

# **TOWARDS**

## **A STRONGER UKRAINIAN MEDIA ECOSYSTEM**

**Countering Russian Disinformation  
During the Russo-Ukrainian War**

**Leah Walker**  
**Alexa Wehsener**  
**Natalia Antonova**



December 2022

# ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY AND TECHNOLOGY

As new technologies present humanity with unprecedented capabilities, they can also pose unimagined risks to global security. The Institute for Security and Technology's (IST) mission is to bridge gaps between technology and policy leaders to help solve these emerging security problems together. Uniquely situated on the West Coast with deep ties to Washington, DC, we have the access and relationships to unite the best experts, at the right time, using the most powerful mechanisms. IST forges crucial connections across industry, civil society, and government. By leveraging our own expertise and engaging our trusted networks, we offer a unique problem-solving approach with a proven track record.

Our areas of focus cover a broad portfolio: from cybersecurity and information warfare, identifying and countering state-sponsored disinformation and propaganda, the impact of technology on democracy and human security, and the rise of digital authoritarianism and algorithmic warfare; to the role that machine learning (ML), artificial intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies play in shaping national security policy and political environments. We create tangible solutions based on analysis and recommendations from our research by bringing both the national security and technology community together to prototype, ideate, and spin out technical solutions with an eye towards digital hygiene and the vulnerabilities created by the integration of emerging technology and existing systems.

The Towards a Stronger Ukrainian Media Ecosystem project is a part of IST's [Geopolitics of Technology](#) portfolio, which looks to strengthen society's resilience and ability to respond to threats in the information environment. These efforts include research on traditional propaganda and disinformation campaigns, the suppression and censorship of information, and digital manipulation and authoritarianism.

The Institute for Security and Technology aims to enable better public and private responses to information threats by: providing open and verifiable insights of contested information environments and the malign narratives that pollute them; convening across policy and industry to develop practical policy and technical recommendations; and implementing promising solutions designed to strengthen a society's resilience to disinformation, digital authoritarianism, and other online harms that have real-world, offline consequences.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
Key Findings	4
<hr/>	
<b>Introduction: Ukrainian Media Resilience and Russian Disinformation</b>	<b>5</b>
Methods	6
<hr/>	
<b>The Ukrainian Media Ecosystem</b>	<b>8</b>
Background: Russian Influence in the Ukrainian Media Ecosystem	8
The Ukrainian Media Ecosystem at the End of 2022	9
<hr/>	
<b>Introduction: Ukrainian Media Resilience and Russian Disinformation</b>	<b>11</b>
Key Theme: Ukrainian Divisions with Allies	11
Key Theme: Ukraine is Dependent on the West and on Russia	13
Key Theme: Ukrainian Aggression, War Planning, and Sabotage	14
Key Theme: Ukrainian Domestic Troubles and Zelensky Failures	17
Key Theme: Ukrainian Weakness	18
Key Theme: Russian Support of the LPR and DPR	19
<hr/>	
<b>Pathways Towards a Stronger Ukrainian Media Ecosystem</b>	<b>21</b>
<hr/>	
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>22</b>
<hr/>	

## **Acknowledgments:**

Pledger Designs Ltd provided design services.

Copyright November 2022. Institute for Security and Technology.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021, the Institute for Security and Technology began supporting the U.S. Embassy, Kyiv by developing strategies to combat Russian disinformation and improve the digital safety of Ukrainian civil society and media. As part of this effort, IST worked with the Embassy and partners on the ground in Ukraine to identify emerging Russian disinformation narratives. This work involved analyzing the origins of Russian disinformation across Ukraine's media ecosystem, in Russian and Ukrainian, with the aim of identifying narratives before they became mainstream and providing timely insights to enable officials and local partners to counter those narratives.

In the weeks leading up to the invasion, as Russian troops and military equipment surged on the border with Ukraine, IST, using data analytics in partnership with VAST-OSINT Technologies, began weekly analyses of narratives in the information ecosystem. The goal with these weekly analyses was not only to identify and respond to narratives, but also to develop a baseline analytical understanding to train stakeholders across the Ukrainian ecosystem on content authenticity practices utilizing technical tools to counter Russian disinformation.

