attack, the Ukrainian authorities closed the checkpoint to investigate the incident and prevent further deaths. The Russian-appointed head of the occupied Zaporizhzhia regional administration, Evgeniy Balitskiy, however, used his Telegram channel and other media outlets to blame the failure of the corridor on Ukrainian authorities. He claimed Ukrainian authorities closed the checkpoint to prevent people from returning to Russian-occupied territory.⁸²

It was not possible within the scope of CIVIC’s research to directly assess the effect that these four posts and other evacuation-related posts analyzed by CIR may have had on civilian decision-making about whether to evacuate. Moreover, because CIR analyzed posts manually rather than using AI, it was only possible for them to look at Telegram channels previously identified as having a clear pro-Russian stance—a factor which likely shapes the viewership of these channels and therefore their impact on civilians. However, the investigation demonstrates concretely some of the different narratives and tactics that were used to spread disinformation about evacuation. While we cannot definitively say that civilians were misled, injured, or killed as a result of the messages, it is clear how they could have contributed to confusion among civilians, complicated decision-making, and possibly led civilians to make decisions that were actually against their best interests in terms of safety and security.



⚡ Сводки ополчения Новороссии Z.O.V. (ДНР, ЛНР, Укр



🇺🇦 Актуальная информация по Харькову от местных источников:

- ◆ На **Салтовском шоссе 159/84, 157, 155/83** оборудованы огневые точки. Всех жителей выселили.
- ◆ В доме по улице **Леси Сердюк, 18** расположил позиции батальон «Азов». Эвакуация жителей не проводилась.
- ◆ ВСУ действительно периодически обстреливают город одиночными снарядами. Вчера РСЗО «Град» вела огонь из поселка **Коротыч** к западу от города.

Также власти фактически заблокировали следующие выезды из Харькова:

- 📌 Солоницевка (запад).
- 📌 Дергачи (северо-запад).
- 📌 Русская-Лозовая (север).
- 📌 Цыркуны (северо-восток).
- 📌 Шестаково (восток).
- 📌 Каменная Яруга (юго-восток).

Выбраться из города можно только по двум направлениям:

- ◆ Змиев (юг).
- ◆ Мерефа (юго-запад).

Любым несогласным с действиями властей и территориальной обороны угрожают оружием.



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Screenshot of March 2, 2022, post by "Dispatches from Militia of Novorossiia" that directed civilians away from six evacuation routes allegedly being blocked by the Ukrainian military and toward another route that was hit by Russian artillery the evening the post was shared.

In addition to disseminating disinformation about specific evacuation routes and the risks surrounding them, Russian-affiliated actors tried to discourage Ukrainian civilians from fleeing Russian-occupied areas by amplifying and falsifying stories about Ukrainian internally displaced persons (IDPs) in western Ukraine and refugees in Europe being mistreated or failing to receive assistance.⁸³ They also tried to instill fear in Ukrainians under occupation that they would have to undergo compulsory, punitive, and abusive filtration processes upon arriving in Ukrainian-held territory.⁸⁴ A Ukrainian subject matter expert described the goal of these narratives as creating a situation where “those in the occupied territories would be terrified of going to Ukraine because they would be seen as collaborators, or that anyone with anything pro-Russian would be eliminated in Ukraine.”⁸⁵ As with disinformation around evacuation routes, these narratives likely contributed to civilian deaths by discouraging civilians from fleeing insecure areas with ongoing hostilities. As an NNGO volunteer working to evacuate civilians told CIVIC, “This information puts at danger and killed a lot of people who decided not to leave, but to stay. It is kind of radical consequences what this information did to the lives of people who could [have been] saved.”⁸⁶

In September 2022, as Ukraine began to gain ground in counter-offensives and Russia was at risk of losing occupied territory, Russian military officials and authorities used similar narratives to try to convince Ukrainians to flee to Russia. Where they anticipated they would no longer be able to hold territory, they appear to have wanted to shift as many people as possible into Russia and tried to motivate civilians to move by claiming that the Ukrainian military would indiscriminately target civilians—imprisoning or killing them.⁸⁷ “When they leave, they try to take as much of the population as they can,” explained a journalist who visited frontline area.⁸⁸ A second journalist similarly told CIVIC, “Before retreating, they would persuade civilians to go with them. They said they would be prosecuted, all of them would be called collaborators and taken to prison and the army would bomb their houses.”⁸⁹ An NNGO official working closely with civilians in newly liberated areas told CIVIC that, in one occupied area, Russian soldiers went from house to house telling families that the approaching Ukrainian military was accompanied by American mercenaries who did not speak Ukrainian and who would rape their daughters and torture them if they stayed. The message was: “If you want to live, you have to leave this place.”⁹⁰

Some of Russia’s information operations were directed specifically at encouraging the movement of Ukrainian children from occupied territories to Russia. Russian authorities and media outlets messaged online and in person to parents that frontline areas were not safe for children and proposed sending them for several weeks to camps where they would have an opportunity to relax and play. Propaganda videos about the camp experience were disseminated, and some families voluntarily agreed to send their children. However, Russian authorities refused to return at least some of the children to their families as promised, claiming that frontline developments made it unsafe to do so. Some Ukrainian stakeholders argued that Russian authorities never intended to return the children and that they used the camp to indoctrinate children with Russian propaganda.⁹¹

“This information puts at danger and killed a lot of people who decided not to leave, but to stay. It is kind of radical consequences what this information did to the lives of people who could [have been] saved.”

– NNGO volunteer



Image of Borodyanka one year after its liberation from Russian occupation. Borodyanka, Ukraine, April 2, 2023.

A journalist speaking about these cases told CIVIC, “It is because they are brainwashed by propaganda and don’t see the real thing. This is a dramatic situation when you think about it. You have people who are being invaded by the country and they give their children to that country because they don’t see the truth.”⁹² An NNGO official condemned the Russian tactic, saying, “Why is it bad? It is bad because you tricked them. Bad, because of indoctrination. Bad, because you are telling them...bad things about Ukraine and to destroy their Ukrainian identity and it is your strategy...”⁹³ Information operations targeting Ukrainian parents in frontline areas of the conflict appear to be just one aspect of a broader strategy to relocate as many Ukrainian children as possible to Russia. In March 2023, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Commissioner for Children’s Rights Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Beleva for the war crime of unlawful deportation and transfer of children from Ukraine to Russia.⁹⁴ On April 5, 2023, following the ICC’s indictment, Russia held an informal meeting at the UN on the unlawful forced deportation of children from Ukraine. Forty-nine Member States plus the European Union issued a statement condemning this meeting as an attempt to spread disinformation about crimes committed against children in Ukraine.⁹⁵

Undermining Social Cohesion

Some of Russia’s earliest identified disinformation efforts in Ukraine have been focused on trying to undermine social cohesion and drive a divide among different segments of the population, especially between Ukrainians who speak Russian as their primary language and Ukrainians who speak Ukrainian as their primary language.⁹⁶ Russian efforts to undermine social cohesion in Ukraine

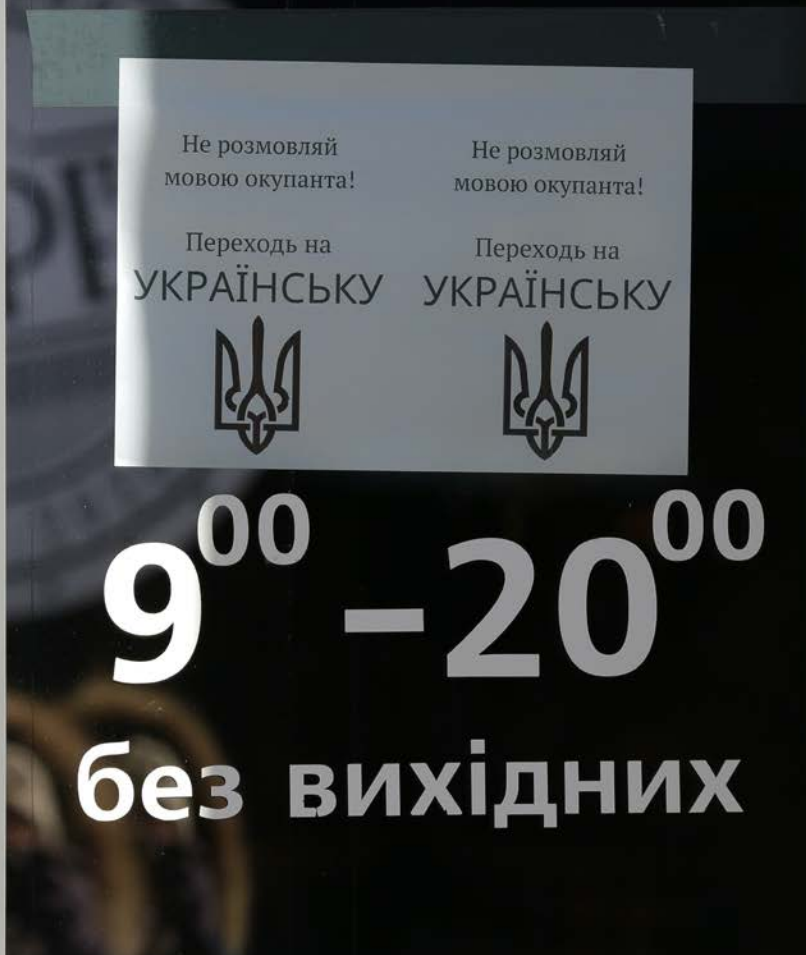
since the start of the full-scale invasion risk forming and deepening fault lines in ways that are already harmful and are likely to become more so over time.

