

# DISINFORMATION AS A WEAPON: MEDIA TACTICS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE IN THE UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

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## Abstract

*This article critically examines disinformation as a strategic weapon in the Russian-Ukrainian war, arguing that it forms a core pillar of hybrid conflict by targeting cognition and perception rather than solely battlefield outcomes. The study aims to define and investigate key research problems: how disinformation campaigns are structured and disseminated; which objectives they pursue (shaping opinions, eroding social cohesion, delegitimizing authorities, justifying aggression); and how effectively Western responses mitigate their impact. Methodologically, it employs qualitative content analysis of state media, digital platforms, and social networks, tracing techniques from fabricated news and manipulated audiovisuals (deepfakes) to coordinate bot/troll operations, and reviews counter-disinformation policies and media-literacy initiatives by the EU, NATO, and allied actors. Major findings show Russia operating as a particularly sophisticated information-warfare actor, with campaigns that manipulate emotions—fact-checking, education, detection technologies, and international cooperation—have value but face structural limits due to rapid content diffusion, platform dynamics, and growing distrust of institutions.*

**Keywords:** *Disinformation, Misinformation, Psychological Warfare, war in Ukraine, social media*

## INTRODUCTION

The state of research on the war in Ukraine is already quite extensive; however, the issue of disinformation is still discussed too rarely. Scholars and policy reports describe Russian disinformation as part of a “hybrid war” strategy, operating alongside conventional military action (Pomerantsev, 2019; Paul & Matthews, 2016). Research highlights a “firehose of falsehood” approach – high-volume, multi-platform messaging with little concern

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for consistency – used to distort facts and overwhelm audiences (Paul & Matthews, 2016; EUvsDisinfo, 2023).

Academic and institutional analyses stress the range of media tactics: seizure of TV and radio infrastructure in Crimea and Donbas (Bachmann & Gunneriusson, 2015), use of state broadcasters (RT, Sputnik), and expansion into digital platforms. The Internet Research Agency and bot/troll networks have been widely studied for their role in spreading Kremlin narratives (Starbird et al., 2019; NATO StratCom COE reports). Recent literature also addresses synthetic media: the 2022 Zelenskyy deepfake is cited as an early but significant example (Chesney & Citron, 2019; EUvsDisinfo, 2022).

From a psychological perspective, research shows how propaganda seeks to undermine morale and cognitive stability, sowing doubt, confusion, and distrust. Case studies include fabricated atrocity stories (“crucified boy”), conspiracy theories about U.S. biolabs, and denial campaigns after Bucha (European Digital Media Observatory, 2022). Scholars of political communication emphasize the framing of Ukraine as a “Nazi state” or NATO as aggressor, narratives designed to legitimize Russian actions (Huang, 2015; Carter & Carter, 2023).

Policy and institutional responses are another major strand. Analyses of EUvsDisinfo, NATO StratCom, and StopFake underline the importance of systematic monitoring and fact-checking, though effectiveness is debated due to the speed and volume of disinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; ISD, 2025). Recent work stresses the need for media literacy and resilience-building rather than reactive debunking (Adjin-Tettey, 2022).

Overall, the literature shows that Ukraine has become both a laboratory and showcase for modern disinformation warfare. Studies converge on the view that Russian tactics have grown more sophisticated, shifting from broadcast propaganda in 2014 to globalized digital manipulation by 2022–23. Yet research also emphasizes Ukraine’s resilience and the growing body of comparative, cross-national studies that situate the conflict within broader debates on authoritarian propaganda, democracy, and information security. Given the sophistication and persistence of Russian information operations since 2014, there is a pressing need to examine disinformation in the Ukrainian conflict as a weapon that combines media tactics with psychological warfare, in order to better understand its impact on societies, security, and democratic resilience.

The article is structured as follows: the first section reviews theoretical frameworks and relevant literature; the second outlines the methodology; the third analyzes selected case studies of disinformation campaigns; the

fourth discusses vectors of diffusion and their systemic effects; and the final section evaluates countermeasures and draws conclusions about the broader implications of disinformation in hybrid warfare.

## **1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The analysis of disinformation campaigns in the context of the Ukrainian conflict requires a theoretical framework that allows us to understand the hybrid nature of contemporary communication, the psychological dynamics activated by propaganda and the structural role of digital media in producing consensus or disorientation.

In this perspective, it is necessary to conceptually distinguish between disinformation, misinformation and propaganda (Søe, 2021). Disinformation refers to the intentional dissemination of false information with the aim of manipulating opinions or behaviours; misinformation, on the contrary, includes unintentional errors, often amplified by users in good faith; finally, propaganda is configured as a broader set of persuasive techniques, sometimes also based on real facts, but aimed at supporting a cause or a worldview through a selective and manipulated use of information.

A fundamental starting point for understanding the strategic use of information in conflicts is represented by classical studies on propaganda. Harold Lasswell, already in the 1930s, defined propaganda as the management of collective opinion through the manipulation of significant symbols (Lasswell, 1927). Starting from this definition, several theoretical lines have developed, including the “manufacturing consent” by Herman and Chomsky (1988), according to which traditional media act as information filters that serve power, selecting what is shown or hidden based on economic and geopolitical interests. These theories, although developed in a pre-digital context, remain essential to understanding the logic of selection and hierarchization of news even in contemporary media.

With the advent of social media, however, there has been a radical transformation in the production and dissemination of information. Information is no longer conveyed exclusively by centralized actors such as newspapers or television broadcasters but is produced and disseminated horizontally by a multiplicity of subjects, including anonymous users, automated accounts and state actors operating undercover. This shift has produced a fragmented, decentralized information ecosystem that is highly vulnerable to manipulation.

The concept of “information disorder”, proposed by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2017), helps to describe this scenario: it is a system in which disinformation, misinformation and malinformation are intertwined, fuelling an epistemic confusion that makes it difficult to distinguish the true from the false, the fact from the opinion.

Within this ecosystem, the concept of “cognitive warfare” also fits in, which emerged in the NATO context, which encompasses a set of practices aimed at influencing not only what people think, but how they think. From this perspective, disinformation is not limited to spreading false content, but acts on a deeper level, interfering with the cognitive processes of individuals, destabilizing common sense, creating internal divisions and fuelling distrust in institutions (Pomerantsev, 2019).

Within the theoretical framework, it is necessary to further clarify the meaning of the concept of “cognitive warfare”, placing it within both the cognitive science debate and international security doctrines. Within NATO, the term is defined as the set of operations aimed at influencing individual and collective mental processes, affecting perception, attention, memory, and judgment to alter the behaviour of social groups and entire populations. Unlike traditional propaganda or simple information manipulation, the focus of cognitive warfare is the ability to intervene in the cognitive mechanisms that determine the construction of reality, exploiting psychological vulnerabilities rooted in the biology of the nervous system.

The connection with neuroscience and cognitive psychology is essential. Research on reconstructive memory, like Elizabeth Loftus (2005), shows that individuals do not remember information passively, but reconstruct it through pre-existing narrative schemas, facilitating the impact of false visual attributions. On the neurocognitive level, several studies by Antonio Damasio (1994) have highlighted the importance of somatic markers, according to which decisions and judgments are guided by rapid and automatic emotional responses that precede rational processing, making audiovisual content particularly effective in influencing actions. Video narrative, which combines highly emotionally charged images with an immediate narrative structure, is one of the most powerful vectors for activating these mechanisms.

