EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN NARRATIVES ABOUT UKRAINE AND THEIR EXPORT TO UKRAINIAN MEDIA SPACE
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Disinformation remains one of the main threats to information security in Ukraine and the world. It can influence election results, undermine the stability of democratic societies, exacerbate internal conflicts within them and incite hostility. It also poses an immediate threat to life and health, as was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when people refused to acknowledge the threat of the disease, believed in conspiracy theories about its origin and actively disseminated them, and were hospitalized or died as a result of self-medication.

The European Commission declared that the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China are responsible for spreading most of the coronavirus-related disinformation. Authoritarian governments produce and disseminate disinformation in their political interests, and the Kremlin keeps its leading position in this process. Its information and psychological operations are permanent and do not depend on the state of relations with another party - this understanding is enshrined in the strategic documents of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, which constantly conducts information warfare, regardless of relations with one or another country.

UKRAINE REMAINS ONE OF THE MAIN TARGETS OF RUSSIAN ATTACKS, WHICH HAVE THREE MAIN DIRECTIONS:

1. aimed at the domestic Russian audience in order to create an image of Ukraine as an enemy and obtain a social mandate to implement their aggressive policy;

2. aimed at the Ukrainian audience in order to destabilize society and force it to peace on Moscow’s terms;

3. aimed at the international audience in order to legitimate Russian policy, consolidate the Kremlin’s influence in the areas it considers its zone of influence, and achieve the recognition of Crimea as a Russian territory and sanctions relief.
To achieve all these goals, the Russian government uses a wide range of available tools of influence, with a special role assigned to the media. The media within Russia itself are under the Kremlin’s direct or indirect control and, thus it can freely promote the desired agenda to consumers of these media products. Similar control is exercised over a number of news agencies working for the Western audience, the most famous being RT and Sputnik. To reach more people and disguise its true political goals, the Russian government actively involves local intermediaries - proxies - to disseminate certain messages and adapt them to the needs and tastes of the local audience. In Ukraine, the role of such proxies has grown significantly since 2016, after the Ukrainian government banned several Russian TV channels and social networks. Both the media which are under the Kremlin’s direct influence and those that are under it indirectly disseminate disinformation primarily in the form of narratives. A narrative is the main structural element of disinformation, ensuring its sustainability and effectiveness, and consisting of many components from fakes to excluding certain information and presenting truth in a desired context.

This study presents an in-depth review of the key narratives on Ukraine that have been steadily disseminated by the Russian media and later local proxies since 2014. It analyzes their development dynamics depending on the information situation, and considers the main channels of disinformation export to the Ukrainian media space, major risk factors enabling such exports, and provides recommendations to combat such informational influences.
EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN NARRATIVES ABOUT UKRAINE AND THEIR EXPORT TO UKRAINIAN MEDIA SPACE

The key object of research for determining the main Russian narratives of Ukraine and their export to the local media space is television. Despite the rapid development of social networks and online media, television remains the main source of news for a large part of population: 69% in Russia and 74% in Ukraine. Such broad coverage makes television channels a fundamentally important tool for disseminating the narratives that are of strategic significance for the Russian government’s information policy.

Television plays a pivotal role because due to its submission to the Russian government’s control the Kremlin can use television channels as a kind of a test platform where necessary messages are launched into the information space and later disseminated further by other communication channels. However, not all disinformation operations of the Kremlin are carried out according to this scheme - the mechanisms depend on the purpose, so it may be, for example, that only online tools are used or a public discourse is encouraged through television after first launching the operation online. In any case, it is not possible for the Russian government to promote key narratives without television.

The first three are invariably the top-rated Russian channels and have access to a wide audience.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study is based on the analysis of the main news and information-political programs of the following Russian TV channels:

**Channel 1**
(Pust Govoryat, News);

**Russia 1**
(Vesti, News with Dmitry Kiselev, News on Saturday with Sergei Brilev, 60 minutes, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov);

**NTV**
(Segodnya, Itogi Nedeli with Irada Zeynalova, Mesto Vstrechi);

**TVC**
(Postscriptum, V Centre Sobytiy with Anna Prokhorova);

**Zvezda TV channel**
(Glavnoye with Olga Belova).
TVC and the Zvezda TV channel were chosen for other reasons outlined below. TVC is associated with Russian politician Konstantin Zatulin, who was actively involved in the information aspect of the Russian hybrid war against Ukraine. Zatulin is not only a deputy of the State Duma and the first deputy chairman of its Committee on CIS Affairs, Eurasian Integration and Relations with Compatriots, but also the director of the Institute of CIS Countries. This institution, together with the Political Environment Center, regularly provided analytical materials to the office of Vladislav Surkov, a former aide to the Russian President, one of the architects of the Russian hybrid war against Ukraine and author of the “Novorossiya” project. In addition, Aleksei Pushkov, a member of the Federation Council Committee on Constitutional Legislation and State-Building, has his own information and analytical program on the TV channel. Pushkov is also the chairman of the temporary commission of the Federation Council on information policy and is very keen on the topic of information warfare.

