

# BUILDING RESILIENCE OF UKRAINIAN FACT-CHECKERS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This book is being published under the project titled “Building resilience of Ukrainian fact-checkers in the fight against disinformation about the EU” which was funded by the European Media and Information Fund (EMIF). The project was led by the UC3M MediaLab Research Group in Madrid University Carlos III in collaboration with StopFake.org, the leading fact-checking organization in Ukraine. The aim was to strengthen the capacity of EU and Ukrainian fact-checking organizations to combat disinformation, particularly around topics related to the European Union.

The war in Ukraine has intensified disinformation, including Russian propaganda that actively discredits the EU and tries to undermine support for Ukraine from EU states and democratic values inside Ukrainian media space (European Commission, 2022). The project mapped the main disinformation narratives and

actors to flag them to the wider fact-checking community in the European Union to help them identify malign narratives and mitigate their impact.

This initiative is a set of research and educational activities aimed at improving fact-checking skills and awareness among fact-checkers. The project fosters positive transformations in the EU and Ukrainian media landscapes through information dissemination and knowledge exchange. The project strengthens the work of fact-checking organizations and reviews expertise and methodologies on information verification. Through this approach, it is expected to contribute significantly to the fight against disinformation in Europe.

Therefore, this project is funded by EMIF and led by UC3M MediaLab and StopFake.org, key organizations in the field.

#### 1.1. THE EUROPEAN MEDIA AND INFORMATION FUND (EMIF)

EMIF is a funding agency based in Portugal that was established by the European University Institute and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. In addition, Google has joined as an EMIF donor. The fund is managed by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, which ensures its day-to-day management. EMIF supports collaborative efforts to debunk disinformation, amplify independent fact-checking, and enable targeted research and innovation tools designed to address online disinformation in Europe. The EMIF provides support to organizations based in Europe through competitive award processes and using independent and impartial selection committees. The fund is committed to scientific autonomy and freedom, transparency, pluralism, non-discrimination, and diversity (EMIF, 2023). The EMIF grants funding to projects in Europe that aim to fight disinformation. The fund provides grants for fact-checking and media literacy initiatives, as well as fundamental research projects, with a view to addressing the phenomenon of online disinformation in Europe and promoting a more resilient and fact-based digital information ecosystem.

## 1.2. UC3M MEDIALAB

The Research Group "Analytics, Media and Public Engagement: Communication, Journalism and Technology Laboratory" (UC3M MediaLab) responds to the growing need to study the media and public discourse under the influence of technological advances in the information society. Fields such as the influence of social networks on public perception, citizen participation, disinformation, crisis communication, big data, STEM vocations and data journalism are areas of analysis that are applied to various extents of society such as politics, economics, law, science, health, environment, ethics, international relations, etc.

The members of the UC3M MediaLab study and analyze the behavior of traditional and digital media, journalistic coverage of relevant and sensitive issues for society, as well as the influence of communication technologies on public perception and citizen participation in public debate.

The group is composed by academics, researchers and doctoral students with multidisciplinary profiles from the fields of communication, journalism, science and technology as well as legal and social sciences. The members are participating in several European, national and regional research projects such as the Jean Monnet Chair "EU, disinformation & fake news" (UC3M, 2019).

## 1.3. STOPFAKE.ORG

StopFake.org is the leading Ukrainian fact-checking project. The purpose of the project is to monitor, verify, fact-check and debunk fake stories, look for disinformation coming from state and non-state agents, translate best articles from major European languages into Ukrainian/Russian and to post these translations on the website, and then to spread the information through social networks accounts. In the last 9 years StopFake has accumulated a huge experience, collecting examples of Russian disinformation, mapping the distribution ecosystem of disinformation and its impact on Ukrainian audiences.

In 2014, StopFake received The Bobs award from Deutsche Welle as the best project in Russian language. In 2016, StopFake was included in the list of New Europe 100 (changemakers in Central and Eastern Europe), compiled by Res

Publica, Google, Visegrad Fund, and the Financial Times. In 2017, the StopFake project received the prestigious Democracy Prize from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) as a leading organization in the global fight against propaganda and disinformation. During the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine StopFake received a lot of attention among audiences and policy-makers for its role in combating disinformation. Fortune described it as a "vital force" in protecting Ukraine's efforts against propaganda and disinformation. In 2022, StopFake was one of seven Ukrainian outlets that was awarded the Free Media Pioneer award by the International Press Institute and the Library of Congress announced that it would digitally archive the website as a record of Russian propaganda during the war.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

The idea for the project emerged at the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The world was shocked by Russia's brutal military actions and the scale of information threats that emerged against this background. The migration crisis, energy, and economic threats against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine have become new powerful disinformation topics. It was obvious that addressing these challenges would require new and innovative approaches and collaboration of experts from various fields of information and strategic communications.