In this sense, contemporary disinformation operations can be interpreted through the framework of “narrative warfare”, described by Ajit Maan and Paul Cabaugh (2018) as a conflict that unfolds through the construction and competition of collective stories. Narrative warfare aims to structure interpretative frameworks through which individuals understand complex

events; the effectiveness of narratives depends on their ability to activate consolidated cognitive schemas and produce identity coherence. The goal is not only to persuade, but to shape the very way the public interprets reality: a logic fully consistent with the definition of cognitive warfare formulated in the NATO context. In this theoretical framework, disinformation is not simply the imposition of false content, but the production of alternative narratives that are cognitively plausible and socially recognizable.

The strategic dimension of cognitive warfare becomes clearer when integrated into Russian security doctrines. Although the Western concept of the “Gerashov Doctrine” has often been misunderstood, the writings of General Valery Gerasimov (2013) and his emphasis on “nonlinear conflict” have contributed to the perception that Russia views information as an operational domain equal to traditional military domains. More relevant than the Western debate, however, is the Russian notion of *informatsionnoe protivoborstvo*, or “information counteraction”, which encompasses both psychological influence and technical-information warfare. Russian strategic communications structures (StratCom), as established by the General Staff and the Ministry of Defense, operate according to a logic that combines long-term narratives, psychological operations, and the systematic exploitation of digital media. Within this framework, video content, visual representations, and the construction of manipulated audiovisual testimonies play a central role, as they enable simultaneous action on the narrative, emotional, and cognitive levels.

Integrating perspectives from neuroscience, cognitive psychology, war narratives, and Russian military doctrines allows us to understand the complexity of the phenomenon under examination. Disinformation is not limited to communication, but operates as a form of systemic cognitive manipulation, built on processes deeply rooted in the human mind and translated into strategies that state actors incorporate into their geopolitical vision. The explicit inclusion of these elements in the theoretical framework is essential to demonstrating why the campaigns analysed in the Ukrainian case are not isolated episodes, but part of a consolidated paradigm of cognitive conflict, in which the battle for perception becomes a fundamental strategic objective.

In this regard, the approach of social psychology is particularly useful, which highlights how people tend to believe information that confirms their previous opinions, also known as confirmation bias (Casad, 2025), are influenced by narrative framing (framing effect) and react emotionally rather than rationally to content with a strong visual or linguistic impact.

The theoretical framework cannot ignore the analysis of the algorithmic mechanisms of digital platforms (Cinelli et al., 2021). The latter are not neutral: through systems of personalization and amplification of content, they amplify polarizing, emotionally charged, and sensationalist content, creating real echo chambers and contributing to the radicalization of public opinion. In this sense, disinformation is not only a content “external” to the system but becomes structurally integrated into the logic of how digital media works.

This multidisciplinary theoretical framework, which draws on the sociology of communication, cognitive psychology, hybrid warfare studies and algorithmic analysis, forms the basis for the analysis of the case studies that will follow. Understanding the functioning of disinformation campaigns in the Ukrainian conflict requires grasping the interaction between content, tools and recipients within a complex, dynamic and ideologically contested media environment.

A recurring limitation in studies of disinformation in the Ukrainian conflict is the underestimation of the role of cognitive mechanisms that determine the reception of manipulative messages, particularly when they take audiovisual form. The conceptual distinction between misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda alone is insufficient if it is not linked to the ways in which individuals process information. Cognitive psychology research shows that exposure to emotionally charged content reduces the capacity for critical evaluation, as visual information activates rapid judgment processes based on the effect heuristic (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), a mechanism in which the truth value attributed to content depends on its emotional intensity rather than its factual validity.

These processes are particularly relevant for video content, which today constitutes a privileged form of digital propaganda. The cognitive impact of video is amplified by what Paul Messaris (1994) called the “illusion of authenticity”, a tendency to interpret moving images as intrinsically truthful, even when manipulated or decontextualized. Platforms themselves foster this effect through algorithms that reward visual retention and emotional engagement, as illustrated by Zeynep Tufekci (2018) in her analysis of algorithmic radicalization.

The widespread use of deepfake videos, selective editing, short-form content, and clips extracted from context demonstrates how information warfare is not limited to the dissemination of counter-factual messages but exploits the cognitive vulnerabilities inherent in audiovisual reception. In this context, the “truthiness effect”, described by Norbert Schwarz (2004),

particularly stands out: images and clips associated with a claim increase its credibility even when they provide no evidentiary evidence. In the Ukrainian context, many of the campaigns analysed in the literature, from Zelensky's deepfake to the manipulated videos related to the Bukha massacre, built their effectiveness not only on false content, but on the visual form that made them cognitively fluid and immediately processable.

This theoretical orientation also allows for a more solid foundation for the discussion of policy recommendations. Countermeasures are weak when they fail to incorporate an analysis of the cognitive processes that disinformation exploits. Textual media literacy alone is insufficient in an ecosystem dominated by video content; to be effective, educational strategies must include critical decoding of audiovisual language, knowledge of editing techniques, awareness of the cognitive biases that make visual content more persuasive, and training to recognize signs of manipulation that often escape superficial analysis. Education in cognitive resilience must therefore begin by recognizing the psychological vulnerabilities that make populations susceptible to visual propaganda. Without this focus, countermeasures risk being limited to belated debunking, unable to impact the perceptual dynamics activated at the very moment of exposure to the content.

Understanding the dynamics of disinformation in the Ukrainian conflict requires an approach that goes beyond the interpretative frameworks of political science or communication studies, but integrates perspectives from diverse disciplines, whose interactions explain the complex and hybrid nature of contemporary information operations. The phenomenon does not respond to a single logic: it is simultaneously a political device, a psychological process, an algorithmic product, a strategic act of hybrid warfare, and a cultural phenomenon that operates on the construction of common sense. From this perspective, disinformation becomes a point of intersection between disciplines that normally operate on different levels, but which, in the digital context, converge to describe a single space of cognitive conflict.

Communication studies allow us to reconstruct narrative techniques, frame manipulation, and the use of media as tools for building consensus. Cognitive psychology allows us to analyse the mental processes that make certain messages more persuasive, from the effects of the availability heuristic to the relevance of emotion as a catalyst for credibility. Computer science, through the analysis of algorithms and platform architectures, shows how content dissemination is structurally conditioned by automatic

amplification systems and profiling models that prioritize sensationalism over verification.

Studies on international security and hybrid warfare highlight the strategic nature of disinformation, not as a random or spontaneous phenomenon, but as an integral part of military doctrines and psychological operations conducted by state actors. Sociology and anthropology also contribute to explaining the cultural dimension of credibility, the construction of collective identities, and the emergence of interpretive communities within polarized information ecosystems (Rid, 2020).

An interdisciplinary approach not only allows us to interpret the complexity of the phenomenon but also enables us to understand its regulatory implications. Counteracting policies are effective only when they recognize the multilayered nature of disinformation: purely technological interventions are ineffective without an understanding of cognitive biases; literacy initiatives are weak without knowledge of geopolitical influence strategies; platform regulation is incomplete if it fails to consider the role of audiences' political culture and the social construction of information authority. The integration of these disciplines reveals that disinformation is not an anomaly of the media system, but a space where technology, psychology, and political power converge to redefine what appears plausible, credible, and legitimate within a society.