## Key Findings



# 1

Russian disinformation efforts during the Russo-Ukrainian War spanned a variety of narratives, an approach that muddied the water and allowed for the dissemination of different narratives that could appeal to different audiences.

# 2

The disinformation narratives evolved during the lead up to and first two weeks of the war, as new items, such as Zelensky's speech at the Munich Security Conference, broke through and provided new avenues for attracting attention.

# 3

The Ukrainian media ecosystem demonstrated admirable resilience in the face of disinformation, and has many opportunities to further boost its resilience to future challenges.



# INTRODUCTION: UKRAINIAN MEDIA RESILIENCE AND RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

In 2021, the Institute for Security and Technology began supporting the U.S. Embassy, Kyiv to develop strategies to combat Russian disinformation and improve the digital safety of Ukrainian civil society and media. Just as our work with Embassy-Kyiv got underway, Russia launched its invasion, and the nature of the project shifted from preparation to response. This report captures that response.

As Russian troops and military equipment surged on the border with Ukraine in 2021, IST used data gathered by VAST-OSINT Technologies to identify emerging narratives in Russian and Ukrainian across Ukraine’s media ecosystem. IST was able to pinpoint the origins of Russian disinformation narratives before they became mainstream and to provide timely insights to counter those narratives.

This baseline research also equipped IST to train stakeholders across the Ukrainian media ecosystem on content authenticity as a way to counter Russian disinformation. Such skills-building training was essential to Ukrainian media resilience in the early months of the war. The table below shows how disinformation narratives (detailed in the [Key Themes and Emerging Narratives](#) section of this report) exploited vulnerabilities in the Ukrainian media.

## Russian disinformation narratives’ broad impacts



Russian disinformation goals				
Ukrainian media’s biggest current vulnerabilities	Sowing panic via false information	Undermining Ukrainian institutions	Localized confusion about Russian troop movements and behavior	Stress/ demoralization of Ukrainian media workers
Oligarchic control of the media ecosystem		✘		
Lack of OSINT training	✘			
Insufficient investment into local reporting			✘	
Cyber security vulnerabilities				✘

## Methods

As our work shifted into wartime support, we expanded our partnership with VAST-OSINT to gather data about the Ukrainian information environment in the early weeks of the Russian invasion.

The data collection stage of the project occurred during 1/4/2022-3/15/2022. Data collected included active Russian information media domains. It was gathered and analyzed in three steps.

**1** VAST-OSINT captured all stories about the Ukraine crisis from over 1,602 Russian and Ukrainian domains in real-time using automated full text scraping and natural language processing capabilities. These stories were calibrated by multiple theme profiles, the nature of amplification, and impact.

**2** VAST-OSINT filtered these stories down to the most likely propaganda and disinformation domains.

**A. VAST used a clustering model to identify the stories that advanced emotional and victimization narratives and promoted blame on Ukraine, NATO, or the U.S. Emotionality and victimization are common ingredients of propaganda and disinformation.**

**B. Using unsupervised machine learning, VAST grouped 36,000 stories into the most similar clusters.**

**C. For this report, VAST isolated 30 domains that pushed Russian disinformation narratives. We assess that these were high-signal domains. Given the evolving nature of the crisis, VAST pulled all stories from those 30 domains every 24 hours during the collection period.**

**3** IST reviewed the stories daily, compiling data on key themes of interest in the disinformation campaign.

The following 29 domains were identified during the research period as domains producing large amounts of Russian disinformation.



Domains				
5-tv.ru	antifashist.com	antifashist.online	comitet.su	dontimes.ru
i-don.ru	interfax-russia.ru	khersonline.net	lug-info.com	mirnov.ru
nation-news.ru	news-front.info	novorosinform.org	osnmedia.ru	ourdonbass.ru
ren.tv	rubaltic.ru	rueconomics.ru	ruinformer.com	rusdnepr.ru
secretmag.ru	tehnovar.ru	topcor.ru	topwar.ru	uz.sputniknews.ru
video.t30p.ru	voskhodinfo.su	warfiles.ru	politobzor.net	

The original intent was for the IST project team to complement our data analysis with on-the-ground interviews and to conduct in-person training sessions with Ukrainian journalists. Due to the Russian invasion, the project team was not able to travel to Ukraine and thus conducted all collaborative and investigative work virtually. This work included virtual interviews of subject matter experts, journalists, fact checkers, and activists in Ukraine. IST also conducted virtual training sessions on countering disinformation, online safety, and content authentication.

