



# WHY CONSPIRATORIAL PROPAGANDA WORKS AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT:

Audience Vulnerability and Resistance to Anti-Western, pro-Kremlin Disinformation in Ukraine

# ABOUT



# ARENA

Arena is an innovative programme dedicated to overcoming the challenges of disinformation and polarisation. Based within the Institute of Global Affairs (IGA) at the London School of Economics and Johns Hopkins University SNF Agora Institute, the Arena programme aims to use high-quality research, analysis, and evaluation to create effective best practices that can then be disseminated to journalists, public diplomacy teams, and civic groups. Arena seeks creative ways to counter the menace of unreality, stop the spread of hatred and division, and foster a fact-based discourse that enhances security, enables democracy, and builds trust. Its experimental research projects involve journalists, academics, and data scientists who seek both to understand disinformation campaigns and to reach audiences impacted by them.

# LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

## Research team:

**Peter Pomerantsev**, Director, Arena

**Nataliya Gumenyuk**, Co-Founder, Public Interest Journalism Lab

**Angelina Kariakina**, Co-Founder, Public Interest Journalism Lab

**Inna Borzylo**, Researcher, Public Interest Journalism Lab

**Tetiana Peklun**, Researcher, Public Interest Journalism Lab

**Volodymyr Yermolenko**, Analytics Director at Internews Ukraine; Chief Editor at UkraineWorld.org

**Vitalii Rybak**, Analyst, Internews Ukraine

**Denys Kobzin**, Director, Kharkiv Institute for Social Research

**Maria Montague**, Projects Manager and Researcher, Arena

**Jaroslava Barbieri**, Doctoral Researcher, University of Birmingham

**Martin Innes**, Director of the Crime and Security Research Institute, Cardiff University

**Viorica Budu**, Research Associate, Cardiff University

**Andrew Dawson**, Research Associate, Cardiff University

**Media monitoring carried out by Internews Ukraine.**

**Social media analysis carried out by Cardiff University Crime and Security Research Institute.**

**Focus groups carried out by Kharkiv Institute for Social Research.**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The most effective propaganda resonates with audiences' underlying worldviews and personal experiences. In order to fight it, one has to understand the mindsets that it preys on. This paper sets out to do exactly that.

We first track a set of Kremlin-aligned propaganda narratives across Ukrainian media, then measure their overall traction through a representative national survey conducted by the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich, and finally use focus groups to understand their deeper appeal and impact. This gives us a uniquely holistic view of contemporary propaganda: from its sources, dissemination, and impact on society right through to how it is received and perceived from the point of view of audiences.

The narratives in question include accusations that George Soros' minions run Ukrainian politics, that the US is building secret bioweapons in Ukraine, and that shadowy "Western curators" secretly control the government. CSS survey data shows that approximately 40% of Ukrainians believe these narratives.<sup>1</sup> They are in turn part of a larger message that sees Ukraine as perpetually under attack from nefarious Western forces. While individual narratives can change over time, this meta-narrative remains. Outright disinformation, conspiratorial thinking, and anti-Western messages combine in a toxic mix. The overall aim is to undermine reforms, strengthen vested economic interests, alienate Ukraine from its Western partners, and push the country back into Russia's orbit. While explicitly pro-Russian narratives have become a harder sell in Ukraine since the Kremlin opted to invade the country in 2014, these narratives don't so much boost Russia as try to make the rest of the world look just as malign. They resonate outside of the usual "pro-Russian" bubble in Ukraine and spread among audiences that are often viscerally opposed to the Kremlin. They find an echo in many peoples' underlying worldviews, the sense that zero-sum relationships predominate in the world, and that any type of international assistance is actually a trap. Sometimes these views express healthy scepticism about Western organisations, but they can also tip over into conspiratorial thinking and corrosive distrust.

Our research also reveals how such conspiratorial narratives can be resisted, be that in Ukraine or any other country where similar mindsets have taken hold (as in the United States and much of Europe). With Covid vaccines becoming the latest focus of disinformation campaigns, overcoming this challenge now represents an urgent public health priority as well as a political one.

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<sup>1</sup> Nationally representative survey implemented by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in October 2020.

# Summary of Findings

These narratives come from a plethora of sources: from traditional and online media, from outside and inside the country, and from sources openly aligned with the Kremlin and those simply looking to undermine reforms. Social media personalities are more important than online media brands in spreading these narratives, with pro-Russian YouTubers particularly important. The messaging app Telegram acts as a crucial amplifier.

The most prevalent narratives are:

- **Ukraine is now under the covert external governance of Western curators, creditors, and “Soros minions”:** 40% of the population believe this narrative.
- **Soros and the International Monetary Fund want to exploit Ukrainian lands:** 39% believe this narrative.
- **The US deployed a network of bio labs in Ukraine:** 25% believe this narrative.

The EU is presented as a “greedy creditor” in Kremlin-aligned sources, which also spread false claims that Ukraine trades more with Russia than the EU. Some 39% of Ukrainians now believe that “EU integration brought no benefits to Ukraine”.

People who watched the pro-Russian channels of Putin associate Viktor Medvedchuk were almost twice as likely to trust anti-West disinformation narratives. Medvedchuk’s TV channels were recently banned in Ukraine due to their connections with the financing of terrorist activity. But the audience has shifted to other channels associated with the pro-Kremlin party Opposition Platform For Life.<sup>2</sup> CSS survey data showed that over half of Opposition Platform voters are likely to believe anti-Western, conspiratorial disinformation.

Regional factors also play a role. Some 49% of Ukrainians in the south and 51% in the east believe that Ukraine is controlled by Western “curators”, as compared to 31% in the west and 29% in the centre.

CSS polling also showed that belief in conspiratorial narratives correlates more with TV rather than consumption of online media.

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2. Since the closure of Medvedchuk’s channels, the audience share of the channel Nash, owned by another businessman connected to Medvedchuk’s party, increased from 0.3-0.5% to 1.7-1.9%, making it the most popular news channel in Ukraine. Data analysis by Arena Media Expert (February 2021). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3tJSfAm>

But our focus groups show that people across the country, including in the largely geopolitically “pro-West” central and western regions, are generally vulnerable to conspiratorial narratives. Conspiracy theories tap into widespread distrust, enabling them to gain traction even among those who are otherwise aligned towards the West. The view that “nothing comes for free” pervades attitudes towards international assistance to Ukraine, and even patriotic participants agreed that while support from the West is necessary, there is a concern that Ukraine “will have to pay a very high price” in the end.

Such views are partly reinforced by hundreds of years of harrowing Ukrainian history. As data from the World Values survey reveal,<sup>3</sup> many Ukrainians have a “survivalist” mentality, which could tilt towards seeing the world in terms of brutal zero-sum interests. Focus groups also showed that a low sense of agency is often related to conspiratorial mindsets: people who feel they can control little around them are more susceptible to thinking that dark, hidden forces control the world. CSS survey data shows that 68% of Ukrainians agree that “there are secret organisations that greatly influence political decisions”. By contrast, even in Hungary, which is well known for the prevalence of its conspiratorial propaganda, only 47% of the population agree with this statement.<sup>4</sup> Some 55% of Ukrainians also agree that “it is not the government that is leading the country and we do not know who is pulling the strings in the background”, whereas less than half as many (26%) Hungarians feel the same.

However, CSS survey data also shows signs of resistance to the ultimate aims of pro-Kremlin disinformation. 61% of Ukrainians see Russia as the biggest threat to Ukraine, compared to 15% who see the US as the biggest threat. Some 80% agree that “Ukraine should pursue closer relations with the EU”, despite the significant scepticism that some Ukrainians harbour about the benefits of EU integration thus far. In a dog-eat-dog world, the Kremlin is still seen as the most malign dog. Moreover, as we know from other Arena research in Ukraine, a general distrust in the government, the media, and the state is tempered by high levels of trust in civil society groups and volunteers:<sup>5</sup> there remain deep reservoirs of social capital to build on.

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3. See:

- World Values Survey, Wave 7 (2017-2020). Available at: <https://bit.ly/2QsXrKP>
- World Values Survey Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map 2005-2020 (showing scale of survival vs self-expression values)
- World Values Survey. Ukraine in World Values Survey 2020: Resume of the Analytical Report, November 2020, p.5 and p.79. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ufBj5i>

4. Data from nationally representative survey in Hungary carried out by Median Market Research in February 2020, as part of Arena project “Moving Beyond Polarising Populist Propaganda: the Case of Hungary”

5. See “From Memory Wars to a Common Future: Overcoming Polarisation in Ukraine”, Arena Initiative, Institute of Global Affairs, London School of Economics and Political Science (July 2020), p.95. Available at: <https://bit.ly/39Pym4d>

# Recommendations: Turning Negatives into Positives

The seemingly negative “survivalist” Ukrainian mentality can, however, be turned into a positive. “Personal survival” can be connected to broader national survival, which is also linked to integration into the international community. National cohesion, reforms, and international connections can reinforce Ukrainians’ sense of personal security.

Likewise, Ukrainians’ distrust can be turned into a positive. In focus groups we found that people prided themselves on being able to sift through different sources and come to their own conclusions. We observe the emergence of a more media-literate media consumer, whose cynicism is tempered by a genuine quest for truth.