As for the Zvezda TV channel, it is part of a media group of the same name, which is affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Defense. Since 2004, the channel has positioned itself not as military, but as “patriotic.”
The first three of these channels are associated with Viktor Medvedchuk, the leader of the “Opposition Platform – for Life” political party and one of the key pro-Russian figures in Ukraine. NASH TV channel is owned by another pro-Russian politician, Yevhen Muraev, who previously headed a political party of the same name and was a member of the Opposition Bloc. Presumably, Muraev is close to another key player who supports Russian hybrid influence in Ukraine, Vadim Novinsky. Muraev and Novinsky are united not only by their joint work in the Opposition Bloc, but also by their active affiliation with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

The Inter TV channel is of particular interest considering that its shares belong to Valery Khoroshkovsky, Vice Prime Minister under Viktor Yanukovych and former head of the Security Service of Ukraine, who left the country in 2012 but returned in May 2019.

Thus, all the analyzed Ukrainian TV channels are politically vulnerable and can be used to export Russian narratives to the Ukrainian media space, given the interests of their ultimate owners. This does not exclude the possibility of other Ukrainian channels also importing disinformation, but due to limited resources, it is not possible to analyze all Ukrainian TV content at this stage and this study focuses on the most vulnerable points of Ukraine’s media landscape.
NARRATIVE AS THE MAIN STRUCTURAL ELEMENT OF PROPAGANDA

One of the main features of disinformation is its systematic nature. Constant promotion of the same messages through different communication channels ultimately makes them more convincing for the audience. For years, Russian government-controlled and state-run media have been systematically producing disinformation on key topics (the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, coronavirus pandemic, etc.) and on major political issues. Ukraine remains one of the main targets of their disinformation campaigns, which have been going on since 2014 and aim to create and consolidate its enemy image, legitimize aggressive Russian policy, and split the Ukrainian society by exporting and adapting disinformation for the Ukrainian audience.

In 2017, the term “fake news” was named the Collins Word of the Year. Fake is the most well-known and the most discussed component of disinformation. A lot of effort is made to combat fakes and the lion’s share of this activity is done by fact-checking organizations. In 2014, the Russian media produced an abundance of fakes about Ukraine, with the Zvezda TV channel, affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Defense, being among the leaders. In particular, it broadcast a story that Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) fighters allegedly fought in Donbas for “a plot of land and two slaves.” However, other Russian media did not lag behind: a well-known story about a “crucified boy” presented on Channel 1 is comparable with the fake of Russia 1 about the “blood of Russian babies,” which the ATO fighters allegedly take to warm up.

Fakes are still widely used in disinformation campaigns. For example, in November 2020, a number of Russian media outlets stated that Ukraine planned to “catch Russians and put them in reservations.” However, according to the study conducted by the Ukraine Crisis Media Center in 2018, such outright lies are not the main element of disinformation. They are easy to refute, and have a resonanting, but limited effect.

Instead, the main structural element of disinformation is a narrative. A narrative can be understood as a story or as an interpretation of events that helps form a desired attitude to an object. A narrative is a more systemic and, long-lasting phenomenon than fakes, and it helps to
ensure a stable perception of a particular event or aspect by the target audience.

A narrative is a more systemic, long-lasting phenomenon, and it helps to ensure a stable perception of a particular phenomenon by the target audience.

Narrative is formed not so much by fakes, (which are also a part of it), but through various manipulations, quoting out of context and, most importantly, selecting and covering information that supports a desired narrative, while ignoring the events that do not fit its framework. The imbalance between the negative and the positive plays an important role here: regular coverage and discussion of only negative news, which may well be true, distorts the viewer’s perception of the situation. Facts becomes a secondary element of the news, while the narrator’s vision becomes the main one.

The Ukraine Crisis Media Center identified 5 main narratives about Ukraine that have been promoted by the Russian media since 2014 and remain relevant for the study period:

“There is a civil war in Ukraine”;

**Example 1**: “We have been talking about Donbas, about the war there, about thousands of people who died there for the sixth, seventh year. We are all perfectly aware that the reasons that caused this war have not disappeared - they will not be eliminated as long as Kyiv has that government with that ideology.” (Artem Sheinin, Vremya pokazhet, Channel 1, November 27, 2020).

**Example 2**: “Ukraine has only one military conflict - an internal armed conflict in Donbas, where people are blown up, killed and the Ukrainian army is involved. There are no other conflicts in Ukraine. Two thousand kilometers of the border with Russia is not the front line.” (Rodion Miroshnik, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, Russia 1, October 19, 2020).
Example: “According to experts, while trying to suppress everything Russian and inveigh against Moscow, Kyiv is wreaking havoc on its citizens’ level of education” (Vesti, Russia 1, September 1, 2020).

Example 2: “Ukraine’s Cabinet of Ministers went even further and submitted to the Verkhovna Rada a bill on internment, and in fact - on the creation of concentration camps for Russians, which is unprecedented for the whole civilized world” (Glavnoye with Olga Belova, Zvezda, November 15, 2020).

“Fascism is thriving in Ukraine”; 

Example: “Neo-Nazi sentiment is growing in Ukraine and the Baltics. This was stated by Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, in an interview with a Russian newspaper. He said: neo-fascists are becoming popular not only in society but also among the political elite.” (Vesti, Russia 24, August 5, 2020).

Example 2: “In case their requirements are not met, nationalists threaten greater protests and even revolution.” (Segodnya, NTV, February 9, 2020).
“Ukraine is a failed state”;

**Example:** “Coronavirus is attacking. How are they going to stop it in Ukraine, where the sanitary and epidemiological service was closed down 3 years ago and epidemiologists are no longer trained?” (Typical Ukraine, Russia 24, April 8, 2020).