The project analyzed the StopFake.org own database and identified the key disinformation narratives of Russian propaganda about the EU and separate European countries that have become the focus of Russian fake news. The project team also researched modern information verification methodologies, which led to the creation of a unique training program for journalists and fact-checkers.

An important task of the project was also to create a new discussion platform that would bring together academics, journalists, and fact-checkers. The 1st European Congress on Disinformation and Fact-Checking became such a platform, where we brought together leading European experts in various fields involved in overcoming problems in the field of information and disinformation.

### 3. PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research project includes the analysis of the database of the Ukrainian fact-checking agency StopFake.org which is a leader among fact-checking projects in Ukraine, revealing disinformation and misinformation about events in Ukraine by debunking fake news. The website publishes debunked fake news stories about events in Ukraine in 10 languages, including Ukrainian, Russian, English, Spanish, Bulgarian, French, Italian, Dutch, Czech, German, Polish, and Turkish.

Over the past eight years of regular monitoring, the StopFake project team has compiled a database of Russian disinformation, which now includes more than 30,000 links to disinformation materials from the Russian media. The interpretative phase of the research project employed selected methods that are part of standard research practice in media and communication studies and social sciences in general, including narrative analysis, content analysis, and discourse analysis. In addition, the methodology included a systematic review on the most prominent and effective fact-checking tools that are being used.

The results were used for the development of a set of key recommendations for fact-checkers, media, politicians, and other relevant actors, and for the development of a guide and fact-checking curriculum that is based on state-of-the-art international standards and best practices to mirror professional reality.

The results were also discussed and summarized in a conference format, the European Congress on Disinformation and Fact-Checking, with the participation of media researchers and fact-checker practitioners from many European countries and beyond. The project also ensured that all activities were carried out in a gender-sensitive manner, and further that equal opportunities for all were guaranteed, and that both men and women were treated equally.

#### 4. ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT UNDER THE PROJECT

##### 4.1. ANALYSIS OF EU-RELATED DISINFORMATION IN UKRAINE

One of the project's objectives was to analyze how Russian disinformation influenced Ukrainians' pro-European beliefs and shaped the negative information background around the topics of Ukraine-EU relations. StopFake.org researchers conducted a study “Anti-EU Narratives through the Russian-Ukrainian War in the Light of StopFake.org's debunks”. This study analyzed and compared the narrative map of Russian disinformation about the EU before (2014-2022) and after the full-scale invasion (February 2022-now), examined narrative changes in disinformation, and studied which European countries were mostly often mentioned in fake news, in which context and what channels for spreading false information were used.

Narrative analysis not only allows us to trace key disinformation topics, but also to identify their correlation with political processes and Russia's overall strategy in the context of the war against Ukraine. Therefore, this study opens up broad prospects for further research.

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 operations, 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. Also, the aim is to undermine the efforts of governmental institutions to act effectively in times of crisis, war, conflict, and finally, to influence local political processes. 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 operating in real-time, including threat prevention measures.

The study also demonstrates the importance of fact-checking activities. Considering the number of debunking articles analyzed in the study, we can see the format of countering disinformation implemented by fact-checkers and the ways in which fact-checkers interact and communicate with external target audiences, as the project's goal is not only to identify and refute harmful messages, but also to build effective communication with readers about the current threats of Russian disinformation.

#### 4.2. FACT-CHECKING METHODOLOGIES AND TOOLS

Fact-checking is a crucial process in the information ecosystem for ensuring the accuracy of information in publication stages, and it can be conducted either in-house or by independent fact-checking organizations. Fact-checkers play a vital role in verifying the accuracy of names, dates, and facts. The proliferation of fake news has become a global phenomenon with significant consequences for elections, public health, and beyond. Effective fact-checking tools become crucial to combat this global concern. This project activity provides a comprehensive synthesis and analysis of contemporary fact-checking methodologies, offering the latest insights on verification techniques and fact-checking tools.

This activity draws upon prior scientific publications in the field and serves as a valuable resource for staying up-to-date with the most current information in the field of fact-checking and verification methodologies. The team systematically identified and described the characteristics and outcomes for each recent study where effective fact-checking methodologies had been assessed. The studies analyzed consistently delivered key outcomes when evaluating the precision and accuracy of the developed tool. The results categorized fact-checking methodologies into content-based and social context-based approaches. Various fact-checking tools were highlighted as essential in helping individuals discern the veracity of information online. However, it is recognized that challenges need to be addressed (RAND Corporation, 2023; Deutsche Welle Akademie, 2020; Chung, 2023). The ongoing battle against fake news requires continuous efforts to improve fact-checking methods and promote digital literacy (Chung, 2023).