**International partners** such as the EU should engage the public through “pro-social” communicators who can systematically explain their position to Ukrainians. This job was done by Irish and Polish heads of state Pat Cox and Aleksander Kwaśniewski during the preparations for signing the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU in 2012-2013. With the disappearance of such public figures, the space of the “Western interlocutor” has been filled with mythical, conspiratorial fantasies about “Western curators” and “Sorosites”.

Together with the **Ukrainian government**, the international community needs to explain how reforms and international integration can strengthen security and survival. Reforms are too often described as bringing pain and instability in the short term and providing benefits only in the future.

**The Ukrainian government** also needs to tackle the **root causes of conspiratorial** thinking by improving people’s agency through greater online civic participation in government. The government has pledged to create “government in a smartphone”. Ukraine’s excellent IT sector offers the technological knowhow to make this a reality, which would give citizens the chance to participate in everything from municipal budgeting to crowd-sourced solutions to public health crises. People are excited by decentralisation<sup>6</sup>, and they are more likely to trust local than national government.<sup>7</sup> Much research in Ukraine also shows

6. See “Decentralisation and local government reform. Third wave of sociological research among amalgamated communities”, Social Indicators Centre (September 2020). Available at: <https://bit.ly/31Qw67R>

7. See “From Memory Wars to a Common Future: Overcoming Polarisation in Ukraine”, Arena Initiative, Institute of Global Affairs, London School of Economics (July 2020), p.95. Available at: <https://bit.ly/39Pym4d>

high levels of trust in civic organisations and the voluntary sector.<sup>8</sup> Ukraine has all the right ingredients to bring together civic activists, local government, and digital democracy in order to help people to feel more empowered. Inspiration can be drawn from countries such as Taiwan and Estonia, where enhanced digital democracy and online civic participation are part of a broader social resilience strategy that aims to fend off the “hybrid” threats posed by Russia and China, among others.<sup>9</sup>

**Ukrainian media** need to promote trust and empower audiences to help move beyond conspiratorial mindsets. Constructive, solutions-based news can increase people’s understanding for the possibility of positive change. Pioneering efforts such as “Hearken”<sup>10</sup> bring citizens into the editorial and agenda-setting process, welcoming them into newsrooms in order to develop trust and participation. The concept of “social journalism”<sup>11</sup> refocuses journalistic practices around taking an active part in the community and facilitating social change through community engagement.

Media also need to work with the grain of people’s desire to sift through information to find the truth, as well as their desire to form communities. This could mean crowdsourcing evidence or building teams of what a recent Reuters Institute study calls “disinformation warriors”.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond this, it is necessary to develop algorithms that aggregate and order information for people in ways that help them to sift through different sources. What future for “public service” algorithms? How can technology become a partner in people’s quest to understand the world?

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8 See:

- “From Memory Wars to a Common Future: Overcoming Polarisation in Ukraine”, Arena Initiative, Institute of Global Affairs, London School of Economics (July 2020), p.95. Available at: <https://bit.ly/39Pym4d>
- For example see “State and social institutions: who do Ukrainians trust?”, Democratic Initiatives Foundation (March 2021). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3dKDo2v>

9 See:

- Miller, Carl. “Taiwan is making democracy work again. It’s time we paid attention”, Wired UK (November 2019). Available at: <https://bit.ly/312Ez7s>
- DemDigest. “Detecting Digital Fingerprints: Taiwan’s resilience to Chinese disinformation”, Democracy Digest, European Endowment for Democracy (August 2020). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3cS985k>
- Siikut, Siim. “How 20 years of digital transformation made Estonia a model for dealing with international crises”, Emerging Europe (August 2020). Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Pg5hXn>

10 For an example of Hearken’s work, see “Introducing Introducing Engagement Efforts To Your Newsroom”: <https://bit.ly/3cWKgcw>

11 Sweet, Melissa et al. “Outlining a Model of Social Journalism for Health”, Australian Journalism Review (2017). Available at: <https://buff.ly/3tZm2VS>

12 Skippage, Rebecca. The role of public service media in the fight against disinformation (December 2020) p. 6. Available at: <https://bit.ly/314MS2t>



# UKRAINE'S INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Since the start of Russian military aggression against Ukraine in 2014, it has become harder to push explicitly pro-Kremlin narratives in Ukraine. In the same year, Russian television channels and social media platforms were also blocked across the country in accordance with the new National Information Security Doctrine.<sup>13</sup> Attitudes to Russia, and to Putin's regime in particular, have become radically more negative: in 2013, 85% of Ukrainians viewed Russia positively, falling to just 41% in 2021.<sup>14</sup> However, recent years have seen the rise of a new set of narratives that are not explicitly pro-Russian but which do frequently appear in Kremlin propaganda.<sup>15</sup> These narratives present the West as the biggest threat to Ukraine. They aim to undermine domestic reforms and Ukraine's relations with the international community. Many of these narratives are deeply conspiratorial and rife with disinformation.

These anti-Western narratives are propagated by a wide range of outlets and politicians, via both traditional and online media, and as such they do not rely on official Russian state media for distribution. Some of the key Russia-aligned media responsible for popularising anti-Western narratives in Ukraine are the now defunct channels associated with Ukrainian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, who has strong business and personal ties with Russia in general and with Vladimir Putin in particular. The network of TV channels affiliated with Medvedchuk included national TV news channels 112, News One, and ZIK, as well as a number of regional channels. The three news channels focused exclusively on coverage of political topics and targeted different audiences (with ZIK more oriented towards the Western Ukrainian audience, for example). However, in February 2021, Medvedchuk had his assets frozen by the Ukrainian government for

<sup>13</sup> In 2017, President Poroshenko also sanctioned Russian social media platforms VK, Odnoklassniki, Yandex services, and Mail.ru Group. President Volodymyr Zelenskyi extended these restrictions in 2020 (although these platforms remain easily accessible by using a virtual private network, or VPN, which allows users to circumvent government restrictions).

<sup>14</sup> Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. Attitude of the population of Ukraine to Russia and the population of Russia to Ukraine (February 2021). Available at: <https://bit.ly/2NAiN7Q>

<sup>15</sup> Rybak, Vitalii. "Hacked Pluralism: How Ukrainian TV Channels Were Used to Spread Russian Propaganda Messages", Internews (February 2021). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3tLDvRP>

allegedly “financing terrorism”, and the TV news channels associated with his business empire were closed down.

These channels – ZIK, News One, and 112 – together accounted for around 3% of audience share in Ukraine,<sup>16</sup> making them the predominant block in the news TV segment. By comparison, the two channels owned by former president Petro Poroshenko, Pryamiy and Channel 5, together make up about 1.5% of audience share. Through their acquisition of ZIK the so-called “Medvedchuk channels” had also begun to make significant inroads with traditionally anti-Kremlin audiences in West Ukraine. As such, the closure of channels controlled by Viktor Medvedchuk will certainly have made an impact on the prevalence of anti-Western disinformation narratives, at least for the time being.

However, these narratives are likely to gain traction by other means. Since the closure of Medvedchuk’s channels, the audience share of the channel Nash, owned by another businessman connected to Medvedchuk’s party, increased from 0.3-0.5% to 1.7-1.9%,<sup>17</sup> making it the most popular news channel in Ukraine.

Moreover, as media monitoring and polling show, anti-Western conspiratorial narratives are also common in media that are not so explicitly aligned with the Russian state. Most Ukrainian media is controlled by business interests, some of which aim to destabilise the ongoing reforms and anti-corruption processes in order to cement their financial and political power. Many such media combine entertainment and news, thereby achieving a much higher audience share than straight news channels. Disinformation and conspiracy theories can also be spread by guests on programmes with talk-show or debate formats. The Ukrainian broadcast regulator has no remit to push back against inaccurate or biased news content.

From Ukraine’s independence in 1991 up until 2019, TV was the most popular medium in the country. In 2019, online and social media surpassed television in terms of popularity and reach, according to InMind research for Internews Network.<sup>18</sup> According to the InMind poll, 68% of respondents used social networks to get news (up from 53% in 2018), while TV use was down to 66% compared to 77% in 2018. In 2020, the gap grew to 10 percentage points, with 62% using

<sup>16</sup> Television Industry Committee, Ukraine. Top channels, average figures taken from 2020 statistics. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3tMGLwI>

<sup>17</sup> Data analysis by Arena Media Expert (February 2021). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3tJSfAm>

<sup>18</sup> USAID-Internews 2020 Media Consumption Survey. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3IC8RYb>

social networks to get news versus 52% for TV. This reflects a growing trend towards digital media worldwide. The research also found that the most popular social networks for getting news are Facebook (47%), YouTube (30%), Telegram (21%), Viber (18%), Instagram (18%), and VK (2%).

Facebook and Instagram are the most popular social media websites in Ukraine with 16 million and 14 million users respectively.<sup>19</sup> Despite the ban on Russian social media in Ukraine, some Ukrainians still use Russian platforms with a virtual private network (VPN), which allows them to circumvent government controls. Thus, VK remains the fourth most visited website in Ukraine, according to SimilarWeb data.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Ukraine is the second largest source of the traffic to the VK website.<sup>21</sup> Kremlin-aligned narratives are dominant in the Ukrainian segment of VK, but they are also visible on Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube.

