

An analysis of media consumption and disinformation in the Ukraine's information environment













Pro-Russian disinformation, local elections and the COVID-19 epidemic were the three strongest influences on Ukrainians' media consumption and communication of Ukrainians on social networks in 2020. Detector Media conducted a large-scale study using classical monitoring, expert interviews, big data analysis and sociological research in order to get detailed answers to several key questions: 1) who and what influenced the perception of information and the effectiveness of disinformation in Ukraine in 2020; 2) who was trying to manipulate Ukrainian society at the national level and in the South and East of Ukraine in particular; and 3) how Ukrainians responded to the main events and challenges of 2020. This is an analytical report on the results of that study. - Kyiv: Media Detector, 2021. - 76 p.

Analytical report

# ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SCREEN

An analysis of media consumption and disinformation in the Ukrainian information environment

Authors: Editor-in-chief:

Galina Petrenko Natalia Ligacheva

Otar Dovzhenko

Oksana Iliuk

Petro Burkosky

Literary editor: Design:

Katrina Rozkladai (Haddad) Oleksandr Ivanov

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## PROBLEM STATEMENT



People all around the world spent a lot of time in front of screens in 2020, and Ukrainians were no exception. The COVID-19 pandemic has restricted physical mobility, cancelled plans and literally kept everyone in their homes. This development has been a challenge, since humans are social beings. The need for security encourages people to take membership in communities, especially in times of uncertainty like the coronavirus pandemic. If you define yourself as part of a certain community, you believe that this community will be able to protect you and your family, through a common future and a common solution to problems.

A person's perception of their surrounding reality shapes their behaviour and dictates everyday decisions. A person adjusts their behaviour in accordance with the requirements of the community by, for example, adhering to the general point of view of that community accordingly forming a vision of the future. The main source of information by which this vision and worldview is formed and aligned with the communities one identifies with is the media (classical, new and social media).

Since the beginning of the pandemic, people around the world have begun to spend more time online. Global Internet traffic was up 30% from 2019 by July. More time in front of screens means more consuming and creating the content. Media consumption and online user behaviour largely reflect societies' real moods. Posts, likes, comments and retweets serve as a mirror of users' reactions to events. On the other hand, social platforms and stakeholders often influence these reactions. Theoretically, the responsible consumption of information, critical thinking, and the objective reflection of reality by journalists give a person the ability to choose between different communities and different visions of the future. In practice, however, stakeholder groups often influence or even shape information ecosystems which fragment society by dictating certain realities that these groups find more beneficial. For example, according to the Oxford Internet Institute, back in 2018, 48 countries experienced manipulative information campaigns on social networks during their elections.

The desire to influence the masses, in particular through disinformation and misinformation, is not a new phenomenon, but it poses new and hard challenges to the democratic world as technology has revolutionized the sharing of information. Ukraine suffers from Russia's hybrid aggression, which makes monitoring the Ukrainian information environment, understanding the players trying to shape the agenda, and tracking citizens' reactions crucial to reforming and building the country's democratic society. Detector Media decided to focus its attention on the South and East of Ukraine, whose oblast border the illegally Russian-occupied Donbas and Crimea. The region is marked by ethnic and cultural diversity and, of course, proximity to Russia, both territorially and ideologically, as we can see by looking at electoral preferences and attitudes of the population towards Ukraine's foreign policy.

Ukraine has been facing Russian and pro-Russian information aggression for a long period. Illegal annexation of Crimea followed by military aggression on Donbas are considered as one of the scenarios that happened with the support of extensive, deteriorating disinformation campaigns. The regions of South and East Ukraine border the occupied Crimea from one side and the contact line from the other side. From the perspective of malign information operations, this region can be targeted by direct disinformation campaigns orchestrated by Russian and its domestic proxies in Ukraine. It contributes to maintaining and generating a pro-Russia, anti-Ukrainian electorate tricked into fulfilling Russia's plans on undermining Ukraine's independence and democratic aspirations.

This analytical study addresses the vulnerability of the South and East of Ukraine through looking at the penetration rate of hostile narratives into media space of South-East Ukraine. Two major indicators have been assessed in order to describe the problem: 1. world view of media consumers in South-East Ukraine, and 2. changing patterns of media consumption in South-East Ukraine.

The region proved to be vulnerable in terms of Russian and pro-Russian key narratives affecting citizen's views and opinions. It affected citizens' attitude towards Ukraine's integration to the EU and NATO. The general population in the region has been more sceptical towards the Euro-Atlantic integration that other regions in Ukraine. Even though, the support of this geopolitical vector has been slowly growing since 2014, it has not exceeded the 50% barrier1. Electoral preferences of citizens also reflect more positive attitudes towards pro-Russian rather than pro-European parties in the region. For example, results of 2020 local elections in Ukraine demonstrated some leading trends pro-Russian political forces in Odesa, Kherson, Mykolaiv and Zaporizhzhya oblasts<sup>2</sup>. Those domestic actors usually mimic key disinformation narratives produced by Russia.

Since 2014, there has been a growing number of citizens in the region who cannot decide whether they agree with pro-Russian or Pro-Ukrainian interpretation of events on national significance<sup>3</sup>. For instance, war on Donbas: a remarkable share of the local population either blame the Ukrainian government for starting the war or cannot affiliate responsibility for the war to any party<sup>4</sup>. Other sociological indicators support analytical assumption regarding negative effects of penetrating hostile narratives on citizens' attitudes and opinions in South-East Ukraine<sup>5</sup>.

Media consumption is also an important indicator. The shifts in media consumption in the region is affected by several factors at the same time: ongoing pandemic of COVID-19, toxicity and reach

of Russian and pro-Russian media channels, and labile structure of media landscape.

As demonstrated by analysis conducted by the Detector Media, most pro-Russian narratives originates from television, in particular, from the media channels controlled by pro-Russian political forces in Ukraine. Those media and TV channels enjoy the highest level of trust in South-East Ukraine. While broadcasting TV is still the king in the region, information consumption from social media networks is impressively growing<sup>6</sup>. Officially banned in Ukraine, the Russian social media network VK is still popular in the region as 33% of the residents still regularly use it for getting the latest information about events in Ukraine and the world<sup>7</sup>. Many groups in VK as well as channels in Telegram and YouTube are provenly considered to be a breeding ground for anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and hate speech.

The year 2020 was marked not only by the pandemic, but also by local elections in Ukraine, which significantly affected the information environment of the South and East, as well as the country as a whole. Ukraine was one of the first countries in the world to hold elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, local elections, which became even more important in the context of Ukraine's decentralization reforms, were conducted in accordance with a new electoral code. The complexity of Ukraine's internal processes and Russia's ongoing hybrid aggression have generally added obstacles to the country's reform and democratic development process, not to mention the chaos caused by the pandemic, which has challenged even the world's most stable democracies.

<sup>1)</sup> Kermach, Roman. 2017. "Ставлення Українців До НАТО: Актуальні Тенденції, Приховані Мотивації Та Завдання На Майбутнє [Attitudes Of Ukrainians Towards NATO: Current Trends, Hidden Motivations And Challenges For The Future]". Kyiv: Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF).

<sup>2) &</sup>quot;<u>Хто Переміг На Виборах У Вашому Місті Та Області. Карти</u> - BBC News Україна [Who Won The Election In Your City And Region. Maps]". 2021. BBC News Україна.

<sup>3)</sup> Detector Media. 2019. "Джерела Інформації, Медіаграмотність I Російська Пропаганда: Результати Всеукраїнського Опитування Громадської Думки [Sources Of Information, Media Literacy, And Russian Propaganda: The Results Of The All-Ukrainian Public Opinion Poll]". Kyiv.

<sup>4)</sup> Detector Media. 2019. "Джерела Інформації. Медіаграмотність I Російська Пропаганда: Результати Всеукраїнського Опитування Громадської Думки [Sources Of Information, Media Literacy, And Russian Propaganda: The Results Of The All-Ukrainian Public Opinion Poll]". Kviv.

<sup>5)</sup> Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. 2021. "ДОВІРА СОЦІАЛЬНИМ ІНСТИТУЦІЯМ І ПАРТІЯМ: ГРУДЕНЬ 2020 [TRUST IN SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND PARTIES: DECEMBER 2020]".

<sup>6)</sup> Detector Media. 2020. "Як Змінились Уподобання Та Інтереси Українців До Засобів Масової Інформації Після Виборів 2019 Р. Та Початку Пандемії COVID-19 [How Ukrainians' Preferences And Interests In The Media Have Changed After The 2019 Elections And The Beginning Of The COVID-19 Pandemic]". Kyiv.

<sup>7)</sup> Detector Media. 2019. "Джерела Інформації, Медіаграмотність I Російська Пропаганда: Результати Всеукраїнського Опитування Громадської Думки [Sources Of Information, Media Literacy, And Russian Propaganda: The Results Of The All-Ukrainian Public Opinion Poll]". Kyiv.

These processes make it necessary to constantly monitor the information environment as a basis for decision-making, implementing reforms and communicating necessary changes to society.

Finally, media consumption in 2020 was affected by the decision of all the biggest Ukrainian TV holdings to code their satellite signal in order to develop pay TV market. The decision was made in January 2020. As a result, Ukraine entered the COVID-19 quarantine with more than 2 million households without access to the most popular Ukrainian TV channels, and with news TV channels (including "Medvedchuk group") and Russian broadcasters instead.

This research covers period from March to November 2020 and shows the influence of the above-mentioned factors on Ukrainian media landscape and media consumption.





REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EUrope

SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC, PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD HAVE BEGUN TO SPEND MORE TIME ONLINE.

GLOBAL INTERNET
TRAFFIC WAS UP 30%
FROM 2020 BY JULY.

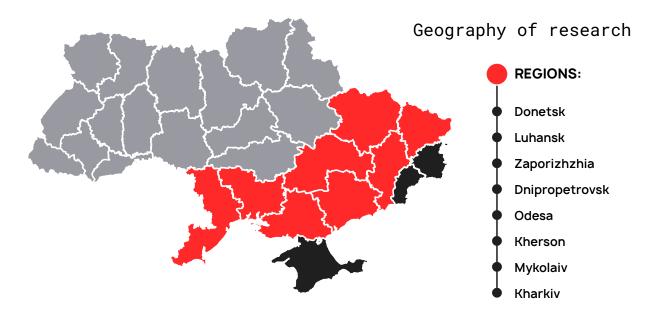
## METHODOLOGY



As part of this study, Detector Media asked several research questions:

- How has the media landscape changed after the coding of satellite TV signals?
- How has the consumption of media content changed during the quarantine?
- What disinformation narratives were spread by local figures and the Kremlin during the election campaign?

The eight target regions of the study include Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa, Kherson, Mykolaiv and Kharkiv regions. In the case of Donetsk and Luhansk regions - we talk about the free, government-controlled areas of them - the media of the occupied areas were not studied (it is more difficult for social networks to make such a distinction). The South and East of Ukraine require constant monitoring and analysis in the context of information security. The region is characterized by socio-cultural diversity, which is often exploited in foreign and domestic information operations. Its geographical proximity to Russia in general and to the demarcation line in particular makes this region a target for manipulation campaigns.



# 1 stage

In the first stage, Detector Media conducted an expert study of the media outlets (television news, talk shows, online publications, groups in social media and Telegram channels) which are the most popular in the target regions, as well as a study of media content at the national level.

## 2 stage

In the second stage, we monitored the content of Ukrainian media, looking for disinformation and narratives:

- in local online groups and social networks posts by city residents in the target regions;
- · in online publications;

 on local television channels in the target regions (evening television news on two local TV channels in each region during five work days).

## 3 stage

In the third stage, we conducted a sociological study on the role of social platforms and oral communication, as well as on the effectiveness of disinformation narratives. This made it possible to find disinformation that digital monitoring tools did not see.

The study consists of a qualitative sociological study in the target regions, during which we collected the necessary information for the second stage – representative quantitative research in the target regions. We asked questions about the practice of using social networks, forms of verbal transmission of unverified information, etc.

# 4 stage

In the fourth stage, we compared Ukrainian disinformation narratives found during the study with the narratives distributed in Russian media to find similarities and differences, as well as the foreign origin of some narratives.

# Methodology of social network content analysis.

We had Semantic Force and Let'sData collect and analyze over 23 million messages from eight target regions on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and Telegram. The collected material underwent cluster data analysis to identify disinformation narratives in the Ukrainian segment of the social networks, in particular those related to the socio-political life of the regions. Content and sentiment analysis was conducted within the clusters. Users within each cluster were analyzed separately; opinion leaders, trolls, and bots were identified and links among them were established.

# Methodology of the sociological survey.

The survey of public opinion of the residents of the target regions was conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in November 2020 on behalf of Detector Media. Adults (18 years and older) in these regions were asked about watching TV channels, using social networks and generally accessing various sources of information, as well as about socio-political sentiments, particularly in the context of countering disinformation and propaganda. A separate representative sample was developed for each of the eight regions - a three-stage random sample with quota selection at the last stage. The sample of each region is representative for adults (18 years and older) who live permanently in the region, do not serve in the military, are not imprisoned and are not residing in hospitals or boarding schools.

The field phase of the study lasted from November 12 to December 1, 2020. 3264 interviews - 408 in each region - were conducted. The statistical error for all respondents (with a confidence level of 0.95 and without taking into account the design effect) does not exceed:

- 1.7 % for figures close to 50%,
- 1.5 % for figures close to 25 or 75%;
- 1.1 % for figures close to 12 or 88 %;
- 0.8 % for figures close to 5 or 95 %.

The statistical error of the sample of 408 respondents (each region separately) (with a confidence level of 0.95 and without taking into account the design effect) does not exceed:

- 5.0 % for figures close to 50%,
- 4.3 % for figures close to 25 or 75%;
- 3.3 % for figures close to 12 or 88 %;
- 2.2 % for figures close to 5 or 95 %

#### Focus group methodology.

4 focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 33 participants, including: 16 women and 17 men; 12 people under the age of 35, 11 people aged 36 to 59 and 10 people aged over 60; 4 residents of Zaporizhzhia region, 4 residents of Kherson region, 4 residents of Mykolaiv region, 4 residents of Odesa region, 4 residents of Kharkiv region, 4 residents of Dnipropetrovsk region, 4 residents of Luhansk region and 5 residents of Donetsk region.

# Expert interview methodology.

A qualitative sociological survey using the method of in-depth interviews was conducted. 15 interviews were conducted as part of the survey. Participants included experts in the field of mass media, mass communications and civil society, and civil servants responsible for the information sphere.



#### Interactive infographics.

Graphs, charts, and tables marked with this icon have a link to a web page with full interactive infographics. Go on to learn more.

#### List of interviewed experts:



Liubov Tsybulska

head of Hybrid Warfare at Ukraine Crisis Media Center



Serhiy Solodkyi

First Deputy Director of the New Europe Center; expert in foreign policy, international relations and security



#### **Dmytro Dubov**

head of the Information Security and Information Society Development Department of the National Institute for Strategic Studies



#### Tetiana Lebedeva

honorary chair of the Independent Association of Broadcasters, Fundraising Curator and Representative on the Supervisory Board; member of the Supervisory Board of the National Public Television and Radio Company of Ukraine; member of the Commission on Journalistic Ethics



Yulia Kazdobina ex-adviser to the

Minister of Information Policy of Ukraine



**Dmytro Zolotukhin** 

former Deputy Minister of Information Policy



Oksana Moroz

founder of the How Not to Become a Vegetable initiative



Mykola Ozhevan

expert at the National Institute for Strategic Studies



Maria Zolkina

Political Analyst at Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation



Volodymyr Borodiansky

former Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports



**Roman Shutov** 

Eastern Partnership Network Manager of Open Information Partnership



**Dmytro Kuleba** 

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine



Gillian McCormack

director of Internews in Ukraine



Oksana Melnychuk

head of the Cultural Policy Department at the National Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of Ukraine



Volodymyr Yermolenko

Analytics Director, Internews Ukraine, Editor-in-Chief at UkraineWorld.org

## RESEARCH TERMINOLOGY



#### Propaganda

Propaganda is a systematic communication process that combines a series of activities to convey information, facts, and messages to the target audience in order to form a world view or impose certain values, opinions, views on specific things/phenomena/ events. Propaganda is divided into "black" and "white" depending on the goals and methods it pursues. Black propaganda is destructive in nature. Disinformation campaigns and fakes are used within the framework of black propaganda. White propaganda aims to convince society of the adoption of attitudes and values; it operates with truthful information.

#### Disinformation

Disinformation is the dissemination of false information and the distortion of facts in order to influence the thoughts and behavior of individuals or a society, achieving belief by social groups in a picture of the world different from the real one.

#### Disinformation narratives

Disinformation narratives in this study refer to stable sets of statements or assessments which, according to the authors of the study, are generally intended to influence public opinion by exaggerating or distorting the picture of reality. All the narratives on the list are typical of Russian propagandist media, so the study records statements and assessments that are consistent with them. As it is impossible to determine the motivation of journalists, media or other distributors of media content, the authors of the study do not claim that they are engaged in targeted pro-Russian propaganda, instead of, for example, simply criticizing the current government or certain political opponents. We only state the fact that messages appear in their materials which are identical or close to the Kremlin's narratives.

#### Fake

A fake is an information unit that contains fictional stories, personalities, news, events, trends etc., or distorts true facts, and which is used to influence people's opinions and behavior. A fake can be a tool to achieve the goals of a disinformation campaign.

## Bot

A bot is an automated account programmed to interact with users, in particular on social networks. It is programmed to automatically perform certain actions, such as "distribute" or "comment" on a given schedule.

## Troll

A troll is an account managed by a living person. In the context of disinformation, trolls emotionally color discussions, provoke other users, and sow doubt and mistrust.





The coronavirus epidemic and quarantine have affected the structure of information consumption in Ukrainian society. In general, the demand for information regardless of source has grown, and preferences have changed8.

According to a poll by Detector Media and KIIS, almost all Ukrainians have access to Ukrainian television – 94 %.

The vast majority have access to Ukrainian online publications (73 %), print media (53%), radio (60%). At the same time, 47 % also have access to Russian online resources, 39.5 % to Russian TV channels, and 22 % to Russian social networks.

Although central Ukrainian television channels remain the most popular source of information, the popularity of social networks has almost doubled (from 24 % in 2019 to 44 % in 2020)<sup>9</sup>. In the

southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, people spend an average of two hours a day watching TV and the same amount of time on the Internet.

Experts interviewed by Detector Media say that disinformation narratives can be broadcast through any media. Television is used to systematically broadcast propaganda messages and disinformation campaigns, and outright fakes are spread mostly in online publications and social networks.