## **2 SOCIAL MEDIA AS VECTORS OF DISINFORMATION**

The examination of the disinformation campaigns implemented during the war in Ukraine highlights an extremely sophisticated, modular and adaptive communication system, in which traditional propaganda techniques merge with the dynamics of the contemporary digital ecosystem. Rather than being disorganized or sporadic, disinformation linked to the conflict presents itself as a coordinated set of operations designed to have a profound impact on both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of the populations involved, and to manipulate the international perception of the war (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

### **2.1 The Bucha Massacre**

One of the first large-scale campaigns was developed in connection with the events in Bucha, a Ukrainian town recaptured by Kyiv forces in March 2022 (Vakulina, 2025). The images of civilians being executed in the streets,

their hands tied behind their backs and showing obvious signs of torture, sparked a strong international reaction, and were immediately cited as evidence of war crimes committed by the Russian military. In response, the Kremlin's media machine activated an aggressive counter-narrative, centred on the accusation that the scene was "staged" by the Ukrainians themselves. Videos and articles by RT and Sputnik claimed that the bodies were disposed of after the Russians withdrew, insinuating that they were actors, before further retracting the narrative by claiming that they were killed by Ukrainian artillery (EUvsDISINFO, 2024).

At the same time, a video was shared on Telegram and Twitter in which the alleged "corpses" could be seen moving slightly, or "raising their hands", as evidence of the staging, except that these were distortions due to the reflection of a drop of water on the window of the car from which the film was taken (Maldita.es, 2022). The widely discussed footage used by Russia to deny the accusations against Bucha comes from a TV broadcast published on April 2, 2022, by the YouTube channel of Espresso.Tv, a Ukrainian TV station (European Digital Media Observatory, 2022). In turn, the video published by Espresso.Tv had originally been published on Facebook the same day by Ilya Novikov, a Russian lawyer of Ukrainian origin who has defended several Russian political prisoners.

The same anti-Ukrainian narratives arrived, via the pro-QAnon channel "The Real Great Awakening"<sup>3</sup>, even in Italian conspiracy Telegram channels, such as "Cesare Sacchetti"<sup>4</sup> and "QANON ITALIA"<sup>5</sup>. This highlights how these narratives are propagated through social media through personalities or groups apparently unrelated to pro-Russian narratives.

The attempt was clearly twofold: on the one hand, to discredit the moral authority of Ukraine, and on the other to disorient the global public, instilling systematic doubt about the veracity of any source, even in the face of evidence documented and verified by independent reporters.

## 2.2 The Biolab Fraud

A second emblematic example is the spread of the theory of US biological laboratories in Ukraine. This narrative has taken hold since March 2022

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<sup>3</sup> Telegram channel link: [https://t.me/Q17\\_Awakening](https://t.me/Q17_Awakening). The video was posted on April 3, 2022. To find it, simply search for the word "Bucha" in the channel's chat.

<sup>4</sup> Telegram channel link: <https://t.me/cesaresacchetti>. The video was posted on April 4, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Telegram channel link: <https://t.me/QITALIA>. The video was posted on April 4, 2022.

and continues to this day, with the amplification by the spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, and with the support of Russian state media and diplomatic accounts (Echols, 2025). In January 2025, Russian state broadcaster Sputnik repeated Zakharova's allegations in a series of posts on the social media platform X. Neither Zakharova nor Sputnik provided documents or sources to support their claims.

The thesis claimed that the United States, in collaboration with the Ukrainian government, had set up secret laboratories for the testing of pathogens, in violation of international conventions. This theory was then taken up by conspiracy influencers, personalities of the US radical right and Italian alternative media, contributing to creating a narrative convergence between anti-vax, anti-NATO and pro-Russian environments. The strategy behind this campaign was clear: to relaunch a frame capable of delegitimizing the West in the eyes of global public opinion, building the image of an aggressive and criminal NATO, in contrast to the Russian narrative of the "defensive war". Once again, disinformation acted not only on the content level, but also on the emotional one, evoking primal fears of contamination, unethical experimentation, and hidden power structures.

But contrary to what one might think, the theory does not originate in Russia, nor in Ukraine, but in the United States, specifically on Gab, a social network frequented by extremists and conspiracy theorists (Vagnozzi, 2022). On February 14, 2022, a user posted a map of the alleged laboratories, but the post went unnoticed. On February 24, the day of the Russian invasion, the Twitter account @WarClandestine reposted the map claiming that Russia was hitting those laboratories and accusing the US of preparing new biological weapons (Collins & Collier, 2022). According to the Anti-Defamation League, the account is owned by Jacob Creech, a former soldier with ties to the QAnon movement, who is also active on Telegram where he spreads disinformation (ADL, 2022). Creech quit his job at a wine shop due to discontent with the health measures and the liberal political environment. On March 3, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the United States "has built two biomilitary laboratories in Kyiv and Odessa, where pathogens are created". On March 8, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova revealed that the "Kyiv regime" has hidden American "biological weapons".

As Thomas Rid, a professor at Johns Hopkins University and author of the book *Active Measures*, pointed out in an interview with NBC News, the Kremlin has a long history of spreading disinformation and accusing the United States on the subject. For Rid, this type of fake news serves above all

to divert attention from the real use of chemical weapons by Russia (Collins & Collier, 2022). In the early 1980s, the Russian army had used chemical weapons in Afghanistan and Laos, and it was precisely in that period that bizarre theories about mosquitoes genetically modified by the CIA to spread encephalitis had appeared.

For instance, in Italian Telegram channels, the narrative quickly resurfaced - not only in the groups mentioned above but also across numerous channels in other countries, such as 'ULTRA Pepe Lives Matter'<sup>6</sup>. In this sense, as Leonardo Bianchi points out, the entire story of the "Ukrainian biolabs" shows how there is now a total convergence between Russian propaganda and Western conspiracy theories.

In Italy, the narrative gained ground shortly before the Russian invasion of 2022, with users sharing maps of the alleged locations of the biolabs on social networks such as Gab and Twitter/X (Branca, 2023). Propaganda has linked these alleged labs to Russian attacks, presenting them as part of a special operation to thwart a joint US-Ukrainian crime.

One of the most significant and recent phenomena in the disinformation landscape surrounding the Ukrainian conflict is the marked shift in information manipulation toward visual content, particularly short videos, selective editing, and synthetic products generated by artificial intelligence. The spread of deepfakes, such as the notorious case of Zelensky's fake video calling for surrender, is not an isolated incident but the beginning of a structural trend. The ability of audiovisual content to trigger rapid emotional responses makes these materials particularly effective in influence operations. Neuroscience has shown that highly emotionally impactful visual stimuli activate the amygdala even before cognitive control processes kick in, orienting judgment based on immediate, non-analytical impressions. The simple exposure effect, studied by Robert Zajonc (1968), helps us understand why repeated video fragments, even if unreliable or manipulated, end up acquiring a sense of familiarity and therefore verisimilitude.