On YouTube, pro-Russian messages are mainly spread by Anatoliy Shariy, the highly popular political YouTube blogger in Ukraine, who has 2.43 million subscribers and 3.7 billion video views. Shariy is allegedly supported by the Kremlin, though there is no direct proof of this link. The messages that he promotes, however, are often very similar to those disseminated by Kremlin propaganda.<sup>22</sup> His websites are registered in Moscow, according to a study by data mining specialists Texty.<sup>23</sup>

The Telegram messaging app is also actively used by Russia to influence public opinion in Ukraine. In February 2021, Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) revealed that a number of political Telegram channels in Ukraine were being run by a large-scale network of agents specialised in subversive activities and answering to Russian intelligence agencies.<sup>24</sup>

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19 See January 2021 report on Facebook and Instagram in Ukraine by Plusone, available at <https://bit.ly/3tGsn8B>

20 SimilarWeb. Top Ranking Website in Ukraine as of February 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/30ZZulp>

21 SimilarWeb. Vk.com Traffic, Ranking & Marketing Analytics. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3lBmEQv>

22 For instance, Shariy has made claims on numerous occasions that Ukraine's SBU produced fake evidence in an attempt to meddle with the MH17 trial in order to set Russia up as a guilty party. Shariy is also known for his anti-Maidan rhetoric.

23 Harasym, Andrii. "Shariy created his 'educational platform'. Physically, his site is located in Russia", Texty.org.ua (July 2020). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3vOyObs>

24 Security Service of Ukraine. "SBU exposes Russian agent network" (February 2021). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3tTSsBt>

# 2

## MEDIA MONITORING AND KEY NARRATIVES

In 2020, Internews Ukraine and UkraineWorld published a report entitled *Divide and Conquer*, which provided an extensive analysis of the most popular anti-Western narratives circulating in Ukrainian media.<sup>25</sup> This *Divide and Conquer* report and a number of other studies on disinformation narratives by Internews and UkraineWorld were able to isolate the key sources of anti-Western narratives, disinformation, and conspiracy theories in Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> Our research then analysed this set of sources – including 9,000 news website (using the LOOQME monitoring service), six TV channels, six YouTube channels, 20 Facebook pages, and 27 Telegram channels – throughout the period September-November 2020.

Both the monitoring carried out for the *Divide and Conquer* report (January-June 2020) and the additional monitoring (September-November 2020) consistently identified the following conspiratorial, disinformation narratives:<sup>27</sup>

25 Internews Ukraine and UkraineWorld. *Divide and Conquer: The 5 Most Popular Anti-Western Narratives in Ukraine So Far in 2020* (June 2020). Available at: <https://bit.ly/315Mz7L>

26 See various studies by Internews Ukraine and UkraineWorld at: <https://ukraineworld.org/articles/infowatch>

27 One useful explanation of the term “conspiracy theory” in our context is the “intuitive” definition given by Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule: a conspiracy theory is “an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who have also managed to conceal their role” (see Vermeule and Sunstein’s paper, *Conspiracy Theories* p.4, available at <https://bit.ly/3wkQyM6>). As Kreko et al. write in the *The Conspiratorial Mindset in the Age of Transition*, “this definition allows for a specific conspiracy theory to be true. Indeed, our critique of conspiracy theories does not centre on whether individual conspiracy theories are true or false. Rather, it centres on what we call a ‘conspiratorial mindset’, a firm belief that conspiracies can be used to explain all sorts of events and decisions. The conspiratorial mindset may lead to correct decisions in certain cases – it hardly needs saying that some conspiracies are in fact real. But someone with a conspiratorial mindset is likely to often go wrong simply because their approach relies too heavily on conspiracy theories in the face of the available evidence...a belief that the government is not fully in control of the country is not in itself a conspiracy theory, because it can also reflect the view that the government’s powers are merely limited. For a full-blown conspiracy theory to emerge, power must at least be attributed to a particular source – a secret club or an individual megalomaniac, for instance.” Available at: <https://bit.ly/3fycJZI>

# 1 Ukraine is under covert, external governance from Western “curators”

Steeped in the language of Soviet conspiracy theories, this meta-narrative argues that reforms are driven by shadowy Western “curators” who want to make Ukraine dependent on loans for the ultimate benefit of the West. Reforms are alleged to extract resources from the country and are sometimes even characterised as “genocide”.

This narrative also argues that “anti-corruption” reforms in Ukraine are just another branch of “external governance”, with Western embassies trying to “cleanse” the Ukrainian economic and political space of actors that prevent Western business interests from taking over local markets.

Another part of this meta-narrative takes aim at the EU, claiming that it “forced” Ukraine to sign an unprofitable Association Agreement and peddling the false claim that Russia is a larger trade partner for Ukraine than the EU.

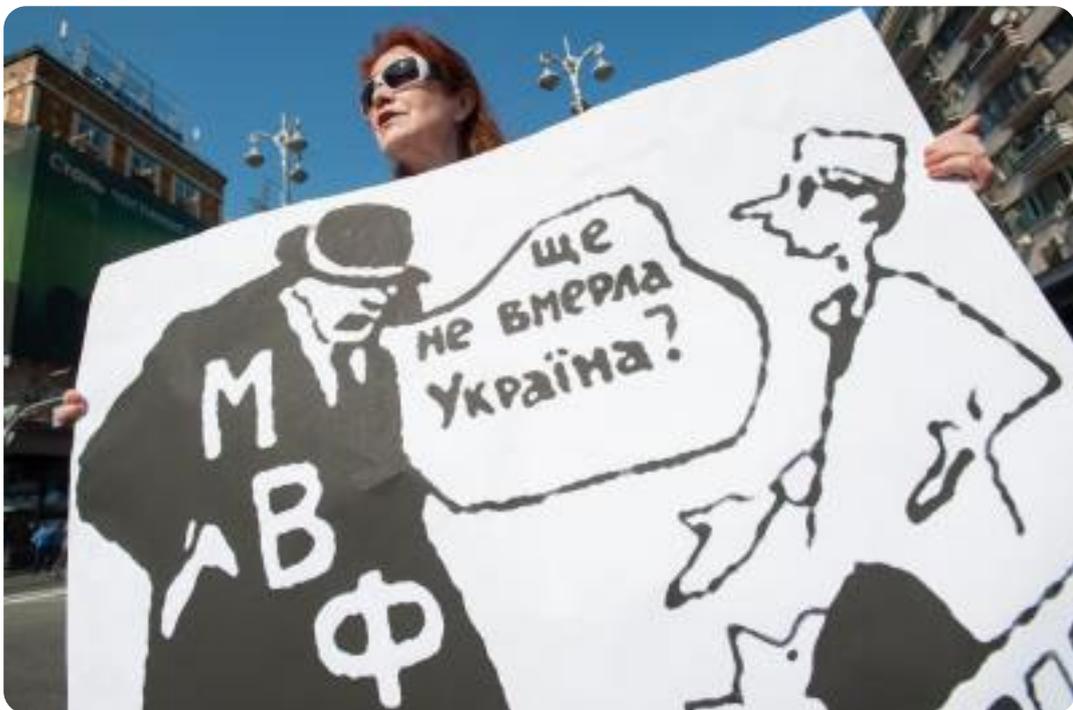


Photo: Scanpix. Figure on the left has 'IMF' written on his coat, with the speech bubble reading “has Ukraine not died yet?”

## 2

### Ukraine is ruled by “Sorosites” (Children of Soros)

According to this narrative, the “evil and greedy Sorosites” do everything to please their master, the Budapest-born American financier and philanthropist George Soros, who is portrayed as “the almighty leader of the globalists”. “Sorosite” is a label that can be used to smear any politician or civil society leader who has any connection to Western donors or favours economic reforms.



## 3

### Soros and the IMF want to rob Ukraine of its land

“The greedy West”, namely Soros and the IMF, want to buy up Ukrainian agricultural lands on the cheap, effectively stealing them from ordinary Ukrainians. This supposed land grab would lead to the deterioration of Ukraine’s agricultural industry, leaving many Ukrainians unable to survive.

## 4 The US has established a network of biolabs in Ukraine to experiment on humans

According to this narrative, the US government has created “biological laboratories” in Ukraine and other Eastern European countries to carry out tests on humans. This narrative has become more popular in relation to the development of COVID-19 vaccines, with claims that the US intended to test COVID-19 vaccines on Ukrainians.



Photo: YouTube AfterShock. Text reads: “the West is carrying out yet another experiment on Ukraine”

Some conspiratorial narratives and disinformation come and go with the political context. During the US elections, for example, there was a spike in stories on this issue. But one constant is the meta-narrative that portrays Ukraine as being under perpetual attack from nefarious Western forces bent on undermining Ukraine’s domestic reforms and international partnerships. As the information war over Covid vaccines intensifies, we expect this to become a consistent area of focus.

# 3 PUBLIC OPINION POLLING

Based on Internews Ukraine's monitoring, the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich carried out quantitative research exploring the traction of anti-West conspiratorial narratives among different demographics in Ukraine.<sup>28</sup> The polling explored these narratives in the run-up to the October 2020 local elections.

The nationally representative survey conducted by CSS showed that there are high levels of scepticism towards Western powers and international institutions. For example, 39% of Ukrainians believe that "EU integration brought no benefits to Ukraine". Though the highest levels of agreement with this statement were found in the east (44%) and south of Ukraine (52%), levels were also high in the west (27%) and the centre (33%).

With regard to the specific narratives that we focused on, 40% of Ukrainians believe that "Ukraine is now under external governance by Western curators, creditors, and 'Sorosites'"; some 39% believe that Soros and the IMF want to exploit Ukrainian lands; and 25% believe "the US deployed a network of bio labs in Ukraine".