Fact-checking is likely to continue evolving in the future. Some future trends and recommendations include the rise of automation, collaborative fact-checking, deepfakes and misinformation challenges, blockchain technology, educational initiatives, real-time fact-checking, and incorporation into social media. Last but not least, as fact-checking evolves, there may be discussions about the ethical and legal responsibilities of fact-checkers.

#### 4.3. RECOMMENDATIONS

During 9 years of active fact-checking work in the context of war and crisis, the work of Ukrainian professional data verification organization has proven its effectiveness. StopFake.org analysts have repeatedly participated in the development of communication strategies for various international organizations and provided advice to governments and the military.

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 organizations and government agencies.

The main recommendations for fact-checkers are based not only on the importance of understanding the narrative structure of disinformation, but also on the analysis of gathered information and communication with partners and audiences.

Among the main measures we recommend to fact-checkers are:

- Use the narrative map of Russian disinformation surrounding the EU as a basis for identifying threats of this type.
- Pay special attention to those EU countries that are systematically targeted by Russian disinformation.
- To conduct a regular analysis of target audiences of Russian disinformation.



- To conduct systematic monitoring and narrative analysis aimed at identifying new thematic and substantive changes in order to anticipate new threats.
- To analyze technologies and tools used by disinformation to produce fake news.
- To set up a publicly available repository of disinformation examples.
- To promote the internationalization of fact-checking to track and analyze the cross-border spread of disinformation. To establish an extensive monitoring framework.

StopFake.org experience in combating Russian disinformation will be also useful to governments and governmental organizations in the EU. We are convinced that existing approaches and measures taken in the context of combating information threats are constantly evolving, as disinformation changes and adapts to the current trends in the digital world. That's why it's important to support independent scientific research and systematic analysis of disinformation. These are the main measures we recommend implementing:

- to encourage cross-disciplinary cooperation of researchers,
- to include fact-checking in the structure of strategic communications,
- to involve fact-checkers in the policymaking process on countering disinformation.

#### 4.4. THE CURRICULUM OF FACT-CHECKING

This project activity aimed to discuss important elements that should be included in the curriculum for professional fact-checkers. Indeed, the professional activity of fact-checkers involves a set of essential skills that are crucial in ensuring the accuracy and reliability of information in today's complex information landscape (Carpenter, 2009). These skills were identified as follows:

1. **Critical Thinking:** Critical thinking forms the foundation of effective fact-checking, enabling fact-checkers to approach their work with skepticism, objectivity, and a commitment to accuracy. This skill is vital for countering misinformation and promoting a well-informed society.

2. **Evaluating Newsworthiness:** Fact-checkers need to critically assess the factual basis of the information that constantly flows into newsrooms. This skill helps them decide whether the material is newsworthy and should be included in further processing.
3. **Broad Knowledge Base:** Fact-checkers benefit from a broad knowledge base beyond journalism, as diversified knowledge equips them to identify potentially false or inaccurate information effectively.
4. **Proficiency in Information Gathering and Investigation:** Fact-checkers must excel in research and be skilled at finding credible sources, documents, and data to support or refute claims. They play a crucial role in providing accurate and reliable information to the public and countering the spread of misinformation.
5. **Familiarity with Social Media:** In the digital age, fact-checkers need advanced skills in information verification to combat the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms.

In addition to these skills, an essential skill in today's information landscape is "Media Literacy", which complements fact-checking. Media literacy enables individuals to critically evaluate and navigate the vast amount of information they encounter, understand how information spreads in the digital age, and recognize various forms of misinformation and disinformation (Potter, 2013; Tornero, 2008).

Academic qualifications for fact-checkers vary across organizations, but some recommended academic backgrounds include journalism, communication studies, political science or public policy, statistics and data analysis, law, library science or information science, and courses in critical thinking, digital literacy, ethics, and media literacy. Multilingual skills can be advantageous in multilingual or international fact-checking contexts. On-the-job training is also common in fact-checking organizations, and practical experience is valuable.

Adhering to a set of established principles and ethical codes is imperative for fact-checkers. These principles uphold the highest standards of quality and integrity within the field. The International Fact-Checking Network's Code of Principles emphasizes nonpartisanship, transparency of sources, funding, methodology,

and corrections. NPR's Guideline Principles focus on accuracy, fairness, completeness, honesty, independence, impartiality, transparency, accountability, respect, and excellence.