Stakeholders emphasized that Russia's tactic of isolating frontline and occupied areas from outside information while creating a parallel information universe in these areas has the effect of creating societal divisions that can be challenging to overcome once the areas are liberated. "I think we will have some societal problems, because people lived in a totally different information space," observed a government official.⁹⁷ Echoing this concern, a second government official reflected, "[In] the territory that was occupied, even for two to three months, like [some parts of] the Kharkiv or the Donetsk region, there is already its own political culture [and] information culture that differs from the Ukrainian one. People, without other alternatives for information, are brainwashed by Russian media and propaganda, and it is already very difficult for them."⁹⁸ Other interview participants described the challenge of engaging with people who lived in areas under Russia's information influence—even close relatives.⁹⁹ One woman from Kharkiv, for instance, lamented, "Because of Russian television, they hear completely different news, which makes it hard to have arguments with them. ... It feels like you cannot do anything to convince people of reality."¹⁰⁰

Outside occupied areas, a number of narratives spread via pro-Russian social media outlets since February 2022 have sought to undermine social cohesion.¹⁰¹ Some of these narratives appear rooted in real grievances and issues, while others appear to be entirely fabricated with the intent of creating cleavages in the population. As already discussed in relation to evacuation, there are many social media posts highlighting discrimination and violence against IDPs from eastern Ukraine. Beyond discouraging flight, these narratives can also exacerbate social tensions by claiming that discrimination arises because IDPs are primarily Russian-language speaking. Information operations have amplified concerns about Russian-speaking IDPs being attacked in western Ukraine, being charged exorbitant rates to rent accommodations, or being unable to enroll their children in school.¹⁰² As one NNGO official in Kharkiv reflected, "I don't think it arises by itself. It's intentionally stirred up by somebody. For what purpose? Actually, the goal is clear to me—it's a split within the country among people, because it really alienates people from each other."¹⁰³ Speaking about the impact of these narratives, an INGO official said, "It does pose a protection issue when it comes to social cohesion."¹⁰⁴

Stakeholders explained to CIVIC that these narratives are rooted in reality—while rent prices in western Ukraine may not be different for IDPs from eastern Ukraine as compared to other civilians, rent prices have increased drastically in some areas of western Ukraine. Additionally, there appear to be some tensions around the use of the Russian language in Ukraine.¹⁰⁵ A number of participants reported experiencing or witnessing discrimination or aggression against people speaking Russian since February 2022,¹⁰⁶ and others admitted that they are angered by hearing the Russian language now.¹⁰⁷ For example, a man from Rivne posed the following question: "When...a person from Luhansk oblast city of Severodonetsk says, like, 'I don't speak Ukrainian' and uses the Russian language, then how can we trust them?"¹⁰⁸ While these narratives could contribute to societal divisions, the majority of Ukrainians—84 percent of those surveyed by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) in May and June of 2023—do not feel that Russian-language speakers in Ukraine are systematically oppressed or persecuted.¹⁰⁹

Other narratives seem to be rooted in fears rather than reality. For example, stories have surfaced that the Ukrainian authorities are disproportionately conscripting people from eastern regions of Ukraine into the military and unfairly rationing electricity between western and eastern regions of the country.¹¹⁰ A Ukrainian subject matter expert explained these efforts and their impact to CIVIC, saying "The narrative was that the Ukrainian authorities managed these blackouts unfairly, providing



Sign in the window of a Lviv shop door reading, “Don’t speak the language of the occupier. Switch to Ukrainian.”

electricity to the west part of Ukraine, but that they don’t care about the east part of Ukraine. ... I do believe that there is influence, because people are ready to believe.”¹¹¹ However, the stakeholders interviewed by CIVIC who observed this narrative in the social media space felt it was not credible, and CIVIC was unable to identify any credible evidence that these practices are occurring.

Many stakeholders who CIVIC spoke with felt that, given some of the other tactics and narratives deployed by Russian actors in Ukraine, there is a risk of Russian-affiliated sources mounting efforts to sow discord in newly liberated areas between civilians who stayed in Russian-occupation areas and those who fled. However, participants admitted that there was little visibility on or understanding of whether or how these dynamics are unfolding at a local level.¹¹² A media official reflected:

“Some people already talk about it, and in the future, it will definitely be used by the enemy or by the internal political or oppositional authorities. After the victory, we will definitely face social disruption: whether one fought or didn’t, whether one left or stayed, whether one was in Kyiv or escaped, whether one volunteered or not ... If there was no war context here, we could talk of the different shades and levels of grey. But war embeds us into the black-and-white paradigm, us versus the enemy.”¹¹³

While participants lacked clarity on how this dynamic was developing locally in newly liberated areas, they did feel that broader narratives in social media and media spaces—whether genuine concerns or part of information operations—are contributing to societal divisions between those who stayed in occupied areas and those who fled. For example, there is significant concern and online debate about who constitutes a collaborator and how collaborators should be treated in Ukraine.¹¹⁴

Some posts blame civilians in eastern Ukraine for the war based on the idea that many of these civilians welcomed Russian occupation,¹¹⁵ and some individuals are highlighting the different levels of assistance available to civilians who fled versus those who stayed.¹¹⁶ As one journalist observed, “It’s an attempt to divide people: those who were under occupation, meaning that they wanted all this...and those who weren’t under occupation, meaning they didn’t allow for this to happen, so they are true Ukrainians.”¹¹⁷

These narratives can have a real and immediate impact on civilian well-being and social cohesion if they perpetuate or exacerbate societal fault lines, discrimination, and violence, as well as if national authorities do not act to protect vulnerable individuals from retribution. Stakeholders described some of these underlying tensions and vulnerabilities to CIVIC. For example, a man in Kharkiv who stayed in Russian-occupied territory to care for his ill father told CIVIC he is now viewed as a traitor by those who are returning.¹¹⁸ A journalist told CIVIC that civilians in liberated areas are increasingly wary of speaking about their experiences, for fear of being unfairly portrayed as collaborators.¹¹⁹ A local government official in Kharkiv told CIVIC that civilians suspected of being collaborators had been violently attacked by other community members,¹²⁰ and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR) has corroborated the killing of dozens of civilians in liberated areas alleged to have collaborated with Russian forces under occupation.¹²¹ A woman who stayed in Kharkiv throughout the Russian occupation shared her anger toward those who evacuated, saying:

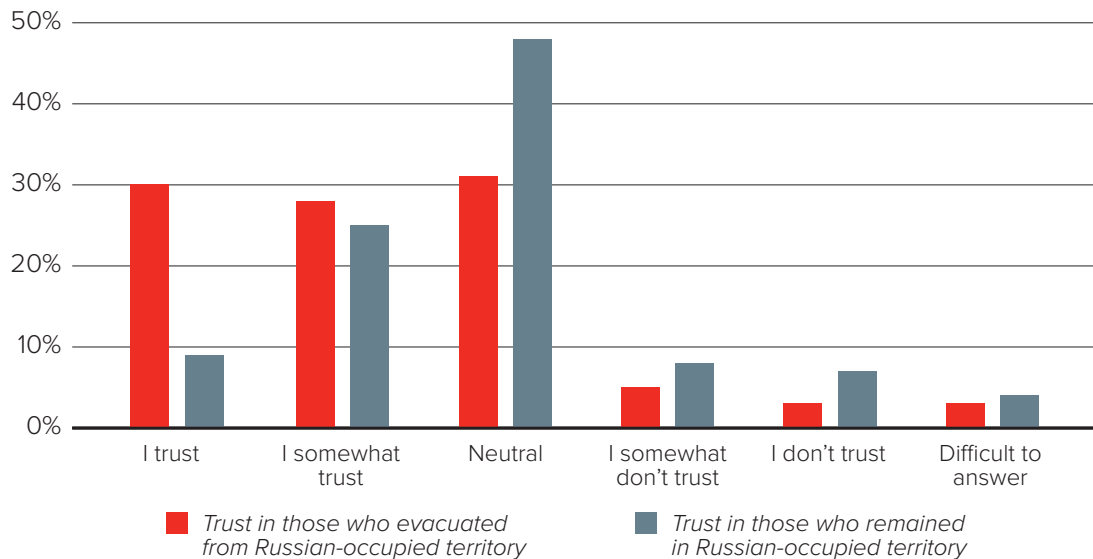
“They left, and I believe they betrayed the country. They fled from difficulties just like that, and now they come back with money and with such ambitions that everyone owes them something. That’s why they behave so arrogantly, and it’s noticeable. They come and start demanding that we all be like this or like that, it’s immediately obvious. I’ve come across it, and many of my friends left, some even want to stay there. I talk to them, it suits them more there because they give them housing and more humanitarian aid, and they’re better off there, with much more help than we have.”¹²²

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Despite these simmering tensions, there still appears to be a strong level of social cohesion among Ukrainians, which may make Ukrainians less vulnerable to disinformation narratives that seek to divide communities. Tracking social cohesion and civilian sentiments over time cannot definitely determine the impact of narratives aimed at undermining social cohesion, but it can help indicate areas where disinformation may be influencing civilians. Most of the civilians CIVIC surveyed who were living outside occupied areas or who had evacuated from them expressed a nuanced view of why their fellow Ukrainians chose to stay behind. Survey participants cited a variety of reasons people chose not to flee—including the need to care for sick relatives, disabilities that complicated evacuation, fear of losing one’s property, and economic constraints. However, they also cited Russian sympathies as one reason Ukrainians chose to remain behind, and they expressed somewhat lower trust in those who stayed under Russian occupation as compared to those who evacuated Russian-occupied areas.

FIGURE 3

Trust in those who evacuated from Russian-occupied territory versus those who remained



Disinformation About Life-Saving Services

Given how disinformation has been used to undermine access to or the delivery of life-saving assistance in other contexts—including in Syria, where disinformation about medical first responders was spread by Russian-affiliated actors—CIVIC investigated the possibility that such narratives have also been used in Ukraine.¹²³ Although it does not appear that they were a significant component of Russian disinformation efforts, CIVIC did identify a few narratives that had the potential to undermine the health of civilians and their access to critical humanitarian assistance.

In December 2022, some messages targeting residents of Ukrainian-held territory and spread through social media claimed that hospitals in Kyiv were overwhelmed and suspending planned hospitalizations for procedures because of influxes of wounded soldiers from the frontlines.¹²⁴ Similarly, other messages said civilians in the Volyn area of Ukraine were unable to access ambulances because they had been donated to the military.¹²⁵ These claims were debunked by civil society organizations that review and investigate potential disinformation narratives. Several interview and survey participants recalled reading fake posts on social media that water in some areas of the country was contaminated, as well as false or exaggerated messages claiming critical goods and services like food and electricity would be widely unavailable for more extended periods of time than they were in reality.¹²⁶ While the primary purpose of such narratives is likely to undermine trust in the Ukrainian government as a service provider to its citizens, civilians told CIVIC that they believe these messages could increase risks for Ukrainians by discouraging them from seeking out critical goods and services that are available, causing psychological stress, or possibly prompting people to flee their homes when it is not necessary, therefore undermining their health and well-being.¹²⁷

In areas of Ukraine occupied by Russia, Russian authorities have misled civilians about humanitarian assistance while propaganda has politicized aid. Notably, Russian authorities in some areas directed civilians toward registration sites under the pretext that they would receive humanitarian aid there. While some humanitarian assistance was given to civilians at these registration sites run by the Russian authorities, the sites were also used to collect biometric data and direct some civilians on to filtration camps.¹²⁸ Human rights organizations have documented extensive abuses inflicted on civilians at these filtration sites, including prolonged detention in inhumane conditions during which detainees were subjected to IHL violations such as torture and sexual violence.¹²⁹ Russian authorities therefore disinformed civilians about the true nature of these sites and therefore endangered some civilians—particularly adult men. Describing this practice, an international subject matter expert said, “Those are two

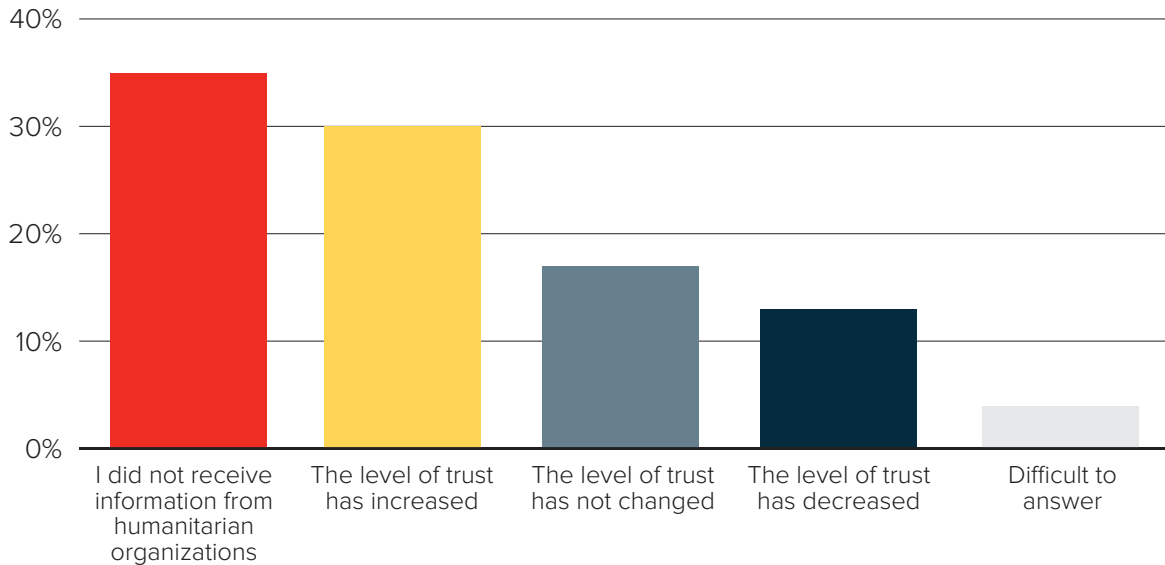
situations where they were misleading about what certain locations were: in the first case, to collect data and the second case to say these are refugee hubs where you can get food, water, and aid, but really they were for the filtration process. ...They definitely employed information operations to advertise or put a positive spin on those and market them to the population. [They were] branding them as humanitarian operations when there was something more sinister.”¹³⁰ Russian authorities have also blocked UN and non-governmental humanitarian assistance from reaching occupied areas, falsely attempted to portray the level of services in occupied areas as higher than in other areas of the country, and created propaganda videos praising Russian aid efforts.¹³¹

Lastly, CIVIC identified one case where malicious actors appear to have launched a disinformation campaign against an INGO. Officials of the INGO and other organizations working in the same domain reported that the campaign led to concerns for the safety and security of staff, trust deficits for the INGO, lost time and effort to rebuild trust, and a spillover effect for the reputation of affiliated operations.¹³² Some of the information shared about the INGO does not appear to be supported by any credible evidence, such as claims that the organization evacuated and sold Ukrainian children to Russia, yet several civilians who expressed decreased trust for the targeted organization cited these disinformation narratives as the reason for their distrust.¹³³ However, other civilians cited inaction, personal experience with the organization that was unsatisfactory, or general grievances as the source of their distrust.¹³⁴ More broadly, there is often genuine discontent and dissatisfaction among civilians because need regularly outstrips the capacity of humanitarian responders and because humanitarian responders are not always efficient, effective, or immune from error. It is sometimes difficult, therefore, to distinguish real discontent from disinformation efforts.¹³⁵

Notably, Russian authorities in some areas directed civilians toward registration sites under the pretext that they would receive humanitarian aid there.

FIGURE 4

Since the February 2022 Russian invasion, how has your level of trust in information shared by international humanitarian organizations changed?