CSS survey data also revealed important correlations between susceptibility to these narratives and demographic factors, media consumption habits, and political preferences.

- **Supporters of pro-Russian parties are more likely to believe anti-Western conspiracies**

Those who intended to vote for pro-Russian political parties in the October 2020 local elections were more likely to believe anti-Western disinformation and conspiratorial narratives. By far the most likely to believe these narratives were supporters of Ukraine's second largest party, Opposition Platform-For Life, and the small but high-profile Party of Shariy, founded by Kremlin-aligned YouTuber Anatoliy Shariy. Over 50% of the Opposition Platform voters believed the narratives about "Western curators" and "Sorosites", and 35.7% believe the narrative about US biolabs.

28. Additional analysis of CSS survey data upcoming: Maschmeyer L., Abrahams A., Pomerantsev P., and Yermolenko V. (2021). Donetsk Don't Tell: Ukraine and the limits of digital influence operations. Working paper.

Conversely, only 6% of voters for the firmly pro-EU party Holos believed that the US had deployed a network of biolabs in Ukraine, while 16% of voters for Batkivschyna (for which EU membership is a strategic goal) believe that Soros and the IMF want to exploit Ukrainian lands.

**Percentage of respondents who trusted narratives, by political preference:**

	<i>“Ukraine is now under external governance by Western curators, creditors and Sorosites”</i>	<i>“Soros and International Monetary Fund want to exploit Ukrainian lands”</i>	<i>“The US deployed a network of bio labs in Ukraine”</i>
Voting intention (showing political parties with vote share of 1.5% or above)	Share expressing agreement (“unequivocally agree” and “tend to agree” combined)		
<b>Servant of the People</b>	6.7	14.2	6.0
<b>European Solidarity</b>	3.3	4.2	1.7
<b>Opposition Platform-For Life</b>	59.2	53.1	35.7
<b>Batkivschyna</b>	9.1	15.9	13.6
<b>Za Maibutnie (For the Future)</b>	24.0	24.0	16.0
<b>Radical Party of Oleh Liashko</b>	20.7	27.6	17.2
<b>Nash Krai</b>	30.4	26.1	26.1
<b>UDAR of Vitali Klitschko</b>	9.5	4.8	0.0
<b>Svoboda</b>	10.0	20.0	10.0
<b>Party of Shariy</b>	68.0	56.0	32.0
<b>Holos</b>	0	0	5.6

- **Ukrainians in the south and east of Ukraine are more likely to believe anti-Western narratives, disinformation, and conspiracy theories**

Some 49% of Ukrainians in the south, 51% in the east, and 61% in the Donbas either “tend to agree” or “unequivocally agree” that Ukraine is under the yoke of Western “curators”, as compared to 31% in the west and 29% in the centre. Ukrainians in the west are the least susceptible to the narrative about US deployment of bio labs, with 18% believing this narrative, as compared to 30% in the east, 32% in the Donbas, 27% in the south, and 25% in the centre.

**Percentage of respondents who encountered and trusted narratives, by region:**

Region	<i>“Ukraine is now under external governance by Western curators, creditors and Sorosites”</i>	<i>“Soros and International Monetary Fund want to exploit Ukrainian lands”</i>	<i>“The US deployed a network of bio labs in Ukraine”</i>
Region	Share expressing agreement (“unequivocally agree” and “tend to agree” combined)		
<b>West</b>	31	30	18
<b>Centre</b>	29	30	25
<b>South</b>	49	50	27
<b>East</b>	51	48	30
<b>Donbas</b>	61	57	32
<b>Non-controlled</b>	59	54	25
<b>All Ukraine (including NGCA)</b>	40	39	25

- **There is no strong link between education level and belief in conspiratorial disinformation**

Respondents with PhDs and Masters degrees are more likely to believe these disinformation narratives than those with only a partial secondary education. The group most likely to believe the external governance narrative were people with vocational training after secondary school, whereas the group most likely to believe narratives about US biolabs or the IMF and Soros wanting to exploit Ukrainian lands were those who received no secondary school education. Overall, however, there is no significant correlation between education level and belief in these narratives.

	<i>“Ukraine is now under external governance by Western curators, creditors and Sorosites”</i>	<i>“Soros and International Monetary Fund want to exploit Ukrainian lands”</i>	<i>“The US deployed a network of bio labs in Ukraine”</i>
Educational level	Share expressing agreement (“unequivocally agree” and “tend to agree” combined)		
<b>Less than high school</b>	33	56	44
<b>Completed some high school</b>	15	20	20
<b>High school graduate</b>	43	43	30
<b>Job-specific training programme after high school</b>	56	34	24
<b>Completed a bachelor’s degree or equivalent</b>	26	34	15
<b>Specialist</b>	43	36	26
<b>Completed a graduate degree (master’s, PhD, or equivalent)</b>	35	35	36

- **More important than levels of education are levels of employment**

The unemployed and retired are the groups most vulnerable to the narratives that we monitored.

	<i>“Ukraine is now under external governance by Western curators, creditors and Sorosites”</i>	<i>“Soros and International Monetary Fund want to exploit Ukrainian lands”</i>	<i>“The US deployed a network of bio labs in Ukraine”</i>
Educational level	Share expressing agreement (“unequivocally agree” and “tend to agree” combined)		
<b>Employed full-time</b>	35	39	20
<b>Employed part-time</b>	32	38	18
<b>Self-employed, entrepreneur</b>	35	29	21
<b>Unemployed but looking for work</b>	39	42	28
<b>Unemployed and not looking for work</b>	41	36	26
<b>Unemployed and unable to work due to disability or illness</b>	57	55	50
<b>Retired</b>	50	49	30
<b>Student</b>	29	29	18
<b>Homemaker</b>	29	29	13

- **Younger respondents are less susceptible to these narratives**

Vulnerability to anti-West disinformation narratives increases with age, but this is not as significant in predicting susceptibility to these narratives as political views or employment status.

	<i>“Ukraine is now under external governance by Western curators, creditors and Sorosites”</i>	<i>“Soros and International Monetary Fund want to exploit Ukrainian lands”</i>	<i>“The US deployed a network of bio labs in Ukraine”</i>
Age	Share expressing agreement (“unequivocally agree” and “tend to agree” combined)		
<b>18-29</b>	27	32	16
<b>30-44</b>	37	35	23
<b>45-59</b>	43	41	26
<b>60+</b>	49	46	31

**- Belief in conspiratorial narratives correlates more with TV rather than consumption of online media.**

This correlation is explored in more detail in the upcoming CSS report.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Maschmeyer L., Abrahams A., Pomerantsev P., and Yermolenko V. (2021). Donetsk Don't Tell: Ukraine and the limits of digital influence operations. Working paper.

- **Consumers of Medvedchuk-owned channels (News One, ZIK, 112) are almost twice as likely to trust anti-West disinformation narratives**

<i>“Ukraine is now under external governance by Western curators, creditors, and Sorosites”</i>		
Posture	Watch at least one Medvedchuk-owned channel	Don't watch any
<b>I do not agree at all, these are fabrications</b>	18.7	37.3
<b>Sounds dubious, but there might be something in it</b>	28.2	31.1

<b>I tend to agree</b>	26.0	14.9
<b>I agree unequivocally</b>	27.0	16.7
<b>Total</b>	100.0	100.0

***“Soros and the IMF want to exploit Ukrainian lands”***

Posture	Watch at least one Medvedchuk-owned channel	Don't watch any
<b>I do not agree at all, these are fabrications</b>	21.7	39.0
<b>Sounds dubious, but there might be something in it</b>	28.5	29.1
<b>I tend to agree</b>	22.9	16.2
<b>I agree unequivocally</b>	27.0	15.7
<b>Total</b>	100.0	100.0

***“The US deployed a network of bio labs in Ukraine”***

Posture	Watch at least one Medvedchuk-owned channel	Don't watch any
<b>I do not agree at all, these are fabrications</b>	36.3	52.2
<b>Sounds dubious, but there might be something in it</b>	30.7	28.5
<b>I tend to agree</b>	18.2	10.3
<b>I agree unequivocally</b>	14.8	9.0
<b>Total</b>	100.0	100.0

# 4

## SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

Social media monitors based at Cardiff University analysed anti-Western disinformation narratives across four social media platforms during the period of 1 August - 1 December 2020. The monitoring explored data quantitatively and qualitatively across:

- **25 public Facebook pages of news channels, political parties, and key political actors identified as sources of disinformation by Internews.**
- **31 Telegram public channels identified by Internews.**
- **A random sample of Twitter accounts geolocated in Ukraine.**

Data was gathered using a blend of manual collection and the automated search functions of Crimson Hexagon and CrowdTangle. The data was analysed and organised around trends and top posts.

This analysis indicates that:

### 1 Different social media platforms are preferred by users with different political orientations

In Ukraine, content on Twitter is more pro-Western, while Facebook and Telegram content tends to be more anti anti-Western.