**Example 2:** “I have no illusions about Yanukovych, but in fairness I must tell you that the level of professionalism of Yanukovych-era officials was tenfold higher.” (60 Minutes, Russia 24, July 24, 2020).

“Ukraine is a puppet of the West”;

**Example:** “It was the easiest for Americans, the main organizers of events in Ukraine, to find approaches to recruit those Ukrainian politicians who had already been involved in the activities of a sect, because those sects are Western.” (Glavnoye with Olga Belova, Zvezda, November 29, 2020).

**Example 2:** “Why does it [Ukraine] stuff itself with an extremely dangerous type of bacteriological weapon that acts in the interests of the Americans and has nothing to do with the national interests of Ukraine? And here the main question constantly arises - what is Ukraine in this sense today? First of all, it is a state that has agreed to be a satellite, an anti-Russian, peripheral appendage of this, so to speak, American system.” (Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, Russia 24, April 26, 2020).
The Kremlin has been steadily promoting all these narratives about Ukraine for years, using all available tools. They are announced by top Russian officials and broadcast on Russian TV channels - public and private, federal and regional. They are disseminated online, through the media and social networks, including via trolls and bots.

**MAIN RUSSIAN NARRATIVES ABOUT UKRAINE**

- “There is a civil war in Ukraine”
- “There is heavy Russophobia in Ukraine”
- “Nazism flourishes in Ukraine”
- “Ukraine is a failed state”
- “Ukraine is a marionette of the West”
INTERRELATION BETWEEN NARRATIVES

These narratives form a logical semantic matrix in terms of propaganda, where the main ideas are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For example, the idea of “Ukraine as a failed state with”, no real institutions, and unable to provide its citizens with basic rights and freedoms, serves to discredit the Ukrainian state. This idea gives the impression that Russian influence is desirable and necessary to help settle the chaos on the Ukrainian territory, which the local population is allegedly incapable of doing.

As the idea of total incapability of institutions is imposed, the question naturally arises about how Ukraine can continue existing as a state. The answer within the system of Russian disinformation is in the narrative about “Ukraine as a puppet of the West.” According to it, the West (mostly the USA as the main object chosen by the Kremlin to build the enemy image) uses Ukraine for its own purposes, and therefore Ukraine continues to exist on the political map of the world. Their goals are allegedly the implementation of Russophobic US policy, the exploitation of Ukrainian resources and other “privileges” of colonialism. According to this narrative, there is no sovereignty in Ukraine and all key decisions are made in Washington and then imposed on the local population, which has no control over its own government. It reduces Ukraine to the role of a pawn on a big chessboard and indirectly legitimizes the Kremlin’s aggressive policy aimed at maintaining and strengthening Russian influence - the argument going that if Russia does not influence Ukraine, then this will certainly be done by the West, which will be much worse for Ukraine.

Closely related narratives of Russophobia, fascism, and civil war play a similar role. By their internal logic, the Revolution of Dignity, interpreted by Russian propaganda as a “coup d’état,” brought to power a radical nationalist government whose alleged Russophobic agenda is part of a broader “fascist” policy. It should be noted here that “Russophobia” is in fact an artificial concept actively used by Russian officials and the media since 2014 as a kind of a defense mechanism against the world’s reaction to the annexation of Crimea and aggression in the eastern regions of Ukraine. In addition, Russian propaganda traditionally does not distinguish between fascism and Nazism, using them as interchangeable terms to define the policies of other countries that are not acceptable to the Kremlin. In Ukraine’s case, Russophobia is being used to means...
“anti-Russian changes in education,” “total Ukrainization,” an alleged ban on the use of the Russian language, etc.

This rhetoric is important to Moscow for two major reasons: it helps portray the reason for the «civil war» in Ukraine as being the uprising of the Russian-speaking population in Crimea and the eastern regions, and it gives the Russian Federation a reason to intervene. «Protecting the Russian-speaking population» has been the main justification for the Russian aggression: in 2014, Putin stated that «in the southeast, people are worried about the future of their children; they do not accept Kyiv’s desire to abolish the rights of the Russian-speaking population.» In 2016, he confirmed this thesis once again, declaring that “When we were forced, I want to emphasize this, we were forced to protect the Russian-speaking population in Donbas, we were forced to respond to the desire of people living in Crimea to return to the Russian Federation, they immediately began to whip up anti-Russian policy and sanctions.” Thus, the narrative of Russophobia remains a fundamentally important tool of Russian policy, which is also used to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, including the Baltic States and the Republic of Belarus.