Overall, 30 percent of CIVIC survey participants reported increased trust in international humanitarian organizations since the February 2022 Russian invasion, which is significantly more than the 13 percent who reported decreased trust. While these views cannot be directly linked to misinformation and disinformation, they provide insights into changing civilian perceptions of INGOs that may be linked to their response to the conflict, failures to clearly communicate, or misinformation and disinformation circulating about them. Most civilians who reported improved trust in INGOs cited their direct experience receiving assistance or witnessing the delivery of assistance.¹³⁶ Some of those with reduced trust explained that their expectations had not been met or that they had witnessed what they perceived as inconsistencies or inequities in how services were delivered.¹³⁷ Other civilians with reduced trust specifically cited poor communication from INGOs, a lack of transparency from them, and confusion about their services and eligibility as reasons for their decreased trust.¹³⁸ More broadly, many civilians told CIVIC that they had not received any information from INGOs at all or that they identified false information circulating about INGO efforts. They also referenced some efforts by Russian and pro-Russian actors to spread false information about services.¹³⁹ Whether misinformation, disinformation, or propaganda, these challenges underscore the importance of humanitarians communicating effectively to communities in Ukraine, monitoring the information space to identify and counteract mis- and disinformation, and supporting community-level and intercommunal efforts by civilians to access and validate or debunk information.

TEXTBOX: DISINFORMATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

Drawing a causal connection between disinformation and the mental well-being of civilians is challenging, particularly in a high-intensity conflict like Ukraine where many civilians have been exposed to multiple potentially traumatic events and experiences.¹⁴⁰ However, the intent of many information operations is to have a psychological impact on the target. The goal is often to create panic and chaos or to undermine morale.¹⁴¹ CIVIC's research indicates that, while Ukrainians have responded with resilience to these attacks, Russia's disinformation efforts have indeed taken a mental toll.

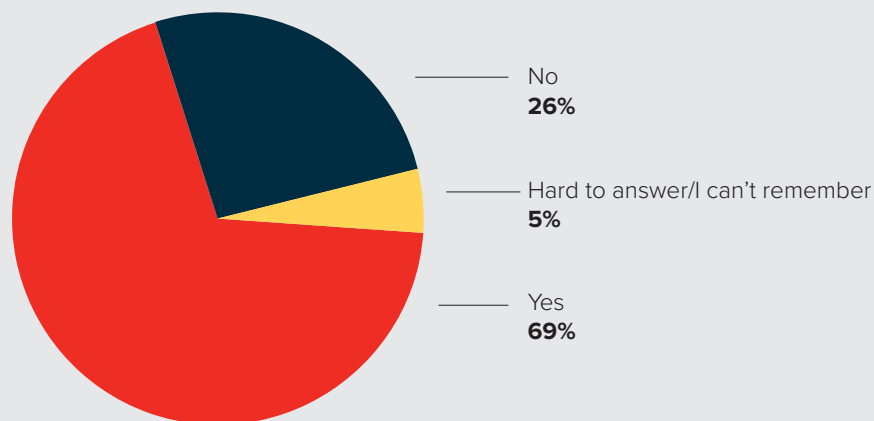
Civilians who participated in CIVIC's survey overwhelmingly responded that they believe disinformation affects their emotional and mental state—with many explaining that it has caused them feelings of anger, vulnerability, stress or anxiety, constant alertness, panic, and despair. One survey participant explained, for example, "It makes me nervous and tense. I am getting moody. I lose self-confidence. I feel doomed [and] I lost trust."¹⁴² Another respondent described disinformation as creating "a sense of confusion, oppression, chaos, and all of it together,"¹⁴³ while a third said, "there is internal anxiety, panic attacks, not understanding what to do next, internal negative feelings."¹⁴⁴

Civilians and civil society leaders that participated in semi-structured interviews recounted the same concerns. "It shakes the mental state to the point of mental imbalance," stated a man from Irpin.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, a woman from Kharkiv described disinformation triggering "emotional breakdown." She said, "I feel anxious. ... You think about it all the time. That is why you can't work productively."¹⁴⁶ As a Ukrainian psychologist explained:

"People constantly live in cognitive dissonance. The information that they receive often does not correspond to reality, to real life, and people always live in anticipation of what they were promised somewhere. But it is not happening as expected. There are a lot of nervous, aggressive people—distrustful, closed off—and it has a very strong impact. ...Yes, of course, it does have an impact. A very strong one... Some people become aggressive, while others go into a panic. There is a certain tension in the air that people can sense, and they do not know what to believe or prepare for."¹⁴⁷

FIGURE 5

Does the information about the military conflict that you perceive as disinformation affect your emotional state?



Indirect Impact of Some Strategic and Political Narratives

In addition to disinformation narratives that can more directly provoke civilian harm, there are a number of narratives that can indirectly contribute to harm. As one Ukrainian civil society leader summarized, “Some information leads to more of an immediate death and some...it leads to death eventually.”¹⁴⁸ CIVIC did not endeavor to map all of these indirect pathways. However, one pathway stood out, given the nature of CIVIC’s work: the potential for disinformation about the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) to undermine civilian trust in the Ukrainian military and therefore to undermine civil–military relations.

Russian and Russian-affiliated information operations against the AFU have ranged from commentary by Russian officials and Russian state-sponsored media stories to social media campaigns at strategic and localized levels. These operations have focused on accusing the Ukrainian military of corruption and of committing atrocities against civilians, including atrocities that are likely the responsibility of the Russian military. While corruption is a significant concern in Ukraine and human rights organizations have identified a small number of alleged IHL violations committed by the AFU, many of these information operations appear to be making false or unfounded claims.¹⁴⁹ For example, several stakeholders emphasized that after retreating from previously occupied territory, the Russian military often begins bombarding these areas with munitions without proper care for avoiding civilian casualties. Russian authorities then blame these bombardments on the AFU.¹⁵⁰ While support for the AFU is currently extremely high and such disinformation is unlikely to deceive most, interviewees did identify some cases where civilians falsely attributed shelling to the AFU instead of the Russian forces as a result of disinformation.¹⁵¹ Moreover, the aim of such disinformation is not always to convince civilians, beyond a doubt, that the AFU is responsible for casualties. At times, the objective is just to create doubt and exhaust civilians so that they distrust everyone. Several stakeholders expressed the view that this was an objective and potential result of disinformation being spread by Russian-affiliated actors about the AFU.¹⁵²

“Some information leads to more of an immediate death and some... it leads to death eventually.”

– Ukrainian civil society leader

Civilian Concerns about Ukrainian Strategic Communications and Information Control

Information operations have also been a component of Ukraine’s efforts to defend and retake its territory from Russian forces. These efforts have included strategic communications initiatives to inform civilians and maintain morale, as well as restricting access to or reporting on information that could undermine military operations—such as the timing and specific locations of missile strikes and the numbers of casualties suffered by the AFU. At times, such initiatives can also actively be a component of countering disinformation, either by filling or preventing information gaps that are being or could be exploited by adversaries. Here, CIVIC analyzes some of the concerns civilians raised about immediate and longer-term harm arising from these information operations. Section VII, then analyzes the strengths, challenges, and gaps in the Ukrainian government’s efforts to specifically counter disinformation.

CIVIC identified significant frustration and concern among civilians about communication from Ukrainian government officials before and during the first weeks of the full-scale invasion that dismissed the possibility of a large attack and then downplayed how long the war was likely to last.