### 2 Telegram is the most potent social media platform for amplification

Often the level of traction for a post on Telegram is higher than for the same post on Facebook. For example, a post by Klymenko Time about “Sorosites” supposedly using Ukrainian taxpayers’ money on “useless” projects such as the “de-occupation of Crimea from the Russian Federation” received only 41 reactions on Facebook, but the same post received 12,900 views on Telegram.<sup>30</sup>

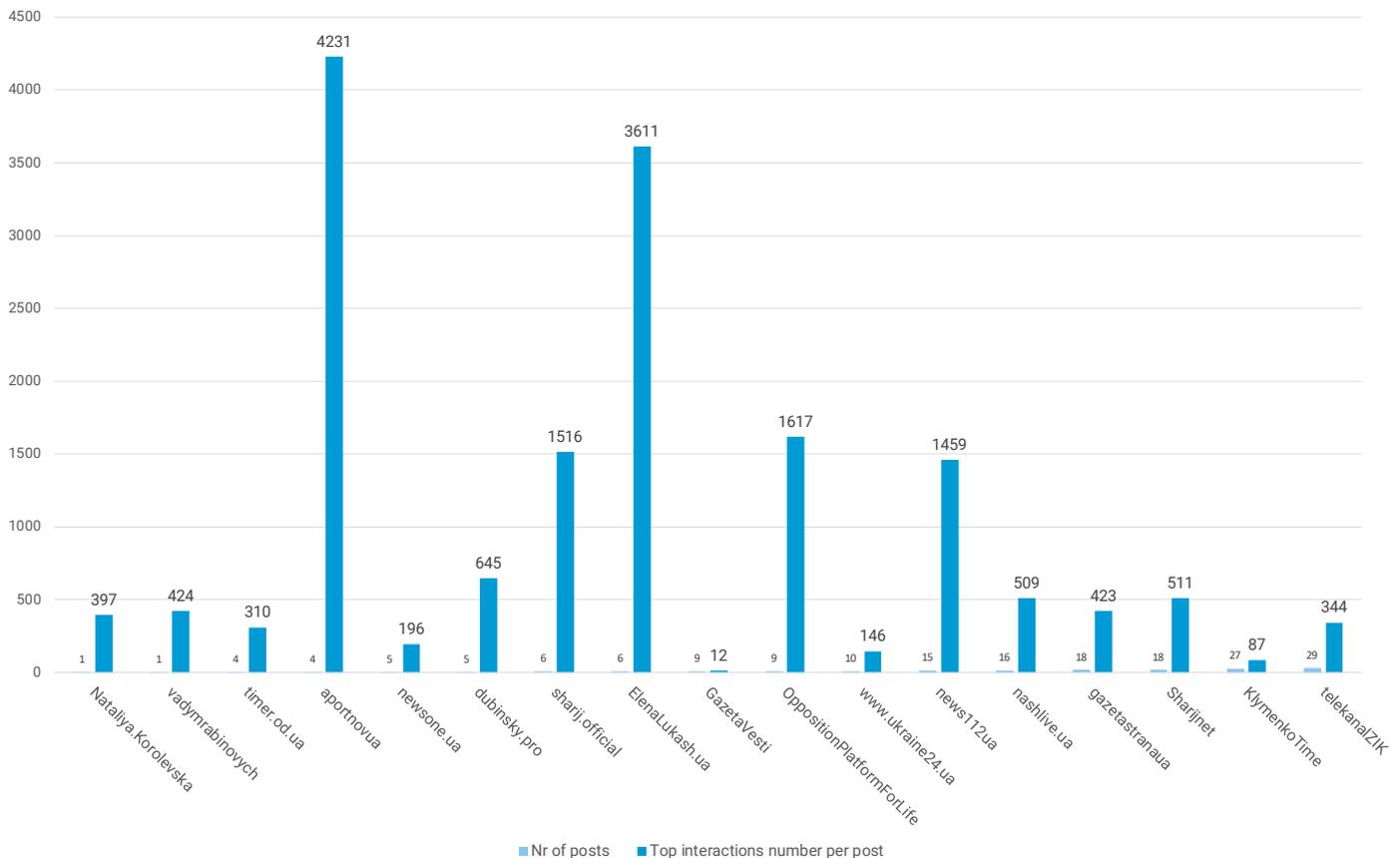
<sup>30</sup> See Facebook post with 41 interaction (<https://bit.ly/3fb0CRI>) versus Telegram post with 12,900 views (<https://bit.ly/3tUKIV5>).

In another illustrative example, the politician Andrey Portnov published a post in support of President Trump, referring to “Poroshenko’s entourage and non-governmental organisations, activists, parasites, and other thieves wandering around Ukraine, funded by Trump’s opponents”. This post performed very well on Facebook (4,100 reactions and 268 shares) but gained even more traction on Telegram (66,300 views and 6,100 likes).<sup>31</sup>

### 3 Social media personalities gain more traction than publications

Our social media monitoring found that posts by individual opinion-makers expressing anti-Western narratives gained more traction than similar posts by media platforms. This tendency is clear in the below graph, which compares the traction of posts from 17 different sources alleging that Western institutions like the IMF exercise financial control over Ukraine. The posts that gained the highest levels of traction were by politicians Yuriy Boyko, Andrey Portnov, and Elena Lukash.

30. See Portnov’s post on Facebook (<https://bit.ly/3rrIMNT>) and on Telegram (<https://bit.ly/3deuB8S>).



# 5

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: PENETRATION OF ANTI- WESTERN DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

To better understand the spread of the anti-Western narratives within Ukrainian society, we divided the audience into segments. The segments that we focused on were defined by a previous Arena project, *From Memory Wars to a Common Future*<sup>32</sup>, which performed a K-means<sup>33</sup> cluster analysis based on respondents' social and political values, feelings of nostalgia, and aspirations for Ukraine's future.

- **Segment 1:** the younger and better-educated population, mostly residing in the west of Ukraine and Kyiv. They generally hold pro-Western and liberal views.
- **Segment 2:** the younger and better-educated population, mostly residing in large cities in the south and east of Ukraine, especially Odesa and Kharkiv. They generally hold pro-European, liberal views, but often with weak pride in being Ukrainian and high levels of cynicism.
- **Segment 3:** the older population with lower education levels, mostly living in villages and small towns located in the west and centre of Ukraine. They have conservative/authoritarian values and tend to be highly patriotic and suspicious of the Kremlin.
- **Segment 4:** the older population with lower education levels, mostly living in villages and small towns located in the south and east of Ukraine, in particular in the Odesa and Kharkiv regions. They are more inclined towards pro-Soviet and pro-Russian views, and they have conservative/authoritarian values.

31. "From Memory Wars to a Common Future: Overcoming Polarisation in Ukraine", Arena Initiative, Institute of Global Affairs, London School of Economics and Political Science (July 2020). Available at: <https://bit.ly/39Pym4d>

32. K-means clustering is a statistical method for dividing sets of observations into clusters based on their similarity.

In total, the Kharkiv Institute of Social Research carried out eight focus groups (total 54 participants). We recruited five focus groups with participants coming from one segment only, and three mixed focus groups with participants coming from two different segments.

The discussion guides were drawn up by a team of international and Ukrainian experts. The aim of the focus groups was to understand which forms of disinformation, anti-Western narratives, and conspiracy theories achieve the greatest traction in Ukrainian society. We also wanted to know how susceptibility to these narratives correlates with peoples' wider views on Ukrainian politics, society, and international relations.

## Key findings:

1

**Anti-Western narratives tap into widespread distrust and zero-sum thinking, enabling these narratives to gain traction even among those who are otherwise aligned with Ukraine's Western orientation.**

As expected, the majority of Segment 4 (the most pro-Russian segment) were aligned with anti-Western narratives.<sup>34</sup> More surprising, however, was the level of traction that these narratives achieved among Segment 2 and Segment 3 participants (both shown by our previous research to be broadly in favour of closer ties with the West). Despite seeing Russia as the greatest threat to Ukraine and viewing European integration as the right direction for the country's development, it was common for Segment 2 and Segment 3 participants to take cynical views about the West's intentions in assisting Ukraine. While some of this thinking is grounded in healthy scepticism, often it tips over into a conspiratorial attitude. Overall, the acceptance of anti-Western narratives reflects a deep-seated worldview that sees the world in zero-sum, dog-eat-dog terms. This kind of worldview leaves little room for a belief that aid could be offered as part of a mutually reinforcing relationship.

The view that "nothing comes for free" pervaded attitudes towards Western assistance for Ukraine. Even where Segment 2 (urban, east Ukraine) and Segment 3 (rural, west Ukraine) participants largely agreed that support from the West is necessary, they were often

33. For example, "Ukraine is under the influence of the United States since all these so-called experts have been sent here from there, from Washington". (Respondent from Segment 4)

concerned that Ukraine “will have to pay a high price” for this support in the end. People often referred to Western aid as the “cheese” in a mouse trap, for example, or compared Western loans to the tricks of a loan shark. One keyword that participants’ commonly used in relation to the West’s aims in Ukraine was “vygodno” (profitable, beneficial). Others said that they felt abandoned and that Ukraine was not really receiving any serious assistance.

Among Segment 2 (the urban, educated, cynical population in east Ukraine), there was a particularly strong sense of being “encircled by enemies”. Here the motives of any international institution interacting with Ukraine in any way were considered malicious and self-interested.

This universal mistrust fuels participants’ beliefs that “secret organisations” are at work in Ukraine and against Ukraine. The range of actors involved, according to participants, is wide: from Kremlin-backed organisations acting in Russia’s interests and IMF agents who promote the Fund’s economic interests in Ukraine to the closed international cabals that control the global agenda.

Fear of losing sovereignty due to international assistance also shapes respondents’ attitudes towards the West and its development programmes. Members of Segment 2 in particular voiced strong feelings over historical traumas and territorial claims against Ukraine (not only by Russia, but also by Poland, Hungary, and Romania).