It is worth noting that, in addition to these key narratives, the Kremlin also uses historical and cultural topics. Whitewashing Soviet history, exploiting nostalgia for the Soviet Union and creating an image of it as a superpower that was able to ensure not only an influential role in the international arena but also a high quality of life, the use of the fraternal unity myth - all of these elements are used to advance the idea of historical indivisibility of Ukraine and Russia. A special role in this disinformation aspect is played by the refusal to recognize the Soviet Union’s aggressive policy in the first years of World War II, the blame for which the Kremlin shifts to the Western powers while, attributing itself the role of savior from fascism, and information operations related to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

“When we were forced, I want to emphasize this, we were forced to protect the Russian-speaking population in Donbas, we were forced to respond to the desire of people living in Crimea to return to the Russian Federation, they immediately began to whip up anti-Russian policy and sanctions.”
The danger of this meta-narrative is that it creates the idea of a kind of an historical and cultural superstructure, thus significantly facilitating the spread of all other narratives, including the above, as a result of which the Russian Federation is perceived in a more positive context. Such myths are of great internal political importance and are actively used together as a unifying myth within Russia itself, contributing to the legitimization of the regime - according to the Levada Center as of October 2020, 89% of Russians are proud of victory in “the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45”.

However, 41% of Russian youth do not know about Stalin’s repression, which indicates a distorted perception of the Soviet period. Nevertheless, it is for political reasons that glorification of the Soviet Union is extensively exported to other countries, including Ukraine.

In contrast to the formation of Moscow’s historically positive role, Russian disinformation systematically demonizes the Western way of life. It shows European democracies as menacing, unstable countries, life-threatening due to constant terrorist attacks and economic and social crises. A crucial component of this enemy image is the idea of moral decline of the West with its allegedly imposed “unnatural values,” which it tries to export to
Russia and impart to other “fraternal” peoples, whom Russia has a historical duty to protect in this paradigm. Human rights manipulation is a key tool in this sphere, convenient for the Kremlin for two reasons. First, it allows to divert attention from the critical human rights situation in Russia itself. Second, it identifies an enemy, from whom only a strong authoritarian government can protect. The exploitation of LGBT, juvenile justice, and religious freedom issues creates social distance between the target audiences of Russian disinformation and the democratic Western world and makes the latter alien on a fundamental and, emotional level of values.

Thus, all major Russian narratives about Ukraine are interconnected and steadily advancing. They form a picture of a world in which Russian influence on Ukraine is inevitable and desirable, and the Kremlin’s aggression, which is not directly recognized, is quite legitimate and benefits the local population. Such rhetoric is part of a broader information political strategy that works with historical and cultural values for building a “friend-or-foe” dichotomy, where authoritarian Russia is “friend” and the democratic West is “foe.” All these narratives have three main audiences - domestic Russian, international and Ukrainian, and are adapted to the needs of each. The mechanism of this adaptation, including to changes in the current political situation, is discussed below. Being sustainable and based on the
EVOLUTION OF NARRATIVES

selection of news in accordance with the information needs of the regime, narratives do not significantly depend on the actual political and economic situation in the country or the world. However, the Kremlin’s information policy is forced to respond to key challenges and radical changes in the agenda to keep disinformation convincing.

In 2014-2015, during the hot phase of aggression, the main narrative about Ukraine was “a country in civil war”, whereas in 2020, according to the results of the UCMC monitoring, much more emphasis was put on the “failed state” and “puppet of the West” narratives. This change, however, does not mean that other narratives have disappeared from the information field - speaking of the conflict in the east, Russian politicians and the media call it exclusively a civil war, in addition to the continued prevalence of narratives about and do not forget about “Russophobia” and “fascism”.

Last but not least, the creation and spread of narratives is connected with the socio-political situation in Ukraine and the world. The use of the “failed state” narrative always increases during election campaigns, holding elections and summarizing election results. This tendency could also be seen during both the 2019 presidential and parliamentary campaigns and during local elections; in 2020. But even more than the factors outlined above, the formation of the agenda was influenced by the coronavirus pandemic when the rhetoric about the incapacity of the Ukrainian state was brought to the fore.

The pandemic prompted a number of information and political operations orchestrated by the Kremlin actively promoting the rhetoric of the allegedly greater effectiveness of authoritarian governments in responding to the health crisis compared to democratic ones and seeking to leverage sending humanitarian aid to a number of countries to achieve sanctions relief. In the case of Ukraine, the difficult epidemiological situation made it possible to exaggerate its internal problems, to show it as totally incapable of protecting either the life and health or the economic well-being of its citizens. The danger - especially when it comes to exporting this narrative - is that it is often based on real facts and difficulties, making it more convincing. In addition, the coronavirus crisis gave Russian media another opportunity
to talk about the “harmful influence” of the West, which had allegedly supported medical reform in Ukraine that is accused of creating and exacerbating the current difficult state of affairs.

To strengthen the narrative, the Kremlin has resorted to “active measures” from its traditional arsenal. The most striking example was the situation with aggressive protests on February 20, 2020 against the accommodation of 45 Ukrainian citizens and 27 foreigners evacuated from the Chinese city of Wuhan. Photos showing protesters’ aggressive behavior circled the globe and strengthened the impression of Ukraine as an uncivilized country, unable to maintain order on its own territory. Russian media actively participated in disseminating this image, as this discredit played into their hands: “In Ukraine, people called for burning down a sanatorium in Novi Sanzhary, Poltava region, where evacuees were taken from Wuhan. And Zelensky finally realized what country he rules - European, but this is medieval Europe.” (60 Minutes, Russia 24, February 21, 2020).