# THE UKRAINIAN MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

## Background: Russian Influence in the Ukrainian Media Ecosystem

Since 1991, the Ukrainian media has worked to move beyond the Soviet legacy of censorship while also battling with oligarchic dominance and violence directed towards journalists. This legacy of violence is best exemplified by the 2000 murder of prominent journalist and corruption whistleblower Georgiy Gongadze, founder of *Ukrainska Pravda*. The men convicted of carrying out the crime were Ministry of Interior officials, further demonstrating Ukraine's struggles with censorship and violence.

The legacy of intimidation of the Ukrainian media and the co-opting of media resources by wealthy, corrupt figures was well summarized in a 2006 [Woodrow Wilson's Keenan Institute](#) summit, where one Ukrainian media specialist warned that "privatization of media does not guarantee freedom of speech." Even after the Orange Revolution, Ukrainians struggled to financially extricate their media from elite interests.

Popular revolutions and uprisings in Ukraine are a reflection of how corruption stifled development of Ukrainian civil society in general, and the development of the Ukrainian media in particular. The 2014 revolution and ousting of unpopular and singularly corrupt president Viktor Yanukovich ushered in limited improvements to the media landscape. But it also resulted in the beginning of Russian hostilities and challenges to the Ukrainian media ecosystem, which simultaneously faced control by domestic forces and Russian aggression.

As a 2021 openDemocracy report noted, Ukrainian media magnates, some of them virulently pro-Russian, continued to [dominate the media landscape](#) following the 2014 revolution. While Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 has re-aligned priorities and diminished old rivalries in Ukrainian politics and other spheres of life, much remains to be done both to survive the war and to prepare for a healthy, post-war Ukrainian media environment.

Even before February 2022, the Ukrainian state implemented the use of a firewall to reduce the infiltration of Russian narratives in Ukrainian — including banning social media networks like Russia's VK.com, once popular with Ukrainian citizens, as well as Russian propaganda sites constructed to look like they belonged to Ukrainian news organizations.

The Russian state has also worked with so-called quislings, Russian sympathizers, on Ukrainian territory. These include prominent Putin ally Viktor Medvedchuk, whose television channels were shut down by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in 2021.

Ironically, these long-standing Russian efforts were set back by the military invasion in 2022. Although propaganda remains a popular tool for Russia in captured territories, Ukrainians are more resistant to Moscow's political control than ever—a fact that generates enormous opportunities to strengthen the Ukrainian media ecosystem now and in the future.



## The Ukrainian Media Ecosystem at the End of 2022

The Ukrainian media ecosystem has already withstood eight years of Russian aggression on Ukrainian territory. Some key ways Ukrainian resilience has grown since then include:



**Extensive wartime experience.** Eight years is a long time for a “frozen” conflict that never truly froze. Today, the Ukrainian media has a strong backbone of professionals used to working in wartime conditions, much more so than the Russian media.



**Experience with Russian fakes and hackers.** After being affected by 2017’s devastating NotPetya ransomware attacks and similar, smaller-scale incidents, Ukrainian newsrooms are much more prepared for Russian cyber warfare and similar demoralization attempts involving fake images and video instead of/in addition to malware.



**Greater awareness of open source intelligence (OSINT).** In 2014, Ukraine became one of the first conflict zones to be extensively documented online (this development followed similar developments in Syria). As such, Ukrainian newsrooms familiarized themselves with OSINT tools to help them analyze video and photos. By contrast, most traditional Russian newsrooms have relied on false conflict information provided by the Russian government generally and the Russian Ministry of Defense specifically.



**Greater cooperation with Western newsrooms.** While Russian newsrooms have grown increasingly isolated, Ukrainian newsrooms have enjoyed greater cooperation and extended contact with Western newsrooms, which are often endowed with greater resources and more transparent reporting standards.