According to a number of stakeholders, this messaging was intended to prevent panic, but in some cases, actually contributed to it and led to a lack of preparedness and civilian harm.¹⁵³ “You can’t give people false hopes,” warned a journalist in Chernihiv. “People then would believe in this and refuse evacuation, and they won’t survive.”¹⁵⁴ Likewise, an NNGO official observed, “At first, they created these high expectations, these unrealistic expectations. They made people believe they would win in two weeks or one month. It is understandable to want to give people confidence. Maybe what we lack is the reality check in some aspects in how our government communicates.”¹⁵⁵

Civilians also stressed the importance of maintaining a balance between restricting or controlling information to avoid damaging military operations and preventing censorship that can deny civilians vital information to make decisions about their protection. They likewise observed that overly restricting or censoring information can undermine trust in government institutions and, therefore, the ability of the government to credibly counter disinformation. In this regard, many stakeholders raised some concerns about the United News telethon. Ukrainian authorities streamlined all television broadcasts into this single and continuously available news service—also known as Yedyni Novyny—after Russia’s full-scale invasion to facilitate civilian access to relevant information amidst the crisis and to improve the ability of authorities to communicate important information to civilians in a harmonized voice. While initially helpful in its tone and content, many respondents interviewed by CIVIC viewed the service as increasingly politicized, focusing too heavily on successes rather than realities, and undermining a public broadcasting platform that could be more useful to civilians.¹⁵⁶

Beyond the telethon, civilians, journalists, and civil society leaders felt that several other efforts to restrict information could, over time, undermine the credibility of the government’s strategic communications and counter-disinformation efforts.¹⁵⁷ One example given was military casualty figures. For instance, a woman whose son is fighting in the Ukrainian military said, “When you look at what is happening in reality, when you come to the guys on the front line, trust in these [official] sources simply dissolves in the air.”¹⁵⁸

Aside from these specific concerns, most stakeholders CIVIC consulted felt the government had managed the balancing act between information control and transparency well. They were more worried about media self-censorship than restrictions placed on the media by government authorities.¹⁵⁹ While interview participants generally agreed that the government had not placed undue restrictions on free expression and that some restrictions were warranted, they stressed the importance of several dynamics: the media maintaining independence and credibility; the government streamlining journalistic requirements like accreditation; the Ukrainian authorities being transparent about corruption cases and military accountability rather than white-washing issues that emerge; and authorities regularly weighing the potential harm that could arise from controlling information about military developments versus the military benefits of these restrictions.¹⁶⁰

VII. LEARNING FROM UKRAINE'S FIGHT AGAINST HARMFUL RUSSIAN INFORMATION OPERATIONS

The negative impact that malign information operations can have on civilians depends not just on the tactics and narratives deployed by those spreading disinformation, but on the societal and environmental conditions that prevail in the area where the harmful information is being spread. Important factors include the level of digital resilience and media literacy of the population, levels of social cohesion and trust, the governance structures and capacities that exist, the legal framework in place for media, and the resources and response efforts of critical protection actors.¹⁶¹ CIVIC assessed some of these capacities and response efforts to help identify recommendations for protection actors within Ukraine, as well as lessons for other countries and militaries who may face similar disinformation efforts targeted at their citizens. CIVIC's findings are summarized in the sub-sections below.

Lessons from the Counter-Disinformation Efforts of Ukrainian Government Officials

Much of the government work of countering Russian disinformation has been conducted by four entities that were all created or significantly overhauled in the several years preceding the February 2022 Russian invasion: the Center for Strategic Communication and Information Security within the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy; the Center for Countering Disinformation in the National Security and Defense Council; the State Service of Special Communications and Information Protection of Ukraine; and the Ministry of Digital Transformation. The Ukrainian government's decision to create and resource these institutions demonstrates its commitment to addressing Russian disinformation and is a testament to the government's foresight in understanding the potential scale, use, and impact of disinformation in warfare.

President Zelenskyy, with his background in media, and presidential advisors from the marketing and public relations fields also prioritized sharing timely, simple, and clear messaging, as well as videos and photos to reassure civilians, prevent panic, and counter false information. This effort was acknowledged and appreciated by civilians and civil society.¹⁶² "I can say that because the President and a lot of his inner circle are coming from the media sector, they have a very good grasp of media relations and the use of the image and perception to deliver the message," reflected one subject matter expert.¹⁶³ Likewise, military officials have clearly and effectively communicated to civilians in ways that have helped dampen the impact of disinformation by, for example, sharing daily reports and updates.¹⁶⁴

Mayors, governors, and local authorities at the village level—referred to as *starostas*—extended the strategic communication and counter-disinformation work of the government down to the local level. They were an important resource for civilians.¹⁶⁵ Even local officials

Military officials have clearly and effectively communicated to civilians in ways that have helped dampen the impact of disinformation by, for example, sharing daily reports and updates.

who evacuated from occupied areas often continued to utilize their networks to send information to their constituents in occupied areas.¹⁶⁶ Speaking about this effort, a military official told CIVIC: “The task that the central government set for us, and we oriented ourselves specifically towards the president, was the necessity of daily communication with people, conveying information about the current state of the situation in the region, what is happening, what actions the government is taking.”¹⁶⁷ Discussing communication by local authorities, a civil society leader observed, “They are extremely efficient and effective. ... They were stopping the panic.”¹⁶⁸ A second civil society leader added, “It seems to me that communication in social networks from local government bodies has become more efficient, in cases of territories where hostilities took place, in particular. The authorities responded quickly enough to challenges. In social networks, there were messages about green corridors, about places where they give water, help, etc. There were also constant calls to use only verified sources of information.”¹⁶⁹ The efforts of these local authorities to share information critical to decision-making and counteracting the effects of disinformation are particularly important given how localized some of the disinformation efforts have been and due to the higher levels of trust that some civilians have for local authorities because of their proximity to events.

Civilian authorities and military officials have increased their use of social media platforms to help inform civilians and to discredit disinformation. CIVIC also identified efforts by government officials to diversify their methods of communication to overcome Russia’s tactics of destroying and jamming telecommunications infrastructure. These efforts have included publishing and distributing leaflets, using the radio to share messages, and communicating via word of mouth at a more local level.¹⁷⁰ Moreover, through government advocacy with the private SpaceX company, Ukrainian officials were able to secure the deployment of the Starlink satellite network to help restore Internet to frontline and occupied areas of Ukraine.¹⁷¹ The government also invested significant energy in trying to quickly repair damaged telecommunications infrastructure as it reclaimed territory and, through a provision of martial law and engagement with telecommunications companies, ensured private companies were sharing infrastructure to extend Internet and mobile access to as many users as possible.¹⁷²

There were also significant efforts at internal coordination among government entities and external collaboration with civil society leaders. In Kyiv, the Office of the President organized working groups to coordinate messaging, and government officials were able to forgo bureaucracy—to some extent—in order to discuss developments and action at an expert-level and avoid delays.¹⁷³ A government official commenting on the dynamic between the different government bodies said, “It changed us, because we are not rivals anymore.”¹⁷⁴

Civil society leaders also spoke very highly of collaboration between their organizations and the Center for Strategic Communication and Information Security, which is their main interlocutor in the government and with which they have jointly monitored and countered disinformation narratives.¹⁷⁵ “We can see that [civil] society acts as well and influences the government policies,” shared one civil society leader. “Together, we are working toward better information hygiene and critical thinking in the society.”¹⁷⁶ Reflecting about lessons learned on engagement between civil society and government, one civil society leader said, “We built very effective relationships and it was done even before the invasion, which is very important. ... So, when the invasion started, we didn’t waste time organizing, but delivered something that was needed at the moment.”¹⁷⁷ An EU official noted, “It is the only such example in the region we are covering—the former Soviet republics, but also farther afield—where there is such cooperation between government and non-government actors.”¹⁷⁸

Overall, most stakeholders CIVIC interviewed were quick to praise the efforts of the Ukrainian government in identifying Russian information operations and countering Russian disinformation narratives.¹⁷⁹ However, the national bodies tasked with countering disinformation have largely focused on monitoring narratives that have the largest uptake, as well as political and strategic



Mykhailo Fedorov, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Digital Transformation of Ukraine speaking in the Tech Power and Cooperation session at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2023 in Davos-Klosters, Switzerland, January 19, 2023.

narratives with the potential to undermine their war-fighting efforts. As CIVIC's analysis demonstrates, some of Russia's disinformation narratives most likely to cause or contribute to civilian harm are being shared through Viber and social media groups at a hyper-local level. Government authorities are sometimes in the best position to de-bunk this information. At the time of CIVIC's research, however, they were not focused on hyper-local narratives.¹⁸⁰ Identifying harmful disinformation shared at a village, town, city, or oblast level is undoubtedly a difficult task, but coordination with local authorities on this effort could help. Ukrainian authorities should also ensure that their operational objectives for countering disinformation include reducing its negative impact on civilian protection in addition to addressing the country's warfighting capabilities.

Similarly, Ukrainian authorities should try to anticipate new efforts by Russian actors to use disinformation to undermine social cohesion between segments of the population, including among Ukrainian and Russian-speaking civilians as well as civilians who remained in Russian-occupied areas and those who evacuated. Because many information campaigns have followed similar patterns and themes over the years, national authorities could try to anticipate and pre-bunk some of them. Authorities should also invest in increased monitoring to identify in the early stages other narratives intended to undermine social cohesion at the national and local levels. In addition, they should communicate as clearly and transparently as feasible around issues that have been flashpoints for division in the past, such as conscription, filtration, and accountability processes for collaboration with Russian occupiers.¹⁸¹ Moreover, Ukrainian officials need to consider how their actions may inflame these tensions and weigh these risks against other considerations.