However, further analysis of the events resulting in the protests in Novi Sanzhary revealed that natural feelings of fear of an unknown disease were cleverly amplified to escalate the situation. Thus, on February 20, it was revealed that citizens of Ukraine had received fake letters allegedly from the Ministry of Health, telling them about 5 recorded cases of coronavirus in Ukraine (these data were not true as; there were no officially recorded COVID-19 cases in Ukraine at that time) and calling upon them to share this information with others. Sending such letters is a typical tool often
used by Russia. In particular, in 2019, Russian hackers **sent out** fake letters allegedly from the Ukrainian Interior Ministry containing “instructions” for police officers on the conduct at polling stations. These letters supported the narrative about Ukraine as a “failed state”, the spread of which was intensified during the election.

Moreover, local residents of Novi Sanzhary **were sent** messages on Viber with emotional calls to protest and protect themselves and their families against the “fatal disease”. Similar information was posted from inauthentic accounts on local groups pages on Facebook. Thus, the situation in the city was largely artificially escalated.

Situational news hooks are generally important for promoting the desired narratives. Some of them are tied to the political calendar: for example, the spread of the narrative about “fascism” in Ukraine peaks on dates related to World War II. Thus, Ukraine is accused of revitalizing fascism, whereas Russia allegedly has the historical right to fight against it.

Therefore, the main narratives about Ukraine remain unchanged, but their promotion may be more or less intensive depending on the political situation, which also influences the modification of narratives to keep their relevance for the audience.
With the ban on Russian TV channels and social networks in Ukraine in 2016, local proxies increased in importance to the Kremlin as disseminators of misinformation. A number of risk factors in the Ukrainian media landscape, the main of which is the market structure, allow them to export the above narratives and historical myths. There is a clear chain of command in Russia, which makes television a convenient controlled environment for spreading misinformation, whereas the “fragmented horizontal” setup of the Ukrainian television environment makes it vulnerable.
Market oligarchization is dangerous on two levels. First, a number of politicians who directly influence the channels take an openly pro-Russian position and have significant resources to promote it. Second, even those oligarchs who do not take such a position tend to seek their own business and political interests. Under such conditions, natural safeguards against the export and production of disinformation (i.e., transparent funding, compliance with journalistic standards, independent editorial policy).

As a result, media resources can situationally disseminate Russian narratives for reasons of political expediency. For example, during election campaigns, the amount of such rhetoric grows rapidly. This rhetoric portrays Ukraine as a failed state, since in political struggles it is often considered important for success to criticize opponents and focus on their failures. Instead of a balanced presentation of information, they rely on the negative. The results of these efforts were clearly seen during the 2019 presidential campaign.

Manipulations around "American biological laboratories" in Ukraine illustrate how political expediency affects the TV channel’s agenda. In April 2020, Viktor Medvedchuk and Renat Kuzmin, deputies of the Opposition Platform - For Life, initiated an investigation into 15 alleged American military laboratories in Ukraine. In the context of the coronavirus pandemic and the popularity of conspiracy theories (34% of Ukrainians believe that COVID-19 is a biological weapon developed by China and/or the United States; even more people believe in the artificial origin of the virus), this topic generated widespread interest among the Ukrainian audience. In fact, it is a revival of a conspiracy theory long used in Russia, which periodically links outbreaks of various diseases with the activities of "American laboratories" in neighboring countries.

Medvedchuk and Kuzmin’s thesis was picked up by the media involved with OPFL and many questionable quality or fringe websites. The Russian media also widely covered this topic because it is a vivid illustration of the narrative of Ukraine as a puppet of the West. It should be noted that in Ukraine this disinformation was spread not only by channels in Medvedchuk’s zone of influence, but also by 1 + 1, which is the most popular TV channel in the country. 1 + 1 released a manipulative investigation on this topic, giving the conspiracy theory a new twist. The reason for this move can be seen in a kind of a situational coalition between Viktor Medvedchuk and Ihor Kolomoisky.
It is known that Kolomoisky took a pro-Ukrainian position for some time, but after the conflict with former President Petro Poroshenko over the nationalization of PrivatBank and the US Department of Justice’s investigation into the assets of Kolomoisky and his partner Gennady Bogolyubov, he changed his position to the opposite. He has consistently taken steps to undermine the Ukraine-US partnership, with Members of Parliament close to him, such as Oleksandr Dubinsky, promoting the need for Ukraine to default - and often doing so on Medvedchuk’s channels, who benefits from such a situational partnership in promoting anti-Western rhetoric.

The use of local agents of influence and their media resources plays into Moscow’s hands for several reasons. Firstly, they enjoy greater public confidence. As of September 2020, Russian television is the main source of news for 6% of Ukrainians, whereas local television enjoys greater popularity and public confidence. This is evident, in particular, in the rating of information channels of the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting for the 3rd quarter of 2019 below:

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<th>Information channels rating</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rating</strong></td>
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<td>112 Ukraine</td>
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<td>Rabinovich TV</td>
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Among IPTV and OTT users, III quarter of 2019.
Secondly, it is more difficult to restrict the activities of such resources, even if they pose a threat to national security, as from a legal point of view they are Ukrainian television channels that employ Ukrainian citizens. In order to reduce risks and avoid law enforcement issues, such channels often modify their activities. In particular, they choose the tactic of inviting guests with a respective political position, for which the channel cannot be held responsible, allegedly acting solely as a platform for expressing personal positions and evaluative judgments. The imbalance between positive and negative portrayal and the prevalence of certain narratives in the rhetoric of these guests ensure the achievement of a desired result.

