



Policy Brief

RUSSIA'S CYBER WARFARE & DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS IN BELARUS AND UKRAINE: WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW TO COUNTERACT IT?

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Contributors:

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- the comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the impact of and responses to COVID-19 in Belarus;
- the analysis of social, economic, political, cultural and historical issues which shape contemporary Belarus and which can inform external understanding;
- engagement, wherever possible, with domestic stakeholders;
- the production of timely and reliable evidence in response to both real domestic policy needs but also external stakeholder initiatives; and
- the communication of evidence in ways that are useful to, and usable by, policy-makers, national and international civil society, the media and other non-academic stakeholders.

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Russia's cyber warfare & disinformation campaigns in Belarus and Ukraine: what do we need to know to counteract it?

Executive Summary

This policy brief offers a recap of the discussion held on 19 May 2022, at the webinar conjointly organised by the Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO), the Research Centre of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST) and GLOBSEC. The discussion focused on Russia's cyber warfare and disinformation campaigns in Belarus and Ukraine. Throughout the war, an ongoing battle within the information landscape and struggle to dominate the cyber-domain rages on. This policy brief covers key developments on the side of cyber warfare and offers policy recommendations to counteract Russia's disinformation campaigns in Belarus and Ukraine. On a broader scale, it highlights that proper and effective communication strategies are required to raise citizens' awareness in Europe and across the world about dis- and mis-information, and how they can protect themselves from their impact. If not addressed, the void is manipulated by the authoritarian regimes, disinformation campaigners, propagandists and conspiracy theorists to their advantage, to critically undermine democracy, human rights, and independent media.

Background

In his 2017 testimony to the Committee on Armed Services at the US National Congress, Christopher S. Chivis (RAND Corporation) said: 'As used today in relation to Russia, "hybrid warfare" refers to Moscow's use of a broad range of subversive instruments, many of which are non-military, to further Russian national interests. Moscow seeks to use hybrid warfare ...to divide and weaken NATO; to subvert pro-Western governments; to create pretexts for war; to annex territory; and to ensure access to European markets on its own terms'. Five years on, Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine proves just that: it used its state propaganda not just in Russia itself but also in other countries of the region, including Belarus, to justify its 'special operation' in Ukraine; it brainwashes its population to entice hatred; it is awash with self-denial of the committed atrocities; it has annexed and occupied territories of neighbouring states; and it lives a dream-turned-nightmare as a restorer of the Russian World (Russkiy Mir) which might include countries of the former USSR.

How can we stop the misinformation campaign waged, for several decades, by Russia in Belarus, Ukraine and other countries? How can we penetrate the flow of lies and Russia-sponsored brainwashing, to allow the truth to be more widely understood and shared? How can we mobilise those who do disagree with the state and pro-Russian propaganda, to counteract misinformation? What has already been done in Belarus to counter the propaganda and what are the prospective next steps?

These and other questions were discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office (OST Research Centre), the Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) and GLOBSEC think tank. The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by **Roger Hilton**, Media Presenter at GLOBSEC and the speakers of the event included **Franak Viačorka**, Senior Advisor to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Head of the Foreign Policy Department; **Benjamin Heap**, Senior Expert (A5) GBR-LVA CIV, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, (Latvia) **Yuliana Shemetovets**, spokesperson for the Belarusian Cyber Partisans; **Ivan Tkachenko**, student of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, volunteer for the Ukrainian cyber-partisans; **Katarina Klingova**, Senior Research Fellow of the Centre for Democracy & Resilience, GLOBSEC.

Analysis of the issue

The media play a critical role in social movements. This was also the case during the pro-democratic mass protests against the Lukashenka regime in Belarus in 2020. The media space proved instrumental for protestors to organise, coordinate their activities, and reach thousands of people in mass protests in 2020 and keep their positions in 2021. However, more recently, pro-Russian forces are trying to deprive Belarusian Democratic Forces of the major platforms which helped independent media, independent bloggers, and outlets to be present in Belarus. Even though Belarusian democratic leaders invested time and financial support in cultivating and developing independent media outlets, their dependence on key platforms continues. For instance, Yandex Zen platform, before August 2020, provided millions of views per hour to the Belarusian media outlets. One of the speakers claimed that after Yandex Zen kicked out Belarusian independent media (and later on blocked), the Belarusian media lost up to 70-80% of their traffic. As part of the delegitimization campaign, independent bloggers, media outlets, and telegram channels are stigmatised as “extremists.”¹

Since 2020, Lukashenka’s regime has also been destroying business people and companies sponsoring the independent media. Since then, most of these outlets, organisations and even bloggers and influencers try to find resources by themselves through alternative methods. As an outcome of this intense pressure and shrinking space for independent media, the Belarusian media have been filling out with pro-Russian, pro-Lukashenko resources. One of the speakers mentioned that according to his estimations, for instance, *Sputnik*, which used to have less than 5-7% of Belarusian traffic before the Revolution, now controls at least 15-20% of the media space. Belarus, for all these reasons, is a clear case of hybrid war and information warfare. Russia actively uses Western platforms (such as YouTube) and invests large amounts of money through paid advertisements for propaganda purposes, further disseminating misinformation at the domestic and international levels.

¹ If, for example, a page was closed or designated as “extremist” and the same person or institution opens a new one, it is also automatically labelled as extremist along with the subscribers.