These dynamics emerge clearly in the cases analysed. The video disseminated to deny the Bucha massacre, constructed through the perceptual illusion of a moving corpse, demonstrates how the visual medium allows for the exploitation of errors in perception that the public tends to interpret as "direct" evidence. Video manipulation operations adopted in the context of the war in Ukraine have highlighted a growing technical ability to imitate textures, voices, and facial movements, creating an information

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<sup>6</sup> Telegram channel link: <https://t.me/PepeMatter>.

environment in which visual authenticity can no longer be taken for granted. The strategic shift from text to video therefore constitutes a structural shift in the way disinformation spreads, as the emotional component typical of audiovisual media amplifies the cognitive mechanisms mentioned above, making factual verification more difficult and delayed after the moment of reception.

### 3 DIFFUSION VECTORS

In addition to specific narratives, it is important to analyse the diffusion infrastructures. The analysed campaigns have made extensive use of digital platforms such as Telegram, where pro-Kremlin channels reach millions of subscribers and act as primary information hubs. Telegram, due to its technical architecture, allows the publication of highly graphic content without filters, and facilitates virality through the forward chain, or the chain of forwarding between groups and channels (Hern, 2024), like “Donbass italia”<sup>7</sup>, managed by Vincenzo Lorusso, Italian journalist and correspondent from Lugansk for “International Reporters”. The platform is active on several channels, including a website, a Telegram channel with over 42,000 subscribers, and a presence on Rutube.

On Twitter/X, campaigns have been supported by automated and semi-automated networks, with accounts created ad hoc or stolen from other users, capable of artificially promoting manipulative hashtags such as #IStandWithRussia or #UkraineNazis (Fraser, 2022).

Despite the restrictions imposed by the EU (European Council, 2022) on the transmission and distribution of RT (Russia Today) content, the broadcaster continued to operate through a network of proxy sites and alternative platforms (Maristany de las Casas & Reyes, 2025). These sites, often disguised as independent news sources such as “InfoRos” or “NewsFront”, replicate RT’s content, making it difficult for European authorities to effectively monitor and block the spread of Russian propaganda.

Taking the Italian case as an example, RT and other pro-Kremlin actors have exploited Italian culture and media to amplify their narrative. Through collaboration with local cultural organizations, the promotion of events, and participation in television programs, Russian propaganda has found fertile ground in Italy.

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<sup>7</sup> Telegram channel link: <https://t.me/donbassitalia>.

This strategy has allowed them to reach a wider audience and legitimize pro-Russian positions in the Italian public discourse. Such influence operations aim to:

- undermine European support for Ukraine by portraying Russia as a liberator rather than an aggressor.
- legitimize Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territories by presenting Russian authorities in Luhansk and Donetsk as legitimate representatives.
- erode trust in Western media by promoting RT and its affiliates as "truthful" sources of information (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025).

As we have mentioned, confirmation bias is one of the most relevant psychological mechanisms in the spread and persistence of disinformation (Casad, 2025). This is the tendency of individuals to seek out, interpret, and remember information in a way that is consistent with their pre-existing beliefs, while ignoring or downplaying data that contradicts them. In the context of the Ukrainian conflict, this mechanism has been widely exploited by disinformation campaigns.

For example, users already critical of NATO or distrustful of mainstream media were particularly inclined to accept, without verification, theories about American biolabs in Ukraine or claims that the Bucha massacre was staged. Such narratives were embedded within a cognitive framework predisposed to reinforce worldviews centered on conspiracy, Western manipulation, or Russian heroism. Consequently, disinformation not only takes root more readily but also becomes resistant to correction, even when confronted with concrete evidence to the contrary.

Closely related to this psychological concept are echo chambers, closed information environments in which users are exposed almost exclusively to content that reinforces their own opinions, due to algorithmic selection and interaction with homogeneous social networks (Cinelli et al., 2021). These environments amplify confirmation bias and drastically reduce the possibility of encountering alternative points of view or verifiable information.

In the Ukrainian case, Telegram channels, Facebook groups and X profiles linked to the anti-vax, QAnon or anti-establishment world have functioned as real echo chambers. Within these spaces, disinformation narratives have found fertile ground because they are shared and repeated by actors perceived as "reliable" in the context of the information bubble. The case of the influencer Giorgio Bianchi is emblematic: his "counter-hegemonic"

narrative, shared in information environments already hostile to the official version of the facts, has been strengthened through repetition, the selectivity of sources and the absence of contradiction (Global Times, 2022).

Echo chambers, therefore, not only facilitate the spread of disinformation, but multiply its impact, creating epistemically isolated communities that are increasingly difficult to reach with traditional debunking interventions. In the context of the war in Ukraine, there has been an increasing use of what can be defined as “intermediated disinformation”, that is, the dissemination of strategic narratives through third parties who have no apparent direct affiliation with the state authorities involved in the conflict, but who in fact act as privileged vehicles for their communication agenda (Starbird et al., 2019).

This category includes the so-called “gray influencers”: opinion makers, freelance journalists, writers or academics with an aura of independence and credibility, who nonetheless consistently contribute to the dissemination of narratives aligned with the interests of the Kremlin (Guerzoni & Sarzanini, 2022).

Their role is particularly insidious, as it occupies a liminal space between overt propaganda and independent opinion, thereby making it more difficult for the public to discern the boundary between information and manipulation.

One of the most emblematic cases is that of Giorgio Bianchi, an Italian photojournalist with a long experience in covering conflict areas, particularly in Donbass<sup>8</sup>. Bianchi has built his profile on a narrative that presents itself as “counter-hegemonic” (Global Times, 2022), focused on the criticism of the mainstream media and the Western version of events. His approach relies heavily on a rhetoric of “truth from the field”, which mixes documentary content with geopolitical readings strongly unbalanced in favour of the Russian narrative.

Bianchi has often accused the Italian media of manipulating the news in favour of Ukraine and has produced interviews aimed at dismantling Russian responsibility for war crimes, as in the case of the bombing of the hospital in Mariupol. His interviews, however, have been criticized for the selectivity of the sources and for the tendency to provide a unilateral vision, often marked by selective omissions and strategic ambiguities that serve to construct an anti-Western narrative.

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<sup>8</sup>Giorgio Bianchi Photojournalist, Telegram channel link: <https://t.me/giorgiobianchiphotojournalist>.

During the war in Ukraine, he often criticized Western media for their alleged distortion of events. For example, he accused RAI (Italian Radio and Television) of having wrongly attributed a Ukrainian missile attack on Donetsk as if it had been carried out by the Russians (l'AntiDiplomatico, 2022). Bianchi also interviewed Marianna Vishegirskaya, the influencer linked to the Mariupol hospital bombing, in an attempt to refute the accusations against Russia. However, the interview was criticized for omitting crucial details and thereby contributing to the spread of disinformation (Puente, 2022).

In terms of strategic communication, these influencers operate through a combination of rhetorical techniques that include the appeal to authenticity, the systematic critique of official sources, the selective use of direct testimony and the re-proposal of consolidated frames (e.g. aggressive NATO, neo-Nazi Ukraine, mendacious Western media). This narrative arsenal not only favours the legitimization of the Russian position but also undermines the capacity of Western audiences to make an autonomous and informed judgment. Gray influencers thus represent a crucial component of contemporary cognitive operations, which do not so much aim to convince, as to confuse, saturate and paralyze public discourse.