The interviewed focus group participants indicated various channels for obtaining information. Moreover, these are sources of both "pro-Ukrainian" and "pro-Russian" orientation. Among the latter, the most commonly mentioned were the television channels 112 and NewsOne, as well as the Strana.ua news website. When looking

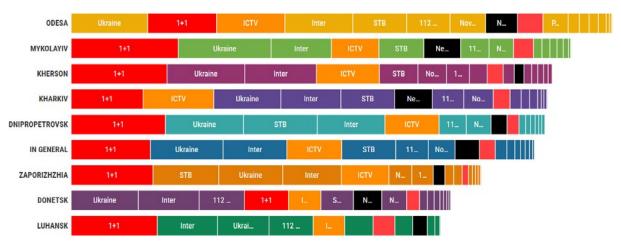
<sup>8) &</sup>quot;<u>Карантин Та Українські Телекомунікації: Навантаження Посильне, Тарифи Не Виростуть [</u>Quarantine and Ukrainian Telecommunications: the Load Is Heavy, Tariffs Will Not Increase]," Укрінформ, Аргіl 3, 2020

<sup>9) &</sup>quot;Trends and Changes in the Choices of Media and Consumption of Information of the Ukrainians After 2019 Elections and COVID-19 Outbreak," Detector Media, October 2020

#### What Ukrainian TV channels do you watch most often?

Choose no more than 5 answers.





In total, 14% could not answer the question

# Which of the following Ukrainian TV channels do you trust most? Choose no more than 5 answers.





at the criteria by which respondents choose their media, respondents most often answered that they consider the objectivity and honesty of the information provided, interesting content followed by alignment with their views".

When asked which television channels the respondents trust the most, 19 % answered that they do not trust any channels, and 14 % could not answer. 42 % were able to name at least one TV channel they trust.

Odesa and Donetsk regions, where despite the high level of distrust in TV channels in general,

top-trusted outlets are TV channels that are part of the so-called "Medvedchuk group". Meanwhile, the Detector Media's monitoring indicates that media outlets close to the leadership of the Opposition Platform - For Life (OPFL) party account for 70 % of recorded examples of spreading pro-Russian disinformation narratives in the national media space.

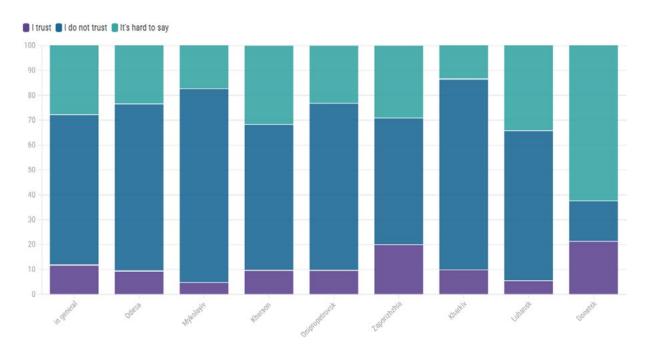
The target regions also have their own local focal points of disinformation, although they are not pronounced everywhere.



#### Trust in Russian media

Do you trust the Russian media (TV, radio, newspapers)?

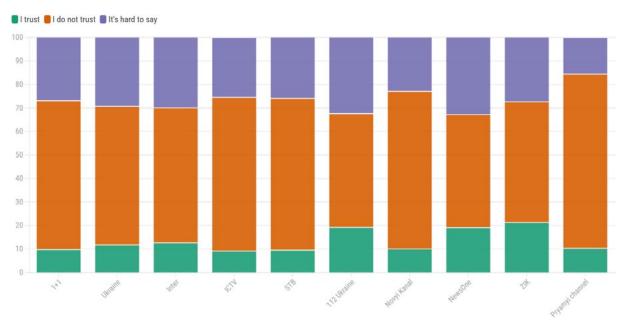




# Trust in Russian media - a survey of residents in 8 regions of southern and eastern Ukraine



Do you trust the Russian media (TV, radio, newspapers)?



% of respondents who include the respective TV channel to the top 5 by watching

In Odesa region, most of the outspoken pro-Russian propaganda was recorded on the Timer website, in Kherson region on Kherson.life, in Kharkiv region from the Kharkiv News Agency. At the same time, most of the content published by these publications is made up of reprints from national pro-Russian media, including the media from the "Medvedchuk group".

12 % of respondents directly say that they trust Russian media (from 5 % in Mykolayiv and Luhansk regions to 20 % in Zaporizhzhia region and 21 % in Donetsk region). At the same time, a significant number of respondents avoid answering this question. It thus can be assumed that the percentage of those who trust or partially trust the Russian media is actually higher.

Interestingly, although viewers of pro-Russian TV channels, in particular belonging to the "Medvedchuk group" (112, ZIK and NewsOne), are almost twice as likely to trust Russian media as other respondents, the number of respondents who do not trust Russian media was the same

among the audiences of pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian channels. It can be assumed, therefore, that the viewers of these channels may not only be those who are prone to pro-Russian views and attitudes and/or are sympathetic to the Opposition Plattform--For Life party. Moreover, there may be viewers who actually have pro-Ukrainian views who watch these channels to strengthen and nourish their own negative perceptions of pro-Russian and Russian narratives. However, this hypothesis requires a more detailed study of the audiences of these channels.



# "UKRAINE IS A FAILED STATE" IS THE MOST COMMON NARRATIVE OF (PRO-)RUSSIAN PROPAGANDISTS

"Ukraine is a failed state" is the most common narrative of (pro-)Russian propagandists. Other narratives and messages are formed around this narrative and serve to reinforce and complement it. This narrative is more typical of the national media and is less frequently noticed in the regions.

At the national level, this narrative predominates on the "Medvedchuk group" channels. For example, Ukrainians were intimidated by tariff increases (Channel 112)<sup>10</sup> and an uncontrollable increase in coronavirus cases (ZIK)<sup>11</sup>. Traditionally, the "failed state" narrative is often used as a basis for messages to distort or tends to distort real news or opinions. For example, Strana.ua writes in the headline "increase in all utility tariffs is inevitable", while the author of the post which was the basis of this material, actually wrote something else: that tariffs are generally increasing, but "there will be no such general increase on October 1, 2020" 12.

In the regions, in addition to the OPFL party, this narrative was disseminated by local media. For example, a website in Lysychansk writes: "Unemployment is rising, businesses are closing, and the government is in no hurry to create new jobs" and "Apparently, the current government refuses to consider support and development of domestic business and industry [...]. Warning the people of Ukraine in advance that they will simply be left to their own devices (6451)" 13. "Zelenskyi is not only not feared - he is openly despised,

and recently one by one the regions have been in open confrontation with the head of state" (Kharkiv News Agency)<sup>14</sup>.

In the regions, the narrative was distributed by local media and social media pages close to local politicians, in particular to candidates in the 2020 local elections. In their election campaigns, they tried to discredit the central government, blame them for failures, and demonstrate their own success against this background. Examples include Odesa Mayor Hennadiy Trukhanov and Dnipro Mayor Borys Filatov. The latter used not only traditional media (for example, <u>television</u> news positively showcasing the activity of the candidate and participation in political talk shows)15. From May to October 2020, there were 103,000 posts on Facebook concerning Filatov, with a significant proportion of them contrasting the successes of the mayor with indifference and weakness of the central government.

In local media and social networks, it is difficult to distinguish criticism of the government in general and the president in particular from the "failed state" narrative, because with regard to traditional media or Telegram channels, we can see the outlets' general editorial policy and at least assume the purpose of their criticism from pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian positions. We can also understand what interests the owners of traditional media pursue based on the information known about them. But when it comes to groups on social networks, audience composition can

<sup>10) &</sup>quot;Власти Перекладывают Ответственность За Непопулярные Решения о Повышении Тарифов На Тепло и Воду На Регионы, - Эксперты [The Authorities Are Shifting Responsibility for Unpopular Decisions to Increase Tariffs for Heat and Water to the Regions, - Experts]," 112.ua, October 19, 2020.

<sup>11) &</sup>quot;<u>У Нас Буде 10-15 Тисяч Хворих На COVID-19 Шодня. Як Ми Зупинемо Цю Хвилю? - Раімов</u> [We Will Have 10-15 Thousand Patients with COVID-19 Every Day. How Do We Stop This Wave? - Raimov]".

<sup>12) &</sup>quot;Повышение Всех Коммунальных Тарифов Все-Таки Неизбежно [An Increase in All Utility Tariffs Is Still Inevitable]," strana.ua (Strana.ua, September 29, 2020).

<sup>13) &</sup>quot;<u>В Украине Нет Денег На Выплаты По Безработице, Работы Heт Toже</u> [There Is No Money in Ukraine for Unemployment Benefits, There Is No Work Either]," 6451.com.ua, October 9, 2020.

<sup>14) &</sup>quot;Зеленский Пропустил 'Тревожный Звоночек' Предвестника Распада Украины [Zelensky Missed the 'Alarm Bell' Herald of the Collapse of Ukraine], "Ahentstyo Novostei Kharkova, October 24, 2020.

<sup>15) &</sup>quot;Філатов, Садовий, Краснов, Бондаренко: Кого Піарили Токшоу Напередодні Виборів - Моніторинг [Filatov, Sadovy, Krasnov, Bondarenko: Who Publicized the Talk Show on the Eve of the Election - Monitoring]," DetectorMedia, November 23, 2020).



be quite diverse. The difference is usually in the tone and emphasis not on the erroneousness of decisions, but on the actual failure of the institution or person being criticized. Pro-Russian information channels often pick up constructive criticism of the government, drain it of arguments and rational basis, and leave only the emotion of negativity.

History is a field of constant manipulation on social networks. There is a common disinformation narrative which denies or distorts Ukrainian history by asserting that "Ukrainians are Little Russians without their own language or history". It is spread mostly by bots and trolls on social networks. This is evidenced by the user accounts of the contributors who make those assertions and the fact that their comments often had nothing to do with the content of the posts. For example, one user calling himself Krakus writes, "Shevchenko wrote in Russian, except for 2-3 works that were written in the "Little Russian language"... What does Ukraine have to do with it?". He left this comment to a video titled "Crimea without water: Is the Dnipro

turning into a swamp because of the blocked canal?" from Krym. Realiyi".

The general "Ukraine does not have its own history" narrative falls into the broader "Ukraine is a failed state" narrative. In May 2020 alone, Facebook communities in the southern and eastern regions disseminated messages saying that "Ukraine distorts history" more than 470 times. A surge of manipulation on a historical topic were devoted to May 9, celebrated as Victory Day in commemoration of the defeat of Nazi Germany. Around that this time, when (pro-) Russian forces spread messages saying "we can repeat" (suggesting that Russia could repeat its World War II conquest of Eastern and Central Europe) and "to Berlin." Holiday messages from the local branches of OPFL dedicated to May 9 spread false claims about an alleged ban on the celebration of Victory Day. On the Facebook page of the Dnipro city organization of OPFL, one post read: "It is our sacred duty to preserve the memory of this Great Feat and to provide a reliable barrier to attempts to rewrite the great history of the Victory over Nazism.

# Perception of the conflict in Donbas by residents of the South and East of Ukraine



From the following statements, please choose the one that best fits your personal opinion, views?

	in general	Odesa	Mykolayiv	Kherson	Dnipro- petrovsk	Zapo- rizhzhia	Kharkiv	Luhansk	Donetsk
Conflict - there is Russian aggression with the use of local militants in Donbas	44,8	46,3	56,4	52.9	53.7	37	49.8	65.4	7.8
Conflict - there is is an internal Ukrainian con- flict, a civil war in Donbas	29,6	29,4	32,4	29.7	27.2	48	28.9	2.7	25.2
Hard to say	14,6	16,9	7,8	13	17.2	11.5	10.3	31.1	15
Non	11,1	7,4	3,4	4.4	2	3.4	11	0.7	52

According to a survey conducted by the KIIS for the Detector Media

It is unacceptable for liberating warriors to be forgotten. For traitors and fascist collaborators to become new heroes for Ukraine." Such posts often turn into criticisms of the government, which "patronizes radicals, refuses to celebrate Victory Day and humiliates veterans," and promote the narrative that "Ukraine is a Nazi state." <sup>16</sup>

Historical topics were also raised during the election campaign to mobilize voters. These messages were particularly prominent on the Kryvyi Rih TV channels Rudana and Pershyi Kryvorizkyi: Almost every week, materials about the "Great Patriotic War" were broadcast with a subtext or a direct statement about the "rewriting of history", even though they lacked significant elaboration. Rudana, in a news segment featuring a candidate for mayor from OPFL, broadcast messages about the mistake of decommunization and the alleged contempt that

World War II participants feel in today's Ukraine: "We have all stood up against historical and legal injustice: veterans, residents of Kryvyi Rih. Because these three battle flags are sacred to us, the people of Kryvyi Rih. And we must protect them. And the fact that the battle flags that took part in the liberation of our city in the Great Patriotic War are in the museum is our common victory".

According to our survey of residents of the South and East of Ukraine conducted by KIIS for Detector Media, 46 % of respondents perceive decommunization as "aimed at rewriting history and denying the achievements and feats of the Soviet era", while almost half as many (27%) believe that decommunization is aimed at restoring historical facts. Negative attitudes towards decommunization prevail in all target regions.



39 % of respondents believe that "despite the change of president and parliament in 2019, nationalists and right-wing radicals have a decisive influence on the government of the country." Moreover, only 18 % agree that the influence of pro-Russian forces has increased. In all regions, the percentage of those who are concerned with the influence of "nationalists and radicals" is higher than those who are concerned with pro-Russian forces. It can be assumed that the popularity of OPFL media and the relatively high level of trust in the Russian media significantly influence the fact that almost half of the respondents see a threat in "nationalists and right-wing radicals", but not in pro-Russian forces.

The narrative that "Ukraine is a Nazi state" is also the richest in hate speech. On the Telegram channel "Bearded grandmother" (23,922 subscribers), one post read: "In the Right Sector camp of the "Commandos", the children laid out a swastika with their bodies. The camp is run by a

certain Diana Vynohradova (Kamlyuk), who served a sentence for murder. On the Maidan in 2013 she read her poetry against "Jews". Drobovych, what do you say to that?" Although this narrative is deconstructed and ridiculed in the pro-Ukrainian environment, propagandists speaking towards their target audience look for all possible occasions for reviving the narrative. For example, a "confrontation" between Ukrainian security forces and Hassidic Jewish pilgrims who tried to cross into Ukraine from Belarus for their Rosh Hashannah holiday pilgrimage to the Ukrainian city of Uman was used by Medvedchuk's media to accuse Ukrainian authorities of anti-Semitism<sup>17</sup>.

Messages promoting the narrative of a Ukrainian "civil war" were regularly featured from March to the end of October 2020. According to this narrative, the armed conflict in Donbas has nothing to do with Russia's actions, and the aggressor in the conflict is Ukraine itself, which "kills its own people" (Vesti<sup>18</sup>, Mignews<sup>19</sup>, ZIK<sup>20</sup>).

<sup>17) &</sup>quot;Бенкети в Час Ковіду. Коронавірус у Новинах Та Токшоу 14-20 Вересня 2020 Року," Detector Media, September 27, 2020).

<sup>18) &</sup>quot;<u>Песков Прокомментировал Заявления Фокина о России</u> [Peskov Commented on Fokine's Statements about Russia," Vesti, September 30, 2020.

<sup>19) &</sup>quot;Пытались Забросать Меня Камнями: Фокин Ответил На Свое Увольнение Из ТКГ [They Tried to Throw Stones at Me: Fokin Responded to His Dismissal from TCG]," Mignews, October 31, 2020.

<sup>20) &</sup>quot;Відмовився Бути Зрадником. Чому Зеленський Відсторонив Фокіна Від Переговорів Щодо Донбасу [He Refused to Be a Traitor. Why Zelensky Removed Fokin from Negotiations on Donbass]," 112.ua, September 30, 2020.

Residents of the target regions also have split understanding of the war in Donbas. Forty five percent of respondents label the war as Russian aggression, whereas 30 % call it a civil war. Remaining respondents either disagreed with both of the labels or stated that it was difficult for them to answer. According to the interviewers, a significant number of respondents spoke of the conflict as a "war of the oligarchs" or a "war between Russia and the West" and therefore could not "place" themselves among these interpretations. When asked about the motives of volunteers who fought in the Donbas on the side of Ukraine, 45% respondents in the South and East believed that volunteers went to war to defend the independence of the state, 31 % believed that they volunteered to make money. This suggests, on the one hand, that residents of the target regions are very vulnerable to pro-Russian narratives. On the other hand, neither the political authorities of Ukraine nor the pro-Ukrainian media have a decisive influence on the consciousness and sentiments of these citizens. This situation requires both large-scale information work and greater success for Ukraine on economic and social issues in order to win the hybrid war led by Russia and its agents of influence in these regions.

According to Detector Media monitoring, media outlets seeking to operate legally, avoid direct claims of civil war, apparently fearing action from the security services and regulators. Propagandists spread this message through social networks and garbage websites, as well as in the comments of bots and trolls. This narrative is actively disseminated by news sources in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, while the topic is discussed less in other regions.

Another cross-cutting topic for manipulation is religion. Attacks on the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which is called "schismatic" and opposed to "the only canonical church in Ukraine" (ostensibly the church of the Moscow Patriarchate) have been going on since the granting of autocephaly for Ukraine's Orthodox Church by the world leadership of Orthodox

Christianity in Constantinople. Propagandists argue that the local church is an instrument of Ukrainian (and Western) politicians' struggle against Russia and has nothing to do with spirituality and faith in God. Thus, NewsOne commentator Vyacheslav Pikhovshek warned apocalyptically about potential seizures of churches, permanent schism, and physical violence against believers in the Moscow Patriarchate<sup>21</sup>.

For example, a video titled "Crimea will not return to Ukraine! A shocking statement by the bishop of the Church of Tomos" received 50,000 views<sup>22</sup>. The video's comment section further contained a number of propagandistic distortions and manipulations and contained repeated claims about "schismatics". Aggressive messages concerning the Kyiv Patriarchate Orthodox Church of Ukraine occurred especially often in Dnipropetrovsk region. In Dnipro, there was an interesting case when Mayor Filatov ordered a trench dug in the road leading to a Moscow Patriarchate church which refused to comply with guarantine restrictions. Users of various social networks were divided on their opinion of the order, but there were significant numbers of those who wrote that this church was punished only because it belonged to the Moscow Patriarchate.

