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## Ukraine- Digital Information Environment Report 15 – 28 Nov 2022

### Key Findings

- Kremlin Press Secretary, Dmytro Peskov, stated that Russia was targeting infrastructure while claiming that the lack of heat and light in many areas of Ukraine was a result of Kyiv's refusal to negotiate.
- Pro-Russian media outlets appear to be leveraging videos of what appear to be war-crimes allegedly committed by Ukrainian Forces in a likely effort to portray these alleged actions as common within Ukrainian Forces.
- Ukraine's SBU has searched over 350 churches affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate for subversive behaviour and spreading Russian propaganda.
- Russian grey media continues to push messages that military aid to Ukraine from the West is destined to end up in the hands of criminals and terrorists because of corruption in Ukraine. It is now linking the bankrupt cryptocurrency exchange firm FTX to the corruption.
- An article by Global Research, provides commentary on the addition of Guy Boulianne, a Quebec based blogger, to the controversial Myrotvorets, list of enemies of Ukraine.

### Purpose

This report presents summary findings from research and analysis on information manipulation, including disinformation, related to the Russian war in Ukraine during the 15 - 28 Nov reporting period. This series of reports is designed to establish a baseline understanding of online activity, identify emerging narratives, and facilitate early warning for evolving malign influence and information manipulation conducted by Russia.

### Methodology

This report leverages a combination of in-house and off-the-shelf tools to examine publicly available digital platforms and websites. [RRM Canada](#) analyzed the content of a network of approximately 20 websites that partner reporting has assessed as linked to Russian intelligence services or that have otherwise been identified as generally promoting Russian narratives.<sup>1</sup>

RRM Canada's methodology builds on past experience, assessing a set of indicators associated with foreign interference (FI), including: circulation of false, misleading, and polarizing narratives; alignment of narratives with the objectives of hostile state actors; or highly suspicious and abnormal shifts in volume and scope of engagement on a given topic accompanied by signs of coordination and inauthenticity. All RRM Canada reporting is subject to an [ethical and methodological framework](#). Government and non-government partners also inform RRM Canada's reporting.

<sup>1</sup> The bulk of these websites have been outlined in the US Global Engagement Center's *Pillars of Russian Disinformation* report as well as other public reporting. See here for more: <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>

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## Findings

This round of RRM Canada's reporting reflects monitoring of traditional media outlets and Telegram channels focusing on local regions throughout Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> Reporting covers 15 - 28 Nov 2022.

### Ukraine Information Environment

Russia continued to attack civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, particularly energy infrastructure in what is likely part of an effort to demoralize the Ukrainian population and decrease its will to fight.<sup>3</sup> 15 and 23 Nov saw two of the largest daily missile barrages of the entire conflict. On 17 Nov, Kremlin Press Secretary, Dmytro Peskov, admitted that Russia was targeting infrastructure but claimed that the lack of heat and light in many areas of Ukraine was a result of Kyiv's refusal to negotiate.<sup>4</sup> Further, they are damaging communications equipment, making it challenging for Ukrainians to communicate through wired or wireless networks. However, as of Nov, Ukraine's Ministry of Digital Transformation announced that upward of 73% of its mobile network has been put back online following a large scale blackout resulting from Russian infrastructure attacks.<sup>5</sup> Currently, the most affected Ukrainian controlled regions are Kherson, Kharkiv, Kirovohrad, Poltava and Mykolaiv while communications also remain difficult in Russian occupied Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia.

Ukrainian media has been largely unable to broadcast in the occupied territories, often due to damage or communications infrastructure being seized by Russian forces.<sup>6</sup> In many cases, pro-Russian news and radio programming had replaced Ukrainian media in occupied areas. Local news reports that following the liberation of Kharkiv, it took around three weeks to restore communications infrastructure in the area. More recently however, Russian attacks on critical infrastructure, especially attacks disrupting electric and broadcast infrastructure, may cause further delays in renewing the establishment of local media in the liberated territories even as independent journalists may once again start covering these areas.

Ukraine Ministry of Internal Affairs has distributed letters for residents in the recently liberated territories of Ukraine<sup>7</sup> providing instructions on what to do if they have witnessed or been victim of a war crime, how to avoid telephone scammers, how to restore a lost passport, how to access psychological services and who to call to find information on missing persons.<sup>8</sup>

### Russian Information Operations in Ukraine

Local media monitors report that a notable theme on Russian Telegram channels is the attempt to "illuminate the cruelty of Ukrainian soldiers and the Zelensky regime." This includes two videos posted on Telegram on 18 Nov that insinuate Ukrainian soldiers shot Russian POWs.<sup>9</sup> The videos were shared by the Russian Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, RIA Novosti state news agency and former President Dmitry Medvedev on

<sup>2</sup> Most of the local news outlets monitored here are drawn from a list of local media produced by the Ukrainian Institute of Mass Information, an independent organization established in 1995 and partner of Reporters Without Borders. Telegram monitoring was drawn from a local contractor produced database of Telegram channels that includes 8 local channels from Chernihiv, 60 from Kharkiv, 7 from Sumy, 29 from Dnipro, 8 from Mariupol, 9 from Kramatorsk, 9 from Sloviansk, 2 from Severodonetsk, 23 from Zaporizhzhia, 16 from Mykolaiv, 8 from Kherson, 39 from Odesa, and extra category of Donbas with 28 channels.