From a theoretical point of view, their role can be interpreted considering the concept of “contested information environments”, in which the distinction between political communication, information, propaganda and disinformation becomes increasingly blurred (Forner, 2024). Within these environments, the truth-value of content is subordinated to its social performativity: what matters is less its accuracy than its credibility, shareability, and alignment with existing identity frameworks. In this context, grey influencers function as intermediaries between the mainstream and alternative infosphere, serving as catalysts of distrust, polarization, and epistemic disintegration.

### **3.1 The Interconnected Czech-Slovak Information Space as a Regional Vector of Disinformation**

Adding to this general picture is a regional peculiarity that directly affects Central Europe, and the Czech-Slovak region. The Czech and Slovakian infospheres display a level of interconnection that makes them unique in the European landscape (Zachová, 2024). Disinformation content often circulates simultaneously in both languages, both in the form of subtitled videos and through the rapid adaptation of the message to local audiences.

Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok host numerous channels and pages that operate across the Czech-Slovak space, where the same manipulated video can be reposted with dual subtitles, leveraging a shared linguistic and cultural background. This intermingling is also reflected in the analysis of comment sections, where a spontaneous blend of Czech and Slovak is frequently observed, indicative of the natural informational permeability between the two contexts. This feature allows disinformation to spread more rapidly, as a narrative introduced in one country can easily penetrate the other without the need for complex translations or cultural adaptations.

This interconnected information ecosystem represents an important variable in the dissemination of the campaigns analysed, as it creates a multiplier effect: manipulative content is relaunched in parallel networks that feed off each other. Pro-Russian or anti-Western networks present in Slovakia, some of which were already established before 2022, have found fertile ground in their linguistic and cultural proximity to the Czech public, contributing to the rapid intensification of narratives hostile to Ukraine. The Czech-Slovak context thus emerges as a shared information space, characterized by the continuous circulation of visual content, often difficult to distinguish between the two national sides and consequently highly exposed to the cross-border dynamics of contemporary disinformation.

An analysis conducted by GLOBSEC in “Russian Embassy in the Slovak Information Space” (2024) examines the Russian Embassy in Slovakia’s communication strategies during 2024, focusing specifically on content shared through its Facebook and Telegram channels. Through a selection of fifty posts with the highest engagement between August and October 2024, complemented by a longitudinal analysis spanning the entire year, the report identifies the narratives systematically promoted, as well as the amplification network connecting the embassy to profiles, groups, and media outlets—both national and transnational—engaged in disseminating pro-Kremlin propaganda.

The report highlights how the embassy’s Facebook account (Vel’vyslanectvo Ruska na Slovensku / Посольство России в Словакии), with over 68,000 followers, and its Telegram channel, with approximately 4,900 subscribers, operate not only as institutional communication tools, but as active nodes of a broader information ecosystem, which exploits feedback interconnections to spread disinformation, revisionist narratives, conspiracy theories, and divisive messages regarding the conflict in Ukraine. Monitoring work shows how symbolic events—historical anniversaries,

commemorations, and anniversaries—are systematically used to relaunch messages favouring the Russian narrative, often blending identity values, historicist rhetoric, and cultural references to strengthen the emotional and symbolic appeal of the propaganda. This tactic anchors communication in a Slovak socio-cultural context, favouring the legitimization of pro-Russian views within a domestic discourse.

Another key aspect highlighted by the report concerns the existence of a very large network of outlets, pages, and groups—estimated in the hundreds—that operate with a pro-Russian narrative and collaborate with or amplify the embassy’s content: a parallel media ecosystem that blends traditional media, social media, and less institutional digital channels. This amplification pattern demonstrates how propaganda is not confined to official channels but is embedded in a broader context of connected information actors, making it more difficult to distinguish between diplomatic discourse, media content, and political-ideological propaganda. GLOBSEC’s analysis highlights that the actions of the Russian embassy in Slovakia go far beyond mere cultural or institutional diplomacy: they constitute a deliberate strategy of media and informational influence, part of a transnational “information warfare” project that exploits the dynamics of the Slovak context—historical, linguistic, political, and technological—to convey narratives favourable to Russia and hostile to Bratislava’s European and Atlantic integration.

Among the vectors of dissemination amplifying manipulative narratives related to the Ukrainian conflict, the shared information space between the Czech Republic and Slovakia is particularly relevant. This shared information space is characterized by a level of linguistic, cultural, and media interconnection unique in the European Union. This proximity produces a permeability effect that allows disinformation content to circulate across both national contexts more rapidly than in other European regions. The near-total mutual intelligibility of the two languages facilitates the immediate reuse of manipulated videos, extracted statements, montages, and synthetic content, often distributed bilingually or with simultaneous subtitles in both languages.

The Czech-Slovak digital environment is also characterized by a convergence of communication practices, manifested in the intermingling of languages in comments, the intertwining of social groups, the algorithmic cooperation that unites the feeds of users from both countries, and the presence of pages, channels, and influencers operating indiscriminately on both information markets. This interdependence allows disinformation

to exploit a nearly unified ecosystem, which acts as a single echo chamber capable of amplifying and legitimizing pro-Russian narratives. Analyses conducted by research centers such as GLOBSEC demonstrate that the Russian Embassy in Slovakia systematically uses this regional space to relaunch content that, once inserted into Czech circulation, finds additional channels of dissemination and broader forms of social validation.

This dynamic offers interesting comparisons with other European cases, such as the cross-border information system connecting Italy and Italian-speaking Switzerland or, more broadly, regional ecosystems that share a common language or strong cultural proximity. The Czech-Slovak region, however, stands out for the intense circulation of manipulated video content, fostered by an audience accustomed to consuming media in both languages without a perception of discontinuity. In this sense, the region constitutes a unique vector of dissemination within the EU, where the propagation of disinformation benefits from a linguistic and social infrastructure that multiplies its speed, reach, and cognitive resilience.

### **3.2 The Rise of Video-Based Disinformation and Synthetic Media**

The recent evolution of the information ecosystem demonstrates a clear shift toward forms of disinformation primarily based on video content, a phenomenon that represents a structural transformation and not a simple change in format. Manipulative narratives related to the war in Ukraine have made extensive use of decontextualized clips, selective editing, artificial audiovisual products, and deepfakes generated by artificial intelligence models, which exploit users' cognitive weaknesses particularly effectively (Chesney & Citron, 2019). Unlike textual disinformation, videos trigger immediate and difficult-to-modulate emotional processes, as rapid visual processing engages neurological circuits, such as the amygdala, responsible for automatic and pre-reflexive responses. Video narratives therefore possess an intrinsic capacity to inspire intuitive credibility, accentuated by the simple exposure effect that increases familiarity and, consequently, the perception of the veracity of repeated content.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, this shift is evident both in state-sponsored influence operations and in the spontaneous circulation of manipulated content by online communities. The deepfake of President Zelensky, released in the first weeks of the invasion, represents one of the first examples of the strategic use of synthetic media to attempt to undermine the morale of the Ukrainian population and influence international public

opinion. Similarly, clips related to the Bucha massacre, manipulated to create visual ambiguity around the presence of bodies in the streets, demonstrate how audiovisual media allows for the construction of alternative narratives by exploiting perceptual margins that users interpret as direct evidence. The growing availability of video generation tools and the ease with which short clips can be extracted, reassembled, and refined contribute to making the distinction between authentic and synthetic content increasingly complex.