Respondents in Segment 3 were afraid of “being swallowed up by the creditors”. This fear tends to tie in with concerns about losing land and natural resources in Ukraine, as well as with worries that “our children will leave the country” (in part thanks to the opening of borders with Europe). Conversely, they also feared that “migrants will flock into the country”, which sometimes even veered into the xenophobic apprehension about “dilution of our ethnicity”. All of these concerns already exist to varying degrees, but they are only reinforced by anti-Western narratives.

However, it is worth repeating that for most people outside of Segment 4, the most pro-Russian segment in the rural south and east of the country, Russia represents the main threat to Ukraine, whereas greater integration with Europe is viewed favourably.

# 1

## The IMF is the most distrusted of the Western agencies

Most focus group participants had extremely limited knowledge about how the International Monetary Fund operates. Disinformation narratives – that Ukraine will have to repay the IMF “three times” the amount initially received, for example – were also voiced by some participants. The majority of participants see the IMF as a threat to the country rather than a partner, and they would prefer not to receive assistance from the Fund. As we note previously, robust criticism of IMF and other international institutions’ policies is of course laudable, though in some cases it is filled with inaccurate information.

Half of the participants suspected the IMF of being involved in a conspiracy to appropriate resources and destroy the economy.

However some participants noted that there is “a lot of speculation and disinformation” in media coverage on IMF-related subjects, often linking it back to Russian sources. The absence of intelligible messaging about how international organisations like the IMF work, as well as a lack of information explaining domestic reforms in simple language, can create a vacuum that is easily filled with conspiracy theories and disinformation.

# 2

## Disappointment with reforms can lead to distrust of the West

For many, reform efforts in Ukraine are strongly associated with support from the US, the EU, and the IMF, as well as with the conditions of this support. Where the speed of change has been disappointingly slow and expectations of reform efforts have not been met, people often blame the West for these apparent failures. This is particularly clear in Segment 4, where respondents referred to Ukrainian politicians pushing for the reforms as “agents of influence” and called reforms themselves “genocide”. But this tendency to blame Western partners for the perceived failure of reform efforts was also evident among Segments 2 and 3. Some participants also took the view that the failure of the reform process was somehow orchestrated in advance and engineered from the “outside”.

Healthcare reform, land reform, overhauling law enforcement, anti-corruption measures, tariffs, and changes to the banking system – these are precisely the structural changes included in the IMF’s programmes, and significant resources are indeed put into attempts to achieve them. The prevailing majority of participants, however, perceive little progress in these areas, leading some to feel that Western assistance has only created huge debts that will “need to be repaid by our children and grandchildren”.

# 3

## A weak sense of agency increases vulnerability to conspiracy thinking

In all segments bar Segment 1, there is scepticism about Ukraine's ability to independently tackle the challenges of war, economic crisis, and the reform process. As the World Values survey has shown, most Ukrainians prioritise "survival" values (economic and personal security) over "self-expression" (desire for participation in decision-making in economic and political life).<sup>35</sup> A lack of security and a weak sense of agency together drive a tendency to transfer responsibility to external actors: other individuals, authorities, external powers, and so on. Many participants in our focus groups exhibited a sense of detachment from political processes in the country, taking the view that only politicians can drive change. Such attitudes create fertile ground for the many conspiracy theories that shift the blame on to external actors, particularly the West.

This weak sense of agency is particularly prevalent within Segment 4, whose members feel politically marginalised and prevented from expressing their voice. President Zelensky's idea of referenda had a certain resonance, but now they feel disenchanted: "how can we have an influence if no referenda are held?", asked one Segment 4 participant. A curious combination of paternalistic and individualistic attitudes can also be observed, with many Segment 4 participants wanting to influence the country's political track but also waiting for someone else to provide the necessary tools.

Segment 4 participants also took the view that nothing happens organically, as everything is engineered. This mindset appears to go hand in hand with conspiratorial thinking. One Segment 4 participant felt that "all the problems [discussed in the public space] are invented". Yet this approach contains a certain paternalism: the idea that "someone is inventing these problems" complements and reinforces a weak sense of individual agency.

Along the same lines, our focus groups found that representatives of Segment 1, who have a strong sense of personal subjectivity, were much less susceptible to conspiracy theories about Ukraine being controlled by the West.<sup>36</sup>

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34. See:

- World Values Survey, Wave 7 (2017-2020). Available at: <https://bit.ly/2QsXrKP>
- World Values Survey Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map 2005-2020 (showing scale of survival vs self-expression values)

35. World Values Survey. Ukraine in World Values Survey 2020: Resume of the Analytical Report, November 2020, p.5 and p.79. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ufBj5i>

# 4

## Control or influence?

People who resist conspiratorial framings and have a stronger sense of agency can be better at drawing a distinction between “influence” and “control”, and they often describe the West’s influence on the reform process in Ukraine in positive terms, taking the view that is logical that in return for financial assistance, the West should impose certain conditions, to see that this assistance does indeed support reform efforts.

*The Americans are our strategic partners in the conflict against Russia, and we need to coordinate many issues with them*

Segment 1 participant

*Everybody who is helping Ukraine, in my opinion, is doing it under certain conditions that we have to follow. It’s appropriate management. Because who would give money away just like that? It would all be done under appropriate conditions.*

Segment 3 participant

People in all of our segments usually blamed Ukrainian politicians for messing up the reforms. Rather than seeing Western actors as necessarily nefarious, they tend to see them as naive for giving away public money, only to have it stolen. Perceived in this way, Western actors are at fault mainly for the failure to understand Ukrainian “reality”.

# 5

## People sift and cross-check different media sources, including some that they know to be unreliable.

Participants detailed their sifting and comparison processes, which generally involved moving systematically between different news sources to “orient” themselves. The media diet of each segment contains at least a couple of information sources that are owned either by pro-Russian politicians or by oligarchs with vested anti-West interests. Due to a generalised lack of trust in media of any kind, many participants across all of our segments went to great personal effort to verify content, purposefully consuming ideologically polarised sources in order to identify inconsistencies.

*You need to compare, search for the information that overlaps – then it’s probably at least partially true. It’s not like it used to be – when before, if the newspaper published it, then it was true.*

Respondent from Segment 3

*I heard some information, for example, on Channel 5, then I watched ZIK, then ICTV, then Inter. I then add up all that information, and there are parts that don’t match up. Those parts are a lie.*

Respondent from Segment 3

This cross-checking process is an interesting combination of critical thinking and vulnerability to malign informational influences. People increasingly get information from a variety of sources and form judgements themselves, but there is also room in this mix for propaganda, conspiracy theories, and disinformation.

Our focus groups also showed that people are increasingly getting their news from bloggers and the social media output of public figures. Respondents pointed to the fact that they often hear anti-Western narratives from Ukrainian politicians in parliament, from within President Zelensky’s ruling Servant of the People party, from the opposition, and from charismatic bloggers who post simple and engaging comments on topical events via social media. Since the internet is the second most important source of information across

the Ukrainian population<sup>37</sup>, anti-Western narratives can easily migrate from bloggers' YouTube channels and opinion leaders' Facebook pages to our participants' chats at the dinner table.

Amongst Segments 1, 2, and 3, many participants recognised that anti-Western narratives are driven at least in part by pro-Russian propaganda.

This awareness of the Kremlin's hand in driving anti-Western narratives is often linked to security concerns and concerns about Russian aggression. Some participants view assistance from the US, the EU, and NATO as the only way to protect Ukraine from a future escalation of Russian military action against Ukraine – even if they might not fully trust the West either, they see Russia as the main enemy.

36. USAID-Internews 2020 Media Consumption Survey (August 2020) p.7. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3rS9tKR>

*In the past, before 2014, I always wanted all the Slavs – Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine – to be together, the Slavic nations. Had the war not started, I would have stuck with this opinion. That's why now, because of the war, we're probably better off siding with the EU. These are strong countries, despite them also having their eyes set on grabbing a piece of Ukraine.*

Respondent from Segment 2

*A strong hand? Of course it's needed. A military one, from the US; an economic one, from Europe.*

Respondent from Segment 3

# Penetration of specific narratives

As well as asking general questions about attitudes towards the West and towards the reform process, we asked focus group participants specifically about the most prevalent narratives identified by our media monitoring and social media listening.

# 1

## “Ukraine is under external governance”

The majority of participants across all focus groups had encountered this statement before and were inclined to agree with it. However, there were many different interpretations and doubts about the meaning of “external governance”, including on who these external forces might be and whether this supposed external governance is necessarily a bad thing.



Photo: Party of Shariy. Text reads «Volodymyr Biden. New President of Ukraine.»

As expected, Segment 4 participants see Western assistance as something unambiguously harmful to Ukraine. They are convinced that “Ukraine is under the external governance of the US”, whose “main goal is to weaken Russia in the international arena”.

*The US needs Ukraine as a geopolitical testing ground in politics, to set us and everyone else against Russia. Everyone knows this, and it's not a secret for anyone, and every informational channel is aware of this.*

Respondent from Segment 4

On the other side of this coin are the Segment 1 participants, most of whom take a positive view of Western assistance. Insofar as they believe the statement about “external governance”, they see it as a good thing.

Segment 2 and Segment 3 participants displayed a more mixed set of views on “external governance”. Segment 3 tended to share the view that Ukraine is controlled by Western actors, but some in this group also felt that Russia and pro-Russian politicians exerted an influence over Ukraine’s internal affairs.