Interestingly, according to a survey of residents of the South and East of Ukraine conducted by KIIS for Detector Media, given the intensity and constant presence of the above narrative in the information space, 50% of respondents are in favor of the independent existence of the state and the Church. Another 27.5% chose the option of independent existence, but with the state's respect for the moral principles of the Church. Only 13 % believe that the state and the Church should cooperate for the common good, and 2 % hold the opposite view that the state in general should limit the Church's influence on citizens. These data allow us to conclude that the respondents do not have a clear idea of what exactly should be the relationship between church and state in a democratic society.

<sup>21) &</sup>quot;XPOHOЛОГИЯ НЕДЕЛИ" с Вячеславом Пиховшеком На NEWSONE: ПОЛНАЯ ВЕРСИЯ 08.11.20 ['CHRONOLOGY OF THE WEEK' with Vyacheslav Pikhovshek on NEWSONE: FULL VERSION 08.11.20]," YouTube, November 8, 2020.

<sup>22) &</sup>quot;Крым Не Вернётся в Украину! Шокирующее Заявление Епископа Церкви Томоса [Crimea Will Not Return to Ukraine! Shocking Statement by the Bishop of the Church of Tomos]," YouTube, October 19, 2020.

# Perception of Euromaidan by residents of the South and East



	in general	Odesa	Mykolayiv	Kherson	Dnipro- petrovsk	Zapo- rizhzhia	Kharkiv	Luhansk	Donetsk
"Please, tell which of the following 2 opinions is closer to your opinion? Euromaidan was"									
People's protest in support of the European path of development	35.4%	33.6%	53.4%	38.2%	41.9%	32.4%	47.1%	20.8%	4.9%
Struggle for power of anti-Russian, nationalist forces with the support of Western intelligence services	33.7%	32.6%	31.1%	33.8%	38.5%	49.5%	29.4%	24.8%	22.8%
It's hard to say	30.8%	33.8%	15.4%	27.9%	19,6%	18.1%	23.5%	54.4%	72.3%
"Please, tell which of the following 2 opinions is closer to your opinion? The events on the Maidan in late 2013 - early 2014 are"									
A rightful uprising of the people against the dictatorship	28.7%	25.7%	50.5%	40.9%	38%	22.3%	27.9%	7.1%	10.5%
Illegal coup d'etat	53.1%	50.2%	40.4%	43.9%	47.1%	61.5%	48.5%	46.8%	81.6%
None	5.2%	6.9%	4.9%	4.2%	1.5%	5.4%	11.3%	2.5%	2.5%
It's hard to say	13%	17.2%	4.2%	11%	13.5%	10.8%	12.3%	43.6%	5.4%

According to a survey conducted by the KIIS for the Detector Media

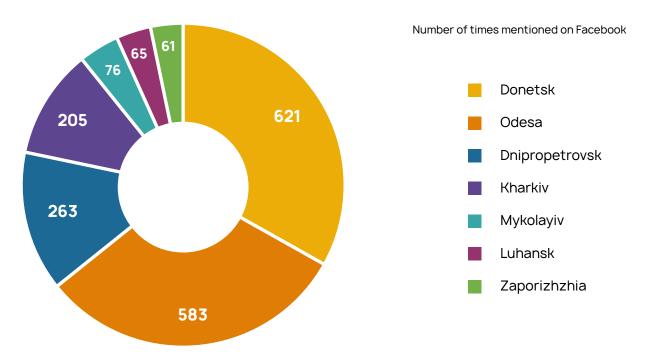
Another narrative: "The Maidan was a mistake." Propagandists claim that the Revolution of Dignity was in fact an armed coup d'etat, everyone in Ukraine lived better before the Maidan, and the "coup" caused Ukraine to lose Crimea and experience a civil war. This narrative often occurs in local media and is retransmitted onto social networks in both posts and in comments.

For example, a <u>publication on the "6451"</u> website claims that the birth rate after the Revolution of Dignity fell sharply, whereas in fact, the birth rate had begun to decline before 2014<sup>24</sup>. The highest level of media agitation against the Maidan and its participants is present in the media and social networks of Odesa region. The tragedy in the House of Trade Unions on May 2, 2014 comes up frequently in this context. During the monitoring period, this event was mentioned more than

<sup>23) &</sup>quot;Это Пропасть'. В Украине с 2014 Года Стало Рождаться На 40% Меньше Детей ['This Is the Abyss." In Ukraine, since 2014, 40% Fewer Children Were Born], " 6451.com.ua , September 9, 2020.

# Mentions of "Soros boys" in a negative context in local Facebook publics





70,000 times on social networks. For Odesa, this topic is conflicting: various political forces are trying to use it to advance their interests and accuse opponents. The leader of Opposition Platform - For Life, Yuriy Boyko, in remarks promoting Odesa mayoral candidate Odesa Mykola Skoryk, wrote: "Odesa needs justice - in the investigation of the tragedy of May 2, 2014, in the issues of free use of native language, in ensuring affordable tariffs and much more. And we can achieve that"24. This post gained more than two thousand likes and 320 shares. In comments, the May 2 tragedy was called "Odesa Khatyn", blaming Verkhovna Rada Speaker Oleksandr Turchynov and National Security and Defense Council Secretary Andriy Parubiy. Since August, when protests began in Belarus, pro-Russian media and social media manipulators have been actively comparing events there with the Maidan. In particular, it was claimed that if the protests succeed, Belarus will fall into decay, "as Ukraine did."

In Ukraine, compared to <u>2015 data</u>, the overall rate of support for the thesis that "The Maidan

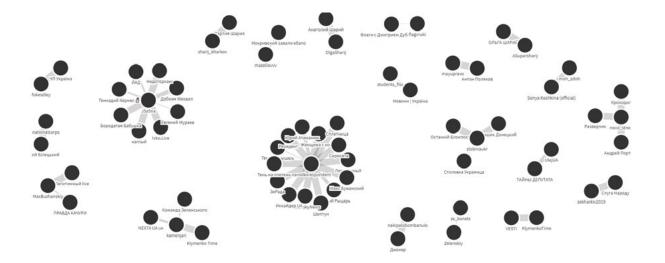
was a popular protest in support of the European path of development" among residents of the target regions decreased by 10 %25. In contrast, the share of those who chose the "hard to say" option increased by 10 %. Almost half of those polled in Zaporizhzhia region consider the Maidan a "struggle for power by anti-Russian forces with the support of Western secret services." Interestingly, almost 55 % and 72 % of respondents in Luhansk and Donetsk regions, respectively, could not answer which opinion was closer to them. It is also interesting that a change of emphasis in the questions about Euromaidan shows other results. The first question contrasts "rebellion against dictatorship" and "illegal coup d'etat." The second one contrasts "pro-European protest of people" with "a struggle of nationalist forces using the support of the West." The respondent, for example, may consider Euromaidan an "illegal coup d'etat", but at the same time recognize it as a "people's protest for European integration." This indicates a lack of clear understanding and attitude to Euromaidan in the public opinion of the population of the South and East.

<sup>24)</sup> Yuriy Boyko personal Facebook page, accessed October 12, 2020.

<sup>25) &</sup>quot;Russian Propaganda Efficiency Index," Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, March 2015.

#### Telegram channel connections





Close to the anti-Maidan narrative is the widespread and increasingly popular "external management" narrative. It includes claims such as "the International Monetary Fund rules Ukraine", "civil society organizations are a US agent network", as well as the use of the offensive term "Sorosiata" to describe people who have or have had ties to international institutions or who receive grants. This term was rarely used until the fall of 2019, when it began to be applied to government officials from the team of then-Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk. On the national level, Channel 112 presenter Anna Stepanets sarcastically wondered if there were things in Ukraine that the country had not yet given to the United States<sup>26</sup>. Yevhen Chervonenko, a former member of the Verkhovna Rada and a former Minister of Transport, believes that they (West) were trying to make Ukraine a world prostitute<sup>27</sup>, while presenter Diana Panchenko in this bloc directly and unequivocally called the joint strengthening of the Ukrainian Navy with Britain "selling off the country" 28.

In general, during our monitoring period, the majority of messages feeding the narrative of "external management" were recorded on social networks in Donetsk and Odesa regions.

The main source of messages about "Sorosiata" and "external management" is Telegram channels, as the anonymous nature of the channels helps to disseminate information about conspiracy theories harmoniously. During our monitoring period, about four thousand were recorded connected to this topic. For example, one of the anonymous Telegram channels writes: "SS is not bad. They even have one goal with the SS - to reduce the population in Ukraine. Our new SS-men (Soros's Servants) just stretched the Ost Plan a bit and renamed their divisions. Modern SS units include: SS divisions "Voice" [ed. a liberal-democratic political party started by rockstar Sviatoslav Vakarchuk] and SS "Servant of the People [ed. the political party of President Volodymyr Zelensky]. SS battalions "Savik Shuster" [ed. the host of the popular political talk show "Freedom of Speech"], etc.29

<sup>26) &</sup>quot;Политическое Ток-Шоу 'Пульс' На 112, 01.09.2020. Полное Видео [Political Talk Show 'Pulse' on 112, 09/01/2020. Full Video]," YouTube, September 1, 2020.

<sup>27) &</sup>quot;ЕВГЕНИЙ ЧЕРВОНЕНКО В ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОМ ТОК-ШОУ 'УКРАИНСКИЙ ФОРМАТ. ПРЕДИСЛОВИЕ' 07.10.20 [EVGENY CHERVONENKO in the Political Talk Show 'UKRAINIAN FORMAT. PREFACE' 07.10.20],".

<sup>28) &</sup>quot;УКРАИНСКИЙ ФОРМАТ' Ha NEWSONE 07.10.20: ПОЛНАЯ ЗАПИСЬ ПРЯМОГО ЭФИРА ['UKRAINIAN FORMAT' on NEWSONE 07.10.20: FULL LIVE RECORDING]," YouTube, October 7, 2020.

<sup>29)</sup> Telegram, <a href="https://t.me/Ten\_NaPleten/698">https://t.me/Ten\_NaPleten/698</a>



There is also a channel on Telegram called "Sorosiatas", which publishes daily manipulations and fakes about politicians, civil servants and public figures<sup>30</sup>. During our monitoring period, the channel had 19,000 subscribers and had a reach of 8 million people. This coverage was obtained as a result of cross-posting – similar channels regularly share each other's posts. In particular, there is a clear connection between the "Legitimate", "Resident", "Dark Knight", "Dubinsky.pro", "Whisperer", "Maxym Buzhanskyi" and "Klymenko Time" channels. These channels cite each other at least 3-4 times a week.

According to our survey, residents of the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine tend to believe in the "external management" narrative: 69 % of respondents believe that cooperation with the International Monetary Fund makes Ukraine externally governed, whereas 20% believe that cooperation with the IMF provides necessary

assistance. 58 % of respondents believe that since 2014, the most important decisions in Ukraine have been made under the influence of Western countries, whereas 24 % believe that decisions are made by Ukrainian politicians. 42 % see anti-corruption infrastructure as a tool for the external governance of Ukraine, while only 18 % see it as a means of fighting against corruption. In all areas, respondents preferred to choose interpretations which echoed the "external governance" narrative. Amid the popularity of conspiracy theories and gossip, this trend is very alarming and requires the attention of responsible institutions from Ukraine and the EU and NATO. Integrated, systematic and comprehensive communication of Ukraine's cooperation with international organizations and other states is needed. It is important to build an empathic system of dialog not only at the national level but also at the local level, especially in the context of decentralization.



THE CORONAVIRUS
DISEASE PANDEMIC HAS
AFFECTED THE UKRAINIAN
INFORMATIONAL SPACE
AS WELL AS ITS PUBLIC
HEALTH.

There are a number of disinformation narratives associated with it, chiefly the coronavirus denial or reduction of its danger.

There are whole groups on social networks, such as the "STOP Fake Pandemic" Facebook group, which spread such disinformation, as well as organize protests in Kyiv and in the regions. According to our survey, the majority of residents of the southern and eastern regions (54%) believe that the coronavirus is of artificial origin, whereas 25 % believe that the virus is naturally-occurring. The survey further showed that 47.5 % believe that coronavirus treatments do not exist, whereas 18% believe that "coronavirus drugs exist, but they are being hidden."

As has happened in many other countries, the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic in Ukraine prompted some media, politicians and users of social networks to actively promote conspiracy theories. 5G conspiracy theories, which hold that 5G technology either "transmits" the coronavirus disease or is itself the real cause of the CoV-SARS-2 disease rather than the COVID-19 pathogen, are common. Other conspiracy theorists claim that Bill Gates, George Soros, the Rockefellers, Elon Musk and/or the World Health

Organization are the <u>pandemic's main culprits</u><sup>31</sup>. One recent <u>post has been circulating</u> recently claiming that coronavirus is a WHO fraud<sup>32</sup>.

The proliferation of the 5G conspiracy has even led to calls for a ban on the technology in Ukraine, and a petition against the technology<sup>33</sup>.

The President was forced to reassure the public that the technology was safe.

The spread of the coronavirus has also resurrected old hoaxes about the existence of "US military laboratories" in Ukraine<sup>34</sup>. Members of parliament from the ruling Servant of the People (SoP) party have spread the claim that the coronavirus is a "biological weapon" 35 and even called it a "fictional disease" 36 that does not exist. Olha Vasylevska-Smahlyuk called the disease "a marketing move to sell more masks" 37. SoP MP Yevhen Shevchenko stated that the coronavirus will be defeated by "our Ukrainian sun'38. Fellow SoP MP Yuriy Kamelchuk has repeatedly disseminated conspiracy theories, saying on a broadcast of the NASH TV channel that the coronavirus disease COVID-19 is a "fiction", as would be any vaccine against any disease<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>31) &</sup>quot;Fakes during Pandemic - Monitoring," MediaSapiens

<sup>32) &</sup>quot;МАНІПУЛЯЦІЯ: Пандемія COVID-19 – Це Повторення Сценарію Свинячого Грипу [MANIPULATION: The COVID-19 Pandemic Is a Repeat of the Swine Flu Scenario]," VoxUkraine, January 18, 2021

<sup>33) &</sup>quot;Жителів Почаєва Закликали До 'Стояння' Проти 5G, Якщо Їм 'Не Байдуже Життя Дітей [Pochayev Residents Urged To 'Stand' Against 5G If They Don't Care About Children's Lives]," Detector Media, June 25, 2020

<sup>34) &</sup>quot;'<u>Американские Лаборатории в Украине': Медведчук и '1+1' Реанимировали Российский Фейк</u> [American Laboratories in Ukraine ': Medvedchuk and' 1 + 1 'Revived Russian Fake]," MediaSapiens, May 1, 2020

<sup>35) &</sup>quot;'<u>Слуга Народу' Мошенець Вважає Коронавірус 'Одним з Різновидів Біологічної Зброї'</u> ['Servant of the People' Moshenets Considers Coronavirus 'One of the Types of Biological Weapons']," MediaSapiens, January 18, 2021

<sup>36) &</sup>quot;Нардеп Камельчук Вважає, Що Вакцина Від COVID-19 Може Допомагати Людям 'Через Їхні Переконання' [MP Kamelchuk Believes That the Vaccine against COVID-19 Can Help People 'Because of Their Beliefs']," MediaSapiens, December 18, 2020

<sup>37) &</sup>quot;Депутатка: Частина Фракції 'Слуга Народу' Вважає, Що Коронавірус - 'Маркетинговий Хід' [MP: Part of the Faction 'Servant of the People' Believes That the Coronavirus - 'Marketing Move]," Hromadske, February 13, 2020

<sup>38) &</sup>quot;'<u>Украинский Формат' Ha NEWSONE, 08.04.20: Полная Запись Прямого Эфира</u> ['Ukrainian Format' on NEWSONE, 08.04.20: Full Recording of the Live Broadcast]," YouTube, April 8, 2020

<sup>39) &</sup>quot;Сюр. Нардеп-Антивакцинатор Из Слуги Народа Назвал 'Выдумкой' Болезнь COVID-19 [Sur. An Anti-Vaccine MP from the Servant of the People Called the COVID-19 Disease 'Fiction']," LIGA, December 14, 2020



The fact that this disinformation has been disseminated by members of the President's own party has created a serious dissonance in society. People see that the same party which is sowing disinformation about the severity and nature of the coronavirus is also voting for the creation of special "coronavirus funds", extending quarantine measures in the country, and taking other measures to fight the pandemic.

Disinformation about pandemic containment measures is also widespread. The problem is particularly acute regarding face masks, with disinformation sources claiming that they are ineffective against the pandemic, do not protect against the virus, harm health, violate personal freedom and turn people into slaves.

Social network posts have encouraged people to ignore quarantine measures.

In our survey, 49% of respondents considered quarantine and other restrictions during the epidemic to be necessary. Over one in four - 26% - believed on the other hand that the

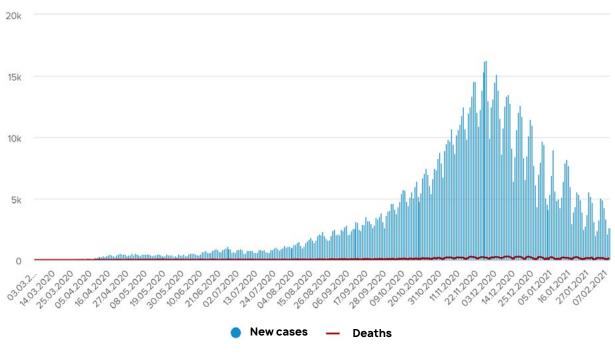
danger of coronavirus was exaggerated, and quarantine and restrictive measures are not needed. 49 % of respondents believed that Ukraine and Russia were equally ineffective in combating the pandemic. We can conclude that the government's communication with citizens about the coronavirus pandemic, the need for lockdowns, and prevention measures has been rather ineffective. The government's communication efforts have also been undermined by the disinformation disseminated by the pro-Russian media and their speakers, including SoP representatives.

Many manipulations and fakes are related to vaccination. The anti-vaccination movement existed in Ukraine before the epidemic, as evidenced by groups like the organization "Vaccination: Free Choice" 40. Our monitoring of fakes and manipulations about the coronavirus showed a considerable amount of disinformation concerning vaccines and vaccination. For example, an outlet linked to OPFL reported that "the United States allegedly banned Ukraine from buying the Russian vaccine"41.