The emergence of video as the dominant vector of disinformation requires a rethinking of countermeasures, as textual denials or simple fact-checking are often insufficient compared to the persuasive power of images. Fact-checking techniques arrive temporally after the immediate emotional impact, and this structural gap between perception and correction contributes to the persistence of false content even after the deception has been exposed. Video thus emerges as the centre of gravity of contemporary disinformation, capable of shaping public perception through a direct interaction with the neurocognitive processes that govern the intuitive assessment of reality.

#### **4 EFFECTS OF DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS**

Equally significant is the capacity of these campaigns to produce systemic effects. First, they operate through cognitive saturation: flooding the information environment with conflicting versions of the same events generates confusion, disorientation, and an erosion of trust across all information sources.

This effect, known as the “firehose of falsehood”, was described by Paul and Matthews (2016) as a strategy privileging quantity and repetition over coherence or plausibility. In many respects, Russia’s contemporary propaganda recalls Soviet-era techniques, marked by intensive information manipulation and the subtle induction of behaviors favorable to propagandists, often without recipients’ full awareness.

Second, campaigns often trigger real reputational crises. On 4 August 2022, Amnesty International published a report entitled “Ukrainian fighting tactics endanger civilians” (Amnesty International, 2022), which claimed that the Ukrainian armed forces had endangered civilians by placing bases and weapons systems in residential areas, including schools and hospitals. The Amnesty International report is not a form of disinformation per se, as it was written by one of the most authoritative international human rights organizations, and its conclusions – although highly controversial – were based on field observations. However, the way in which the content

was used, decontextualized and amplified by Russian media and other pro-Russian information actors represents a classic example of disinformation instrumentalization (Meduza, 2022). Although the report stressed that such tactics did not justify Russia's indiscriminate attacks, its publication sparked strong reactions (Saric, 2022). Russian state media such as RT and Sputnik gave the report a huge boost, ignoring the criticism Amnesty received from experts, Ukrainian activists, and even its own members. The news was presented as "definitive proof" of Ukrainian guilt, without mentioning the context or the disproportion of violations between the two sides (The Moscow Times, 2022).

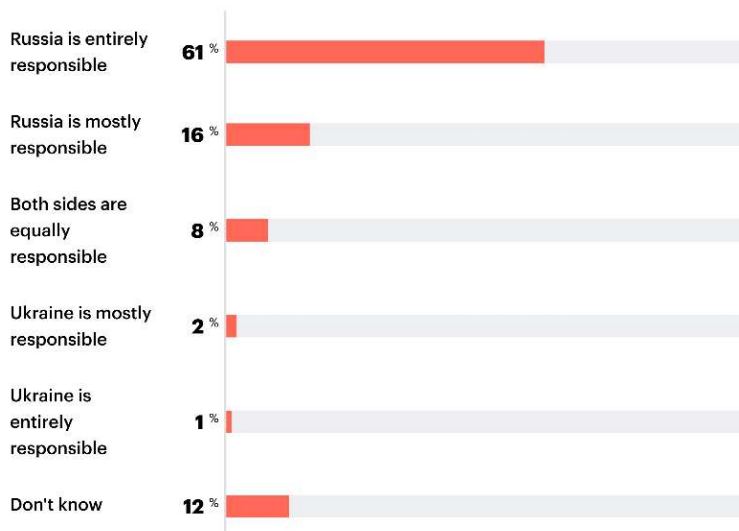
The report was widely criticized by Ukrainian experts and officials, who said it was misleading and potentially useful for Russian propaganda. Amnesty International's director in Ukraine, Oksana Pokalchuk, resigned in protest, saying the report had become a tool of Russian propaganda (Robinson, 2022). A leaked internal review later called the report's language "ambiguous" and "imprecise", raising further questions about its legal validity (Posener, 2024). The report has been used by Russian propaganda to discredit Ukraine and Western human rights organizations, presenting it as evidence of Ukrainian violations and calling into question the credibility of Western NGOs. These dynamics demonstrate that disinformation does more than just falsify facts: it produces alternative realities, generates internally coherent narratives, appeals to deep emotions, and organizes the collective perception of the world (Alhajjar, 2022).

The campaigns under examination are not mere rhetorical exercises but performative acts of communication aimed at reshaping geopolitical realities by redrawing alliances, legitimacy, and identity. The Ukrainian case thus represents an advanced laboratory of cognitive warfare, where boundaries between communication, psychology, technology, and diplomacy are increasingly blurred. Yet the measurable effects of these efforts in the West appear limited: a recent YouGov UK survey of over 8,000 respondents found that 61% consider Russia solely responsible for the conflict, 8% attribute blame to both sides, and only 1% hold Ukraine responsible (YouGov UK, 2025).

**Figure 1:** *Who is responsible for conflict in Ukraine?*

**Do you think that Russia or Ukraine are more responsible for starting the current conflict in Ukraine?**

All adults (8173 GB adults - 19 February 2025)

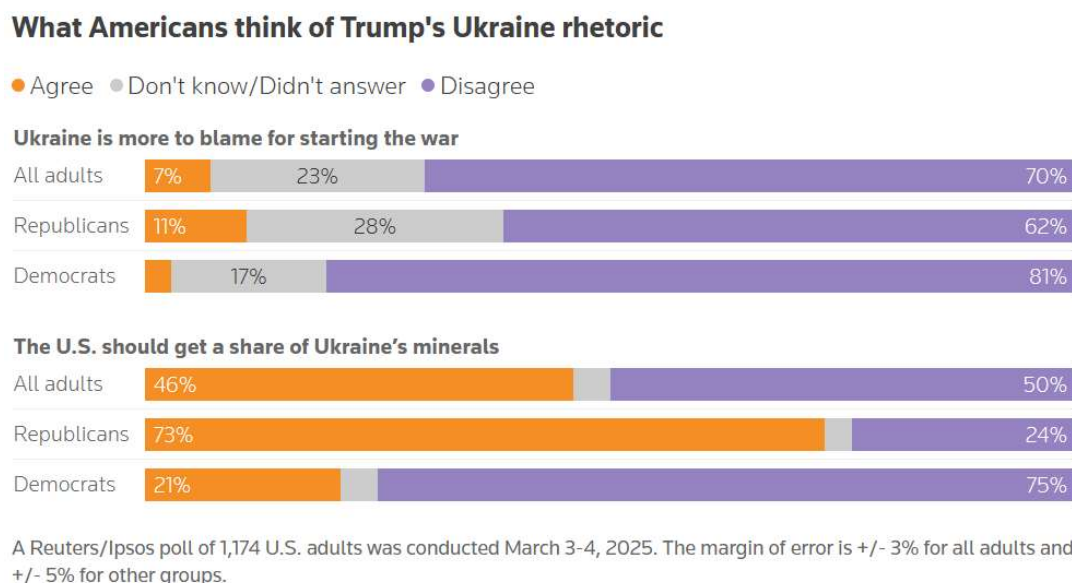


YouGov | What the world thinks | yougov.co.uk

Source: YouGov UK, 2025

Similarly, a Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted on March 3–4 found that an overwhelming majority of Americans reject the notion that Ukraine bears greater responsibility for Russia’s war: 70% of respondents disagreed with this claim, while only 7% supported it (Reuters, 2025).