This concern is particularly acute on the issue of collaboration, which, as noted, is an area ripe for societal division. Between August 2022 and January 2023, according to the UN OHCHR, the AFU

and law enforcement agencies forcibly disappeared or arbitrarily detained 91 individuals, mostly on suspicion of having acted as collaborators. Some of these individuals were subjected to torture and other mistreatment. OHCHR also reported that Ukraine's laws around collaboration are not in line with IHL and human rights standards because they are overly broad, criminalize collaboration with Russian troops even when providing critical and life-saving services in occupied areas, and include sentencing that lacks proportionality with offences.¹⁸² In conversation with CIVIC, an inter-governmental organization official warned, "My apprehension has always been that it will be a much more daunting task to get people's hearts and minds back." According to the official, Ukrainian authorities are now "so overcome with rage, with anger at what they are facing on a daily basis, that they are focusing on that Russia pays for what it is doing" rather than considering longer-term social cohesion needs.¹⁸³

The government also faces many hurdles in restoring damaged telecommunications infrastructure and competing with Russian technology. Interview participants clarified that even though most civilians had access to Ukrainian television before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there had been areas near the border where Ukrainian citizens only had access to Russian channels through their televisions.¹⁸⁴ This was a major vulnerability that the Ukrainian government was working to address before the war. With the extensive damage Russia has inflicted on Ukraine's telecommunications infrastructure since its 2022 full-invasion, Ukraine is facing an even larger gap. Despite the government's attempts to rapidly restore damaged infrastructure, there were areas of Ukraine close to the frontline that were still only receiving Russian broadcasts weeks and even months after liberation.¹⁸⁵ Access to Ukrainian telecommunications infrastructure is particularly an issue in Kharkiv. To address this gap, the Ukrainian government or international donors would need to prioritize earmarking significant additional funds for this purpose—one government official estimated that it would cost \$5 billion—which may be difficult to earmark for telecommunications improvements while there are many other urgent priorities in Ukraine. As one civil society leader noted when speaking about Russian telecommunications dominance in the east, "Ukraine did not disrupt that pattern quickly and effectively, for the reason of lack of resources and, I am afraid, lack of determination. ... Russians chose to change the media consumption first, and Ukraine was paying more attention to survival for those who had already suffered a lot."¹⁸⁶

In some cases, the best way to counter malign information operations is simply with more and better information. As one media official observed, "Official communication? Definitely. This is the mandatory vaccination against fakes."¹⁸⁷ According to interviewees, the provision of more and better information is particularly important for promoting the safe evacuation of civilians in harm's way. Notwithstanding the major information blockages Russia imposed, participants felt that additional efforts by the Ukrainian authorities and non-governmental organizations to provide clear and correct information about evacuations, what would happen after evacuation, and what services civilians would be provided would help them make informed decisions and overcome the mental and physical hurdles to evacuating.¹⁸⁸ "There are examples where people were not so much unaware of the existence of evacuation, as there was a lack of information about what happens after evacuation," stressed one NNGO official. "People didn't understand what comes next. They didn't know what to expect. ... They don't have complete information, that's why they're afraid to move forward."¹⁸⁹

"Official communication? Definitely. This is the mandatory vaccination against fakes."

– Ukrainian media official

Because so many civilians who have been slow to evacuate are older persons and persons with disabilities and these populations utilize different communication platforms than the average Ukrainian, additional focus should be given to ensuring communication is delivered on platforms

and in ways that are accessible to these individuals.¹⁹⁰ An INGO official explained, “A lot of the focus and a lot of the information and enrollment systems are being done online through smartphone [applications], but you do have a considerable part of the population who doesn’t know, is not comfortable with how to access that.”¹⁹¹ Because the habits of older persons and persons with disabilities could change over time, as could their access options to different communication platforms, the government—with support from NGOs—will need to periodically evaluate these habits and access constraints to better tailor their communications.

Recognizing that the Ukrainian government has limited resources and many competing priorities, it should progressively invest in additional media literacy training and guidance for civilians, civilian authorities, and military officials. Stakeholders observed that for civilian officials at the village, town, city, and oblast levels, the strength of their communications skills and preparedness varies significantly and greatly affects the success of efforts to counter disinformation. Some see the value in strategic communications and efforts to counter disinformation, while others do not understand how to do it or may not readily think of it as being part of their role.¹⁹² Investing in the media literacy of government officials at more devolved levels and ensuring they view strategic communications as a priority can also help the central government maintain better awareness of hyper-local disinformation narratives. Moreover, while the concepts of psychological operations and countering disinformation are included in Ukraine’s military doctrine, they could be more strongly emphasized in operational and tactical guidance, as well as in training for some soldiers such as those serving in civil–military cooperation (CIMIC) roles.¹⁹³ With more direction, such officers could help map the civilian information environment and share strategic messaging with communities.

The Role of Civil Society, the Media, and National and International NGOs

One of Ukraine’s biggest assets in the fight against Russian disinformation has been its civil society. Many of Ukraine’s civil society organizations and NNGOs working on monitoring for disinformation began focusing on these issues after the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, and they had built up significant expertise by February 2022. They began countering the wave of Russian disinformation that accompanied Russia’s kinetic invasion within hours. Moreover, their efforts have the added credibility of being independent from political activities.¹⁹⁴ Emphasizing the importance of these organizations, a former Ukrainian military official stated, “If...I wanted to help Ukraine resist disinformation, I would support our civil society and our civil society will push the government to work.”¹⁹⁵ However, civil society organizations and NNGOs focused on monitoring and debunking Russian disinformation face the same weaknesses as the government bodies designed to do this work: most are based in Kyiv and concentrate on the most common narratives arising across the country. One INGO official who recognized that disinformation was infiltrating groups and channels at a very local level warned, “There are only so many grassroots organizations that can monitor it on the ground. If disinformation is turning hyperlocal, I don’t think the response to it is there yet in terms of creating grassroots [monitoring].”¹⁹⁶

Ukraine’s media also plays a critical role in insulating civilians against the harmful effects of Russia’s disinformation by acting as an independent source of credible information for civilians.¹⁹⁷ A strong and independent media sector can help ensure the Ukrainian government continues to strike a healthy balance between the information controls needed to wage an existential war and the free speech and information credibility needed to inform civilians and prevent the public from becoming distrustful of institutions.¹⁹⁸ Before February 2022, Ukraine’s media had a more vibrant presence at local levels than NGOs and civil society working on disinformation. But the war has eroded much of this capacity. Russia’s targeting of journalists in frontline areas has led many of them to evacuate from these areas, and it has become much more expensive, difficult, and dangerous for journalists who do try to report from the frontlines. The war has also undermined the financial models for many media companies, which were largely based on advertising funds that have evaporated.¹⁹⁹



Photo by the Office of the President of Ukraine.

President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy held an online meeting with representatives of Ukrainian media involved in the United News telethon. The Head of State congratulated the media workers on the anniversary of the telethon and noted that United News played an important role in building public unity and trust in the context of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. February 26, 2023.

Alongside government efforts, civil society organizations, NNGOs, INGOs, and media companies can all play a critical role in supporting media literacy among Ukrainian civilians.²⁰⁰ Stakeholders widely felt that, given the difficulty of continuously blocking new websites and social media channels that emerge to spread disinformation, widespread efforts to strengthen media literacy among Ukrainian civilians was one of the best available safeguards. They agree that more media literacy programs are needed.²⁰¹ One civilian told CIVIC that he tried to attend a media literacy training but was unable to because of limited availability and access issues. The civilian said, “Actually, we don’t have skills to check information and separate truth from untruth.”²⁰² Stakeholders informed CIVIC that older persons who grew up with a very different information ecosystem than what exists in Ukraine today were in particular need of media literacy training.²⁰³ There are many other needs in the midst of the ongoing fighting in Ukraine, and scaling up media literacy training will face challenges. However, it will also reap benefits in terms of mental health and civilian protection. International donors should consider investing in media literacy in Ukraine, as well as continuing to invest in and support civil society organizations and independent media outlets.