<sup>40)</sup> Facebook page Vakcinaciya.Vilnyi.Vybir

<sup>41) &</sup>quot;Оппозиционная Платформа – За Жизнь: Давление Посольства США с Целью Помешать Борьбе с Коронавирусом в Украине – Акт Агрессии Против Украинского Народа [Opposition Platform - For Life: US Embassy Pressure to Thwart the Fight against Coronavirus in Ukraine - an Act of Aggression against the Ukrainian People]," 112.ua, October 17, 2020

# New cases of Covid-19 and the number of deaths in Ukraine



Data of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine (as of February 9, 2021)

A number of anonymous Telegram channels have claimed that "Ukraine will not buy the Russian vaccine because of ideological principles." Other reports stated that "Russia will supply vaccines to the People's Republic of China, Moldova and Transnistria." This news was presented to show Russia as "defending its own" and show that Russia is supposedly ready to help those loyal to it, but that Ukrainians will be left with nothing because of their government's rejection of Russia.

Opponents of vaccination have also levelled criticism against former Health Minister Uliana Suprun, whom they accuse of forcing through failed health care reform and desiring to "destroy the Ukrainian nation." At the same time, Ms. Suprun is often mentioned in the context of the "external management" narrative as one of the most influential Ukrainian sorosiata.

Disinformation narratives about the Russian Sputnik-V coronavirus vaccine are worth noting. Media linked to Viktor Medvedchuk began to promote the idea of purchasing the then-untested and questionable vaccine in the autumn, while stressing that Ukraine "refused the vaccine because of Russophobia". The same message was spread by anonymous Telegram channels. The campaign to promote the Russian vaccine in nationwide and regional media began in early October with the spread of manipulative reports about Viktor Medvedchuk's agreement with the Russian authorities on the supply of the Russian vaccine<sup>42</sup>. Then the discussion moved to talk shows on channels controlled by OPFL, where there was almost no room for backing other opinions, except for the expediency of the immediate purchase of the Russian vaccine (which at that time, as now, was not proven effective and safe)43.

<sup>42) &</sup>quot;Моніторинг (Про)Російської Дезінформації в Українських Медіа За 5–11 Жовтня 2020 Року [Monitoring of (pro) Russian Disinformation in the Ukrainian Media on October 5-11, 2020]," Detector Media, October 21, 2020

<sup>43) &</sup>quot;Усі Говорять Про Російську Вакцину Від COVID-19. Вона Справді Існує, і Ми Врятовані? [Everyone Is Talking about the Russian Vaccine against COVID-19. Does It Really Exist and Are We Saved?], "MediaSapiens, August 13, 2020



The media of all target regions spread a frame constructed by propagandists, in which Medvedchuk allegedly agreed to supply the vaccine (although he did not have such authority), and the government for political reasons refused a drug that could save the lives of Ukrainians. One of the highlights of the Russian vaccine manipulation during the local elections was the fake about the US embassy, which allegedly prohibited the Ukrainian authorities to buy Russian vaccines (in fact, the embassy's message was a retelling of the Ukrainian government's position, not the other way around)44. Disinformation about the Russian vaccine was combined with calls to vote for OPFL, which allegedly will buy the drug immediately when it comes to power (in particular, Odesa

mayoral candidate Mykola Skoryk <u>made this</u> <u>promise</u> to Odesa voters)<sup>45</sup>. Usually, materials and literature about the Russian vaccine did not state the official position of the Ukrainian authorities on their principles of vaccine selection and purchase.

Despite the prevalence of disinformation about the coronavirus, the official channel of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine - "Coronavirus info" - has been the most popular Ukrainian Telegram channel since March 2020<sup>46</sup>. As of mid-January 2021, the channel has 666,000 subscribers. The dynamics of growth and decline of subscribers to this channel reflects society's "fatigue" with the coronavirus: in April, at the peak of its popularity, the channel had almost a million subscribers.

<sup>44) &</sup>quot;Топдесятка Проросійських Фейків в Українських Медіа Під Час Виборів-2020 [Top Ten pro-Russian Fakes in the Ukrainian Media during the 2020 Elections]," Detector Media, November 9, 2020

<sup>45) &</sup>quot;Кремлівська Вакцина Від Коронавірусу є, а Від Демократії - Немає. Огляд Проникнення Російської Пропаганди в Український Медіапростір у Жовтні 2020-Го [The Kremlin Has a Vaccine against Coronavirus, but Not Democracy. Review of the Penetration of Russian Propaganda into the Ukrainian Media Space in October 2020]," Detector Media, November 17, 2020

<sup>46)</sup> Telegram, <a href="https://ttttt.me/COVID19\_Ukraine">https://ttttt.me/COVID19\_Ukraine</a>

## Covid-19 pandemic in Ukraine

Region	Patients	Recovered	Died	
Vinnytsia	28517	24380	547	
Volyn	37559	35091	598	
Dnipropetrovsk	69256	63432	1873	
Donetsk	45027 41543		995	
Zhytomyr	45609	42280	769	
Transcarpathian	33398	28565	770	
Zaporozhye	67276	61452	908	
Ilvano-Frankivsk	52141	44204	1005	
Kyiv region	70728	61026	1163	
Kirovograd	9984	7405	342	
Luhansk	14303	12455	413	
Lviv	73046	64462	2145	
Mykolaiv	39811	30047	720	
Odessa	82629	74730	1348	
Poltava	44072	40764	924	
Rivne	46734	44260	590	
Sumy	46538	43934	632	
Ternopil	38835	36442	554	
Kharkiv	79403	72735	1440	
Kherson	21079	19055	599	
Khmelnytsky	44908 41733		814	
Cherkasy	46645	42697	580	
Chernivtsi	47192	41536	902	
Chernihiv	34389	28991	682	
Kyiv city	130567	0567 81389		

Data of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine (as of February 9, 2021)

## Covid-19 pandemic in the occupied Crimea

Region	Patients	Recovered	Died
Crimea	33681	28887	826
Sevastopol	10565	9417	425

Unofficial data announced by the occupying power (as of February 9, 2021)



Both national disinformation narratives ("external government", "Nazi state", etc.) and local ones showed up in local election coverage and discussions. Our monitoring recorded special informational campaigns directed against specific candidates and political forces - for example, the <u>alleged luxury real estate</u> holdings of the candidate Mykolayiv mayoral candidate Oleksandr Senkevych or allegations of "embezzlement of budgetary funds" which spread rapidly over social networks despite their lack of evidence<sup>47</sup>. The political forces that used disinformation narratives the most (in cases when the customer could be identified) were OPFL and the Party of Shariy, led by popular anti-Maidan blogger Anatoliy Shariy. On the other hand, there were also attempts to mobilize the pro-Ukrainian electorate in favor of the European Solidarity party with the help of disinformation narratives.

The vitality and effectiveness of disinformation narratives in the local media space is largely a result of a lack of quality local media from which people can obtain truthful information and, in particular, fact check false information. In the absence of such, people turn to national mass media (including toxic outlets, such as those of the Medvedchuk group), Russian sources, or diverse local groups dedicated to various topics, but often positioned as the ones sharing valuable rumors on social networks. For example, the regional Telegram channel <u>Huyovaya Odessa</u> (roughly translated from Russian as "F\*\*\*ed Up Odesa") is among the top twenty Telegram channels in Ukraine with 190,000 subscribers<sup>48</sup>. No Odesa media – television channels, news websites, or radio stations, let alone print media can reliably reach such an audience. Local groups are often not actually moderated or have opaque moderation, so anyone is able to disseminate information (and disinformation) about candidates and their political parties. In the same groups, users tried to both promote and attack different candidates. We recorded similar cases in moderated groups and on pages where random information was not allowed to appear. We can conclude that those kinds of posts on moderated groups were posted for money.

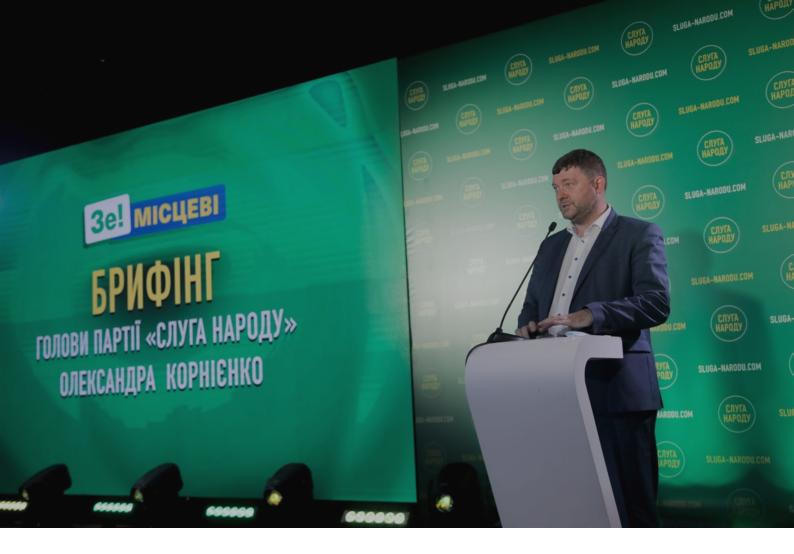
What social networks and/or messengers do you usually use to communicate and receive information in your interests? Select everything that fits



(% among respondents of the corresponding socio-demographic category)



<sup>47) &</sup>quot;'<u>Неудачный Фотошоп', - Сенкевич Ответил Домбровской Насчет Квартиры На Манхеттене [</u>'Unsuccessful Photoshop', - Senkevich Replied to Dombrovskaya about an Apartment in Manhattan]," НикВести - Новости Николаева, October 24, 2020.
48) Telegram, <a href="http://t.me/joinchat/AAAAAFIOSj5ZBloEC-eMhw">http://t.me/joinchat/AAAAAFIOSj5ZBloEC-eMhw</a>



Particular attention should be paid to Instagram, whose users are relatively younger than Facebook or Telegram users.

Memes, stories, creative videos and contests where users can win valuable prizes can all serve as means of conveying disinformation narratives.

Some information about candidates was presented in the form of unconfirmed rumors. It is hard to tell if these rumors flowed from offline to social media or vice versa. However, the experts interviewed by Detector Media say that ordinary offline communication can also be used to deliberately spread disinformation and hoaxes which originate from fictitious people. In any case, interpersonal communication is the

most effective way to disseminate unconfirmed information because people trust their people around them more than any news outlet. The results of our sociological survey show that since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the share of people receiving information from relatives and friends has increased significantly – from 11 % to 23 %<sup>49</sup>. In this way, hoaxes, rumors and conspiracy theories spread in the first place. However, there were also unusual cases, like premature reports of the death of Hennadiy Kernes<sup>50</sup>.

<sup>49)</sup> Detector Media. 2020. "Як Змінились Уподобання Та Інтереси Українців До Засобів Масової Інформації Після Виборів 2019 Р. Та Початку Пандемії COVID-19 [How Ukrainians' Preferences And Interests In The Media Have Changed After The 2019 Elections And The Beginning Of The COVID-19 Pandemic]". Kyiv.

<sup>50) &</sup>quot;<u>На Прямому Кернеса Назвали Путіним - Моніторинг</u> [On Kernes Direct, Putin Was Called Monitoring]," MediaSapiens, December 21, 2020.

Our focus group participants were roughly evenly divided on how they view information from their friends and family.

Some people trust this information, and some treat it with caution.

«WHEN YOU ON THE STREET OR ON A TRIP SOMEWHERE, YOU HAVE TO COMMUNICATE WITH OTHER PEOPLE. AND YOU WILL ALWAYS CONSUME SOME INFORMATION FROM THEM. SO YOU HAVE TO COMPARE EVERYTHING FOR YOURSELF AND DECIDE BELIVE OR NOT».

(woman, 57 y.o.)

«I TRUST THE INFORMATION I HEAR FROM PEOPLE I KNOW IN THE FIRST PLACE, RIGHT? TRUSTED PEOPLE I KNOW WHOM I CAN TRUST».

(woman, 25 y.o.)

For those who trust personal communication more, people elaborated it with personal contact, meaning that the best way to form an opinion is from horse's mouth.

«I ALSO SUPPORT THAT THE FACTS AND GENERAL INFORMATION WILL BE PRESENTED TO US ON TV AND ON THE INTERNET, BUT IT IS MORE INTERESTING TO COMMUNICATE WITH PEOPLE, BECAUSE IT IS LIKE LIVE COMMUNICATION. AND YOU WILL ALWAYS ARGUE AND AGREE, AND DIRECTLY ON THE EMOTIONS, YOU CAN ALSO FEEL SOMETHING LIKE THAT».

(woman, 57 y.o.)

The focus group participants themselves share information that interests them in various ways, but mainly through social networks and messengers.

«MESSAGE TO VIBER OR A CALL. IF IT'S SOMETHING IMPORTANT AND INTERESTING. I CAN TAKE A PICTURE OR SCREENSHOT AND SEND IT TO OTHERS».

(woman, 57 y.o.)

«WELL, I MOSTLY READ INFORMATION ON THE TELEGRAM. AND IF I LIKE THIS INFORMATION, I FORWARD IT TO MY FRIENDS ON THE TELEGRAM».

(man, 37 y.o.)

Bogus polls were a common feature of misinformation during local elections. Popular city Facebook groups, including "Odesa and everything that concerns it "51, "Info Dnipro"52, "Kharkiv Now" 53 disseminated the results of opinion polls without reference to their sources, who commissioned them, their methodology or other key information. Most of the "sociological groups" that allegedly conducted these polls did not actually exist or were shell organizations registered just before the election. There were special channels on Telegram which shared so-called "true polling results," such as the "Sociology I Kharkiv" 54 channel with more than nine thousand subscribers. In addition to sharing dubious poll results, these channels would also survey subscribers about their electoral preferences, which results could also influence subscribers.

Another popular narrative, the "disruption of local elections", was widespread at both the national and the local levels, and held that authorities planned to cancel or postpone the elections under the pretext of the coronavirus threat. This alleged intention was explained by the fact that the government is aware of its low approval ratings and did not want to give up leadership in the regions. This narrative was transformed as Election Day approached and it became increasingly clear that voting would take place. Attention was shifted to the preparation of "falsifications", which are supposed to make the 2020 local elections "the dirtiest in history" 55. It is noteworthy that the media associated with the OPFL leaders prolifically covered all real, imaginary and exaggerated cases of election violations until briefly after the vote, and then immediately stopped doing so.

<sup>51)</sup> Facebook, <a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/lodessal">https://www.facebook.com/groups/lodessal</a>

<sup>52)</sup> Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/INFODNIPRO/

<sup>53)</sup> Facebook, <a href="https://www.facebook.com/KharkovNow">https://www.facebook.com/KharkovNow</a>

<sup>54)</sup> Telegram, https://ttttt.me/sociology\_kh

<sup>55) &</sup>quot;<u>Ще Одні 'Найбрудніші Вибори'. Головні Тенденції Інфопростору 28 Вересня - 4 Жовтня 2020 Року</u> [Another 'Dirtiest Election'. The Main Trends of the Infospace from September 28 to October 4, 2020], "Vybory ta ZMI, October 6, 2020.



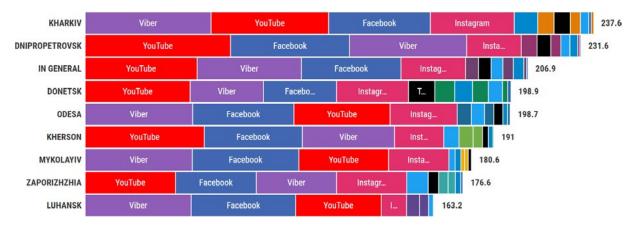
According to our analysis of the topics of posts on social networks, the most popular topics in all eight analyzed regions were national issues: the coronavirus epidemic, elections, the war, gas and utility prices, etc. However, each region had its own agenda and its own popular personalities. In Kharkiv region, most people the majority wrote about Kharkiv mayor Hennadiy Kernes (over 260,000 messages), in Odesa region - about Odesa mayor Hennadiy Trukhanov (over 230,000). in Dnepropetrovsk region - about Dnipro mayor Borys Filatov and oligarch Igor Kolomoiskyi (103,000 and 17,000 respectively), in Donetsk and Luhansk regions - about Rinat Akhmetov (17,000 and 4,000 respectively), in Zaporizhzhia region - about Zaporizhzhia mayor Volodymyr Buriak (62,000), in Kherson region - about the murdered activist Kateryna Handziuk (6,000), in Mykolaviv region - about Mykolayiv mayor Oleksandr Senkevych (80,000).

Kolomoiskyi, a leading national oligarch who is from Dnipro and is widely understood to be the top patron of President Volodymyr Zelensky, did not directly participate in the elections, but obviously acted as and was perceived as an enemy of the incumbent mayor Borys Filatov. Thus, during the election campaign, there were also attempts to attack him with messages such as "Kolomoiskyi is illegally influencing elections in Dnipropetrovsk region" and "Kolomoisky is responsible for separatism in Dnipro". Filatov was accused of embezzling city money and of other transgressions.

A lot was said about road construction in the regions, in particular about the presidential Great Construction program. In areas on the Black Sea coast, ports were an important topic, especially concerns about the danger of explosions at ports in the aftermath of the disaster in Beirut<sup>56</sup>. In Kherson region bordering Crimea, we observed special information operations aimed at inciting residents against the Ukrainian military in the region. In particular, we observed posts about the explosion of a military truck with ammunition near Kherson<sup>57</sup> and about a road accident with five victims involving a military vehicle<sup>58</sup>.

What social networks and/or messengers do you usually use to communicate and receive information in your interests? Select everything that fits.





According to a survey of residents of the South and East of Ukraine, which KIIS conducted for the Detector Media NGO About 30% of respondents do not use any social network or messenger

<sup>56) &</sup>quot;Вибух у Бейруті: Десятки Загиблих і Тисячі Поранених, Ліван Просить Світ Про Допомогу [Beirut Blast: Tens Dead and Thousands Injured, Lebanon Asks the World for Help]," ВВС News Україна, accessed March 30, 2021

<sup>57) &</sup>quot;<u>На Херсонщині Вибухнула Вантажівка ЗСУ, Яка Перевозила Боєприпаси (Фото)</u> [A Truck Carrying Ammunition Exploded in Kherson Region (Photo)]," Segodnya.ua, April 16, 2020

<sup>58) &</sup>quot;ДТП За Участю Колони Військових Автомобілів Сталася в Харківській Області, Постраждали 2 Цивільних (Фото) [Accident Involving a Convoy of Military Vehicles Occurred in the Kharkiv Region, 2 Civilians Were Injured (Photo)]," LB.ua, June 25, 2020



The crash of the AN-26 plane in Chuhuyiv was also discussed. There were posts which falsely claimed that the cadets on board jumped out of the plane, and that the plane hadn't even been authorized to take off because of technical problems. Disinformation and rumors about this story came up in both regional and national media<sup>59</sup>, including those voiced by politicians and political commentators, claiming that the plane crash was due to corruption, poor condition of Ukrainian aviation, etc, which had nothing to do with the fact of the crash. (112<sup>60</sup>, ZIK<sup>61</sup>).

