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Conference Report

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# Roundtable Discussion on Disinformation in Ukraine

**T**HIS REPORT SUMMARISES an informal roundtable discussion held at RUSI on 25 June 2019 on themes and approaches to disinformation in Ukraine. The conversation was led by Oleksandr Danylyuk from the Center for Defence Reform in Kiev and built on field research conducted in Ukraine by Peter Roberts and Ewan Lawson from RUSI in May 2019. Having previously considered Russian involvement in Ukraine's elections, the intent of these discussions was to look broadly at the extent of disinformation in the country, to identify themes of the narratives and approaches employed.

## Context

Disinformation in Ukraine takes place against a wider background of concern about the spread of such activity across the globe. While disinformation is nothing new in national and international politics, the advent of social media allows messages to be spread more broadly and quickly than was previously the case. While much attention is on the political space, such as allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections, these techniques and opportunities are being exploited by a range of actors, including in the commercial sector.<sup>1</sup>

A concern expressed at the roundtable in the context of Ukraine was the lack of transparency in the ownership of traditional media outlets, such as television, radio and newspapers. It was suggested that this opacity was also reflected in some media outlets appearing to be financially unviable, which of course raised questions as to their purpose. However, it was also noted that linkage between ownership and direct editorial control is difficult to establish. As Ukraine goes through an intense political period in 2019 with elections from the presidential to the local levels, there is significant turbulence in the structure of political groupings and parties, with nearly 40 candidates registered in the recent presidential election. It was noted that support from one or more media groupings could, perhaps unsurprisingly, have a significant impact on the performance of a candidate or party at election time, but that the overall lack of transparency raised concerns about some of these arrangements. It was also noted that while some social media platforms such as VKontakte had been banned by the Ukrainian authorities, these were routinely accessed by the public through virtual private networks.

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1. See, for example, Tabby Kinder, 'Firm of Disgraced Peer Lord Bell Hired to Wage Secret PR War on Rival Venue', *The Times*, 22 June 2019.

## Purpose of Disinformation

It was generally agreed that the purpose of efforts at disinformation in Ukraine was to destabilise the country, rather than for an external power to take control. Russian-linked actors were identified as the primary sources of that disinformation. It was argued by some roundtable participants that the core intent was to suggest Ukraine was not a viable state and that whichever government was in power, it could not effectively run the country. This provided a useful contrast to the message from Russia's leadership about its own stability and potentially acted as a distraction from problems at home.

Looked at in the context of Russia's military operations in Crimea and the Donbas, it was argued that since the early 2000s, its approach had been to give primacy to the information line of operations rather than the military. Thus, where in the West the tendency is for information operations to be in support of military activity, in Russia this is reversed. There is therefore no need for further territorial expansion into Ukraine to achieve the destabilising effect required. Equally, in reflecting on disinformation in Ukraine, Western observers need to be conscious not to assume that Russia's disinformation activities are tightly directed and controlled as they might be in Western states.

## Themes and Approaches of Disinformation

The overriding theme of efforts at disinformation in Ukraine appears to be to suggest that it is not a functioning state, through making problems appear worse than they actually are. Further, it focuses on the 20<sup>th</sup>-century history of Ukraine to link ideas of nationalism to support for Nazism, a contrast with the narrative of Russia's victory over fascism in the Great Patriotic War. This is used to argue that Ukraine seeks to provoke Russia. Beyond this, there is a weaponising of all potential divisions in Ukrainian society – whether social, cultural, political or regional – to make problems seem worse than they are in reality, to divide the population in ways that undermine the government's ability to run the country. An example that was also highlighted during field research in Kiev was a sense that the anti-corruption narrative was being manipulated to make corruption in Ukraine seem worse than it is in reality.

A further theme noted was the way in which the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine was portrayed as a civil war rather than an external intervention by Russia. Aside from a desire to avoid censure from the international community for its involvement, it was argued that Moscow is also seeking to avoid the substantial costs that would be associated with rebuilding the region in the event of a settlement where Russia accepted responsibility.

It was largely agreed that the approaches and methods for delivering disinformation in Ukraine reflected those seen elsewhere, albeit mediated through the particular media construct highlighted previously. The traditional media was seen as creating opinion shapers and communities of like-minded people. It was noted that this was no different to most Western media outlets but that the problem was shaped in Ukraine by the opacity of the ownership of those outlets. Social media remained a concern, particularly the use of fake accounts as

a vehicle for mobilising opinion. This was despite the efforts of the Ukrainian authorities to restrict access to particular providers including VKontakte.

## Conclusion: Further Research

The roundtable identified several areas for further research and policy development. First, it was considered important to be clear on the difference between disinformation and misinformation. A recent publication by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and King's Centre for Strategic Communications suggests: 'disinformation is the manipulation of information that purposefully aims to mislead and deceive, while misinformation is inaccurate information that is the result of an honest mistake or of negligence'.<sup>2</sup>

Clarity of understanding is essential to ensuring the development of appropriate policy responses, as is recognising the differences between measures of performance and measures of effect. In the case of disinformation, there is a tendency to note the number of times a social media post is retransmitted, for example, without any sense as to whether that has had the impact that the issuer wished for. It was noted that measures of effect in terms of causality rather than correlation are difficult, not least because the intent is not always obvious.

It was agreed that cross-government cooperation was key and that total defence approaches, such as that followed by Sweden,<sup>3</sup> offered opportunities for policy responses. In Kiev, it was felt that the NATO–Ukraine Platform on Countering Hybrid Warfare had indicated some potential, but this appeared to have stalled.

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2. Jente Althuis and Leonie Haiden, *Fake News: A Road Map* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and King's Centre for Strategic Communications, 2018).

3. See, Government Offices of Sweden, 'Development of Modern Total Defence', <<https://www.government.se/articles/2018/05/development-of-modern-total-defence/>>, accessed 10 July 2019.