Additionally, NNGOs and INGOs can help prevent misinformation and disinformation that interrupts civilian access to life-saving services by ensuring they are monitoring the information space for false information as well as frequently and clearly communicating the correct information to civilians. Moreover, they should take steps to understand how their interventions are being perceived. Likewise, NNGOs and INGOs may need to better prepare for information operations that target their activities and organizations. They should be ready to act quickly to control the damage from these efforts, both online and offline. Given the protection implications of wider disinformation efforts—

such as those around evacuation and those intended to undermine social cohesion—humanitarian organizations should consider how and whether monitoring for protection issues linked to mis- and disinformation can be incorporated into their activities and strategies. For example, these issues could be included in the protection strategy of the Humanitarian Country Team and the protection monitoring activities of the protection cluster. NNGOs and INGOs could work with communities at the grass-roots level to monitor for and track local narratives as well as their impact. Notably, delivering on these commitments would have resource implications for which humanitarian organizations would need to prepare.²⁰⁴

Engagement by Social Media Companies

Social media platforms have helped civilians in Ukraine access information that is critical for their planning and protection.²⁰⁵ However, Russia's massive information warfare offensive since February 2022 has tested the policies and practices of social media companies. Over the last decade, many social media companies have been notoriously slow to respond to warnings and evidence that false, misleading, and hateful content on their platforms is inciting or contributing to violence.²⁰⁶ However, some of these companies have gradually put in place select safeguards, such as community guidelines or rules for use that contain restrictions on the types of behavior and content that will be permitted on their platforms. Facebook (owned by parent company Meta), Twitter, and YouTube (owned by Google), for example, were among the organizations that instituted such measures. Content is typically monitored by a combination of machine learning and human reviewers. Facebook also established an Oversight Board comprised of experts who could review new or representative cases to determine whether users have violated Facebook's community guidelines or values.

Social media companies can also adjust their algorithms to prevent some harmful messaging from being amplified, although they have been reluctant to do this and cautious about removing content because of free speech concerns—as well as, their critics point out, fear of reducing the profits that viral and controversial content can often generate.²⁰⁷ As noted, some social media platforms, like Telegram, essentially allow users to create profiles and channels anonymously without taking any measures to moderate harmful content.

In Ukraine, only a small segment of the harmful disinformation being shared via social media is likely to qualify as hate speech or be recognized as inciting violence in a way that would clearly violate the community guidelines of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. In fact, graphic images of civilian casualties published by Ukrainian individuals and organizations to draw attention to their suffering have been more likely to fall afoul of these algorithms and policies than much of the harmful disinformation being shared by Russian-affiliated actors.²⁰⁸ This scenario has resulted in significant backlash against Facebook among Ukrainians. One disaffected civil society leader, for example, commented, “We tried working with Facebook, but it said our life is content that is not suitable for Facebook.”²⁰⁹ Even in more clear-cut cases of hate speech, the terminology used to attack some members of society can be highly context specific and shift quickly. Speaking about the complexity of this environment, a representative of a social media company said, “People may not appreciate that there isn't a silver bullet solution and that there are pros and cons and sometimes it comes down to a policy decision of what is the best worst option in that situation.”²¹⁰

Given the complexity of identifying content that is harmful in a situation like Ukraine—where most of the hate speech directed at citizens inside the country is intended to demoralize, confuse, and incite panic rather than violence—social media companies cannot follow an exact formula with content moderation. Instead, as an INGO official stressed, they need “content moderation that is contextual and responsive to the environment rather than an algorithm-based, non-contextual thing.” Dialogue

and collaboration between social media companies, civil society, and government authorities can help provide this contextualization and be a critical tool for identifying false and harmful content. Very quickly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Meta, Google, and Twitter entered into dialogue with Ukrainian government officials about social media content that could be harmful.²¹¹ Even before February 2022, Meta was working with civil society organizations in Ukraine to identify false content on Facebook so that it could be labeled.²¹²

CIVIC spoke with several civil society organizations acting in this capacity who said they felt the collaboration had definitely contributed to reducing the amount of false information on the platform, as well as its impact. An official from one of these organizations said, "this debunking by fact checkers is still one of the most efficient tools for making people see less disinformation in their news feed."²¹³ Similarly, another civil society actor concluded that, through this method, "We have been successful at limiting the malign influence of Russia."²¹⁴ In September 2022, for example, Meta removed a network of bots on Facebook that was sharing fake information. The inauthentic behavior was first identified by German journalists and an INGO with national staff operating in Ukraine.²¹⁵

Although Meta had a jumpstart on other organizations in tackling the problem because of its pre-existing relationships with civil society, the backlash against the platform demonstrates that still more needs to be done to ensure policy and practice are sensitive to the context where they are being applied. Likewise, although Meta has done more than any other company to remove harmful content on Facebook—and interview participants CIVIC spoke with were encouraged by their openness to dialogue—stakeholders were nonetheless frustrated by the speed with which concerns were addressed. As one IGO official said, "In most of the cases it took weeks or even months for them to react, let alone act upon what had been flagged."²¹⁶ Echoing this concern, an INGO official asserted, "There was a need for more proactive and quicker responses to the requests of civil society and government. There have been pages that people have submitted of suspicious accounts and requests to take them down and it didn't happen, or not as quickly as people wanted."²¹⁷

...still more needs to be done to ensure policy and practice are sensitive to the context where they are being applied.

Current practices also heavily shift the burden of moderation to non-profit watchdogs rather than the technology companies that reap the financial profits of social media platforms. Over the last five years, some of the largest social media companies began investing in hiring staff to focus on ethics and human rights issues on their platforms. However, in 2023, widespread lay-offs in the technology industry led to many of these departments and functions being decimated—and demonstrating that these issues are still not a high priority for many technology companies.²¹⁸

Absent genuine or sustained commitment from most technology companies when it comes to reducing the harmful content on their platforms, countries can constrain the behavior of these companies and their social media platforms by enacting laws that encourage or require responsible behavior and safeguards from them. EU lawmakers, for example, adopted the Digital Services Act in 2022, which requires social media companies to monitor their platforms more aggressively for misinformation and other types of harmful content, to disclose information about how their algorithms promote content, and to stop certain targeted advertisement practices.²¹⁹ Ukraine could consider adopting legislation similar to the Digital Services Act that would give it additional leverage in its engagements with technology companies and help limit some of the most harmful practices of social media platforms.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Civilians trying to navigate rapidly changing conflict dynamics and complex decisions to protect themselves and their families in Ukraine have had to contend with disinformation obscuring reality, complicating their decisions, and likely leading some to make decisions counter to their own interests and well-being. Russian and Russian-affiliated actors have spread false information about frontline developments to create chaos and have used disinformation to manipulate population movements. To undermine Ukrainian authorities, they have shared fake information or misled civilians about the nature of available services in Ukrainian-held and Russian-held territory—a practice with the potential to endanger civilians and complicate their access to needed assistance. They have also tried to sow divisions within Ukrainian society. The negative impact of these efforts is mental as well as physical. Civilians described to CIVIC the exhaustion, anxiety, and anger triggered by constantly encountering and having to contend with disinformation.

Ukrainian authorities have taken the threat of information warfare seriously, dedicating resources to building government capacity for monitoring and response. Since Russia's full-scale invasion, they have prioritized frequent and clear strategic communications, invested resources in quickly repairing damaged telecommunications infrastructure, used all available digital and non-digital platforms to communicate with civilians, adapted quickly to new developments, and collaborated effectively with civil society and technology companies. But many disinformation efforts have occurred at a localized level, where the Ukrainian authorities and civil society actors are less equipped to identify and counter the hyper-local narratives that seem most likely to undermine civilian protection. The information warfare tactics and narratives that Russian-affiliated actors have used in Ukraine have demonstrated that, in planning for information warfare, governments and militaries need to build defensive capabilities and plans focused on protection of civilians, not only offensive capabilities or information warfare strategies built around waging and winning the war. This additional focus will likely require an ability to monitor information operations at a hyper-local level through collaboration and the complementary efforts of civil society organizations, local and national government officials, journalists, and technology companies. It will also require paying attention to the mental health impact of disinformation. These efforts could include initiatives that support community resilience to disinformation as well as community-level protection efforts to identify and discredit disinformation.

...governments and militaries need to build defensive capabilities and plans focused on protection of civilians, not only offensive capabilities or information warfare strategies built around waging and winning the war.

