

# RECOMMENDATIONS ON STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY OF FACT-CHECKERS TO COMBAT DISINFORMATION

---

VIKTORIIA ROMANIUK

*StopFake, Ukraine*

YEVHEN FEDCHENKO

*National University of 'Kyiv-Mohyla Academy', Ukraine*

RUSLAN DEYNYCHENKO

*StopFake, Ukraine*

## LIST OF CONTENT:

1. Introduction. 2. Recommendations for fact-checking organizations. 3. Recommendations for governments and policymakers. 4. Glossary of terms. 5. References

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the European Commission launched the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, the first self-regulatory piece of legislation that intended to motivate companies to collaborate on solving the problem of disinformation. This updated Code makes 44 commitments and includes 128 detailed measures. Among the main measures mentioned in this document are the following “empowering researchers and fact-Checkers” (The Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, 2022).

This shows the growing role of fact-checking organisations in the EU and the US. Over the last few years, the number of fact-checking services in Europe has increased significantly, both as part of media outlets and independent fact-checking organisations (Graves, Cherubini, 2016).

The world's leading network, The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), comprises about 100 fact-checking organisations from around the world,

including the EU, and plays a powerful role in promoting the importance of fact-checking as a tool for countering various types of information threats.

In 2022, in order to promote the highest standards of fact-checking and to promote media literacy for the public benefit the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) was established. This organisation positions itself as “the voice of European fact-checkers who uphold and promote the highest standards of fact-checking and media literacy. The EFCSN and its verified members are committed to upholding the principles of freedom of expression. They work to promote the public’s access to fact-checked trustworthy data and information and to educate the public in how to assess the veracity of information in the public sphere” (EFCSN). EFCSN has a strong potential to address disinformation and information threats in the EU.

However, Ukraine's experience in the context of combating disinformation in Europe is extremely important, as it is related to the implementation of measures to build resilience against the destructive effects of disinformation against the backdrop of a long struggle to preserve sovereignty and independence and military threats posed by Russia since 2014. During this period, a number of NGOs and governmental organisations have been established in Ukraine to counter disinformation, to do fact-checking, and increase the level of media literacy for various target audiences among Ukrainians.

Therefore, it was an important achievement that Ukraine started the process of neutralisation of the Russian disinformation system in 2014, the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine. That allowed Ukraine to gain strategic advantages in communication and to use these advantages in the future both to build an internal system of resilience and to create an international coalition of allies and partners. Since 2014 Ukraine has been studying the Russian doctrine of information warfare, its strategy, key actors, and dissemination platforms, as well as studying and neutralising the main narratives that would later be used by Russia to justify its invasion of Ukraine.

Ukraine successfully managed to draw the world's attention to the problem of the spread and growing influence of Russian disinformation, explain its impact and discredit its main narratives. And all this was done preemptively, long before the full-scale invasion of February 2022 started.

Since 2014, the systematic work of various actors – state and non-state – to counter Russian information threats through monitoring information, raising awareness and understanding of disinformation threats has been one of the important steps to neutralise the Russian disinformation system. This has enabled Ukraine to gain strategic advantages in communication, and later was used to build an internal system of resilience and to create an international coalition of allies and partners.

There are several approaches to defining propaganda. In the modern context, the most relevant to our study is the approach of Curnalia (Curnalia, 2005) who noted that propaganda is a systematic effort to influence the perception of the people for which different mediums were used for a prolonged time period. Such activity influences public opinion by using emotions and irrational messages. Propagandists tried to use as many sources for message dissemination as possible in order to reach a maximum audience (Manzoor, 2019).

At the beginning of March 2014, the Mohyla School of Journalism at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy launched an innovative project called StopFake. It was an initiative of teachers, students and alumni who decided to create a new mechanism for cleaning the information space from harmful information messages of the Russian disinformation system and informing the Ukrainian audience about it.

Russian disinformation in all its manifestations became the main focus of the new project. Over the past nine years, StopFake has collected key examples of false reports by Russian media and has become a powerful archive of references to Russian lies. In 2022, StopFake was included in the archives of the Library of Congress as one of the "unique historical sources that demonstrates in detail the evolution and threats of Russian propaganda and disinformation". Numerous

materials on the StopFake website show not only the evolution of Russian propaganda at the narrative level, but also the technical side, as it demonstrates tools the Kremlin used to promote its narratives, how it used social media and built an international network of disinformation agents.