**Popular acceptance abroad.** Particularly in the aftermath of the February 24, 2022 invasion, Russia finds itself more isolated both politically and socially. By contrast, Ukrainians are welcomed in Western nations and organizations. The psychological and operational impacts of these factors should not be underestimated. Consider the case of the Kyiv Independent, which arose shortly before the invasion when staff was purged by the owners of the Kyiv Post; popular crowdfunding and attention surged for the Independent before the invasion, and grew even more prominent in the wake of it. Today, the Independent’s employees have extensive networks on social media, deliver their news to a wider audience, and can finance their operations without relying on Ukraine’s oligarchic business community, which traditionally does not have a good track record of transparency and accountable media practices.

In spite of these positive developments, the Ukrainian media ecosystem still displays vulnerabilities. By far the greatest vulnerability comes from Russian military aggression itself – Ukrainian journalists are subject to violence on occupied territory and to random missile and mortar strikes even on Ukrainian-held territory. For example, an independent inquiry into the death of prominent Ukrainian photojournalist Maks Levin by Reporters Without Borders concluded that Levin was [tortured and executed](#) after being captured by Russian forces while on assignment. Levin is just one of many journalists who have fallen victim to Russia’s war on Ukraine.

While conducting our research, we also identified lack of sufficient access to OSINT tools and training as another vulnerability in Ukrainian newsrooms. Multiple Ukrainian journalists confirmed this vulnerability to the authors of this report. Ukrainian journalists also repeatedly cited cybersecurity concerns and poor investment in local reporting infrastructure leading up to February 2022. Improvements in these key areas are seen as hugely beneficial both in terms of short term gains and long term development of the Ukrainian media.

Ukrainian journalists also repeatedly cited cybersecurity concerns and poor investment in local reporting infrastructure leading up to February 2022.



# KEY THEMES AND EMERGING NARRATIVES

Leading up to and immediately following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian information warfare focused heavily on recurring propaganda themes. IST identified six major themes, each advanced by numerous supporting narratives.

## 1 Key Theme: Ukrainian Divisions with Allies

**Narrative: NATO is not interested in admitting Ukraine into the alliance.**

These narratives seek to emphasize friction between the West and NATO. They highlight any rumored tensions within NATO and seek to spread the narrative that, while Ukraine may want to join, NATO would never allow it. The goal here appears to be to paint Ukraine as increasingly geopolitically isolated.

The narratives suggest that Ukraine will never join NATO because NATO will never want Ukraine to be a part of the Alliance. They point to divisions between Ukraine and NATO members, including Hungary and Germany, and note Hungary's opposition to Ukraine joining NATO. They say that Ukraine joining NATO would provoke a war and that that is not worth it for NATO.

**Narrative: Ukraine is a puppet of the West and will never be accepted into the European Union.**

The main message in these narratives is Ukraine has no chance of joining the EU. They claim the EU does not want Ukraine as a member state, and since Ukraine will never join the EU neither party should risk war over it. They emphasize Ukraine is not even a candidate for EU membership and no one in the EU would "accept" Ukraine. These narratives describe Ukraine as a mere 'resource base' for Europe and as a useful territory for foreign policy. They dismiss Ukraine as a puppet for the West, pointing to its exclusion from the EU and NATO.

The narratives also claim that the EU is failing, with Britain out and with Poland on the way out as well. They say that the EU is a marginal entity in Europe, overshadowed by NATO. These narratives also point to disagreements between Ukraine and EU member states, notably Germany and Hungary.

**Narrative: The U.S. is dissatisfied with Zelensky and will profit from the war between Russia and Ukraine.**

These narratives include statements that the U.S. is dissatisfied with Zelensky and his rhetoric, that the U.S. thinks Ukraine is a secondary question compared to Taiwan, and that Zelensky could lose the support of Washington leading to a coup d'état. They suggest that Washington thinks Zelensky is unreliable and is furious that he accused DC of fomenting panic.

They say that Zelensky will be dragged into a war by the Americans and the U.S. will profit from the war through LNG sales to Europe, thus justifying tensions through cynical economic reasoning.

**Narrative: Ukraine, not Russia, is impeding the diplomatic process.**

These narratives imply that the West is overreacting about an attack. They suggest all that is necessary is a return to Minsk-II, which they say is in everyone's best interest. They mock Zelensky for not taking the Minsk agreements more seriously and accuse Ukraine of delaying the diplomatic process. Minsk-II is often held up by these narratives as the best way to prevent war, and they equate Ukraine's refusal to participate with a desire for conflict.