**Figure 2: What Americans think of Trump's Ukraine rhetoric**



Source: Reuters 2025

However, an analysis made by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue highlighted the role of some Italian journalists active in Donbass and Russia in the spread of Russian propaganda in Italy, representing not only a media problem, but also a threat to national security.

In the analyzed period, i.e. January - March 2025, contents linked to the connected networks "Donbass Italia", "Contronarrazione" and "Russia non è il mio nemico" (translated: "Russia is not my enemy") reached 1.84 million users on X, generating 4.03 million impressions (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025). This demonstrates the ability of these campaigns to permeate the Italian digital discourse and influence the political debate.

Despite EU sanctions against RT, the channel maintains a presence in Europe through events and documentaries, exposing flaws in the enforcement of restrictive measures. The pressing challenge is to strengthen control mechanisms and develop more effective strategies to counter disinformation. At the same time, it would be a mistake to assume these efforts target only Western audiences. In recent years, Russia has significantly expanded its activities in the Global South, achieving notable results by long employing information operations as a central instrument of its foreign policy.

Despite restrictions by several Western platforms, Russian state media such as RT continue to enjoy a substantial global presence, claiming to reach around 700 million people in over 100 countries via 22 satellites and more than 230 operators. RT is particularly influential in Latin America, the Middle East, and North Africa, where it operates through traditional media infrastructures and partnerships with local outlets. Africa is a good example of Russia's growing presence. In addition to the growing Russian physical presence on the continent, which we have already discussed above, disinformation operations are constantly growing. Russia has managed to skilfully exploit post-colonial resentments, especially towards the French in the Francophone Sahel and Central Africa, positioning itself as an alternative to the West and a natural ally of African countries in their anti-colonial struggle (Presl, 2024).

As a result, there is unprecedented support for the Kremlin in several African states. This is evident in the demands of Burkina Faso citizens for Russian intervention in the country, and in Niger's demands to replace ties with France with a Russian partnership (Voice of America, 2022). In a demonstration of Russia's growing prestige in Africa and the effectiveness of its information operations, in March 2022, 26 African countries refused to support a United Nations resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Mathekga, 2023). But Russia is achieving similar results and information successes in the Middle East. Thanks to its presence in Syria, it has invested for years in creating platforms aimed at Arab audiences and has actively used disinformation to promote its interests. For example, it has launched disinformation campaigns to divert responsibility for chemical attacks in Syria from the Syrian regime to the West or NGOs. RT Arabic, the Arabic-language branch of Russia Today, is one of the most popular news sites in the region with as many as 15 million monthly views, behind only Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya<sup>9</sup>.

RT Arabic's significant online presence, which often publishes content at two or three times the speed of Al-Jazeera or the BBC, means that pro-Kremlin propaganda is broadcast directly to younger generations in the Arabic-speaking world (Politico, 2023). The Arab Youth Survey 2022 found that nearly one-third (31%) of young Arabs aged 18–24 attribute the war in Ukraine to the United States and NATO, while only 18% place the blame on Russia (Borshchevskaya, 2023).

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<sup>9</sup>Data taken from Similar Web, <https://www.similarweb.com/website/arabic.rt.com/#traffic>.

The analysis of a greater success, beyond the borders of the West, by Russian disinformation is also confirmed by the Pew Research Center<sup>10</sup>. While efforts to counter Russian disinformation are succeeding in Western countries, the situation in the global South is very different.

**Figure 3: Views of Russia**

**Views of Russia remain low, reaching record lows in many countries**

% who have a *favorable* view of Russia

Legend: Highest rating (green), Lowest rating (blue)

	'07	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	'15	'17	'18	'19	'20	'22	'23	'22-'23 change
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Israel	29	31	-	29	-	21	30	25	35	34	45	-	19	13	▼ 6
Germany	34	42	50	47	33	32	19	27	27	35	35	30	16	10	▼ 6
Spain	35	36	40	46	36	38	18	25	27	24	29	31	8	5	▼ 3
Sweden	31	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18	17	12	16	5	3	▼ 2
Japan	22	23	30	28	22	27	23	21	26	26	25	18	6	5	▼ 1
Poland	34	33	45	35	34	36	12	15	21	22	33	-	2	1	▼ 1
UK	47	45	46	50	38	38	25	18	26	22	26	24	10	10	0
Netherlands	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15	15	23	22	7	7	0
U.S.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15	7	7	0
France	35	43	51	53	36	36	26	30	36	30	33	35	14	15	▲ 1
South Korea	54	50	40	-	-	53	43	46	36	53	42	39	13	14	▲ 1
Hungary	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	39	38	35	-	21	23	▲ 2
Canada	52	51	-	-	-	42	-	26	27	27	30	30	10	12	▲ 2
Australia	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18	6	8	▲ 2
Italy	37	-	-	-	23	31	20	27	35	37	43	48	14	18	▲ 4
Greece	-	-	-	-	61	63	61	-	64	52	58	-	27	32	▲ 5
Argentina	19	23	24	-	-	26	19	27	27	34	36	-	-	17	▼ 19
Brazil	-	-	38	33	27	34	24	26	35	35	34	-	-	18	▼ 16
Mexico	38	29	25	23	25	28	21	24	32	37	39	-	-	34	▼ 5
South Africa	-	-	-	-	-	26	25	25	28	34	33	-	-	28	▼ 5
Nigeria	-	-	53	-	-	38	41	39	45	41	41	-	-	42	▲ 1
Kenya	57	35	47	34	-	47	49	35	27	40	38	-	-	40	▲ 2
Indonesia	36	32	38	35	-	43	38	28	36	46	39	-	-	42	▲ 3
India	-	-	-	-	-	45*	39	43	47	-	49	-	-	57	▲ 8

Source: Pew Research Center, 2023

<sup>10</sup>Pew Research Center, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/10/overall-opinion-of-russia/>.

## 5 COUNTERMEASURES

In a context in which narratives multiply, fragment and often contradict each other, democratic societies are exposed to a form of permanent cognitive stress, which undermines not only the ability of citizens to distinguish truth from falsehood, but also the very stability of public debate as a shared space for rational deliberation. Democracies, by their nature open, pluralistic and tolerant of dissent, thus become privileged targets for operations that exploit these very characteristics to create division, polarization and decision-making paralysis.

One of the most serious consequences of disinformation is the erosion of trust (Di Domenico & Ding, 2023): trust in the media, perceived as biased or manipulated; trust in political representatives, accused of acting on ideological or opaque bases; trust even in the very concepts of truth, objectivity and competence. In some contexts, the systematic dissemination of false or distorted news has led to the emergence of a climate of generalized suspicion, in which every source is perceived as potentially interested or compromised.