Mainstreamization of disinformation and counter strategies

The Kremlin propaganda is a widespread phenomenon spreading to several other European countries. For instance, various disinformation and conspiracy theories, which used to be communicated by fringe parties and movements, have become much more influential in Central and Eastern Europe in recent years. According to studies conducted by GLOBSEC, the impact of Kremlin propaganda is significant, which partly reflects the trend of what can be called the “mainstreamization of disinformation.” The GLOBSEC public opinion polls suggest, depending on the narratives, either 30 or 40% of the population believe in various conspiracy theories. Also, before the war, 80% of Bulgarians and 78% of Slovaks thought that Russia was “their” Slavic country. Vladimir Putin was the most popular global leader in the region for years.²

Popular attitudes toward Putin have changed in the region since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, yet there are still huge parts of societies that are under the influence of Kremlin propaganda. A disinformation campaign is also used by the Russians as part of their military attacks. A very clear example was when the Russian media *RIA Novosti* posted news that the Ukrainian army were going to shoot a rocket into a train station in Severodonetsk where people were being evacuated from this territory. And the next day the Russians themselves shot the rocket killing 60 to 80 civilians. The aim was to manipulate the world into believing that the Ukrainian army killed civilians — though the opposite of this was the case. The Ukrainian government, in cooperation with civilian IT experts, counter the propaganda of the Russian state. The Ukrainian government and activists also actively work to block constant pro-Russian disinformation campaigns in the temporarily occupied territories.

The analysis so far brings a fundamental question to the fore: what are the effective ways to counter disinformation? **First**, disinformation has a long history and new approaches are needed to counter disinformation. **Second**, it is important to have a purpose for countering disinformation. It is important to ask *why disinformation (in a particular case or context) is a problem for us and what it is preventing us from doing?* Also, it is not practical to endlessly analyse what the source of disinformation is saying without understanding what the reach and impact of that is, and doing that in a focused way which is driven by strategy, which itself, needs to come from objectives. **Third**, countering disinformation and establishing the truth that people believe in is not just about being good on Twitter, and it is not just about making social media videos for clarification. We really need to ask *why the story that someone’s telling is resonant?* And the **fourth** point is that the thing that resonates with us and that we want to believe in is all underpinned by values. In this sense, the war in Ukraine is essentially a normative conflict between authoritarian and democratic values that were established very clearly in the post-war European consensus: they contain a message of norms people aspire to, and a certain set of beliefs and the way they want to live.

The four points highlighted above suggest it is worth remembering that communication is not just about the content of the message. It is about the subtle and often hidden meanings of the message in terms of what it communicates. In this sense, the starting point for countering disinformation is that it is not just telling a story, it is being a story.

Cyber warfare and Cyber Partisans

² <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2022.pdf>

Cyberspace has become one of the key battlefields of the disinformation war since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, though it has been on the agenda for a long time. In this context, the activities of Cyber Partisans deserves special attention.

Cyber Partisans is one of the most famous hacktivist groups, currently supporting Belarusians on key issues such as how they can read information and access independent news. They are developing the *Partisan Telegram*, which is based on an open-source code. In 2020 around 42% of Belarusians were using Telegram. Currently, around 60% of people use Telegram,³ and that's where they receive their news and follow the independent groups that provide real information. At the same time, there exist a lot of potential security threats because of the usage of independent sources of information (Telegram channels in particular) while people in Belarus can be randomly detained and their phones can be searched at will. Also, people are afraid to follow groups on social media due to intense pressure from the Lukashenka regime. Partisan Telegram, which has some special codes, is developed to protect people, especially when they get detained and their phones can be searched.

The group also tries to reach out to the people who actually follow or support Lukashenka in Belarus. Several partisans also had a campaign sending out messages to Belarusian soldiers, showing them what's happening in Ukraine and why they should not participate in this war. Also, direct actions, like the attack on the railways to stop the movement of Russian military trains, was another aspect of fighting directly, creating proactively the agenda that's showing that Belarusians are fighting in this war, that people are resisting and creating the news that even Lukashenka's or Russian supporters are not going to miss.

The situation with Cyber Partisans in Ukraine is totally different in comparison with that in Belarus. While in Belarus it is an independent initiative fighting for the better future of their country, in Ukraine activities of Cyber Partisans are supported by the national government. In addition, in partnership with Bellingcat, Cyber Partisans in Ukraine also developed a project to uncover FSB agents. They provide information on Russian agents that operated in Ukraine. Cyber Partisans provide relevant data to the investigative agencies, to Ukrainian hacktivists, and to the Ukrainian special forces.

Conclusions

The war in Ukraine has been a wakeup call for the whole world for several reasons. Many people know on which part of the battle they are standing. Still huge parts of society are contemplating where to go and are under the influence of the Kremlin's propaganda. This requires proper and effective communication to inform ordinary people in Europe and across the world and protect them from disinformation and conspiracy theories. Otherwise, the void is filled by authoritarian regimes, disinformation campaigners, propagandists and conspiracy theorists, which jointly undermine democracy, human rights, and independent media. This policy brief looked at the cyber warfare and disinformation aspects of the conflict in Ukraine. Based on the analysis above, three policy recommendations are of relevance to counteract Russia's disinformation campaigns in Belarus and Ukraine.

³ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/698922/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)698922_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/698922/EPRS_BRI(2022)698922_EN.pdf)

Policy Recommendations

1. In order to counter pro-Russian and pro-Lukashenka propaganda, one strategy for the Belarusian independent media should be to invest more in coalition-building, developing a presence on alternative platforms, and building non-branded media outlets as many smaller organisations are better and more powerful than a few big actors, who could be shut down any time. This, however, requires the overhaul of the media strategy of the Belarusian independent media, but also of the international organisations who fund them.
2. A growing number of political actors are using malign content and spreading conspiracy theories because they see that they resonate with significant parts of society. It is therefore important to invest in building a political culture where the detrimental nature of conspiracy theories is constantly emphasised.
3. Following the point above, it is important to keep in mind that communication is not just about the message. Countering disinformation should be based on a coherent set of values framed within the context of a coherent story-telling to resonate with people.

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