**Key themes by week chart**

Week	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>NATO is not interested in admitting Ukraine into the alliance.</b>	✘	✘	✘			
<b>Ukraine is a puppet of the West and will never be accepted into the European Union.</b>	✘	✘	✘			
<b>The U.S. is dissatisfied with Zelensky and will profit from the war between Russia and Ukraine.</b>	✘	✘	✘	✘		
<b>Ukraine, not Russia, is impeding the diplomatic process.</b>		✘	✘	✘	✘	

## 2 Key Theme: **Ukraine is Dependent on the West and on Russia**

**Narrative: Ukraine and Europe are fully dependent on Russian gas. Sanctions will only hurt Europe in the long run.**

These narratives focus on the geopolitics of Russian gas, often specifically focusing on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Many of these narratives emphasize Ukraine’s dependence on Russian gas and mock Ukraine for continuing to buy Russian gas from intermediaries.

They suggest that the U.S. would have to give Russia something in exchange for closing Nord Stream 2. There are arguments that Nord Stream 2 is strictly a commercial project for Russia and that it is beneficial to all parties.

Lastly, narratives also paint Gazprom as “bathing in money” and being in no hurry for Nord Stream 2 to go online. These narratives suggest that these tensions over gas benefit Gazprom, as they drive up the cost of natural gas. They also claim that Europe can find no alternative to Russian gas and that sanctions against the Russian energy sector would hurt Europe.

Key themes by week chart						
Week	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ukraine and Europe are fully dependent on Russian gas. Sanctions will only hurt Europe in the long run.	✘	✘	✘			

# 3

## Key Theme: Ukrainian Aggression, War Planning, and Sabotage

### Narrative: Ukraine is the one spreading disinformation campaigns as a false justification for war

These narratives spread different allegations of the U.S., Ukraine, and other Western countries preparing disinformation or psychological operations against Donbas and Russia. Some of these specific accusations include claims of Kyiv staging videos to justify hostilities against the Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) and the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Ukrainian attempts to use psychological operations to sow panic amongst the population of Donbas.

There are accusations that Western media is collaborating with Ukraine in developing war propaganda and false justification for war. There are numerous warnings about Western and Ukrainian disinformation. Ukraine and the U.S. are being painted as trying to mislead the international community about the situation on the ground. More specifically, some stories alleged that Kyiv influence operations planned to sabotage the Kharkov chemical plant and blamed Russia for the ensuing environmental disaster.

### Narrative: Ukraine wants nuclear weapons and would use them to terrorize Russia and the West

When President Zelensky flew to the Munich Security Conference, he raised the possibility of Ukraine rejecting the Bucharest Memorandum as defunct. The Bucharest Memorandum is the framework that prompted Ukraine to disarm its nuclear weapons after the fall of the former Soviet Union. These comments by Zelensky drove a significant amount of Russian media stories, with many saying that Ukraine was definitively seeking nuclear weapons and was planning to use nuclear weapons against Russia and Donbas.

Some stories suggested that the U.S. could give Ukraine nuclear weapons, while others suggested that a nuclear armed Ukraine was as dangerous for the West as it was for Russia. Stories were split on whether or not Ukraine had the capability to develop nuclear weapons. Those who felt it did not have the technical capability to proliferate on its own suggested that it may go the route of a dirty bomb or acquire weapons from Western allies.

### Narrative: Ukrainian saboteurs are terrorizing civilians in the LPR and DPR and critical infrastructure

These stories seek to drum up fear about Ukrainian sabotage efforts and paint the Ukrainian government as a sinister enemy. These stories tend to focus on LPR and DPR military and police-stopping saboteurs who are going into Donbas to destroy critical infrastructure or assassinate key DPR and LPR entities. Russian media claims that these saboteurs have tried to blow up chemical plants, petrol depots, a weapons depot, and a train station to terrorize the population of Donbas.

The alleged attack on a chemical plant was widely spread in the Russian media ecosystem, alleging that the saboteurs planned to blow up containers of chlorine and ammonia on the grounds of a chemical plant in the Gorlovka region. These stories implied that Ukraine was looking to weaponize a chemical explosion against the DPR and LPR.