In general, people were interested in the local affairs of their own regions, although during the elections, there was a noticeable shift in focus towards candidates and their election campaigns.

# How social networks are perceived and used in the regions

71% of respondents in our observed regions use at least one messenger or social network. The most common ones named were YouTube (52%), Viber (49%), Facebook (46.5%), and Instagram (30%). No more than 6% of respondents named other services. The Russian social networks Odnoklassniki and VKontakte, both of which are blocked in Ukraine, were named by only 6% and 5% of respondents, respectively.

<sup>59) &</sup>quot;Партійне Телебачення. Моніторинг Токшоу 28 Вересня - 2 Жовтня 2020 Року [Party Television. Talk Show Monitoring September 28 - October 2, 2020]." Detector Media, October 6, 2020

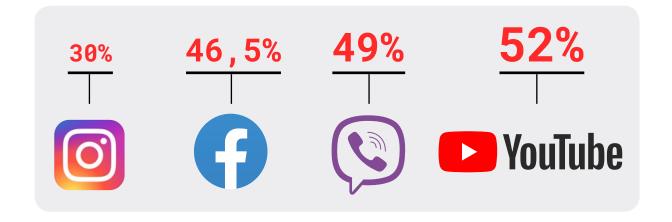
<sup>60) &</sup>quot;Просроченный Ан-26. Опасны Ли Самолеты-Долгожители и Как Пробег Сказался На Катастрофе в Чугуеве [Overdue An-26. Are Long-Lived Planes Dangerous and How Did the Mileage Affect the Crash in Chuguev?]," 112ua.tv, September 30, 2020

<sup>61) &</sup>quot;Перспектив - <u>Нуль: Через 5-7 Років Бойової Авіації в Україні Не Буде, - Лиходід</u> [Prospects - Zero: In 5-7 Years There Will Be No Combat Aircraft in Ukraine, - Lykhodid]," YouTube, October 1, 2020



These platforms differ in their function and content. Experts interviewed by Detector Media say that different social networks and messaging services facilitate different types of (dis) information dissemination. The "herd instinct", whereby a user joins a community and begins to trust it and the information he/she receives from it is common on Facebook. On YouTube, algorithms can form an "information bubble" in which a user receives a single set of information narratives and is insulated from all alternatives.

Even completely implausible fakes spread rapidly in groups and themed Viber channels, as there is often no common practice of referring to sources and verifying information. Fakes on social networks are not always spread with the intention to deceive others or force someone to do something. In part, people and online resources spread lies to attract attention and reach a larger audience. Sometimes they do it because they really believe in what they are writing.



## Twitter accounts with the largest coverage, writing on socio-political issues in Ukraine



<i>)</i>			Петро По	lетро Порошенко			Алексей РБК		ык <sup>Радио</sup>		Onliner		@kpru
						Пушко	В	CE	Свобода		Іяшко		пександр урчинов
Sviatoslav Vakaro	huk			Українська правда		Pavlo k	(limkin	Ron Skry		Собол Любо		,	MDK
		hroma	dske	. B		ЛІГА	.net	Vitaly Portnikov				еннади Зюгано	
TCH.ua (канал 1+1)							ana lenko	Максі	ім Кац	LB.ua	Геннад Гудко	nn þ	овна Наші да айни Гроші
		Arseniy Yatsenyuk	5 канал	удец Радіо Свобода		Свобода		Новости Донбасса	Vitalii Volochai	РБ головного мозга	Голос Америки	Офіс Президента	Голо Амери
				BBC News Україна	Андрій I	Тарубій	тётя	Роза	Сергей Удальцов	Znak.com	Volody Groysi		
Интерфакс		Snob	The Village	Kor	rrespondent.net	Kashin Q Kash	Papa Prislal	Олег Тягнибок	ИноСМИ	мвс	Ехидные	Ecnpeco	Volodymyr Ariev
				KUI	respondentinet		riislal			України	твиты		лдпр

Twitter differs from other social networks in that it holds the largest share of positive messages. We did not record outright misinformation among the most popular tweets of Ukrainian users. At least 15 % of the content from Ukrainian Twitter accounts is generally related to politics. Researching the activity of Ukrainian users on Twitter, we found that the most popular among Ukrainian Twitter users are politicians and public figures, as well as media accounts: hromadske, Ukrainska Pravda, TSN (1+1), Channel 5 and Channel 24. We also recorded a group of active accounts from Russia writing about Ukraine during the monitoring period - mostly propaganda and state media.

Telegram - a messenger with social network functions that has gained popularity in Ukraine in recent years - was one of the main forums of gossip, conspiracy theories, hate speech and disinformation narratives.

Forty nine of the 100 most popular Telegram channels in Ukraine classify themselves as "News and Media". Some of these channels do belong to the media, but the Telegram does not require official registration to be called a media outlet and news distributor. Thus, the majority of the most popular channels in this category are anonymous. The only means of communication with the authors are chat bots or links to the accounts of the managers responsible for advertising. In the top ten most popular Telegram "news" channels, six are ones which often publish "leaks", "insider scoops", "provocations" and clickbait, ignoring journalistic standards. Typical posts include "Porn Was Suddenly Shown on the Screen of the Central Railway Station of Kyiv", "Started with a tooth, finished without one", "P.S. ON what basis were Sternenko and Sentsov included in the rating of "politicians and public figures?".



The second, third and fourth most popular Telegram channels (places in the top after Coronavirus.info) are these types of channels.

Politician and blogger Anatoliy Shariy is not only the author of one of the most popular (over 230,000 subscribers) socio-political channels of the Ukrainian Telegram, but also one of the most frequently mentioned figures. Seven percent of content from channels with over 25,000 subscribers mentions Shariy. These are mostly reports about threats to Shariy's life and threats from his enemies (including right-wing politicians, Petro Poroshenko and the Ukrainian secret services). Anatoliy Shariy's posts are regularly shared on the above-mentioned anonymous Telegram channels, which position themselves as insiders in the dirty world of Ukrainian politics. The main keywords of the posts of these channels are "inside" and "rumor". Their anonymous posters claim that they have access to exclusive information and know the truth about Ukrainian politics.

One of the most common figures discussed on these anonymous Telegram channels is Presidential Administration head Andriy Yermak. He is depicted as a puppeteer who pulls all the strings in the Ukrainian government, managing everything in the state - from the war in Donbas to the crisis of the Constitutional Court.

In general, 2020 saw an increase in the number of manipulations in social networks. The share of fakes is still relatively large, but it is no longer just a matter of spreading false messages or trying to disorient audiences. We rather witnessed a systematic attempt to create a distorted picture of the world or a certain world view amongst audiences. Conspiracy theories, backroom chatter and gossip also accustom people to unverified information and undermine trust in quality media.

## The most popular telegram channels that write about socio-political topics

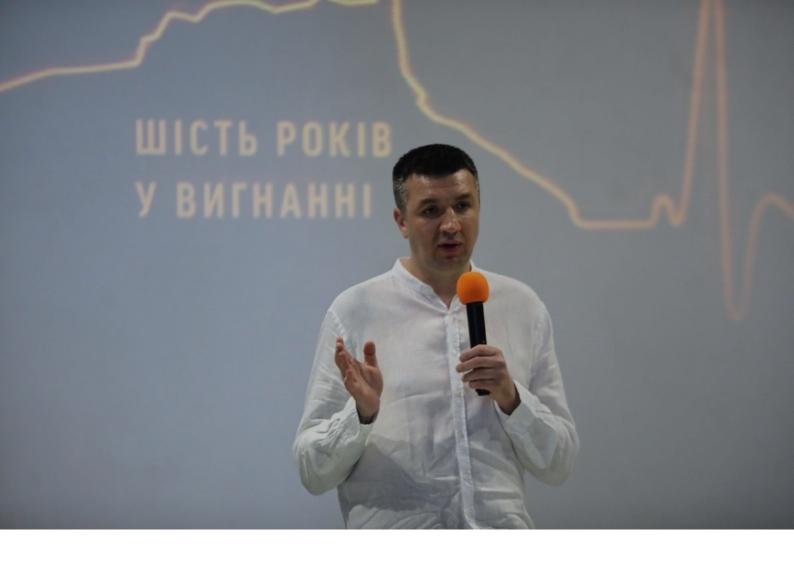












The people with the largest audiences on Ukrainian social networks are mostly politicians and public activists. These figures write on a wide range of topics affecting various aspects of socio-political life. Incumbent president Volodymyr Zelenskyi, former president Petro Poroshenko, and Fatherland party leader Yulia Tymoshenko have the greatest coverage. Volodymyr Zelenskyi is the leader on the relatively young Instagram, Poroshenko on the relatively older and more serious Facebook. Other social media leaders include Dr. Yevhen Komarovskyi, who writes frequently about the coronavirus, and Anatoliy Shariy.

Some of the top opinion leaders on social networks are people who either have a pro-Russian (or at least anti-Maidan) position (Anatoliy and Olha Shariy), or those who use in their work a "common" Russian-Soviet context (Dmytro Hordon).

When asked what political or public figures can be trusted, focus group respondents mostly stated that they have no trust in public figures, especially in politicians. The few respondents who did have trust in politicians indicated that they trusted President Volodymyr Zelenskyi and OPFL.

National trends on social networks coincided with the results of the regional sociological survey for only a few people, including Volodymyr Zelenskyi. Residents of the eastern and southern regions are less likely to follow national opinion leaders such as Petro Poroshenko or Yulia Tymoshenko (though, like the rest of the country, they do have President Zelensky as one of their top-followed figures). Instead, pro-Russian politicians are more popular in these regions. Respondents named Yuriy Boyko, Viktor Medvedchuk and Vadym Rabynovych (all of whom are top figures in OPFL) among the people they follow on social networks, none of whom are top figures on social media for the country as a whole.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyi is the top-followed figure in the eastern and southern regions, but not all of his followers feel positively towards him. Our survey shows that the majority of residents



of the eastern and southern regions think that Zelenskyi is weak, incompetent and dependent on the oligarchs (58% agree vs. 27.5% disagree), and that he is dependent on the European Union and the United States (59% agree vs 26% disagree). 67 % believed that he is honest but inexperienced and thus manipulated by others, while 17 % did not agree. 43 % believed that Zelenskyi had good intentions but betrayed his voters, while 33 % disagreed. It is worth noting that the common pro-Russian "Zelenskyi betrayed his voters" narrative was especially frequently disseminated by the media linked to OPFL: it was important for them to show voters who supported Volodymyr Zelenskyi and his party in 2019 that he had not lived up to their expectations (and therefore that they should vote for a different party)62. The president is usually accused of not fulfilling his election promises and refusing to protect Russian-speaking residents of Ukraine.

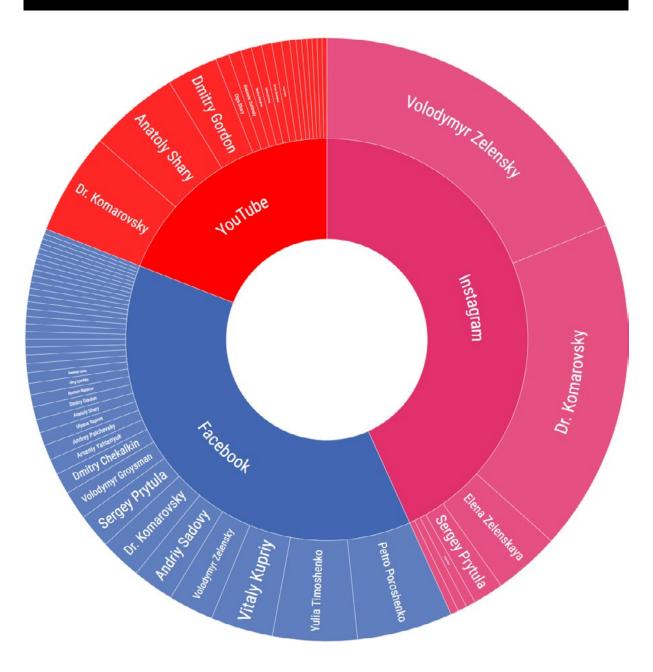
On the other hand, 54 % of respondents disagree (vs 31 % agreeing) with another popular pro-Russian narrative that Zelenskyi has continued Poroshenko's policies. 67 % disagree that Zelenskyi is controlled by pro-Russian forces (vs 13% agreeing), while 31 % believe he is controlled by nationalists and radicals.

Regional opinion leaders who write about socio-political topics. Top-50 national public opinion leaders have audiences of at least 125,000 followers, while the very top regional influencers can boast of audiences that size. The most popular are local politicians (mostly on Facebook) and community activists who discuss issues in their oblast (mostly on YouTube).

62) "Саурон і Саруман Проросійської Пропаганди. Підсумки Моніторингу Дезінформаційних Наративів Під Час Місцевих Виборів 2020 [Sauron and Saruman of pro-Russian Propaganda. Results of Monitoring of Disinformation Narratives during the 2020 Local Elections]," Detector Media, November 27, 2020.

## The most influential users who have written about socio-political topics







Based on our survey, we calculated the effectiveness index of Russian propaganda and compared the data of 2020 with the results collected in a 2015 survey by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in 2015. Our "effectiveness index" assesses a population's commitment to Russian propaganda on a 100-point scale, with zero points meaning no commitment, and 100 meaning total commitment.

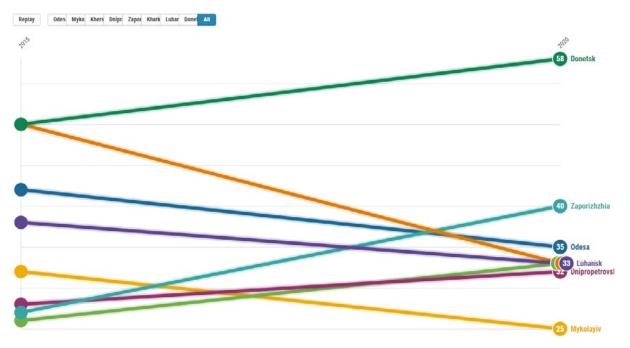
The overall figure for the eight eastern and southern regions remained unchanged at 37 points. On the other hand, while 19 % of respondents in 2015 had a score of 60-100 (i.e. they were rather sympathetic or very sympathetic to Russian propaganda), this figure fell to 13 % in 2020.

The share of respondents with scores of 0-40 (invulnerable or rather unsympathetic to Russian propaganda) increased marginally to 62 % in 2020 from 60%, in 2015. The respondents most sympathetic to Russian propaganda were those who named Medvedchuk's 112 TV channels, NewsOne and ZIK, among the outlets they trust.



## Commitment to Russian propaganda

0 points correspond to the minimum commitment to Russian propaganda, 100 points - the maximum commitment to Russian propaganda

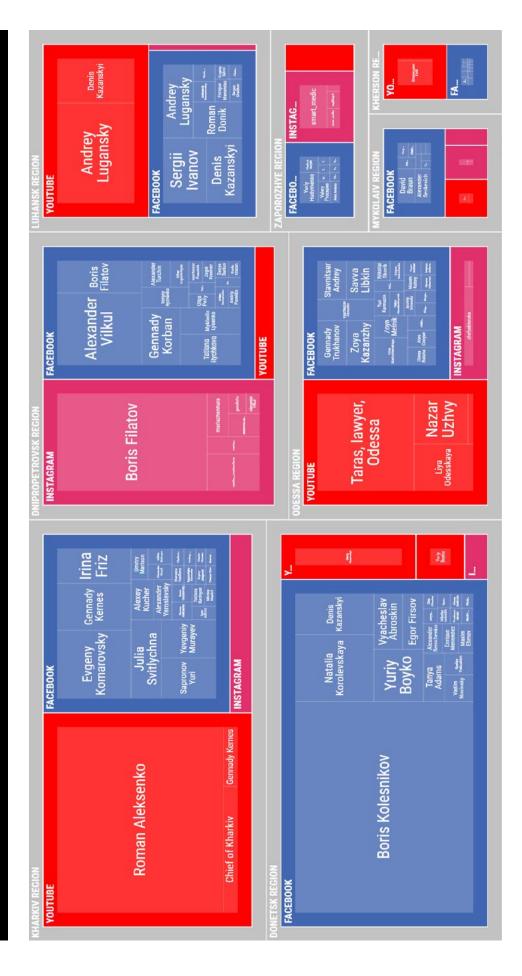


According to a survey conducted by the KIIS for the Detector Media



# Influencers by regions

Users with the greatest coverage among those who have written about socio-political topics



Now I will read to you names of some politicians, journalists, bloggers. For each of them, please tell us if you know him/her and if so, how often you follow him/her on television, on websites, on social networks or in Telegram channels: constantly / regularly, sometimes, I don't follow at all?