Among the StopFake's tasks were regular monitoring of Ukrainian and Russian media for false information about events in Ukraine; analysis of the phenomenon of Kremlin propaganda in all its forms and manifestations; informing various audiences and raising the level of media literacy; and conducting research. The systematic work of fact-checkers allowed them to observe the evolution of the Russian disinformation ecosystem, map its main narratives, and in a way - even predict the future full-scale invasion.

In his research the co-founder of StopFake Yevhen Fedchenko writes that "the example of Ukraine shows that modern warfare is also a war of narratives, and information technology is becoming a universal tool for imposing strategic content and social control on the audience" (Fedchenko, Y., 2023). He also emphasizes that since 2014, measures have been taken to increase public knowledge and awareness of disinformation threats. The result has been a significant neutralisation of the Russian disinformation system, which has enabled Ukraine to gain a strategic advantage in communication.

Strategic narratives are also a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors (Miskimmon, A., O'Laughlin B., Roselle L.) In fact, a strategic narrative is a tool for constructing a global picture of the world for different audiences, a tool for shaping an ideological paradigm and new identities.

At the end of 2023, StopFake researchers conducted a study "Anti-EU Narratives through the Russian-Ukrainian War in the Light of StopFake.org's debunks". The research findings demonstrate the need for systematic approaches to Russian disinformation targeting Ukraine and the EU. Since 2014, topics related to Ukraine's EU integration have been central to Russian malign influence

programs, aiming at undermining trust in Ukraine's international partners, trust in official institutions of the EU, and existing democratic governance system. They are also designed to provoke violence and intolerance towards established democratic political systems, to foster total distrust in the EU, to undermine support for Ukraine's pro-European track and as well as to undermine the efforts of governmental institutions to act effectively in times of crisis, war, conflict, and finally, to influence local political process. Considering the deepening global crisis of various kinds globally, from epidemics to wars and natural disasters, it is imperative to establish a system for effective responses and proactive measures in real-time, including threat prevention measures.

Based on the current research of the StopFake fact-checking project regarding the narrative strategy of Russian disinformation surrounding the EU and Ukraine, the research group has developed recommendations for fact-checking organisations and government agencies.

## 2. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FACT-CHECKING ORGANISATIONS

**Recommendation 1: Use the narrative map of Russian disinformation surrounding the EU as a basis for identifying threats of this type.**

Since the narrative map of Russian disinformation on the EU, as the study shows, remains constant and is systematically employed by Russian disinformation, we recommend that fact-checking organisations and think tanks use it to construct markers and criteria for identifying fake messages across various types of media and social networks on this topic.

**Recommendation 2: Pay special attention to those EU countries that are systematically targeted by Russian disinformation.**

The current research on the narratives, promoted by Russia during the period from 2014 to 2023, has also identified the most targeted countries that have become focal points of disinformation (Poland, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy). To effectively establish counter-disinformation campaigns, we recommend that fact-checkers pay attention to the geographic factor in fake

news and utilise available data for further analysis and information verification. It is crucial to communicate this with governmental institutions in those countries and consider this factor in the process of development of communication strategies.

**Recommendation 3: To conduct a regular analysis of target audiences of Russian disinformation.**

The results of the study demonstrate how Russian disinformation narratives are linked to specific countries. Based on the findings of the current study, we recommend that fact-checking organisations research audience reactions to certain fake news stories, to monitor trends and dynamics of their dissemination, to inform readers in countries with the highest disinformation threats. Such activities will help to anticipate and preempt possible consequences of the Kremlin's information attacks.

**Recommendation 4: To conduct systematic monitoring and narrative analysis aimed at identifying new thematic and substantive changes in order to anticipate new threats.**

As disinformation narratives evolve under the influence of various factors such as political processes and events, unforeseen crisis, and epidemics, it is essential to regularly re-assess narrative analyses to anticipate threats and identify key target groups and communities. We recommend utilising various monitoring and computation tools for monitoring disinformation, enhancing the capabilities of analysts and fact-checkers regarding threats and the ways they are disseminated.

**Recommendation 5: To analyze technologies and tools used by disinformation for the production of fake news.**

In the process of disinformation campaigns in Ukraine, Russia has used various technologies to reproduce false, manipulative information – deep fakes, fake audio, and photo/video messages. Regular monitoring and analysis allow us to

track not only the narrative but also the technological features of disinformation, as well as to prepare strategies and methods of verification and refutation.

**Recommendation 6: To set up a publicly available repository of disinformation examples.**

Based on fact-checkers data to develop a publicly accessible repository of disinformation examples annotated with narrative features across various types of content to be used by the fact-checking community and other stakeholders.