Some participants took the view that even if Western actors do have some influence, it is the Ukrainian government that ultimately makes the decisions by evaluating the risks and accepting certain conditions.

## 2 Ukraine is ruled by “Sorosites”

According to anti-Western actors, “evil and greedy Sorosites” do everything to please their master, the Hungarian-American financier and philanthropist George Soros, who is portrayed as “the almighty leader of the globalists”.

However, our focus groups showed that this narrative is gaining limited traction. Many participants had not heard of “Sorosites”, and some respondents understood “Sorosites” to mean pro-Russian politician Medvedchuk – an interesting example of the agent and the target of particular propaganda ultimately becoming mixed-up in the public mind through association. Some participants also recognised the “Sorosites” narrative as being driven by pro-Russian interests.

The only segment where the “Sorosites” narrative has gained strong momentum is among Segment 4, most of whom have both heard about and agree with the idea that Ukraine is governed by “Sorosites”. They define “Sorosites” as people who studied in the US and came back to Ukraine to help run politics in a way that benefits George Soros. The Soros foundation itself is viewed as an organisation that destabilises other countries in a bid to destroy or envelop them. Segment 4 respondents believe that “Sorosites” exercise their power of influence through their work in the Verkhovna Rada and also by appearing on biased TV channels.

*They [the Sorosites] are in the Verkhovna Rada, they help pass laws that are unacceptable. They conduct an information policy against our country on their TV channels. They disguise it as beneficial for the people, but then it turns out to be quite the opposite, against the people.*

Segment 4 participant

Among Segments 2 and 3, there was less knowledge of “Sorosites”, but participants were nonetheless inclined towards suspicion of this group, even if they were vague on how it was constituted.

*Let's just call it masonry, and things will become clear. Because as a separate phrase, people look at it and don't understand. But when you say Masonic conspiracy, everyone understands what's meant. Sorosites – they created Greenpeace, they see other people's oil rigs, they don't see their own, which are destroying the ocean. It is truly the organisation that dominates the economy today. Accordingly, they have a lot of influence, which extends as far as to our politicians, to Poroshenko, he's a member of this whole gang.*

Respondent from Segment 2

### **3 Soros and the IMF want to rob Ukraine of its land**

Generally, focus group participants did not believe that Soros and the IMF could take away Ukraine's land. On the one hand, many viewed this as simply impossible. On the other, however, even if this were possible, Ukrainian oligarchs would never let it happen.

While Soros and the IMF may not be considered a threat, broader suspicions do exist about “foreign buyers” having designs on Ukrainian land. These concerns can bleed into perceptions about Ukraine's ongoing land reform, which some participants fear could be disadvantageous for the country.

*Maybe it's not from Soros himself or not just from the IMF, but usually there is interest in our soil coming from foreign organisations. We have black soil here.*

Respondent from Segment 1

## 4 The US has established a network of biolabs in Ukraine

Not all participants had heard of this narrative. Those who were aware of this narrative said that they had learnt about it from pro-Russian TV channels (112, News One, ZIK). Some of those who had heard of this narrative dismissed it as pro-Russian propaganda.

In two segments (2 and 4), this statement is conflated with conspiracy theories about the origin of the coronavirus pandemic. Alarming allegations were made about the US carrying out trials of new vaccines on Ukrainians.

## 5 The European Union forced Ukraine to sign an unfavourable Association Agreement

Despite the fact that most participants do not doubt Ukraine's chosen path of EU integration, some feel that the obligations implied by EU membership might conflict with the country's interests. Participants frequently repeat the false claim that Russia is the largest market for Ukrainian exports.

*They constantly say that we have lost trade with Russia. We lost a lot, I don't remember how much in numbers, but we lost crazy money. What we gained with the European Union does not even come close to what we lost.*

Respondent from Segment 2

Participants said that they had heard these claims on the channels 1+1, ZIK, and 112, as well as in statements from pro-Russian politicians.

Some participants think that this information is most likely manipulated by pro-Russian interests, while others believe and support these claims.

# 6

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The focus groups showed that respondents are familiar with many of the most prevalent ideas promoted by anti-Western (dis)information campaigns. These narratives find an echo in Ukrainian society, particularly within segments that have a weak sense of agency at the individual, community, and national levels.

The degree of internalisation of anti-Western narratives varies according to the characteristics of different segments of society. But the core narrative – i.e. that Ukraine is subject to “external governance” – finds a strong echo across the board, especially in Segment 4, and partially in Segments 2 and 3.

Some narratives are based on healthy scepticism of multinational institutions. But deeper anti-Western narratives also find fertile ground in attitudes that much research has shown are common in Ukraine: a weak sense of national agency, a focus on survival values, and a generalised mistrust of others.

The efficiency of the anti-Western information campaign has not translated into total scepticism about Ukraine’s integration with the EU. Many people still see Europe as a model and reference point, not to mention much less of a threat than Russia. However, present trends suggest that Euroscepticism could increase in Ukrainian society, leading to a wider questioning of the country’s pro-European direction. We can expect these tensions to heighten thanks to information wars around the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines. Pro-Russian propaganda will likely claim that Ukraine has been abandoned by the EU in particular and the West in general. It will also seek to sow doubts about Western vaccines while simultaneously lauding Russia’s Sputnik vaccine for geopolitical gain.

The anti-Western (dis)information campaign involves not only the Kremlin and Kremlin-aligned media but also Ukrainian politicians and vested business interests. The narratives that it presents are all-pervasive, and they can circumvent sanctions on Russian or other media with ease. Tackling them will require systematic application of communication- and policy-based counter-measures by Ukraine's government, civil society, and media. To be successful, this communication strategy needs to address the underlying values and worldviews exploited by conspiracy theories and disinformation.

**The aims of this strategy include:**

## **1** Connecting Ukrainians' Search for Individual Survival with Issues of National Security and the Benefits of International Alliances

As the World Values Survey indicates and our focus groups confirm, many Ukrainians have a "survivalist" mentality. This kind of thinking is deep-seated, having been formed by decades of harrowing history, from the Holodomor and Chernobyl to the bitter experience of the 1990s, where most people had to adapt and improvise in order to survive, relying only on their closest friends and family. While the difficult experiences that engendered this "survivalist" mentality have made Ukrainians tough and resourceful, they have also fostered a zero-sum worldview which can easily tip into conspiratorial thinking.

Communications, education, and media strategies need to explore both the pros and the cons of this "survivalist" mentality. The well-understood concept of "self-survival" ("samovyzhivanie") can be built upon and expanded, whereas Ukrainians' current sense of insecurity can be turned into an individual and collective asset by engaging Ukrainians in a conversation about how national cohesion and international integration can strengthen security and wellbeing.

## 2 Tackling the Root Causes of Conspiratorial Thinking

This research concurs with other research carried out around the world in making a link between conspiracy thinking and a weak sense of agency.<sup>38</sup> This underlying feeling needs to be tackled in a systemic way, as a focus on specific conspiratorial narratives will always be insufficient. We need to promote and fund sustained research into how media, government, and other institutions can increase trust and foster a sense of empowerment in society.

However, this sense of individual agency must also connect with collective and national agency. Even among segments of Ukrainian society who do feel that they have control over their own lives, this sense of agency does not necessarily translate into their feelings about their country, as many do not consider Ukraine to be a fully capable or independent actor.

## 3 From Conspiratorial Fears to Evidence-Based Debate

Many of the conspiratorial narratives we analysed were based in perfectly legitimate concerns about the role of international institutions such as the EU and IMF. Instead of dismissing such concerns as “disinformation”, it is necessary to develop a robust and informed debate about these issues. Conspiratorial narratives and disinformation need to be crowded out by a full, free, and fair discussion in town hall-style debates, educational projects, and the media.

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<sup>38</sup> For example:

- Marchlewska, Marta et al. Addicted to answers: Need for cognitive closure and the endorsement of conspiracy beliefs. (May 2017) Available at: <https://bit.ly/3cUjtB>
- Kossowska, M. and Bukowski, M. Motivated roots of conspiracies: The role of certainty and control motives in conspiracy thinking. In: Bilewicz M., Cichocka A. and Soral W., ed., *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories*. East Sussex: Routledge (2015). Pp. 145–161.

# Specific recommendations for different sectors:

## Media and Civil Society Organisations

Media and civil society need to foster a more nuanced public understanding and debate around Ukraine's relationship with "the West". An evidence-based and critical debate about IMF loans, for example, would be entirely normal within a healthy democracy. Many focus group participants admitted to being unclear about what international institutions did. Conspiratorial thinking is just one position on a spectrum that includes healthy scepticism, and Ukrainian media can also help to shift the needle towards the sceptical end and away from conspiratorial worldviews.

At a more structural level, the media need to create editorial formats, framings, and engagement strategies that increase trust and empower audiences. Much research has demonstrated that the media tend to project a "mean world" full of dark conspiracies, thereby increasing people's sense of helplessness.<sup>39</sup> To address the underlying issues explored in our research, a variety of novel strategies need to be implemented.