"/" devides the % among all respondents who know a certain politician, journalist and blogger, and % among all respondents who "constantly" or "sometimes" follow him/her on television, on websites, on social networks, etc

Personalities	in general	Odesa	Mykolayiv	Kherson	Dnipro- petrovsk	Zaporizhzhia	Kharkiv	Luhansk	Donetsk
Volodymyr Zelenskyi		99.8 / 78.9	100 / 74	99.8 / 76.2	99 / 67.2	98.2 / 29.6	98.5 / 75.7	93.6 / 48.3	99.5 / 32.1
Yuriy Boyko		97.1 / 48.3	86.8 / 37.7	90.2 / 41.4	92.6 / 22.3	85.3 / 30.9	94.1 / 52.5	7.75 / 4.56	98.3 / 30.9
Viktor Medvedchuk		96.1 / 48.8	92.4 / 37.5	91.9 / 37.3	89.5 / 20.6	83.8 / 31.4	92.2 / 43.1	83.6 / 30.1	98.5 / 30.4
Dmytro Hordon		80.9 / 32.4	86.3 / 21.8	67.9 / 22.3	84.8 / 39	79.4 / 26.2	88.7 / 59.8	62.7 / 21.3	93.9 / 8.6
Vadym Rabinovych		93.1 / 48.8	92.6 / 34.3	77.9 / 26.5	87.7 / 27.2	77.2 / 13.2	84.1738.7	71.3 / 22.1	93.9 / 23.3
Petro Poroshenko		99.5 / 45.1	99.8 / 21.3	99.5 / 38.5	98 / 14.2	97.8 / 20.8	96.8 / 36.3	91.9 / 5.1	96.6 / 3.7
Anatoliy Shariy		77.9 / 26	68.9 / 16.9	67.4 / 23.3	68.4 / 14.5	56.4 / 15.2	78.7 / 29.2	42.2 / 12.3	92.6 / 26.5
Andriy Palchevskyi		75.2 / 26.7	71.6 / 23	73.3 / 24.5	65.9 / 11	64.5 / 16.2	73.5 / 26.2	43.4 / 20.3	46.8 / 6.9
Vadym Karasiov		63 / 28.9	52.9 / 27.5	18.9 / 7.8	9.6 / 7.07	27 / 9.6	45.3 / 17.2	33.3 / 20.6	16.7 / 3.9
Olena Lukash		61.3 / 22.5	32.1 / 21.6	29.7 / 8.8	41.7 / 11.3	27.2 / 8.3	28.2 / 8.6	31.6 / 18.6	41.2 / 9.3
Andriy Portnov		58.8 / 16.4	60.5 / 25.7	31.6 / 15	41.9 / 10	31.9 / 9.1	39.7 / 12.5	30.4 / 11.5	60.5 / 5.1
Yevgeniy Kiseliov		62.7 / 16.9	56.1 / 11.5	28.4 / 5.6	59.1 / 10.8	42.9 / 8.3	70.6 / 21.8	25 / 3.9	77/6.9
Oleksiy Honcharenko		90.7 / 28.7	65 / 7.1	61.5 / 18.1	57.1 / 6.4	56.6 / 8.6	49.3 / 13.7	44.4 / 0.7	29.2 / 1.2
Oleksandr Dubinskyi		55.9 / 19.9	35 / 10.5	54.4 / 17.2	54.9 / 8.3	51.7 / 11	46.1 / 12	32.8 / 13.2	17.6 / 1.7
Mykola Veresen		59.6 / 16.4	66.2 / 9.6	51.7 / 13.5	61 / 12.7	43.1 / 8.6	67.9 / 15.9	37.3 / 1.7	29.2 / 0.2
Dmytro Spivak		66.7 / 32.1	32.8 / 19.6	15.2 / 5.4	22.8 / 2.2	22.8 / 8.8	21.3 / 4.2	32.4 / 19.1	27 / 4.7
Illia Kyva		69.4 / 13.5	74 / 20.1	54.9 / 12.5	62 / 10.5	9.9 / 67	47.5 / 9.8	59.8 / 8.1	59.3 / 2
Olena Bondarenko		44.6 / 12.3	20.6 / 11.5	27.2 / 9.1	30.9 / 7.1	27.5 / 6.9	22.5 / 11.5	27.7 / 15.7	42.2 / 11
Viacheslav Pikhovshek		49.3 / 22.1	39 / 14.5	41.2 / 11.5	28.2 / 5.1	28.9 / 7.1	34.1 / 11.3	29.2 / 8.3	11.5 / 0.5
Yevhen Chervonenko		65.2 / 16.4	33.1/9.3	27.7 / 8.6	35.5 / 5.9	44.4 / 8.6	28.7 / 7.4	36.5714.5	38.5 / 7.6

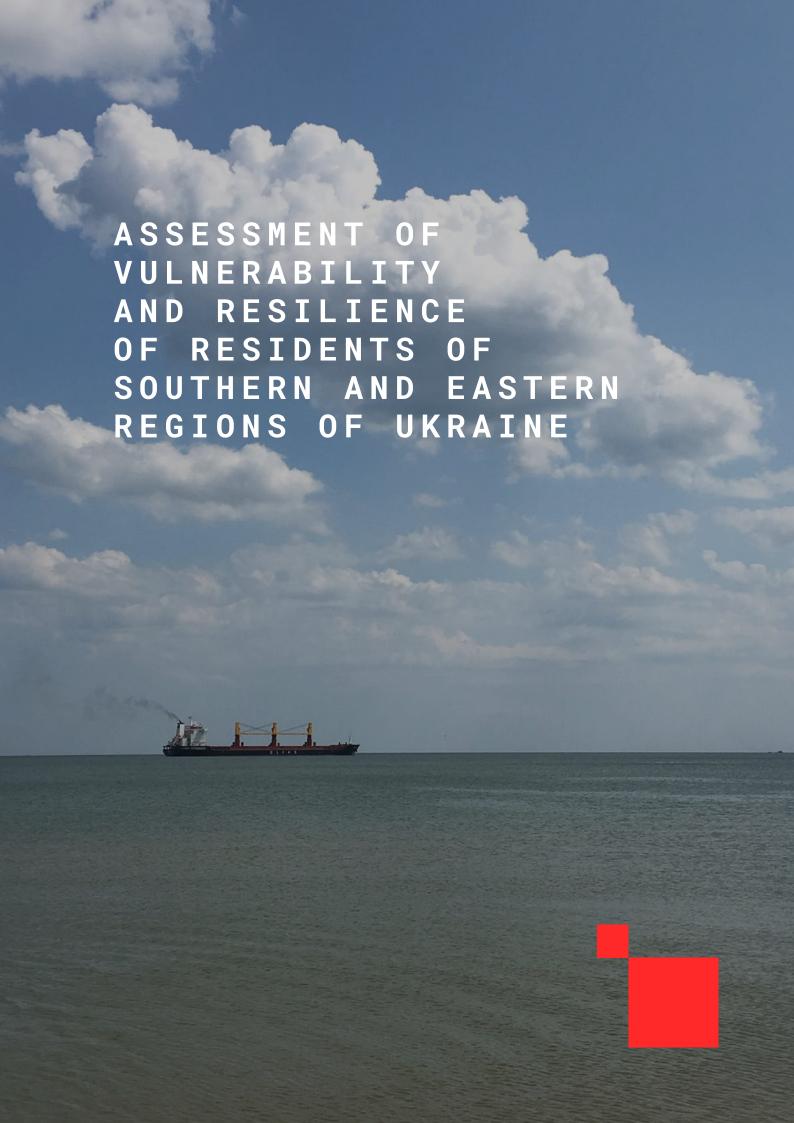
Matviy Hanapolskyi	56.6 / 15.4	66.4 / 9.1	35.3 / 6.4	56.1/9.3	39.7 / 6.6	45.3 / 13	36.8 / 2.2	42.2 / 0.5
Natasha Vlashchenko	22.8 / 4.9	18.1 / 8.3	8.6 / 2.5	29.4 / 8.3	14.5 / 5.1	27.9 / 10.3	31.4 / 10	34.1 / 6.4
Mykhailo Pohrebinskyi	31.4 / 8.1	34.1 / 14.2	28.2 / 8.8	27 / 5.4	26.5 / 5.1	22.1 / 6.1	20.6 / 6.6	8.1/1
Renat Kuzmin	31.1 / 4.9	26.5 / 15.9	25.5 / 6.9	23.8 / 3.4	21.8 / 4.4	15.4 / 3.2	28.9 / 13.2	46.6 / 5.4
Sonia Koshkina	38.5 / 10.5	6.9 / 3.9	23.5 / 4.7	27.7 / 4.4	19.6 / 3.4	25.7 / 5.9	12.3 / 0.2	5.6 / 0
Ruslan Bortnik	26 / 4.2	25 / 8.8	19.1 / 8.1	21.3 / 1.5	19.6 / 4.9	20.3 / 7.1	17.2 / 6.6	5.4 / 0.5
Maksym Buzhanskyi	22.1 / 2.7	7.8 / 5.6	12 / 2.2	38.5 / 4.9	16.9 / 4.7	20.8 / 9.1	13.7 / 0.2	15.9 / 0.5
Oleh Voloshyn	25.7 / 5.4	22.8 / 14.5	10 / 3.9	17.9 / 0.7	16.7 / 4.9	14.2 / 3.9	22.3 / 9.8	10 / 0.7
lhor Palytsia	58.3 / 10.8	35.5 / 2.5	25.7 / 4.9	31.1 / 1.5	30.4 / 1.7	38.5 / 6.6	2.2 / 0.2	49 / 1
Roman Skrypin	22.5 / 2.7	5.4 / 1.2	11.3 / 3.7	24.8 / 7.4	11/2.7	18.4/3.4	3.2 / 0.5	24.5 / 1.2
Svitlana Kriukova	21.6 / 3.7	8.3 / 2.7	22.3 / 9.3	19.9 / 1.5	27.2 / 4.9	20.1 / 5.1	12.3 / 3.2	8.1 / 0.5
Pavlo Kazarin	30.1 / 4.9	7.6 / 1.5	22.1 / 3.7	24 / 3.4	18.9 / 2.2	22.174.7	7.1 / 1.2	3.7 / 0.2
Serhiy Sternenko	38 / 4.2	6.6 / 2.5	12 / 1.5	24 / 4.9	14 / 2	19.6 / 2.9	1.7 / 0	7.1 / 0.2
Denys Bihus	12.7 / 0.2	10 / 5.1	6.9 / 1.5	23 / 4.2	14.5 / 1	16.4 / 6.6	1.2 / 0	5.1 / 0.2
Yevheniy Cherniak	15.4 / 2.5	1.7 / 1	7.4 / 1.7	15 / 1.5	34.6 / 5.9	18.4 / 5.6	2.9 / 0.5	9.8 / 0.7
Kostiantyn Bondarenko	18.6 / 2.7	7.1 / 2.2	15.4 / 4.4	20.8 / 1.5	15 / 2	15.2 / 4.9	4.7 / 1.5	7.4 / 2
Yevheniy Balytskyi	23.3 / 2.9	2.9 / 0.7	7.8 / 1.7	16.7 / 0.2	25.7 / 4.2	9.6 / 2.2	2.7 / 0.2	27 / 7.4
Andriy Poltava	16.9 / 1	7.1 / 2.7	18.4 / 4.4	27.5 / 3.9	10 / 2	13.2 / 3.4	0.270	9.1 / 0.7
Yuliya Mostova	21.1 / 2.9	3.7 / 1.5	14 / 2	17.6 / 1.5	15.7 / 1	15.4 / 5.9	0.5 / 0	5.1/0
Denys Kazanskyi	20.6 / 2	3.7 / 1	8.1 / 0.7	19.6 / 3.7	13.7 / 2.5	14.7 / 3.2	5.6 / 0.7	5.4/0
Svitlana Orlovska	20.6 / 4.2	16.9 / 3.2	4.7 / 1.2	20.8 / 1.7	10.5 / 1.5	9.6 / 1.2	12.7 / 0.5	3.9 / 0.2
Yuriy Tkachov	17.2 / 1.7	1/0	12.3 / 3.4	21.6 / 1.7	19.1 / 2.2	14.2 / 2.2	1/0	7.1 / 0
Tetiana Danylenko	14.2 / 0.7	1.5 / 0.5	11.8 / 2.5	19.4 / 1.7	18.4 / 2.2	10.8 / 2.9	2.9 / 0.2	5.1 / 0.2
Roman Kravets	21.6 / 2.5	3.9 / 0.2	6.4 / 0.5	18.1 / 0.5	20.8 / 1	17.2 / 2.9	0.2 / 0	7.1 / 0
Mykhailo Tkach	14.2 / 0.7	4.2 / 0.5	2.5 / 0.5	22.3/2.2	14.7 / 0.7	9.1 / 2	0/0	8.3 / 0.2
Oleksiy Matsuka	13 / 0.2	0.270	5.4 / 0.7	17.2 / 0.2	12.7 / 2.5	14.5 / 2.9	0.770	25.7 / 1
Nataliya Sedletska	9.6 / 0.5	1.2 / 0.2	3.2 / 0.2	14.5 / 0.2	13.7 / 0.7	6.4/2	0/0	4.2 / 0

## Attitude to Zelensky



According to a survey of residents of the South and East of Ukraine, which KIIS conducted for the Media Detector NGO

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	in general	Odesa	Mykolayiv	Kherson	Dnipro- petrovsk region	Zapo- rizhzhia	Kharkiv	Luhansk	Donetsk
	"Volo	dymyr Zelen	skyi is a weak, ir	ncompetent, o	dependent on	the oligarchs p	oresident"		
Agree	57.8	67.9	63.7	65.2	47.5	60.8	60	58.8	48.5
Don't agree	27.5	19.9	29.4	27.7	34.1	27	31.9	12	24
Hard to say	14.7	12.3	6.9	7.1	18.4	12.3	8.1	29.2	27.5
	V	olodymyr Ze	elenskyi is a pre	sident who co	ntinues Petro	Poroshenko's	policy	·	
Agree	30.9	40.7	49.5	27.5	13.7	39	33.3	44.4	23
Don't agree	53.8	49.8	46.1	58.8	66.9	43.1	55.1	26.2	56.1
Hard to say	15.3	9.6	4.4	13.7	19.4	17.9	11.5	29.4	20.8
Volodymyr Zelenskyi is a president controlled by pro-Russian forces									
Agree	12.7	7.6	11.3	15.2	14.7	17.9	18.9	1.5	4.9
Don't agree	66.6	67.6	73.8	61	65.4	54.4	64.2	53.4	86.8
Hard to say	20.7	24.8	15	23.8	19.9	27.7	16.9	45.1	8.3
Volodymyr Zelenskyi a president who follows the lead of nationalists and radicals									
Agree	31.3	39.5	40.4	31.1	24.5	40.2	31.9	32.6	17.4
Don't agree	48.7	37.7	46.6	51.2	55.1	37.7	49.5	20.1	71.6
Hard to say	20	22.8	13	17.6	20.3	22.1	18.6	47.3	11
Volodymyr Zelenskyi is a president dependent on the US and the European Union									
Agree	59	74	74.8	53.7	45.8	54.4	61.5	75.5	51
Don't agree	25.9	11.8	16.4	30.9	37.5	26.7	27.2	6.6	30.9
Hard to say	15.1	14.2	8.8	15.4	16.7	18.9	11.3	17.9	18.1
Volodymyr Zelenskyi is an independent president who promotes Ukraine's integration with the West									
Agree	43.1	48.8	44.1	50	42.4	42.6	42.4	26.2	40.2
Don't agree	31.3	24.5	32.8	33.1	24.5	30.9	41.7	40.2	31.9
Hard to say	25.6	26.7	23	16.9	33.1	26.5	15.9	33.6	27.9
	Volodymy	r Zelenskyi i	is an honest bu	tinexperience	ed president w	ho is used by I	nis associate	es	
Agree	66.7	61.8	66.9	65	69.1	65.4	65.2	46.1	81.1
Don't agree	17.4	19.9	12.5	22.8	14.7	18.6	25	7.8	10.5
Hard to say	15.8	18.4	20.6	12.3	16.2	15.9	9.8	46.1	8.3
		Volodym	nyr Zelenskyi ha	d good intent	ions, but betra	ayed his voters	3		
Agree	43.4	49.5	53.4	49.3	28.9	45.6	51	31.4	42.6
Don't agree	33.4	23.5	30.1	31.4	44.4	34.3	38	20.6	26.7
Hard to say	23.3	27	16.4	19.4	26.7	20.1	11	48	30.6



During the preparation of our study in eight southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, we formulated the assumption that citizens' choice of certain statements about the internal and external situation of Ukraine allows to assess the scale of the spread and influence of Russian narratives. Separately, we also surveyed the prevalence of fake and unsubstantiated allegations about the coronavirus. These phenomena in general negatively affect the ability of citizens to critically perceive new information. We assessed: 1) Russian disinformation (interpretations of events and phenomena in Ukraine in a context inordinately favourable to Russia), 2) understanding of the coronavirus, and 3) beliefs about the "external management" of Ukraine.

Thus, the questionnaire included eight pairs of statements about the situation in Ukraine, three pairs of claims- various options for "external management" and three pairs about the coronavirus. Each of them contained a disinformation message (thesis) and an opposite statement (antithesis). Not all antitheses can be considered completely objective statements, but presenting them to respondents allowed us to measure how many absolute supporters and opponents of Russian narratives are present in the southern and eastern regions and identify (if possible) the factors that may influence respondents' choices in favour of disinformation theses or their antitheses.

At the same time, in order to avoid the situation of being forced to choose one of two statements which might not properly reflect their views, we offered respondents the option to disagree with both statements or indicate that they found it difficult to answer. Respondents could also decline to answer the question.

After receiving the results of the survey, we looked at which theses of Russian disinformation are most common in the southern and eastern regions and in which oblasts each disinformation thesis is most common. Thus, we will identify the most influential Russian narratives and the most fertile regions for their dissemination. For a more convenient perception of the seriousness of the problems, we will conditionally divide the regions into four groups: the "red" will include areas where an immediate and systematic response

is needed; "orange" will include areas where the seriousness of the problems will require action in the coming year; the "yellow group" will include regions where problematic issues may destabilize the situation in the next 2-3 years; and the "green zone" will be areas in which it is best to leave the situation to be handled by local civil society.

## No longer Russian narratives: Maidan, Russian entertainment and the heritage of the USSR

In all regions of Southern and Eastern Ukraine, bans on certain Russian artists and films are perceived negatively: from 52% of respondents in Kherson region to 92% of respondents in Donetsk region consider the bans to be a violation of their rights.

The next most common thesis is that Ukraine's "decommunization policy is aimed at rewriting history and denying the achievements and feats of the Soviet era:" it is least supported in Odesa region (39%) and the strongest in Luhansk region (59%).

So, the first preliminary conclusion is that the spheres of mass culture, and historical memory are most vulnerable to Russian disinformation. Unfortunately, these are the very issues in which it is impossible to achieve rapid and critical success, especially without proper investment. Countering these narratives requires both funds and trained professionals - artists, cultural and entertainment figures, teachers and professors of humanities, researchers and entire communities of scientists.

Bans that are not followed by offers of quality content, cultural products, and the promotion of historical and cultural heritage in a way that will interest new generations cannot change the situation. At best, bans will be only formal and ignored in practice. If the bans are enforced, people will react not so much to bans on "Russian" as to the intrusive policy of the Ukrainian state, which will again and again reproduce the attitude of non-acceptance of everything Ukrainian.

Although these narratives are related to the language issue, we did not see a link between the choice of Soviet nostalgia and/or Russian entertainment and the prevalence of the narrative of "Russian language persecution" and "forced Ukrainization." Only in Donetsk region did

the majority of respondents (65%) believe that "the Ukrainian government pursues a policy of ousting the Russian language from most spheres of life, even from household activity." In Odesa region, the opinion of respondents was roughly evenly divided: 42% agreed with the statement and 46% disagreed. In Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, and Kherson regions, most respondents did not believe that the Russian language was being persecuted. Only in Dnipropetrovsk and Luhansk oblast did such citizens do not form a convincing majority, as the share of "undecided" and disagree with both" respondents was quite high (26 and 35%, respectively).