Also important is to organise an ongoing process for updating and analysing this data. Provide a transparent methodology for populating and utilising data from this database.

**Recommendation 7: To promote the internationalisation of fact-checking to track and analyze the cross-border spread of disinformation.**

Provide translation capabilities to track and analyse the cross-border spread of disinformation. According to the study, in the context of the war in Ukraine, disinformation clearly identifies the main countries involved and makes them the focus of its fake news. Given its international nature, fact-checking organisations should develop language services and translate refutations. This will increase the level of analysis of disinformation in a pan-European context, allow for the demonstration of trends common to different countries, and facilitate data exchange between fact-checking organisations.

**Recommendation 8: To establish an extensive monitoring framework.**

The monitoring structure should incorporate the most accessible fact-checking databases. To achieve this, it is necessary to initiate the establishment of networking connections and cooperation between fact-checking organisations, communication companies, social media platforms, and other stakeholders in the information process.

**Recommendation 9: To inform and educate various stakeholders about disinformation trends on a regular basis.**

Develop a system for regularly informing all stakeholders. Include the results of systematic analysis of disinformation narrative trends in public reports and discussions, articulate the trends and threats at all levels, and engage a wide audience in this process.

**Recommendation 10. To build a network of fact-checkers and researchers.**

Considering the importance of involving researchers in the search for new approaches to combating disinformation, we recommend that fact-checkers establish lasting cooperation with research institutions and universities. This will help to effectively identify and analyse disinformation challenges and develop effective ways to prevent the consequences of dangerous information attacks.

**3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENTS AND POLICYMAKERS**

**Recommendation 1. To support independent scientific research and systematic analysis of disinformation.**

We urge governments to fund and support independent research in the field of information and disinformation. To create conditions for systematic analytical work by scholars across Europe. In order to study the social impact of disinformation, promote interdisciplinary research that includes IT, social, psychological and humanitarian fields.

**Recommendation 2. To encourage cross-disciplinary cooperation of researchers**

In order to improve the processes of data collection and analysis, encourage interaction between fact-checkers, researchers, and representatives of communication companies and social networks. Also, it will be important to create a platform that would combine the capabilities of professionals across Europe and provide up-to-date information on security threats in the field of information.



**Recommendation 3. To include fact-checking in the structure of strategic communications.**

In the process of building communication companies and strategies at various levels, take into account the results of fact-checking activities. Take into account trends and disinformation narratives to formulate strategic messages and explanations for different target audiences.

**Recommendation 4. To involve fact-checkers in the policymaking process on countering disinformation.**

Since the systematic activity of fact-checking organisations allows to identify technological, narrative and behavioural features of the processes related to the transmission and consumption of information by different groups, their experience and observations can be useful in developing policies and formulating legislation in the field of information and countering disinformation.

**Recommendation 5. To apply clear frameworks and legal mechanisms for data protection and data use policies.**

As data protection and the right to privacy is a value of a democratic European society, it's essential to promote transparency of stakeholders' activities in the field of countering disinformation, create opportunities for the exchange of data, reports and research.

**Recommendation 6. Strengthen sanctions against agents and sponsors of disinformation.**

Since disinformation is changing and actively adapting to new realities and legal prohibitions, systematic updating of formal approaches to combat disinformation should be addressed. Based on systematic monitoring by analytical and fact-checking organisations, develop and strengthen sanctions against disinformation agents and governments sponsoring destructive information actions. Any new digital processes and deformational influences must have a relevant sanction or legislative response.

**Recommendation 7. To collaborate with digital platforms**

Establish close cooperation with civilian platforms to track and block disinformation, messages containing threats to national security, and violent and radical content. Support the best practices of fact-checking programs run by digital platforms and communications companies.

**Recommendation 8. To develop criteria to identify agents and sources of disinformation.**

Disinformation tends to change dynamically and adapts to bans and sanctions and acquires hybrid features. New allegedly independent, not state-related speakers and opinion leaders and influencers are acting as actors of disinformation, manipulating the concept of freedom of speech and undermining the foundations of a democratic society. Due to these trends, we recommend that governments, together with fact-checking organisations and academia, work to define wider criteria for disinformation agents and actors, and disruptors of information processes.

**Recommendation 9. To promote and support self-regulatory initiatives of media/fact-checkers and other stakeholders in the information process.**

In order to ensure multilateral and effective work of journalistic and fact-checking organisations, we recommend that governments create conditions and support self-regulatory initiatives. EFCSN is one such important example of a pan-European fact-checking organisation. Supporting and strengthening such initiatives should be an important priority for the EU councils and parliaments.