**Narrative: Ukraine is heavily shelling Donbas, causing casualties and damaging hospitals, schools, homes, and critical infrastructure**

These stories were a staple of Russian media narratives for several weeks. Each week the stories would allege that Ukrainian shelling had significantly increased from the previous week. The stories also amplified claims from the DPR and LPR that Ukraine was targeting critical infrastructure, most notably power and water systems.

Russian media alleges that critical services were seriously hampered by this shelling and sabotage. Stories of alleged shelling often focus on the harm caused to LPR and DPR civilians as well as hospitals and residential buildings. There are also numerous allegations of critical infrastructure targeting, notably water pumping and filtration systems, as well as oil and gas pipelines and electricity infrastructure.

**Narrative: Ukraine is trying to assassinate LPR and DPR leadership**

These stories allege Ukraine is planning assassinations of LPR and DPR leadership. Most of these allegations stem from a claimed assassination attempt on a senior DPR military officer in Donetsk, whose car was allegedly blown up in front of a government building. There are also allegations that Ukrainian plans to carry out additional assassinations based on alleged intelligence from captured Ukrainian spies.

**Narrative: Ukraine is committing a genocide and massacres, like Nazi Germany**

These narratives accuse Ukraine of committing a genocide against Russian speakers in the LPR and DPR. Some stories repeat claims of mass graves, while others allege that Ukrainian aggression is driven by Russo-phobic and anti-Slavic sentiments. There are parallels drawn between Ukraine and the Nazis, accusing Ukraine of being a neo-Nazi state, and a recurring refrain that the world is ignoring a genocide that is taking place in Donbas. These narratives were echoed by Putin in [his Monday, February 21 address](#).

These narratives include allegations that the West is blocking DPR and LPR channels on YouTube and other social media to create an information vacuum and isolate residents of Donbas in preparation for a genocide.

**Narrative: Ukraine is targeting critical infrastructure in Donbas, depriving residents of critical services**

Widespread accusations emerged in the Russian media ecosystem of Ukraine targeting critical infrastructure. These alleged attacks are attributed to either Ukrainian shelling or sabotage. These allegations include gas pipeline explosions, damage to electrical substations, and damage to water infrastructure. There are also allegations of shelling on airports and hospitals.

**Narrative: Ukraine is preparing for an invasion of Donbas**

These narratives allege that Ukraine is ramping up for an invasion to take back the LPR and DPR. They cite captured Ukrainian spies to claim that the Ukrainian military is plotting forthcoming advancements on Donbas, including a coming amphibious landing and large-scale shelling followed by territory seizure.

Key themes by week chart						
Week	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ukraine is the one that is spreading disinformation campaigns as a false justification for war				✘	✘	
Ukraine wants nuclear weapons and would use them to terrorize Russia and the West			✘	✘	✘	
Ukrainian saboteurs are terrorizing civilians in the LPR and DPR and critical infrastructure				✘	✘	✘
Ukraine is heavily shelling Donbas, causing casualties and damaging hospitals, schools, homes, and critical infrastructure	✘	✘	✘	✘	✘	✘
Ukraine is trying to assassinate LPR and DPR leadership			✘			
Ukraine is committing a genocide and massacres, like Nazi Germany					✘	✘
Ukraine is targeting critical infrastructure in Donbas, depriving residents of critical services	✘	✘	✘	✘	✘	✘
Ukrainian is preparing for an invasion of Donbas	✘	✘	✘			



# 4 Key Theme: Ukrainian Domestic Troubles and Zelensky Failures

**Narrative: Ukraine is a state in decline due to a deteriorating economy and civil and political unrest**

These narratives try to paint a picture of a weak, incompetent Ukraine that is in decline. Economic-centered attacks accuse Ukraine of a deteriorating economy, pointing to increases in Ukraine’s budget deficit and Ukraine’s request for American loans. There are also articles spotlighting Ukrainian poverty and the lack of a prosperous future facing many Ukrainians.

These narratives also heavily imply that any fighting between Russia and Ukraine will only further harm the Ukrainian economy and that the panic over impending conflict is doing more damage to the Ukrainian economy than an actual conflict. There are implied societal failures, such as alleged Ukrainian brain drain and immigration and narratives of unrest and violent protests and riots in Ukraine. Some of these narratives deride Ukrainian accusations of Russia’s role in these efforts, suggesting that Kyiv is trying to shift the blame for its failures to Russia.