Thirdly, Ukrainian TV channels know the tastes of their audience better, which allows them to adapt the necessary narratives and make them more acceptable to viewers. At the same time, their essence is preserved, which, in particular, is monitored by responsible Russian consultants, who oversee the information policy of the media resources.

Adaptation of narratives on Ukrainian television:

“Russophobia is powerful in Ukraine”

Example: “As to people of Russian nationality in Ukraine, I am concerned because I constantly see and often hear on the street that ‘we have such a liberal nationalism built on anti-Russian views, not even in terms of the Russian state, but in terms of everything Russian.’ On Russophobia, roughly speaking.” (“News,” NASH, October 14, 2020).

Example 2: “Our Russophobia is now well paid. They pay well for it, including the State Department. Therefore, it is obvious to me that anything with the “Made in Russia” brand will have a negative connotation here from the mouths of these hysterical porokhobots and acolytes of Soros.” (Pulse, 112 Ukraine, December 8, 2020).
“Fascism is thriving in Ukraine”

Example: “If the grandfathers who were at war could see what their grandchildren are buying into and doing, they would smack them. Because the grandfathers did not give or risk their lives, and spill their blood for Ukraine for some pro-fascist, pro-nationalist forces to sprout from this blood." (“News,” 112 Ukraine, May 9, 2020).

Example 2: “We will have neither land nor economy; there will be only fascism. So, I want to tell you: fascism will not pass in Ukraine! Ukraine is not a fascist country historically and we will remember what our parents and grandparents did. They protected Ukraine against fascism and we will protect it. And to those who think that by robbing the people, taking away their industry, destroying some kind of development in the country and selling the land to finish off the country ‘under color of patriotism’ they can fool the people, we will say - the place of the Nazis is at the graveyard of history.” (“News,” 112 Ukraine, March 2, 2020).

“Ukraine is a failed state”

Example: “Ukraine became a platform for money laundering a long time ago. The money that was stolen either in Europe or in the United States. All these reforms that we are told about are in fact a smokescreen to hide the plundering of the country.” (Uryadovyi Kvartal, 112 Ukraine, December 7, 2020).

Example 2: “The crisis of statehood – the end of November. Inevitable. This is a crisis, this does not mean that there will be no Ukraine, but this is a crisis, and the response to it is - either we re-establish the state by referendum, constituent power, whatever, or we shake hands and say “We don’t have it anymore.” (Chernyi lebed, NewsOne, August 25, 2020).
"Ukraine is a puppet of the West"

Example: “The degree of external control of our country: the order is given to the current President, the Office, one of them to make a decision immediately, otherwise there will be no visa-free regime, money, or anything like, and they immediately rush to obey it. In fact, it is very dangerous and shameful for the country. This is the main danger.” (Podrobnosti, Inter, October 30, 2020).

Example 2: “All these things are signs of external control, total external control. Guys, but external control and sovereignty are, as they say in Odesa, two big differences.” (Rybny den, 112 Ukraine, July 16, 2020).

Speaking about the adaptation of Russian narratives for Ukrainian television, three key trends should be noted. First, pro-Russian Ukrainian television tries to avoid one of the key narratives about the “civil war” - both for legal reasons and the mass audience preferences. According to a poll conducted by the Razumkov Center, “only 10% of Ukrainians would agree to recognize Crimea as Russian in exchange for the liberation of Donbas.” According to the same poll, 13% are ready to support the separation of the temporarily occupied territories in the east of the country. At the same time, 59% of the population is ready to defend the territorial integrity of the state with weapons in hand. Clearly, the issue of Russian aggression is extremely painful for the Ukrainian society, and more and more Ukrainians accuse Russia of waging war. In such circumstances, the rhetoric about the “civil war” would be unacceptable and would most likely provoke disapproval from the audience, reducing the overall level of trust in the resources that broadcast it openly.

Because of this, when talking about the war, pro-Russian TV channels rely primarily on the erosion of responsibility for its beginning and
not on open accusations of the Ukrainian government. The most popular tricks are to say that the war continues because it benefits the oligarchs, or that the war has been waged and continued because of the United States’ interest in it: “Who benefits from the war in Ukraine? It is beneficial to the United States. They have long sought to create a zone of instability around the Russian Federation from the former Soviet republics” (“NASH”, October 30, 2020). An important element is the regular accusation of Kyiv of “sabotaging” the peace process and refusing to comply with the Minsk agreements, as the continuation of the war allegedly benefits “nationalists” - “The return of Donbas is the death of nationalists, so they rejoice over the continuation of the war.” (NewsOne, June 28, 2020).

The second major trend of the adaptation is to maintain the coherence of narratives. As in the original Russian matrix, all narratives exported to the Ukrainian media space support and reinforce each other by a similar logic. “Fascism” and “Russophobia” allegedly make it impossible to end the war in the east. They are presented as beneficial to the current government, which is institutionally incapable and dependent on the West. It is the narrative of Ukraine as a puppet of the West, where the West means the United States and/ or international institutions such as the IMF, that can be considered to be the most actively promoted by agents of the Kremlin.