However, the attitude of citizens to the 2014 Maidan is more worrying than the response to disinformation on the topic of "decommunization" and "Ukrainization". The Maidan revolution was considered by most residents in six regions to have been an "illegal coup d'etat": from 47% in Dnipropetrovsk region to 82% in Donetsk region. Only in Mykolaiv region did the majority (51% against 41%) believe the opposite, while in Kherson region opinion was roughly evenly (41% more in favour of the Maidan vs 44% more opposed).

These data should be compared with the results of the answers to two other theses; first with theses about the protests in Belarus. In Kharkiv (43%) and Zaporizhia (45%) regions - a plurality, in Donetsk region (60%) - the absolute majority believes that the 2020 protests in Belarus are "an attempt by the West to overthrow the legitimately-elected President Lukashenko". This is exactly the kind of narrative that Russia is still spreading about Maidan in Ukraine.

In two more regions, opinion is evenly divided. In Odesa, 40% believe that the protests against Lukashenko are inspired by the West, and 36% believe that this is an "uprising of the people against Lukashenko's election fraud." The situation differs slightly in Kherson region: here, 44% consider the protests an "uprising" and 40% consider them an "attempt to overthrow Lukashenko." Only in Dnipropetrovsk (49%) and Luhansk (40%) regions do pluralities consider the protests in Belarus to be an "uprising of the people".

On the other hand, there is a Russian thesis claiming that as a result of the Maidan, power

in Ukraine was seized by radical nationalists, who still control and influence the new Ukrainian president. At the same time, another disinformation thesis emerges from the more nationalist camp that President Volodymyr Zelenskyi is controlled by pro-Russian forces. In formulating the questions, we decided not to mention Zelenskyi, so that the respondents would not confuse their assessment with their attitudes towards his personality.

As a result, majorities in two regions (65% in Donetsk, 51% in Zaporizhia) agree with the thesis of the dominance of nationalists even after 2019. In three regions, the plurality of those who agree with "the dominance of nationalists" is balanced by an almost identical share who disagreed with both theses or who declined to answer: Mykolaiv (44% vs. 44% disagree/declined to answer), in Odesa (38% vs. 40%), and in Kherson (40% vs. 43%) regions.

Public opinion in Kharkiv region deserves special attention: here, the shares of people who believe that Zelensky's government is beholden to nationalists on the one hand and Russia on the other are almost identical, with 31 and 30%, respectively. A quarter (25%) disagreed with both statements and the remaining 14% were undecided. Luhansk region is also closer to Kharkiv region, where 35% believe that the government is beholden to nationalists, but almost no respondents believed that the current Ukrainian government was beholden to Russia. On the other hand, in Luhansk and Dnipropetrovsk regions, the majority directly rejected or hesitated to choose either of the two statements.

The least successful Russian narratives were those concerning: the war in Donbas and the volunteers who fought in it. Testing of both narratives is particularly important given the threat of Russia to breach the fragile ceasefire in Donbas and the resumption of active hostilities.

There was only one region, Zaporizhia, in which a plurality (48%) of respondents believed that the war in Donbas represented a "civil war". It was particularly interesting that in Donetsk region, 52% of respondents "selected 'disagree with both,' 'hard to say' or declined to answer."



However, the answers of the majority to other questions clearly show that in this case, the respondents avoided answers that conflict with mainstream attitudes.

This is also evidenced by the opinion of 59% of respondents in Donetsk region that "Volunteers who fought in the Donbas on the side of Ukraine, mostly went to the front for benefits, profits and high salaries." This is one of Russia's narratives aimed at strengthening the thesis about the "internal" nature of war and denying the fact of aggression by Russia. Only in Zaporizhia region did a majority of respondents (41%) agree with the negative assessment of the actions and motives of volunteers.

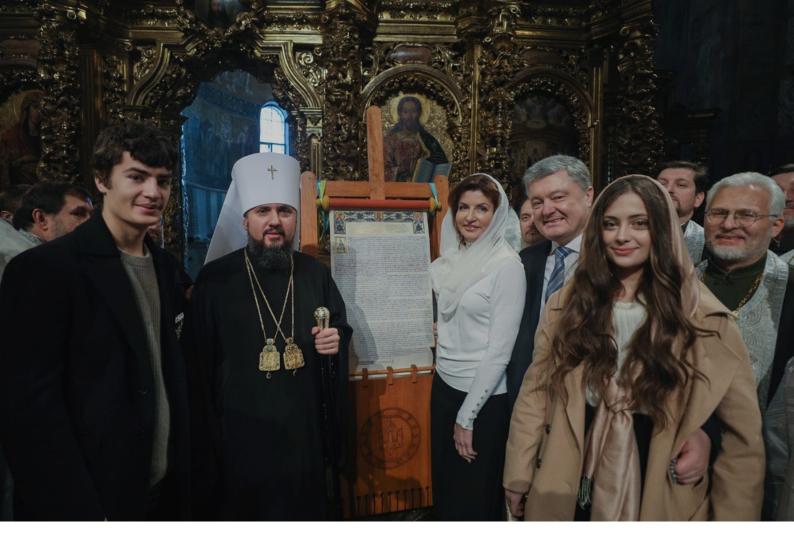
As a result, the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine can be divided into three groups according to vulnerability to the most common Russian narratives.

Donetsk and the adjacent Zaporizhia region are in the "red zone". All Russian narratives in these regions had the support of the vast majority of respondents.

Kharkiv and Odesa regions are in the "orange zone". In the Odessa region, the narrative of the oppression of the Russian language is combined with notions of nationalist control over the government. In the Kharkiv region, Soviet nostalgia is linked to an affinity for authoritarian rule and a rejection of the Maidan.

The "yellow zone" included Luhansk, Mykolaiv and Kherson regions: in all three regions, the Maidan was considered by most respondents to have been a coup that has benefited only nationalists who want to "rewrite history." In Mykolaiv, respondents also expressed concerns about the oppression of "Russian-speakers".

The only region in the "green zone" is Dnipropetrovsk region, which is also the location of President Zelensky's hometown of Kriviy Rih. While the level of non-acceptance of the Maidan is almost the same as in Kharkiv and Luhansk regions, attitudes towards language and memory policies are largely indifferent. The only problem is that these weaknesses continue to be exploited by the aggressor state.



# Is there a connection between the "external management" narrative and myths about the coronavirus?

Another important area of Russian disinformation was the spread of messages claiming that Ukraine is governed from abroad. In August 2020, a study by Detector Media and Democratic Initiatives Foundation found that the idea that "Ukraine is governed by the IMF" was held by at least 45% of respondents.

A study conducted by Detector Media in the southern and eastern regions in November 2020 showed that various theses on "external governance" are firmly entrenched in the minds of most citizens.

In particular, 82% of respondents in Donetsk region to 45% in the Kherson region agree with the thesis that "the most important decisions in the country are made under the influence of Western countries (USA, EU)." Only in Kherson did a significant share of respondents (39%) answer that they thought that Ukraine's governing decisions were being made independently.

In Luhansk, less than one percent of respondents thought so.

Donetsk and Luhansk regions furthermore had the greatest shares of those who think that cooperation with the IMF "puts Ukraine under external governance" and the lowest shares of respondents who saw this cooperation as beneficial for Ukraine. Therefore, according to these indicators, the entire Donbas region falls into the "red zone" of vulnerability to Russian disinformation about "external governance" of the country.".

The "orange zone" includes Kharkiv and Zaporizhia regions. These two regions neighbouring Donbas had the highest share of respondents believe in the "external governance" narrative (54% and 57%, respectively) and in the harmfulness of relations with the IMF (70% and 67%, respectively). The proportions of respondents who chose opposite theses are similar, too.

In the "yellow zone" were Odesa, Mykolaiv and Dnipropetrovsk regions: despite the fact

Table. Vulnerability and resistance to theses of Russian disinformation among Ukrainian and Russian speakers, believers of the OCU and ROCU

	Ukrainian	Russian	ocu	UOC-MP (ROCU)
In general, the Ukrainian government is pursuing a policy of ousting the Russian language from most spheres of life, even from household activity	25%	49%	23%	57%
In general, the Ukrainian government supports the Ukrainian language in state and budgetary institutions, but does not suppress the Russian language in most spheres of life and household activity.	55%	40%	55%	31%
The events on the Maidan in late 2013 - early 2014 were a rightful uprising of the people against a dictatorship	40%	21%	51%	10%
The events on the Maidan in late 2013 - early 2014 were an illegal coup d'etat	41%	62%	31%	73%
The "decommunization" policy is aimed at rewriting history and denying the achievements and feats of the Soviet era	42%	49%	35%	59%
The "decommunization" policy is aimed at restoring historical facts and eliminating the legitimization of the totalitarian Soviet regime.	30%	25%	38%	15%
Volunteers who fought in Donbas on the side of Ukraine mostly went to the front for benefits, profit and high salaries	21%	38%	20%	41%
Volunteers who fought in Donbas on the side of Ukraine mostly went to the front to protect their families and the independence of the state and their beliefs.	59%	35%	67%	22%
The protests in Belarus are an attempt by the West to overthrow the legitimately- elected, President Lukashenko	34%	42%	25%	51%
The protests in Belarus are an uprising of the people against Lukashenko's election fraud	44%	34%	55%	25%

that majorities there believe in the external governance narrative, the share of those who disagree with the narrative statements reaches as high as one third of respondents.

Kherson region falls conditionally into the "green zone".

A separate interesting issue is whether respondents viewed anti-corruption bodies as "elements of Ukraine's external governance" or as "independent bodies." It is important to note that in a number of regions, the share of respondents who rejected both statements or did not make a choice at all was higher than the share of those who chose one of the statements.

This can be interpreted to mean that respondents were only superficially aware of the work of these bodies, or may not have even known about their existence. We saw this particularly in Dnipropetrovsk, Luhansk, Odesa and Kherson regions.

However, most supporters of the thesis about the affiliation of "anti-corruption bodies" to the system of "external management" were in Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk regions), Zaporizhia, Kharkiv and Mykolaiv regions. This coincided with the observation of the vulnerability of these same regions to disinformation about "external management", except for Mykolaiv region.

But a comparison of the results of responses to a pair of statements which were hidden myths about the coronavirus, did not reveal any similarities between the regions, except for the issue of vaccination with the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. In Donbas, a 41% plurality of respondents in both Donetsk and Luhansk regions favuored the immediate purchase of a Russian vaccine because they trust its effectiveness.

If we compare the two groups of regions most vulnerable to Russian disinformation and to messages about "external governance", we see that residents of Donetsk, Zaporizhia and Kharkiv regions have been cross-influenced by several simultaneous disinformation campaigns. As a result, we can assume that the residents of these three regions would be most inclined to agree with the opinion that Ukraine as a state is on the

#### Table. Age distribution

	18-29 years old	30-44 years old	45-59 years old	60 years old and older
In general, the Ukrainian government pursues a policy of ousting the Russian language from most spheres of life, even from household activity.	33 %	37 %	38 %	45 %
In general, the Ukrainian government supports the Ukrainian language in state and budgetary institutions, but does not suppress the Russian language in most spheres of life and household activity.	54 %	47 %	46 %	41 %
Bans on certain artists and Russian films in Ukraine were necessary to protect the state	19 %	19 %	16 %	13 %
Bans on certain artists and Russian films in Ukraine restrict the rights of citizens and are unacceptable	64%	65 %	68 %	72 %
The "decommunization" policy is aimed at rewriting history and denying the achievements and feats of the Soviet era	26 %	38 %	53 %	60 %
The "decommunization" policy is aimed at restoring historical facts and eliminating the legitimization of the totalitarian Soviet regime.	34 %	30 %	26 %	21 %
The protests in Belarus are an attempt by the West to overthrow the legitimately- elected President Lukashenko	22 %	34 %	41 %	49%
The protests in Belarus are an uprising of the people against Lukashenko's election fraud	51 %	43%	35 %	30 %
The events on the Maidan in late 2013 - early 2014 were a rightful uprising of the people against a dictatorship	35 %	30 %	29%	24 %
The events on the Maidan in late 2013 - early 2014 were an illegal coup d'etat	41 %	51 %	55 %	61 %
The conflict in Donbas is Russian aggression with the use of local militants	52 %	47 %	43 %	40 %
Conflict in Donbas is an internal Ukrainian conflict, a civil war	20 %	29%	31 %	34 %
Volunteers who fought in Donbas on the side of Ukraine mostly went to the front for benefits, profit and high salaries	22 %	30 %	32 %	35 %

Volunteers who fought in Donbas on the side of Ukraine mostly went to the front to protect their families, the independence of the state and their beliefs.	54%	47 %	42 %	41 %
Despite the change of president and parliament in 2019, nationalists and right-wing radicals have a decisive influence on the government of the country.	30 %	36 %	39%	48 %
After the change of president and parliament in 2019, pro-Russian forces achieved greater influence over the government of the country.	18 %	17 %	21 %	16 %

verge of destruction and disintegration. Under certain unfavourable conditions, such sentiments may soon prevail in Luhansk and Odesa regions.

# Factors affecting vulnerability to disinformation include native language, religion, age and economic orientation.

It is now necessary to examine how certain likely factors influence the formation of such sentiments of citizens. Unfortunately, the study did not ask respondents about their electoral preferences, which significantly narrows our possibilities for explaining their reasons and motives for subscribing to certain narratives. We asked respondents to provide their native language (Ukrainian or Russian), religious affiliation, age and economic orientation, meaning they support free liberal market or protective approach to national economy.

We had previously identified native language as a possible highly significant predictor of people's tendencies to share Russian disinformation messages.

Our study confirmed our hypothesis. In particular, when having the option to describe the Maidan as either a "people's protest in support of the European path of development" or a "struggle for power by anti-Russian, nationalist forces with the support of Western intelligence services", the plurality of Ukrainian speakers chose the first statement, and the plurality of Russian speakers chose the second one. There were, however, many respondents who did not choose either statement.

The same division was observed among the followers of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (Russian Orthodox Church of Ukraine or ROCU).

Additionally, respondents' attitude towards the Maidan clearly depended on the commitment of respondents to a market economy and entrepreneurship: most of those who supported a market economy and free entrepreneurship called the Maidan a "people's protest." Those who objected to the market economy also called the Maidan a struggle of nationalist forces.

Interestingly, the attitudes of Ukrainian and Russian speakers was attitudes of Ukrainian and Russian speakers were less polarized over the "oppression" of the Russian language than they were between alignment with the newly established Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) or dependent on Russia Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP (ROCU)). It is also noteworthy that followers of the ROCU who consider "decommunization" to be a "rewriting of history" rather than a "restoration of historical facts" about the totalitarian Soviet regime. This is despite the traditional hostility of the Soviet authorities (which also imposed Russianlanguage supremacy) towards the church and their persecution of believers.

Another issue upon which religious views had a stronger influence on that language was the attitude towards Ukrainian Donbas volunteers. Most ROCU believers think that Ukrainian volunteers went to war for profit, while OCU believers saw the volunteers as people who went to war to defend their country. The opinion of the native Russian speakers on this issue, however, was evenly divided.

In the end, the question of church affiliation had the greatest impact on the choice of attitude to the events in Belarus. Respondents who belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church tended to support the self-proclaimed President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko more often than Russian-



speaking respondents overall, and were more inclined to see the protests as driven by "the hand of the West."

Age also appeared to influence the perception of certain disinformation theses. For analytical purposes, we delineated four age groups: youth (18-29 years old), early middle age (30-44 years old), late middle age 45-59 years old, senior age – 60 years old and above.

We observed the weakest link between the age of the respondents and their perception of disinformation in attitudes towards bans on Russian entertainment and films.

However, there were already noticeable differences between young people and other age groups in attitude towards the decommunization policy. Young people were the only age group in which a plurality (and a small one of 34%, at that) believe that the policy is designed to restore historical facts about Soviet totalitarianism. In all other age groups, the larger share of respondents saw the policy as "rewriting history" and "denying the achievements of the USSR". We also observed that respondents' likelihood of not having a view on the matter decreased with age.

Based on this data, we can conclude that changing the attitude of the inhabitants of the Ukrainian South and East to the new policy of historical memory will be a long, time-consuming process that will require serious work not only in education but with mass culture and communication.

Young people, as well as the early middle-aged group (30-44 years) were the most likely to prioritize the values of freedom, dignity and respect for civil rights. This is evidenced by their sympathetic attitudes to the protests in Belarus and the rejection of the Russian narrative of "West meddling into affairs of independent countries".

Most young and early middle-aged respondents understand the importance of Ukraine's sovereignty and the struggle to protect the state from Russian aggression, especially in comparison to older respondents when examining their responses to our questions on the nature of the war in Donbas and the role of Ukraine's volunteer fighters.

At the same time, negative attitudes towards the Maidan and concerns about the influence of nationalists on the country's highest authorities prevail in all age groups.

Based on our data, we can make the following cautious assumptions:

- "Those who want to go back in time to 2013 (or 1991)." People who closely or occasionally follow the leaders of OPFL, who followed the party's TV channels and who (much less often) follow them on social media do so not out of sympathy for them, but because Medvedchuk, Boiko and Rabinovych are the only national politicians who broadcast the messages of the "Russian world". These messages correspond to the theses about the persecution of Russian-speakers, the conflict in Donbas being a "civil war," and support for using the Russian Sputnik vaccine to defeat the coronavirus pandemic. These people prefer authoritarian governance and value stability above freedom. These people tend to be over 45 years old.
- "Those who do not want to return to the crisis of 2014." People who follow Zelenskyi and, to a lesser extent, Poroshenko are supporters of an independent and strong Ukraine, and want to see it free from both Russian and Western influence. They are united by their rejection of authoritarian governance, condemnation of Russian aggression, and fear of nationalist radicalism. Most of them receive information from the Internet and social networks and are probably over 45 years old. Moreover, the fact that they follow Zelenskyi or Poroshenko is rather a consequence of the fact that the actions or words of these politicians correspond to their views and values.