The scale of Russian and Russian-affiliated information operations in Ukraine since February 2022 is unprecedented. It should thus serve as a warning and an example for other governments. Offering cautionary words for Europe, a Ukrainian civil society leader warned, “Russian influence can destroy



Destroyed and melted civilian vehicles line the highway near Irpin, Ukraine, April 3, 2022.

these countries, even without war. They fight basic rights, basic LGBTQ rights, basic women’s rights, basic democracy. They sow distrust between people. ... It is the destructive influence of a country who knows that when Europe is weak, they can work with it.” The civil society leader continued, “You need to fight Russian disinformation when it begins, not when it is already an established part of your media landscape.”²²⁰ Another civil society leader explained, “We have been doing some [things] for eight years that people didn’t understand they need to do in their countries. ... We are the first to greet the enemy.”²²¹

In Ukraine, stakeholders are eager to see accountability for the harm that information operations have caused. But the pathways between disinformation and civilian harm are complex in all but the clearest cases of incitement to violence. The identities of perpetrators are often unknown, and it can be nearly impossible to prove the motivations of the actors spreading disinformation. These factors will likely make legal accountability elusive. Instead, governments and international organizations can focus on strengthening norms against the types of harmful disinformation that Russian-affiliated actors have targeted at civilians in Ukraine. They can also work to strengthen the political, diplomatic, and financial consequences of using such tactics, including through sanctions.

Terminology and Definitions

Definitions in this textbox are adapted from those of the ICRC, the European Union, the Atlantic Council, and the Rand Corporation.

Cyberattacks: An action that includes accessing information systems, information system interference, data interference, or data interception.

Disinformation: False information that is fabricated or disseminated with malicious intent.

Gray war: A set of activities that occurs between peace (or cooperation) and war (or armed conflict) that can include economic activities, influence operations, cyberattacks, mercenary operations, assassinations, and disinformation campaigns. These activities can be carried out by state or non-state actors and involve non-military and quasi-military tools. They fall below the threshold of armed conflict.

Hate speech: All forms of expression (e.g., text, images, and audio) that spread, incite, promote, or justify hatred and violence based on intolerance, usually against identity traits (e.g., gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.).

Hybrid warfare: The mixture of conventional and unconventional, military and non-military, overt and covert actions that can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives.

Information operations: The strategic and calculated use of information and information-sharing systems to influence, disrupt, or divide society. Information operations can involve the collection of intelligence on specific targets, disinformation campaigns, or the recruitment of online influencers.

Misinformation: False information that is spread by individuals who believe the information to be true or who have not taken the time to verify it.

Propaganda: The use of information, often inaccurate or misleading, to promote a particular point of view or influence a target audience. Propaganda may contain some elements of truth, but often presents them in a biased manner.

Psychological warfare: The planned use of propaganda and other psychological operations to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, and behavior of opposition groups.

ANNEX B**Hours Civilians Spent Viewing Information Online and through the Television at Various Time Periods****Before Russia's Full-Scale Invasion***Hours spent viewing information about the political and security situation*

ONLINE		ON TELEVISION	
Up to two hours a day	69.61%	Up to two hours a day	63.37%
I did not use online sources of information	15.69%	I did not watch TV	28.71%
Two to four hours a day	10.78%	Two to four hours a day	3.96%
Four to six hours a day	3.92%	Four to six hour a day	3.96%
Total	100.00%	Total	100.00%

In February–March 2022, During the First Two Weeks After Russia's Full-Scale Invasion*Hours spent viewing information about the political and security situation*

ONLINE		ON TELEVISION	
More than six hours a day	38.24%	More than six hours a day	25.49%
Two to four hours a day	19.61%	Two to four hours a day	15.69%
Four to six hours a day	19.61%	Four to six hours a day	18.63%
Up to two hours a day	17.65%	Up to two hours a day	16.67%
I did not use online sources of information	4.90%	I did not watch TV	23.53%
Total	100.00%	Total	100.00%

October–November 2022*Hours spent viewing information about the political and security situation*

ONLINE		ON TELEVISION	
Up to two hours a day	49.02%	Up to two hours a day	44.12%
Two to four hours a day	32.35%	Two to four hours a day	13.73%
Four to six hours a day	8.82%	Four to six hours a day	8.82%
More than six hours a day	7.84%	More than six hours a day	2.94%
I did not use online sources of information	1.96%	I did not watch TV	30.39%
Total	100.00%	Total	100.00%

ENDNOTES

- 1 Filtration camps are sites used by the Russian authorities since their 2022 invasion of Ukraine to detain, register, and interrogate Ukrainians about their views, actions, and affiliations. Ukrainians have been required to pass through these filtration camps as part of voluntary movement from Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine into Russia and as part of forced displacement by Russian forces.
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- 134 CIVIC interview with civilian, #59, Irpin, February 2023; CIVIC interview with media official, #60, Bucha, February 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #65, Bucha, February 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #66, Irpin, February 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #68, Bucha, February 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #69, Chernihiv, February 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #79, Irpin, February; CIVIC interview with civilian, #80, Chernihiv, February.
- 135 CIVIC interview with INGO official, #3, remote to Kyiv, July 2022; CIVIC interview with Ukrainian government official, #43, Kyiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with NGO official, #48, Kyiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with NGO official, #75, Kharkiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with NGO official, #76, location withheld, March 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #78, Chernihiv, February 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #81, Chernihiv, February 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #82, Kharkiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #85, Kharkiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #86, Kharkiv, March 2023.
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- 146 CIVIC interview with civilian, #82, Kharkiv, March 2023.
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- 151 CIVIC interview with INGO official, #30, Kyiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with journalist, #31, Kyiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with NNGO official, #33, Kyiv, March 2023.
- 152 CIVIC interview with civil society leader, #21, remote to Odessa, March 2023; CIVIC interview with subject matter expert, #20, remote to Washington DC, November 2022; CIVIC interview with INGO official, #30, Kyiv, March 2023.
- 153 CIVIC interview with NNGO official, #41, Kyiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with journalist, #49, Kyiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with journalist, #52, Kyiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with media official, #60, Bucha, February 2023; CIVIC interview with journalist, #63, Chernihiv, February 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #67, Kharkiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #71, Chernihiv, February 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #73, Bucha, February 2023; CIVIC interview with NNGO official, #75; Kharkiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with NNGO official, #76, location withheld, March 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #78, Chernihiv, February 2023.
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- 167 CIVIC interview with Ukrainian military official, #58, Bucha, February 2023.
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- 174 CIVIC interview with Ukrainian government official, #50, Kyiv, March 2023.
- 175 CIVIC interview with subject matter expert, #1, remote to Kyiv, July 2022; CIVIC interview with INGO official, #17, location withheld, October 2022; CIVIC interview with civil society leader, #23, location withheld, January 2023; CIVIC interview with civil society leader, #25, location withheld, February 2023; CIVIC interview with civil society leader, #38, Kyiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with NNGO official, #41, Kyiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with civil society leader, #57, remote to Kyiv, March 2023.
- 176 CIVIC interview with civil society leader, #23, location withheld, January 2023.
- 177 CIVIC interview with civil society leader, #57, remote to Kyiv, March 2023.
- 178 CIVIC interview with IGO official, #16, remote to Brussels, October 2022.
- 179 CIVIC interview with subject matter expert, #11, remote to London, September 2022; CIVIC interview with INGO official, #17, location withheld, October 2022; CIVIC interview with subject matter expert, #18, location withheld, October 2022; CIVIC interview with civil society leader, #38, Kyiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with NNGO official, #41, Kyiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with civilian, #66, Irpin, February 2023; CIVIC interview with NNGO official, #75, Kharkiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with journalist, #77, Kharkiv, March 2023.
- 180 CIVIC interview with INGO official, #3, remote to Kyiv, July 2022; CIVIC interview with subject matter expert, #18, location withheld, October 2022; CIVIC interview with Ukrainian military official, #29, Kyiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with Ukrainian government official, #50, Kyiv, March 2023.
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- 189 CIVIC interview with NNGO official, #76, location withheld, March 2023.
- 190 CIVIC interview with INGO official, #36, Kyiv, March 2023; CIVIC interview with INGO official, #37, remote to Dnipro, March 2023; CIVIC interview with NNGO official, #76, location withheld, March 2023.
- 191 CIVIC interview with INGO official, #37, remote to Dnipro, March 2023.
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- 194 CIVIC interview with subject matter expert, #1, remote to Kyiv, July 2022; CIVIC interview with subject matter expert, #11, remote to London, September 2022; CIVIC interview with INGO official, #12, location withheld, September 2022; CIVIC interview with IGO official, #16, remote to Brussels, October 2022; CIVIC interview with INGO official, #17, location withheld, October 2022;

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Photo by Daniel Brown.

A Destroyed building on a road between Bucha and Irpin, Ukraine, April 5, 2022.