**Recommendation 10. Public awareness and Media Literacy.**

Include issues related to disinformation and propaganda and information verification in the curricula for different age groups at different stages of national education on a regular basis.

Given the potential of fact-checking organisations and their activities in informing different target groups about fake news and promoting critical thinking, the

importance of official sources and trusted resources, involve them in national media literacy events. Support media education initiatives.

Develop and promote information campaigns to promote the role of fact-checking and media literacy and involve various types of media (television, radio, online media), educational and media organisations in such campaigns.

#### 4. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Disinformation** is false information that is purposely spread to deceive people (Lazer, 2018).

**Digital platform:** An internet company and/or service on which registered users post information and communicate digitally, including popular social media sites/companies such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and more (Canadian Citizens' Assembly on Democratic Expression).

**Malinformation** is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere (Wardle, Derakhshan, 2017).

**Misinformation:** verifiably false information that is shared without the intent to mislead. The effects of misinformation can still be harmful. People also deliberately spread false or manipulated information (Pamment, 2021).

**Narrative** is a form of storytelling that helps to explain and shape perceptions of an issue. They are stories that are designed to influence a target audience. (Pamment, 2021).

**Propaganda** is “conceived of as strategically devised messages that are disseminated to masses of people by an institution for the purpose of generating action benefiting its source” (Parry-Giles, 2002). Russian propaganda is not just the promotion of ideas and messages, it is the systematic imposition of ideology. Indeed, this is the most relevant definition. In essence, propaganda aims to change the attitudes and behaviors of the masses and could potentially act as a tool to spread an ideology (Collison, 2003).

**Strategic narratives** are a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors (Alistair Miskimmon, Ben O’Laughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

**Fact-checking** is the systematic assessment of online resources, media messages and publication of claims made by organizations or public figures to assess their validity (Walter, Cohen, Holbert, Morag)

**Fact-checking organisations** are Journalistic organisations focused on professional verification of information.

**Media literacy** is the ability to understand, analyze, evaluate, and create media messages (Austin, E, Chen, Y, Pinkleton, B, Johnson, J.).

## 5. REFERENCES

Austin, E, Chen, Y, Pinkleton, B, Johnson, J. (2006) Benefits and costs of channel one in a middle school setting and the role of media literacy training. *Pediatrics*. 423–33.

Graves, L., Cherubini F., (2016) The rise of fact-checking sites in Europe

Miskimmon, A., O’Laughlin B., Roselle L. (2013) *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge)

Canadian Citizens’ Assembly on Democratic Expression. (2022) “Canadian Citizens’ Assembly on Democratic Expression: Recommendations to strengthen Canada’s response to the spread of disinformation online.” Ottawa, Public Policy Forum.

Collison, D.J. (2003). Corporate propaganda: Its implications for accounting and accountability. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*. DOI:10.1108/09513570310505989

Parry-Giles, S.J. (2002). *The rhetorical presidency, propaganda, and the Cold War, 1945-1955*. Greenwood Publishing Group.

Romaniuk, V. (2023) Weryfikacja faktów i obalenie fałszywych wiadomości: wyzwania i osiągnięcia, Ukraińskie media w obliczu wojny: Regulacje prawne i doświadczenia, Współpraca: Akademickie Centrum Komunikacji Strategicznej, 217

Fedchenko, Y. (2023) Główne narracje dezinformacji kształtujące wojnę i jej wpływ na wojnę kinetyczną, *Ukraińskie media w obliczu wojny: Regulacje prawne i doświadczenia*, Współpraca: Akademickie Centrum Komunikacji Strategicznej, 194

Fedchenko, Y. (2016). Kremlin propaganda: Soviet active measures by other means, *Estonian Journal of Military Studies*.

Pamment, J. (2021). RESIST 2 Counter–disinformation toolkit

Walter N, Cohen J, Holbert RL, Morag Y. (2020) Fact-checking: A meta-analysis of what works and for whom. *Political Communication*. 350–375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1668894>

Wardle, C., Derakhshan. H. (2017). Information disorder: toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making, 108.

The Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation (2022) <https://disinfocode.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/The-Strengthened-Code-of-Practice-on-Disinformation-2022.pdf>

The European Code of Standards for Independent Fact-Checking Organisations (EFCSN) <https://efcsn.com/code-of-standards/>

The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/>