In an adapted form, the idea of “external control” of Ukraine, and its prevalence is the third key trend in the adaptation of Russian disinformation for the local audience. For pro-Russian forces, it is of strategic value because, with the support of the local population, it naturally distances Ukraine from its Western partners and brings it closer to the Russian Federation. The success of this narrative lies in the fact that it plays on the patriotic feelings of the audience, who seeks to preserve the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine and can be manipulated, feel that these fundamental values are threatened.

It is not only media resources that are used to spread and consolidate this narrative. For example, in late November 2020, the OPZZh staged a rally near the United States Embassy against “external control” and George Soros. According to media reports, the
Such a political theater is in line with the work of pro-Russian activists in Ukraine, particularly in 2014-2015, when the Russian government relied on the Novorossiya project in the south-eastern regions of Ukraine and took extensive measures to destabilize the situation from within. This is evidenced by the hacked emails of the former aide to the President of the Russian Federation Vladislav Surkov, who before his removal from the Kremlin was responsible for the hybrid aggression against Ukraine. The Presidential Administration, among other things, coordinated and financed a number of anti-Western actions in Ukraine.

There is no reason to believe that with Dmitry Kozak’s appointment to the post of Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration and the transfer of the “Ukrainian sector” in the Kremlin to him, the Russian scheme of work has undergone significant changes. Moreover, local pro-Russian forces can widely use the same methods without direct instruction from Moscow. They also actively involve “social movements” and “organizations” - such as the NGO “People’s Union”, which also conducts actions against George Soros’ influence in Ukraine. The head of this NGO is Iryna Palamar, one of the regular guests on the channels connected with Viktor Medvedchuk. The use of the myth of Soros and so-called acolytes of Soros (government officials and civic activists allegedly dependent on American funding) is an important component of the narrative of “external control” aimed at discrediting civil society in Ukraine.

The above-mentioned Ukrainian channels rely heavily on such regular guests to promote necessary narratives. Many of the speakers are pro-Russian politicians, for whom such rhetoric has obvious political value - members of the OPFL (Viktor Medvedchuk, Rinat Kuzmin, Oleh Voloshyn - these deputies are among the most media-active members of OPFL) and former government officials and parliamentarians under Viktor Yanukovych (Andriy Portnov, Olena Bondarenko, Olena Lukash, etc.). MPs from other parties, including the Servant of the People, who support the above-mentioned narratives, are also regular guests on information and political talk shows on pro-Russian channels, including Oleksandr Dubinsky, Maksym Buzhansky, and Yevhen Shevchenko.
"EXTERNAL GOVERNANCE" NARRATIVE

How the narrative “Ukraine is under external control” is communicated first by Kremlin and then by its proxies in Ukraine

**IN RUSSIA**

Vladimir Putin, Russian President:

“The United States are courting Ukraine and they took it under external control, but they want Ukraine somehow survive, including at our cost. They do not want to give [Ukraine] money themselves.”

Sergei Lavrov, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs:

“Ukraine] came under external control under the previous regime, and in the end found itself thrown far back, having lost its powerful industrial base.”

Vyacheslav Nikonov, Russian MP:

“The country came under external control, and the United States, in general, does not care whether the oligarchs or someone else is in charge of Ukraine, as long as they follow the instructions of Washington.”

**IN UKRAINE**

Viktor Medvedchuk, Ukrainian MP:

“Ukraine has long been under the external control the West, fulfilling all the wishes and commands of its overseas owners.”

Yuriy Pavlenko, Ukrainian MP:

“The current socio-economic policy has a component of reducing the population and, consequently, strengthening external influence in the governance of Ukraine.”

Vadym Rabinovich, Ukrainian MP:

“The West needs Ukraine as a base for armed confrontation with Russia, and also [it needs] our land and our hardworking people to slave away for them all day long.”
Moreover, no less important part of the pool of speakers comprises guests like Iryna Palamar, who systematically promote the relevant rhetoric, while positioning themselves as independent experts and representatives of public organizations. Their participation helps present the appearance of inclusive discussion and impartiality, although such experts may not have the appropriate education and professional experience, they consistently work with politicians in their interests, and their value lies in advocating for a specific political position.

For example, one of the most frequent guests on political talk shows on all four TV channels except Inter is Mykhailo Pohrebinsky. The director of the Kyiv Center for Political Studies and Conflictology regularly claims that the Ukrainian authorities are sabotaging the peace process in Donbas, and supports the rhetoric about radical nationalism in Ukraine and external control. In early December 2020, he commented positively, including for Russian publications, on the speech by representatives of the so-called «DPR» and «LPR» initiated by the Russian Federation at the United Nations Security Council. This speech was officially condemned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine and ignored by other members of the Security Council.

Another example of such an expert is Vadym Karasyov. In addition to his role as host of his own program on NewsOne “Chernyi lebid,“ he also regularly acts as a commentator on socio-political events, and often does so for Russian federal TV channels, just like Pohrebinsky. In general, such “cross-citation” and the regular participation of experts from pro-Russian channels in programs on Russian TV is a tactic widely used by the Kremlin to legitimize its own discourse. One of the most striking examples and a clear attempt to bring the Ukrainian media space closer to the Russian one was the announcement of a teleconference between the ZIK channel and Russia 24 in July 2019. The event was canceled largely under public pressure.