**Narrative: Zelensky is shrouded in Ukrainian corruption**

These stories point to Ukrainian corruption to paint a picture of a failing state and a dishonest government. They specifically focus on Zelensky’s relationship with oligarchs and imply that he is governing for the elite, not for the people.

Key themes by week chart						
Week	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ukraine is a state in decline due to a deteriorating economy and civil and political unrest.	✘	✘	✘			
Zelensky is shrouded in Ukrainian corruption	✘	✘	✘			

# 5 Key Theme: Ukrainian Weakness

**Narrative: Ukraine’s military capabilities are weaker than Russia’s. Therefore, failure is inevitable.**

These narratives push the idea that Ukraine is doomed to fail in a conflict with Russia. These narratives suggest that it would be impossible for Ukraine to take back Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk. They state that Ukraine cannot withstand the Russian army and that efforts to increase the size and capability of the Ukrainian army have failed.

Narratives allege that Zelensky has talked about improving the army only to boost his own popularity. They draw similarities between Ukraine and Georgia, suggesting that Ukraine will fail in the face of conflict like Georgia did. More specific narratives state that it will take Russia just a matter of days to reach the Dnieper river and “liberate” Ukraine and the Ukrainian population from the West. These narratives seek to spread a sense of inevitably, likely to make Ukrainians feel that the war is already lost and not worth fighting.

Key themes by week chart						
Week	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ukraine’s military capabilities are weaker than Russia’s. Therefore, failure is inevitable.	✘	✘	✘	✘		

# 6

## Key Theme: Russian Support of the LPR and DPR

**Narrative: Given strong citizen and political support, the LPR and DPR should be part of Russia, and Donbas should be “liberated.”**

The narratives emphasize the LPR and the DPR’s ties to Russia and encourage Russian recognition of the breakaway territories. They suggest that citizens of the breakaway territories want to be part of Russia, stating that over 16,000 Donbas residents have moved to join the United Russia party. These narratives often mention Russia’s charitable treatment of the regions and its citizens, from expanding social benefits to facilitating easier border crossings to Russia.

These narratives encourage Ukraine to give up the LPR and the DPR through Minsk-2. They encourage the Russian Duma to vote for LPR and DPR recognition, saying that recognition of the breakaway republics will put an end to the war in Donbas. There is also sizeable language about “liberating” Donbas from Ukraine and stopping the “endless violence and murders” inflicted on Donbas by Ukraine. Other narratives also suggest that Ukraine is ready to take Donbas back by force and that Ukrainians think that the LPR and DPR should be part of Ukraine.

**Narrative: Russia will defend the LPR and the DPR in the face of Ukrainian aggression**

These narratives claim that Russia will defend the LPR and DPR from Ukrainian aggression. They emphasize Russian support for the breakaway republics and their citizens, and emphasize the LPR and DPR loyalty towards Russia. These narratives refer to the residents of the DPR and LPR as compatriots, and allege that their lives are at risk as Ukraine plans an offensive against the two breakaway regions.

These media narratives often claim that Russia does not want war, but will justify military involvement to protect Donbas.

**Narrative: The DPR and LPR militaries are mobilizing in the face of Ukrainian aggression**

Shortly after the [evacuation](#) announcements, the LPR and DPR announced military mobilization. These mobilizations were framed as DPR and LPR residents preparing to defend their land from an overly aggressive Ukraine. There were many stories glorifying the soldiers and reserves who were called up and emphasizing the hatred they felt for Ukraine.

**Narrative: LPR and DPR residents are being evacuated to Russia, where they are being treated very well**

On February 18 the LPR and DPR announced [evacuations](#) of their residents to Russia in preparation for conflict with Ukraine. The announcements quickly became a focus of the Russian media ecosystem. Stories abounded about the details of the evacuation, the first buses out, and the urgent need to evacuate in the face of an alleged impending Ukrainian attack. The stories also amplified pledges from different Russian regions to take in refugees, with Russian media highlighting each region pledging aid and resettlement. There were also several narratives touting Russia’s hospitality towards refugees, including the 10,000 rubles promised to each evacuee and to the medical and psychological assistance for evacuated children.