#### 4.5. THE 1ST EUROPEAN CONGRESS ON DISINFORMATION AND FACT-CHECKING, AND OTHER NETWORKING AND DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES

The project organized the 1st European Congress on Disinformation and Fact-Checking, held on 20-21 November 2023 in Madrid. This was a significant event that aimed at addressing the growing issue of disinformation in the media landscape. The congress was organized by Madrid University Carlos III and StopFake.org from Ukraine, with a focus on "Disinformation Across the EU-Ukraine Media Landscape". The congress brought together leading experts, scholars, journalists, policymakers, and practitioners in the field to foster cross-border dialogue, promote knowledge sharing, and develop innovative strategies to combat disinformation and strengthen fact-checking practices. The event featured interactive sessions, workshops, and panel discussions exploring the multifaceted dimensions of disinformation, its impact on the media landscape, and the challenges it poses to democratic societies.

The congress aimed to answer the question: How to analyze, professionally verify, and communicate disinformation to different audiences? It addressed the challenges faced by journalists and fact-checkers in a rapidly evolving media landscape and highlighted the importance of media literacy in empowering citizens to discern truth from falsehood. By the end of the congress, the organizers envisioned a strengthened network of professionals dedicated to combating disinformation, equipped with new knowledge, tools, and strategies to foster accurate and reliable information dissemination.

In addition, networking and dissemination activities were conducted. For example, a joint expert group of UC3M and StopFake.org presented the project and research findings at the CELSA Communication and Journalism School of Sorbonne University (Paris, France). Representatives of the StopFake.org team also participated at the Fighting Misinformation Online Conference in Brussels which was organized by Google and European Media and Information Fund, in

the EUDisinfoLab Annual Conference 2023 that took place in Krakow (Poland), and in the EMIF Autumn Event 2023 “Community Building Against Disinformation” organized in the European University Institute, Florence (Italy). In addition, the project research findings were widely discussed among the Ukrainian and European expert community.

## 5. IMPACT OF THE PROJECT

The "Building resilience of Ukrainian fact-checkers in the fight against disinformation about the EU" project has had a significant impact on both the professional field of journalism and on society in the fight against disinformation and the promotion of democracy. The project has become a unique opportunity to bring together various stakeholders in the context of countering disinformation - European researchers, fact-checking organizations from Eastern and Central Europe, Spain and Ukraine, and media representatives. The project activities allowed participating parties to look at the problems of disinformation from the perspectives of different organizations regarding the spread of fake news in Ukraine and about Ukraine. The project also brought an opportunity to increase the visibility of Ukrainian fact-checkers, provide access to materials and current analysis by Ukrainian and European experts.

In the professional field of journalism, the project has elevated the capabilities and expertise of fact-checking organizations in Ukraine and the European Union. By analyzing disinformation narratives about the EU and Ukraine, the project has provided fact-checkers with valuable insights into the strategies and tactics employed by disinformation actors. This knowledge equips them with the tools needed to more effectively combat false narratives and ensure the accuracy of information in the media. Furthermore, the fact-checking methodologies and tools developed as part of the project offer a comprehensive resource for fact-checkers and journalists in their pursuit of truth and accuracy. This not only strengthens the quality of journalism but also contributes to the restoration of trust in media, which is crucial in a disinformation-ridden information landscape.

The curriculum of fact-checking outlined in the project ensures that incoming fact-checkers receive appropriate training and education, helping to cultivate a new

generation of professionals who are equipped to navigate the challenges of the digital age and combat disinformation effectively.

The 1st European Congress on Disinformation and Fact-Checking served as a critical forum for experts and practitioners to share knowledge, best practices, and strategies for addressing disinformation. This collaborative effort has facilitated cross-border dialogue and knowledge sharing, ultimately strengthening the network of professionals dedicated to combating disinformation.

In society, the impact of the project is far-reaching. The work of fact-checking organizations like StopFake.org has helped raise awareness among the public about the prevalence of disinformation and the importance of verifying information. Through the dissemination of fact-checks and educational initiatives, citizens are better equipped to distinguish fact from fake. This knowledge contributes to the promotion of a more informed and democratic society where individuals can make informed decisions based on accurate information.

Moreover, the project's recommendations for fact-checkers, government agencies, and policymakers emphasize the need for a coordinated approach to combat disinformation. By promoting cross-disciplinary cooperation, including fact-checking in strategic communications, and involving fact-checkers in policymaking, the project contributes to building resilience against disinformation at both national and international levels.

As Russian disinformation tries to adapt to new realities of sanctions and restrictions, introduced after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the fact-checking remains one of the most effective instruments to combat it. In the context of global crises and wars, disinformation operations and false news have become an even more threatening phenomenon in the global context. Our project helped not only to keep the attention on the problem of disinformation in the context of the war in Ukraine, but also to reflect on the global impact of information threats as a tool of warfare in the digital age.

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