This radical scepticism, although born as a legitimate reaction to the manipulation of information, can quickly degenerate into information cynicism, making the population vulnerable to any alternative narrative if it presents itself as “against” the official version (Lee & Jones-Jang, 2022). This is a dangerous epistemic short circuit, because it paves the way for the delegitimization of democratic institutions and favours the rise of populist, authoritarian or openly pro-Russian forces. In response to this scenario, in recent years there has been a strengthening of institutional and civil initiatives aimed at combating disinformation in a systemic way. At the European level, one of the most significant projects is EUvsDisinfo, a platform born in the context of the European External Action Service<sup>11</sup> and aimed at monitoring, analysing and debunking pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns targeting EU member states.

Through linguistic tracking, narrative analysis and cataloguing of recurring messages, EUvsDisinfo not only exposes the main falsifications, but also highlights their rhetorical dynamics, privileged recipients and strategic objectives. In parallel, numerous collaborative fact-checking networks have grown, often organised along transnational and inter-organisational lines. Initiatives such as the European Fact-Checking Standards Network<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/_en).

<sup>12</sup>European Fact-Checking Standards Network, <https://efcsn.com/>.

or the European Digital Media Observatory project<sup>13</sup> represent concrete examples of how the response to disinformation must necessarily be shared, interdisciplinary and multilevel.

These initiatives, however, clash with some structural limits:

- first, the speed with which disinformation spreads, especially on social networks, is often greater than the capacity of verification structures to react;
- second, simple debunking is not always sufficient to change already rooted beliefs, especially in the presence of cognitive biases, strong ideological affiliations or closed information environments;
- third, the legitimacy of the same actors responsible for debunking can be questioned by those who see these practices as a form of disguised censorship. For these reasons, combating disinformation requires more than reactive fact-checking but must be accompanied by a structural investment in media education and in the cognitive resilience of citizens.

Media education, understood as the development of critical capacity in the analysis of sources, in the understanding of the mechanisms of information production and in the decoding of narrative frames, represents one of the most promising and long-lasting responses to the problem of disinformation (Adjin-Tettey, 2022). It must be conceived not only as a school module or an occasional campaign, but as a structural component of educational systems, capable of forming informed, aware and responsible citizens. In parallel, it is necessary to promote forms of digital civic literacy also for the adult population, through accessible tools, community initiatives, public programs and partnerships between institutions, media and civil society. Cognitive resilience is cultivated not merely through information delivery, but above all through the cultivation of critical thinking, epistemic empathy and awareness of one's own cognitive limits.

An effective strategy to counter misinformation must be built on an understanding of the cognitive mechanisms that make individuals vulnerable to manipulation, since purely informational or normative interventions are insufficient when faced with the pre-reflective power with which emotional and visual content influence perception. Psychological research has demonstrated that the human mind processes information through two complementary systems: one intuitive and fast, and the other analytical and

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<sup>13</sup>European Digital Media Observatory, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/european-digital-media-observatory>.

slow. Misinformation primarily affects the former, exploiting immediate emotional responses, cognitive shortcuts, and heuristics that operate outside of conscious control (Kahneman, 2011). Images and videos activate the amygdala even before rational evaluation occurs, generating a sense of intuitive authenticity that makes subsequent informational corrections less effective (Damasio, 1994).

The phenomenon of cognitive “fluency,” according to which individuals tend to consider as true what appears familiar or easily processed, further contributes to the persistence of misinformation. This mechanism has been systematically described by cognitive psychology and confirmed by numerous studies on reconstructive memory (Schwarz, 2004; Loftus, 2005). For this reason, simple fact-checking strategies, while necessary, often fail to reverse established beliefs, as the correction occurs after the initial emotional impact. Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook (2017) show that misinformation can leave “memory residues” that continue to influence judgment even after refutation.

The paper’s final recommendations must therefore be reformulated to take these cognitive constraints into account. Effective media literacy cannot be limited to the transmission of knowledge on platforms or reliable sources but must include a component of education in the perception and recognition of one’s own cognitive vulnerabilities. In contexts most exposed to visual propaganda, such as Ukraine and neighbouring countries, counteraction strategies must consider the ecology of online attention. “Pre-bunking” and visual literacy are particularly effective because they intervene at the stage when users form their first impression of the content, before its cognitive crystallization. Studies on the preventative treatment of deepfakes show that visual warnings are more effective when applied at the platform level and when they explain not only that the content may be fake, but also why it is manipulable (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

From this perspective, countermeasures cannot be presented as simple operational recommendations, but rather as part of an integrated approach that recognizes the neurocognitive dimension of disinformation. Only by connecting verification, training, and regulatory policies to the dynamics that govern human judgment (emotion, memory, fluency, and narrative structure) is it possible to reduce the lasting impact of manipulative campaigns. The goal is not only to correct the falsehood, but to cognitively make it more difficult for it to take hold.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that, in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, disinformation is not a marginal or incidental phenomenon but a structured, strategic, and pervasive instrument embedded at the core of contemporary hybrid warfare. Far from serving merely as propaganda, disinformation campaigns function as vectors of cognitive warfare, reshaping perceptions, influencing collective behavior, destabilizing democratic societies, and molding consensus or dissent on a global scale.

In response to the first research question, the analysis shows that disinformation in the Ukrainian context revolves around three core frames: the delegitimization of Ukraine as a sovereign state (e.g., accusations of Nazism, claims of using civilians as human shields); the demonization of NATO and the West (e.g., alleged secret biolaboratories, claims that NATO expansion caused the war); and the construction of a defensive narrative for Russia (e.g., portraying military operations as necessary to protect Donbass populations). These narratives circulate across multiple channels, from Russian state media to social platforms, influencers, bots, troll farms, and third-party Telegram channels. Particularly effective has been the strategy of 'intermediated disinformation,' which leverages the apparent credibility of independent voices to conceal pro-Russian messaging.

Regarding the second question on public opinion, findings indicate uneven impacts. In Western countries, support for Ukraine remains broadly stable, though pockets of pro-Russian sentiment persist, alongside declining public attention to the conflict. Beyond the West—particularly in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East—Russian propaganda has been more effective, exploiting anti-Western narratives and post-colonial grievances to foster geopolitical alignment. Even within Western societies, disinformation has polarized debate and eroded trust in democratic institutions and traditional media, leaving information environments fragmented and vulnerable.

In addressing the third question, the study demonstrates that disinformation campaigns pursue psychological (undermining resilience and morale), political (weakening domestic and international consensus for Ukraine), geopolitical (eroding Western unity while expanding Russian influence in the Global South), and strategic (obstructing Western responses) objectives. Their most insidious effect lies in cognitive saturation, producing an information space dominated by systematic confusion that blurs distinctions between truth and falsehood.

Finally, the fourth question reveals that countermeasures remain uneven and insufficient. Initiatives such as EUvsDisinfo, fact-checking networks, and media literacy programs provide valuable tools of democratic resilience, yet their effectiveness is constrained by the speed, scale, and adaptability of disinformation campaigns. Ex post debunking often arrives too late and is further limited by cognitive biases and entrenched beliefs. The real challenge is therefore systemic and cultural: strengthening societies' cognitive resilience, embedding critical media education, and fostering transparent, responsible, and cohesive communication ecosystems.

Ultimately, the Ukrainian conflict exemplifies a 21st-century paradigm of warfare in which the struggle for narrative dominance is as decisive as control of territory. The future of democracies thus depends not only on defending physical borders but also on safeguarding the symbolic and cognitive domains of truth and critical judgment.

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