**Narrative: Russia should recognize the LPR and DPR to protect them from Ukrainian aggression.**

These stories were particularly prevalent in the lead up to Putin’s recognition of the LPR and DPR. The narratives aimed to lobby for the recognition of the breakaway republics but also served to prepare the media ecosystem for the impending decision to recognize. Many of these stories amplify the pleas from the head of the breakaway republics to Putin. This narrative trend suggested that recognizing the LPR and the DPR is the only way to protect Donbas in the face of Ukrainian aggression and alleged genocide.

Immediately following the recognition of the LPR and DPR Russian media highlighted stories of crowds in the republics celebrating the announcement.

Key themes by week chart						
Week	1	2	3	4	5	6
Given strong citizen and political support, the LPR and DPR should be part of Russia, and Donbas should be “liberated.”		✘	✘	✘		
Russia will defend the LPR and the DPR in the face of Ukrainian aggression				✘	✘	✘
LPR and DPR residents are being evacuated to Russia, where they are being treated very well					✘	✘
The DPR and LPR militaries are mobilizing in the face of Ukrainian aggression					✘	✘
Russia should recognize the LPR and DPR to protect them from Ukrainian aggression			✘			

# PATHWAYS TOWARDS A STRONGER UKRAINIAN MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

As part of this project, we held numerous discussions with Ukrainian journalists and members of civil society. The research highlights that Ukrainians—like all citizens of the world’s democracies—would benefit from more investment into media literacy. Increased awareness of OSINT tools would be particularly helpful in combating Russian disinformation and making the Ukrainian media ecosystem more resilient.

- Ukrainians also need a good understanding of Russian disinformation tools and how they go beyond the scope of the current conflict. This is beneficial when teaching OSINT skills. A good example is here: <https://cepa.org/owning-the-conversation-assessing-responses-to-russian-and-chinese-information-operations-around-covid-19/>
- Understanding how the majority of Ukrainians get their news and the vulnerabilities the system presented prior to the full-scale February 2022 invasion will similarly help in establishing a stronger media ecosystem in a post-war Ukraine. A good example is here: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/build-independent-media-in-ukraine/>
- Greater awareness of cybersecurity issues and emerging threats is crucial for long term protection of Ukrainian journalists. There are significant financial resources needed to aid Ukrainian newsrooms in protecting both their equipment and their data.
- Local reporting that adheres to high journalistic standards is the backbone of any healthy media ecosystem. Financial resources, in combination with training opportunities on OSINT in particular, would be greatly beneficial in a post-war Ukraine, when the disruption caused by the invasion will need to be mitigated.
- Independent financing, and crowdfunding in particular, is more beneficial to Ukrainian journalists than oligarchic financing. Even the most “benevolent” oligarch presents problems for transparency and accountability in the Ukrainian media ecosystem.
- Efforts to mitigate the effects of Russian propaganda and disinformation on captured territories will need to be implemented if and when these territories are re-captured by Ukrainian forces.

# CONCLUSION



The war in Ukraine is nowhere near over and even when it ends, the Russian threat to the Ukrainian media ecosystem will not disappear. The war has shown the importance of investment in the health and safety of Ukrainian media, as efforts from 2014 through the start of the war have enabled the population to counter Russian disinformation. In fact, Ukraine provides an encouraging example of the value and feasibility of national digital resilience.

However, especially in wartime, democratic publics cannot be complacent. There remain several steps that Ukraine, Ukrainian society, Ukrainian allies, and the international system can take to further the health and security of the Ukrainian media ecosystem. These include:

- Ukrainian newsrooms need more independent financing for day-to-day operations.
- OSINT training and tools must be made more widely available to members of the Ukrainian media so that Russian fakes and other types of disinformation and misinformation can be spotted and debunked in real time.
- Greater support is needed for a cybersecurity infrastructure for Ukrainian journalists. This can protect them from external and internal threats, thus allowing them to do their work more efficiently and with less potential for harm.
- More investment in local, on-the-ground reporting that is not dependent on local oligarchic financial structures and institutions will allow for more transparent and accountable coverage of events. This will allow isolated areas to become more resilient to any potential outside disruption and will enable greater cohesion and open flow of information between urban and rural centers