- **Increase audience participation in editorial strategies and transform media to serve the community**

In line with pioneering efforts such as "Hearken",<sup>40</sup> citizens can become part of the editorial and agenda-setting process. This can be achieved by welcoming readers and viewers into newsrooms for planning sessions and discussions; engaging audiences in content production through polling; crowdsourcing evidence; engaging dedicated producers/teams to manage audience communities; working with user-generated content; and organising town hall discussions. Such activities can help to build trust, agency, and participation, as well as cultivating teams of what the Reuters Institute has called "disinformation warriors".<sup>41</sup>

39 See the documentary film with Professor George Gerbner, "The Mean World Syndrome", available at: <https://bit.ly/3sH5QIQ>

40 For an example of Hearken's work, see "Introducing Engagement Efforts To Your Newsroom": <https://bit.ly/3cWKgcw>

41 Skippage, Rebecca. The role of public service media in the fight against disinformation (December 2020) p. 6. Available at: <https://bit.ly/314MS2t>

A more socially driven vision of media sees it *“as an action-oriented service built on relationships and collaborations, rather than as primarily content or a product. Social journalism can build trust through relationships, immersion, reciprocity, and consistency, as well as a commitment to authenticity, values-based practice, and to working for social benefit rather than private profit”*.

This is especially important in Ukraine, where many people feel abandoned by a state that they already distrust. Civil society institutions, however, retain a high degree of trust among the public, suggesting that fusing media work with civil society activities could prove beneficial. In essence, media need to take on a role more akin to that of civil society groups, which aim to serve and protect their communities. Such innovations are particularly easy at the level of local media.

However, simply focusing on local news is not enough. It is important to demystify global politics so that major issues cannot become shrouded in a fog of conspiratorial speculation. Media content about national issues in Ukraine – including those from recent history – should strive to explain the real reasons behind momentous events like economic crises rather than allowing them to be explained through conspiratorial frames.

- **Develop constructive or solutions-based news**

Practise solution journalism to show examples of agency and solidarity. Solutions to local and national problems can be drawn from the experiences of a neighbouring community or from abroad. Focus not only on problems but also on ways to solve them, relaying relatable international examples of success.

- **Compete on Telegram and YouTube**

Our analysis shows that Telegram, Facebook, and YouTube are spaces where conspiratorial narratives are pushed and avidly consumed. Quality media need to learn how to compete on these platforms.

- **“Public service” news aggregators**

How can technology become a friend rather than a foe in people’s quest to understand the world? Is there a way to develop algorithms for news aggregators that would encourage access to balanced, fact-based discourse, promoting a broad range of sources, healthy scepticism, and debate while also combating conspiratorial narratives? Media literacy needs to move beyond training sessions and towards integration with technology so that it can become part of the way people explore the information environment in their daily practice.

## International Partners in Ukraine

- **Reforms should equal security**

Together with the Ukrainian government, the international community needs to explain that reforms and international integration can strengthen people's security and survival. Too often reforms come with promises of future benefits but only pain and instability in the short term.

- **Personalities not brands**

There is a need for high-profile "public advocates" who can systematically explain the position of Western partners to Ukrainians. As this research has shown, personalities garner greater trust and popularity than brands do. This kind of job was done by Pat Cox and Aleksander Kwaśniewski during the lead-up to the signing of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU in 2012-2013. The lack of public figures advocating for international programmes and institutions today allows disinformation to build up a myth of the "collective West" centred on the figure of George Soros.

- **Reframe the metaphors**

International actors engaging with Ukraine should examine the metaphors through which they are perceived by local people. The IMF, for example, is seen through the prism of a predatory bank in the Ukraine of the 1990s. The EU, meanwhile, is sometimes compared to a more coercive but more familiar international bloc: the USSR. Are there other metaphors that would make sense to Ukrainians while also providing a more accurate depiction of the nature and role of these institutions?

With a view to fostering a stronger sense of agency, it could also be beneficial to develop communications that foreground Ukraine's role in international projects and trade, showing that Ukraine has something to offer rather than being a passive recipient of aid from the international community.

## Ukrainian Authorities

- **Online civic participation in political decision-making**

The Ukrainian government needs to tackle the root causes of conspiratorial thinking by improving people's sense of agency. This can be addressed in part through greater online civic participation in government, which the current administration has already pledged to deliver, by way of creating "government in a smartphone". Ukraine's excellent IT sector can help to make this happen, giving citizens the chance to take part in everything from municipal budgeting to collectively resolving public health crises through crowd-sourcing.

Ukraine has all the right ingredients to become a world leader in civic digital participation in the democratic process. Aside from its excellent IT industry, Ukraine has a highly trusted civic sector that can mediate between government and society, safeguarding the transparency of digital participation initiatives. There is also genuine enthusiasm for decentralisation and more effective local government. Inspiration can be drawn from countries like Estonia and Taiwan, both leaders in online civic participation. It is no accident that these countries have been at the forefront of building digital societies, as Russia and China respectively do their best to exploit social fissures in both of these countries. Building social resilience and cohesion through initiatives like Pol.is, the digital democracy platform used in Taiwan<sup>42</sup>, which allow the public to set the agenda and reach consensus on new laws, is an effective means of resisting long-term hybrid threats like disinformation.

- **What does it mean to be "pro-European"?**

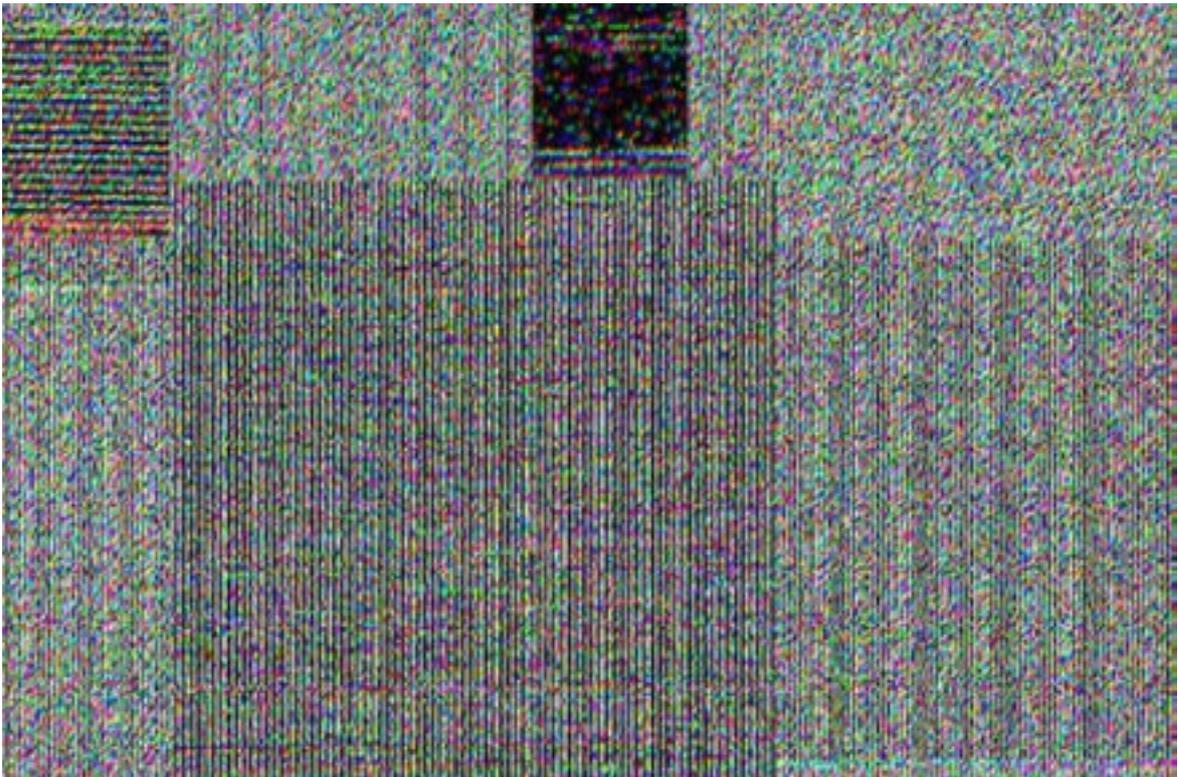
On the one hand, scepticism regarding the benefits of EU integration is very high in Ukraine. Yet on the other, a striking 80% of Ukrainians believe that the country should pursue closer ties with the EU. These apparently contradictory attitudes merit further investigation. What do Ukrainians want and expect from "European integration"? How frail is this aspiration? And how could it be vulnerable to future disinformation campaigns?

In 2021, Ukraine and the European Union will start talks about updating the Association Agreement with the EU. This creates a window of opportunity for the launch of an information campaign on the first five years of the economic and political parts of the Agreement. Not only would this allow the benefits the Agreement to be properly explained to the Ukrainian people, it would also give interested parties (such as the business community) the opportunity to engage with the review process. The last time this kind of campaign was carried out in Ukraine was in 2013-2014. More recently, information activities designed to popularise the Agreement have fizzled out, ceding this space to sources of disinformation.

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<sup>42</sup> See MIT Technology Review's article on how the digital democracy platform Pol.is has been used in Taiwan, available here: <https://bit.ly/39wvtEO>

**Since it has become more difficult to sell a positive image of Russia, Kremlin-backed and pro-Kremlin propaganda activities in other countries can now also focus more on spreading anti-Western attitudes. There is an urgent need to carry out comparative research in countries like Georgia, Belarus and Moldova, for example, in order to further develop best practices and identify effective counter-narratives. More broadly still, we need sustained international research into how conspiracy propaganda works and what we can do to fight it effectively.**





## **Why Conspiratorial Propaganda Works and What We Can Do About It:** Audience Vulnerability and Resistance to Anti-Western, pro-Kremlin Disinformation in Ukraine

**MAY 2021**



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