The clearness of the distinction between these two groups in our target regions may depend on the following factors:

- Further development of the war in the Donbas. Russia's continued armed aggression could increase anti-Russian sentiment and values. Russia's intransigence in response to the Ukrainian government's peace initiatives will diminish the number of people who support any Russian narrative.
- 2. The manner of implementation of Ukrainization and decommunization. Distrust towards the state and the inefficiency of state institutions are so great that the new directive decisions on the introduction of the Ukrainian language and in the field of national memory politics have the opposite effect. This could reduce the share of pro-Maidan supporters and increase the number of those who demand the protection of the "Russian-speakers". This issue will be especially critical for the regions in the "red zone" - Donbas, Kharkiv, Zaporizhia and (to a somewhat lesser extent) Odesa.
- 3. The pace of economic development. Since the narrative of "external governance" is the basis for explaining all of Ukraine's socio-economic woes, a continuing decline in living standards could gradually increase the proportion of those who tend to see salvation in rebuilding ties with Russia. Conversely, a return to economic development, despite the occupation of Crimea and parts of Donbas, would only underscore the benefits of European and Western realignment.

## SUMMARY

Pro-Russian disinformation, local elections and the COVID-19 epidemic were the strongest factors influenced Ukrainians' media consumption and their communications on social media networks in 2020. Detector Media conducted a large-scale study using classical media monitoring, expert interviews, big data analysis and sociological research in order to get detailed answers to several key questions: 1) who and what influenced the perception of information and the effectiveness of disinformation in Ukraine in 2020; 2) what kind of actors were trying to manipulate Ukrainian society at the national level, and in the South and East of Ukraine in particular; and 3) how Ukrainians responded to the main events and challenges of 2020.

Pro-Russian disinformation is centralized and pervasive. The Kremlin and its allies in Ukrainian politics have built an effective, well-coordinated system for disseminating pro-Russian disinformation narratives. They produce diverse and emotionally compelling content which is disseminated on a wide range of platforms, from traditional TV broadcast to social media networks, and is even borrowed by other media far beyond the reach of direct influence of pro-Russian political forces. The main disinformation narratives do not fundamentally change, but rather are illustrated by new "examples". These disinformation actors have continued to propagate the same basic memes and narratives, such as "Ukraine is a defective state" or "Ukrainians are fascists", which were circulating in the Ukrainian information space even before 2014. Moreover, all of these classical narratives are aimed at delegitimizing Ukraine as a sovereign state. This challenge requires a systematic response from Ukraine's government agencies, including a joint body responsible for strategic communications and the creation of a Ukrainian narrative.

The pro-Kremlin agenda does not dominate the national and regional information space. On the contrary, it is contained within a limited **number of outlets** which occupy a relatively small share of the media market. However, those outlets' audiences and their trust in them are growing. Outlets linked to one of the most popular in Ukraine, pro-Russian political party "Opposition Platform - For Life" (OPFL) leadership account for 70 % of our recorded examples of the spread of pro-Russian disinformation narratives in the national media space. At the same time, a person who becomes a consumer of their news is guaranteed to receive a full set of Russian and pro-Russian disinformation messages. Viewers of pro-Russian television channels, in particular those belonging to the "Medvedchuk group" (112, ZIK and NewsOne), are almost twice as likely to trust the Russian media as other respondents. It is important for Ukraine to study the foreign experience of regulating the work of such TV channels, in particular in the Baltic States. In February 2021, Ukraine imposed sanctions on legal owner of these TV channels Taras Kozak for financing terrorism. Therefore, the TV channels were banned, they are broadcasting on YouTube only, Kozak started a lawsuit against this decree.

On social media networks, there is little overt pro-Russian disinformation, while in the regions, its intensity depends on the orientation of the local elite. In the regions where local authorities chose to run in the 2020 local elections under "economic" rather than political slogans, pro-Russian disinformation in local media and social media networks weakened, but there where OPFL was most active, it intensified. It was advantageous for some representatives of local elites to play up the "Ukraine is a defective-state" narrative, but such cases were not systemic. This problem is complex and requires more efforts not only in the information field, but also in building stable party institutions with clear and transparent ideologies and programmes, rather than maintaining the current system whereby parties are almost entirely organized around political personalities and their patronage networks.

At the same time, the pro-Russian propaganda system uses a large arsenal of manipulative means to spread faked trustworthiness of its messages and strengthen its influence, and exploits some vulnerabilities in Ukrainian **societ**y - uncertainty about the future, fear of the coronavirus epidemic, "fatigue" from the war, dissatisfaction with living standards, interethnic tensions, and language and religious issues. Outright disinformation is relatively rare, but propaganda agendas are rather fuelled by various manipulative means. This indicates the need for constant monitoring of the informational space at the national and local level. Ukraine ought to strengthen the role of its communications regulator - the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting, while vigorously ensuring that the body is independent from the influence of political and oligarchic groups and has transparent rules that are consistently and equitably enforced. Ukraine also needs to improve its media legislation, including for the regulation of online space, while maintaining the principles of freedom of speech. Mechanisms for media co-regulation and self-regulation in Ukraine need to be strengthened. Judicial reform is very important; it must ensure that suspected violations of the law by individual outlets or media groups are adjudicated without corrupt influences. It also requires constant monitoring of the region's vulnerabilities and work on them by Ukraine's international partners, central and local authorities, and civil society organizations at both the national and regional levels.

While polarization over language issues, the legacy of Maidan and the war in Donbas is clearly growing, so is the number of people whose political allegiances are undecided.

Compared to 2015, the share of those who support pro-Russian rhetoric has increased, but so too has the share of people who find it hard to choose between clear stances on issues affecting the country. This audience is potentially vulnerable to pro-Russian disinformation and manipulation, as it is possible to use its doubts and to win it over. Beyond Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the situation in Odesa region is especially alarming.

There are a lot of hoaxes (not necessarily overtly pro-Russian) on social media networks and messengers, but we also observed an

increase in the number of manipulations like dubious inside scoops, rumours and conspiracy theories. Disinformation is no longer simply a matter of spreading false messages or trying to disorient audiences, but rather a systematic, multi-vector campaign to cultivate a distorted worldview among audiences. Thus, in addition to debunking individual hoaxes, Ukraine needs a systematic and in-depth study of the large-scale disinformation narratives constructed at different levels, as well as the development of tools to counter them.

The most popular propagandistic narratives observed were those concerning the "external governance" of Ukraine and "George Soros". Thus, 58% of respondents in our target regions believe that the most important decisions made in Ukraine since 2014 were forced by Western countries. This trend is worrying not only for Ukraine but for the democratic world as a whole. Building a resilient society should be a priority for Ukraine's foreign partners, government institutions and civil society organizations. Together, it is important to work in a coordinated, interdisciplinary and interagency way to build a knowledgeable society that is able to meet today's information challenges and to recover from the aggressive campaign of disinformation brought against the country by Russia and pro-Russian forces. The importance of implementing the principles of media literacy and critical thinking in Ukraine and around the world is difficult to overestimate; it is one of the key imperatives for 21st century societies.

Monopolization of users' attention on Anatoliy Shariy's platforms. The transgressive anti-Maidan blogger has managed to become a leader in almost all social media networks. 7% of the content of Telegram channels with more than 25,000 followers is dedicated to Shariy. Together with his wife and fellow blogger Olha, the Shariy's are popular both nationally and regionally, outpacing not only other bloggers but also a number of national media outlets. In the monitored target regions, Shariy is the 7th most followed figure. He trails right behind the former president Petro Poroshenko in terms of name recognition; 72% of respondents know who he is, and 21% follow him on television, websites and various social media networks. Blogger leads the "Party of Shariy". During 2019 parliamentary elections, the party did not overcome the barrier

to enter Verkhovna Rada. During 2020 local elections, it succeeded to enter some municipal councils in eastern and southern Ukraine. In February 2021, the Security Service of Ukraine declared Shariy a suspect for treason and violation of citizens' equality depending on their race, nationality, religious beliefs, disability and other grounds. Blogger leads "Party of Shariy". During 2019 parliamentary elections, the party did not overcome the barrier to enter Verkhovna Rada. During 2020 local elections, it succeeded to enter some city councils in eastern and southern Ukraine. In February 2021, the Security Service of Ukraine declared Shariy a suspect for treason and violation of citizens' equality depending on their race, nationality, religious beliefs, disability and other grounds.

"Decentralization" has taken place in social media networks just like it has in Ukraine's governmental administration. Local pages, blogs, YouTube and Telegram channels are becoming more popular, and their reach at the local level is often greater than that of the local classical media. Some local Telegram channels have achieved top national prominence in terms of their audience reach. Moreover, in addition to national topics such as elections and the coronavirus epidemic, each region has its own key topics for discussions and manipulations on social media networks, as well as for their regional opinion leaders. This suggests that the local media space needs constant research and analysis, as the processes taking place there including destructive ones, such as the rise of separatist sentiment or the growing influence of pro-Russian propaganda - may not be visible from Kyiv. Understanding local information and political context is also important for systematic analysis of disinformation at the local level, as the manipulative nature of messages is often not obvious to those unfamiliar with the local "agenda".

Telegram has become an extremely influential channel for disseminating information, and has actually surpassed the Russian social networks which previously held the top spots, Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki. Anonymous Telegram channels create the appearance of deep awareness, are interconnected (our study has shown a clear link among the groups of such channels) and spread approximately the same

messages. They have become an important new phenomenon in the Ukrainian media space. These sources accustom their audiences to shaping their understandings based upon rumours, gossips and so-called (and unverified) "insider information", rather than quality, professionally reported news.

Southern and Eastern Ukraine have been showing some worrisome vulnerabilities to disinformation, including pro-Russian disinformation. The situation in Donetsk region and the neighbouring Zaporizhia region is the most alarming. Kharkiv and Odesa regions also need a special attention. For example, in Odesa region, the narrative of the oppression of the Russian language is combined with notions of nationalist control over the government. In Kharkiv region, nostalgia for the Soviet times is linked to a commitment to authoritarian rule in the model of Belarusian dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko and a rejection of the Maidan.

# Factors affecting vulnerability to disinformation are as follows: native language, religion, age and economic preferences.

Further fragmentation of the population of the South and East may be influenced by the further development of the war in Donbas and by changes in the economic situation. Another important factor is how the policy of Ukrainization and decommunization will be implemented in the future.

The consequences of this trend can be dangerous for Ukraine's independent media in the short term and for its democracy in general. It is important to study foreign practices of social media network regulation, as well as to initiate discussions on social networks formed on the basis of messengers, such as Telegram and Viber. Here, it is important to unite the efforts of international organizations, state institutions and civil society to initiate a productive dialog with the actual developers of social networks to find common solutions.

## KEY CONCLUSIONS



Based on the results of this analytical study, below are the main conclusions what can be made regarding the existing risks for local media as well as vulnerable groups of media consumers in South-East Ukraine:

Preferences of media consumers in South-East Ukraine do not play significant role in their personal susceptibility to hostile narrative created and disseminated by Russia and pro-Russian proxies in Ukraine. In other words, the problematic issues are overlapped on the axes of supply-demand (origins of content, logistics of distribution, willingness to consume). Foreign hostile narratives operate on the edge of various factors, simultaneously penetrating multiple echo-chambers of one person.

Malicious disinformation campaigns penetrate the media space of and reach the media consumers in South-East Ukraine equally through various channels as TV local outlets and social media networks. Given the variety of disinformation actors, content producers and disseminators, the vast majority of social groups in South-East Ukraine can be affected by anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian narratives such as "Ukraine is a defective state", "Ukraine glorifies Nazism", "Ukraine is governed by external powers", "Situation in Donbas is a civil war", "There is powerful Russophobia in Ukraine". As described by HWAG study<sup>63</sup>, those narrative originate mostly from the information space of the Russian Federation and then migrate through the adaptation cycle into Ukrainian media space where resonate among various vulnerable groups because of re-packaging and multichannelling distribution. For representatives of vulnerable groups, it blurs the roles of Russia in disseminating toxic narratives undermining their perception of Russia and its actions as a threat.

The key drivers for reach and attractiveness of the malicious narratives are multiple (e.g. soviet nostalgia, ideologization of historical memories, politization of the language issue and

religious confession, socio-economic instability, generational gap) and have their maximum impact in amplified conjunction. Since information flow is either direct (i.e. in social media channels) or subjectively edited (i.e. economic dependence or poor qualification of media interlockers), citizens in South-East Ukraine have become a pretty easy target for various manipulations by disinformation campaigns, both initiated by Russia and its proxies in Ukraine or created and exploited by an actor of domestic nature. The majority of population in South-East Ukraine lacks adequate skills of media literacy and therefore are not able to distinguish foreign-led hostile narrative from domestic political issue or stop spreading numerous conspiracy theories. It implies the multidimensional nature of issues calling to adopt complex solutions. Within the conclusion, we could assume that media literacy could improve the situation, but not fix it. The well-coordinated actions of government, local authorities, civil society organisations and international partners and donors on the national and regional level are required.

The generalised profile of the most critically vulnerable group consists of the following descriptive characteristic: a socio-economically disadvantaged Russian-speaking citizen of Ukraine aged 45+ years old from Donbas, Kharkiv or Zaporizhzhya oblast. Taking into account the average patterns of media consumption, the corrective intervention of national and local authorities as well civil society organisations should be planned for two directions: 1. grouptailored trainings on media literacy for less advanced information consumers - raising general awareness and essential skills on personal level; 2. comprehensive development programmes for local journalists in the targeted regions - improving their adaptability for new media challenges, strengthening the sense of responsibility as media interlockers and increasing professionalism in media rooms and outlets.

63) Oleksandra Tsekhanovska and Liubov Tsybulska, EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN NARRATIVES ABOUT UKRAINE AND THEIR EXPORT TO UKRAINIAN MEDIA SPACE, Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group, Ukraine Crisis Media Centre, Kyiv, Ukraine 2021

## RECOMMENDATIONS



Based on the research, the following recommendations are proposed to Ukraine's international partners, donors, Ukrainian legislative and executive bodies at the national and local levels, as well as civil society.

## 1. For all stakeholders (public authorities, international partners/donors, media outlets, civil society organizations):

 taking into account the fact that information challenges are becoming increasingly complex, synergy is needed in the work of international partners, government institutions, media and civil society organizations. Analytical, monitoring and fact-checking initiatives of civil society and various public authorities should not be duplicated, but rather united to increase their effectiveness;

#### 2. For public authorities:

- Nominate a key coordinating body responsible for strategic communication both in the country and abroad. It is important to conduct continuous monitoring of the information space, analysis of disinformation attacks, to promptly respond to them;
- develop a protocol for cooperation between the various bodies of authority involved in the countering disinformation both domestically and internationally;
- take a proactive position on the formation of a pro-Ukrainian agenda in the information domain. In particular, it is about the proper coverage of effective reforms, successes stories, public initiatives and projects. Important to contribute to the creation of positive pro-Ukrainian life-affirming, democratic narratives at the level of the state, region and citizen;
- develop a methodology for collecting systematic evidence of foreign interference in the country's information space and establish an ongoing dialogue with civil society, representatives of businesses and other stakeholders to monitor hybrid threats;
- initiate state funding of audio-visual content for the production of socially important entertainment content by production companies, TV channels, and independent online media, with which pro-Ukrainian democratic values would be promoted;
- continue grant support for media (project funding and institutional support by the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation) in order to accelerate the recovery of the media industry after decline in revenues due to COVID-19;
- improve legal requirements and mechanisms for monitoring the financial transparency
  of the media, in particular, to create restrictive measures for those media that have nontransparent funding and/or Russian capital;
- make amends to the media legislation in Ukraine for strengthening the independence of the regulator - the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting - from the influence of oligarchic and financial-political groups;

- develop a system of co-regulation and self-regulation of the media in order to strengthen
  the quality of coverage of events, problems and reforms, in order to contribute to a more
  balanced view of the situation in the country among the population, including the regions;
- reduce the monetization of disinformation posted in sponsored content: in cooperation with advertisers, to limit advertising on websites which disseminate disinformation;
- encourage domestic medium and small businesses to support quality media, especially in the regions;
- · increase support for Public Broadcasting;
- initiate dialog with representatives of digital technology companies like Facebook,
   Telegram and Viber in order to jointly seek regulatory solutions based on democratic values, fundamental rights and freedoms. Also, work on the technical and legal sides of the transparency of political and information campaigns on social media networks;
- formulate regulations for new media formats, such as Telegram channels under the "News and Media" category in order to increase the transparency of online media;
- · maintain the image of the civil society and quality media;
- develop media literacy and critical thinking among Ukraine's citizens. It is necessary to seek and implement new formats for the development of critical thinking in citizens of different age groups, in particular using the infotainment tools.

### 3. For international partners / donors:

- continue grant support for independent media. Particularly, grants should be used to
  test new business models; digitalization of newsrooms' work, development of editorial
  standards, training and mobility of professionals and exchange of best practices;
- provide institutional support to independent media and NGOs in order to strengthen their capacity to produce content that is challenging in terms of monetization like analytical reports, investigations;
- continue to support the Public Broadcaster, especially its regional branches;
- continue the support of civil society organizations and researchers in maintaining a sustainable and diverse information space, for example, fact-checking activities;
- support the capacity building of the Ukrainian authorities, independent media and civil society to detect and respond to disinformation and foreign influence operations;
- support innovative projects aimed at combating disinformation and projects initiated by civil society organizations and educational institutions, including those with the involvement of journalists;
- support initiatives of civil society organizations and the government aimed at increasing
  the media literacy of citizens and helping them to understand the existence of
  disinformation and to develop skills to distinguish it;
- support the development of self- and co-regulation of the media in Ukraine;

- help production companies, TV channels, independent online media to produce socially important entertainment content, which would be based on pro-Ukrainian, democratic values;
- involve Ukraine's public authorities in a global dialogue with representatives of technology companies like Facebook, Telegram, Viber to jointly seek solutions which will increase the transparency and accountability of these platforms.

#### 4. To civil society organizations:

- continue to monitor the impact of disinformation, debunk it, create and disseminate explanatory materials; implement media literacy projects targeting average citizens;
- help to increase the transparency of the media industry, limit manipulative methods of
  informing and reduce economic incentives to spread disinformation, as well as help with
  developing containing measures by shifting costs to actors involved in influence and foreign
  interference operations;
- · support the development of self- and co-regulation of the media in Ukraine;
- continue building resilient society, promote its awareness of democratic values, help to strengthen the media environment, including support for greater freedom and media pluralism.

### 5. For national and regional media:

- participate in the development of a system for media self- and co-regulation in Ukraine
  in order to prevent the manipulative distribution of malicious content by increasing
  transparency and developing common rules and regulations. Advertisers should also be
  involved in the dialogue on self- and co-regulation in order to reduce economic incentives
  to spread disinformation;
- increase attention to coverage of events in the regions, develop regional offices;
- · train employees on using new digital tools;
- assist the government and civil society organizations in disseminating media literacy campaigns, stories about positive change, success in reforms, etc;
- produce socially important entertainment content that contains pro-Ukrainian, democratic values.