Some experts like Karasyov, Pohrebinsky, Oleksandr Lazarev, Dmytro Spivak (host of “Subjektivnyye itogi”), Ruslan Bortnyk comment on a wide range of topics. Others, like Oleksandr Okhrimenko (participated in programs “Evenings with Vladimir Solovyy”), focus on a particular topic. In both cases, their participation plays a significant role in the process of legitimizing Russian narratives on Ukrainian television. As a result the number of such experts is quite large. The Ukrainian NGO «Texty.Org.Ua» has compiled their detailed database, which as of December 2020 has more than 30 organizations positioning themselves as independent institutions, while having close political connections, and more than 40 experts with such connections. Russian disinformation is a system
HOW BIASED EXPERTS ARE PUSHING RUSSIAN NARRATIVES

Volodymyr Katzman
Business partner of Vadym Rabínevych, "Opposition Platform - For Life"
112, ZIK, NEWSONE

"Slaves must work the land that will belong to the West; they must go to the banks that will belong to the West and keep up. Why would they need education?"

Dmytro Spivak
Political commentator and presenter
112, ZIK, NEWSONE, NASH

"I declare that the political elites of the United States of America, the NATO leadership, do not need peace in Ukraine - they need Ukraine to be in a constant state of conflict."

Mykhailo Pohrebinsky
Kyiv Center for Political Studies and Conflictology
112, ZIK, NEWSONE, NASH

"If Ukraine, together with Poroshenko, had not become a participant in the unconstitutional coup, then we would have both Crimea and Donbass today. And this unconstitutional coup was supported by the European Union and NATO leaders."

Vadym Karasiyov
Institute of Global Strategies
112, ZIK, NEWSONE

"There [in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, the Baltic countries], when they took them under external control, they helped these countries make reforms, become more prosperous and so on. In our country everything is done on the opposite in order to further exploit Ukraine."

Kuslan Bortnyk
Ukrainian Institute for Policy Analysis and Management
112, ZIK, NEWSONE, NASH, INTER

"Occupation to some extent is even better than external control. Because the occupier takes social responsibility for those people who live in the [occupied] area. External governance does not take any responsibility. It is simply plundering this country."

Oleksandr Lazarev
Ukrainian Politics Foundation
112, ZIK, NEWSONE, NASH

"After 2014, we fell under further control of the Western elite, especially the United States. They started dictating us how to behave on the international arena, they started dictating us how to behave in the economic sphere inside Ukraine."
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

where the main structural elements are narratives. Interpretation of events, which helps forms the necessary attitude to the subject of a story, allows systematic work with the audience to be conducted over long term. For all the importance of fakes, narratives are based not on them, but on contextomies and other types of manipulation, among which the disproportion between positive and negative portrayal plays probably the most important role. The essence of such rhetoric usually remains the same, but to lend relevance and credibility to it, the rhetoric tends to be modified in response to changes in social and political circumstances.

The Kremlin has been consistently promoting five major narratives about Ukraine as a failed state, Russophobic, Western-controlled and fascist country where civil war is waged. These narratives are aimed at three audiences - Russian, international, and Ukrainian - among which the latter is of the greatest importance. Successful export and spread of these narratives among the Ukrainian audience will destabilize the state from within and allow the Kremlin to effectively affect its domestic policy in order to return Ukraine to Russia’s sphere of influence.

For such exports of disinformation, Moscow relies primarily on local agents of influence, among which television assumes a special place, as it remains the main source of news for most Ukrainians. Due to its oligarchization, the Ukrainian media market is vulnerable to the penetration of disinformation. Five of the analyzed TV channels successfully promote Kremlin narratives in Ukraine, adapting them to the tastes of the local audience. At the same time, they tend to avoid the rhetoric of “civil war” as the riskiest and least acceptable in society, and instead focus on the idea of “external control.” A significant part of the efforts aimed at popularizing this narrative has yielded results – as of September 2020, about 45% of Ukrainians agree with the thesis that the state is under external control.

In such conditions, a deoligarchization of the Ukrainian media market is needed, being the most important and the most difficult task, given the scale of the problem and
its entrenchment. In this context, the support of public broadcasting is also vital. In the short run, the work of the national regulator must be optimized and the law on media must be updated. The laws in force were developed and adopted mostly in the 1990s and 2000s and do not meet the current needs of the market nor the challenges of the information age. Moreover, it would be appropriate to return to drafting a law that would directly facilitate the fight against disinformation. Such attempts were made during the time of former Minister of Culture Volodymyr Borodyansky. However, the concept of the law was criticized and the initiative was rejected.

The launch of the Center for Countering Disinformation, announced by President Zelensky, is a promising step in the right direction. Given the involvement of professional expertise and the establishment of a comprehensive strategy that would be aimed primarily at building social stability rather than solely at combating disinformation, such a project would be an important component of countering Russia’s information influence.

In addition to the direct identification of the Kremlin’s agents of influence as well as the specifics of their informational influence and counteraction to it, it is important to build Ukraine’s own positive communication. Correct and fact-based positive narratives of Ukraine will develop an information immunity in the target audience and make it less vulnerable to the Kremlin’s destructive narratives. Such a proactive approach can be considered more effective than responding to information attacks, which should not be expected to stop in the short or even medium run.

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"...public broadcasting is also vital. In the short run, the work of the national regulator must be optimized and the law on media must be updated."
EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN NARRATIVES ABOUT UKRAINE AND THEIR EXPORT TO UKRAINIAN MEDIA SPACE

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