<sup>3</sup> See previous RRM Canada reporting.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/11/17/7376792/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.epravda.com.ua/news/2022/11/26/694295/>

<sup>6</sup> (<https://detector.media/production/article/203350/2022-10-03-koly-i-yak-na-zvillnenu-kharkivshchynu-povernutsya-media/>)

<sup>7</sup> <https://mvs.gov.ua/uk/news/viiskovosluzbovci-nacgvardiyyi-prodovzuiut-rozpoisluudzennia-informaciinogo-visnika-mvs>

<sup>8</sup> <https://detector.media/rospas/article/205225/2022-11-22-om-vipustilo-informatsiynyy-viryk-dlya-zluchnykh-teritoriy/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://t.me/rybar/41277>

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Telegram. Russian outlets appear to be leveraging these videos in order to allege that these actions are common among Ukrainian forces. Answering calls for an investigation, including from the United Nation's Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration, Olga Stefanishyna said that an inquiry would be launched.<sup>10</sup> While attending the recent Halifax International Security Forum, Stefanishyna noted that: Ukraine denounces abuses and war crimes; its soldiers are under orders to capture as many prisoners as possible in order to negotiate future prisoner exchanges; and, that the videos shared by Russian sources "are very unlikely to show what Russia claims to have taken place."

Between 21-27 Nov, Ukrainian SBU searched more than 350 churches affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>11</sup> The SBU claims to have found identification cards dating back to the USSR, cash in Hryvnias, Dollars and Roubles, as well as propaganda promoting the 'Russian World'. The SBU accuses these churches of spreading this propaganda to their congregations and in their children's education programs. Patriarch Kirill, leader of the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate, has been supportive of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Vladimir Putin sees the church as a key component of Russian society and identity of the broader Russian World. The Kremlin responded to the search by claiming that Ukraine has been at war with the Russian Orthodox Church for a long time.

Russian Grey Media Websites<sup>12</sup>

RRM Canada monitors articles that mention Ukraine-related terms<sup>13</sup> on websites<sup>14</sup> partner reporting has assessed to be linked to Russian intelligence services or is otherwise generally aligned with Kremlin narratives. Between 15 – 28 Nov, this network of websites produced 2,388 unique articles, 184 (8%) of which related to Ukraine, up 11% since the last reporting period.

31 articles received over 10 shares this reporting period. The most highly shared article was from The Grey Zone (4,957 shares), which claimed that Italian police arrested 5 members of a neo-Nazi organization called the Order of Hagal. The article claimed the organization established "operational ties" to the Azov Battalion and that they were stockpiling weapons in order to conduct terrorist attacks on civilian and police targets in Italy. They claimed there is a sixth member of the group who is wanted by police but is currently fighting with the Azov Battalion in Ukraine. The article also claims that the members host seminars on holocaust denial, and have traveled to Israel to receive martial arts and weapons training.

The key narratives observed during this reporting period were:

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/ukraine-to-investigate-video-of-alleged-shooting-of-russian-war-prisoners/2746102>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-63726540>

<sup>12</sup> Grey media is a term used to describe unattributed or falsely attributed media. In this case, we refer to websites not overtly tied to the Russian state but closely aligned with Russian state narratives. The term has been popularized by various open-source researchers and academics. See here for another use of the term in the context of websites thought to be linked to the Kremlin or Russian intelligence services:

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/nov/20/russian-trolls-stoking-anti-islamic-sentiment-in-australia-experts-warn>

<sup>13</sup> The Ukraine-related terms used to search for articles this week were: Azov Battalion, Azov Battalion's National Corps, Crimea, Crimee, Kyiv, Kiev, Ukraine, Ucraina, Ukrainian government, National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, Kharkiv, Lviv, Luhansk, LPR, Mariupol, Sumy, Ukrainian army, Yanukovich, Odesa, Donetsk, DPR, Donbass, Zelensky, Kramatorsk, Lysychansk, Snake Island, Crimean Bridge, Kherson, Transnistria, Bayraktar, Popsanya, DRR Army, Zaporizhzhia, Severodonetsk, Kupiansk and Lyman.

<sup>14</sup> Websites monitored: mondialisation.ca, infobrics.org, news-front.info, thegrayzone, veteranstoday.com, rbth.com, katehon.com, strategika51.com, 21stcenturywire.com, fort-russ.com, MoonOfAlabama.org, globalizacion.ca, journal-neo.org, asia-pacificresearch.com, natoexit.it, theduran.com, strategic-culture.org, mitpressnews.com, counterpunch.com, globalresearch.ca, geopolitica.ru, southfront.org

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**Corruption around American military aid to Ukraine.** In this reporting period there were 10 articles, which were shared 779 times alleging different types of corruption relating to US aid to Ukraine. Some of the articles allege that the American military aid to Ukraine was diverted to investments in the recently bankrupted cryptocurrency exchange firm, FTX. It mentions that the CEO of FTX, Sam Bankman, donated tens of millions of dollars to Democratic Party candidates for the US midterm elections, and that he was the second largest donor to George Soros.<sup>15</sup> One article claims that private investors' money in FTX was used to fund the West's proxy war in Ukraine. Other articles suggest that the US Congress has "opened the floodgates for war profiteers" and claim that the Americans have funded an Anthrax laboratory in eastern Ukraine.

**A Canadian journalist has been added to Ukraine's 'kill list'.** An article by Global Research,<sup>16</sup> which was shared 20 times, provides commentary on the addition of Guy Boulianne, a Quebec based blogger, to the Ukrainian Non-Government Organization, Myrotvorets, list of enemies of Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> The article claims that "the Myrotvorets list is a list developed by fascist Ukrainians to have anyone who stands in the way of their pursuit of an ethnically pure state killed" The article describes the threat to Boulianne by highlighting that there are over 1.3 million people of Ukrainian origin living in Canada, including Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland. The article also lists Canadian organizations with links to both DPM Freeland and Ukrainian fascist organizations.

**Missile strike in Poland.** There were nine articles mentioning the missile that struck Przewodow, shared a total of 169 times. Moon of Alabama published the article with 167 of those shares, entitled "Another Ukrainian Missile Stunt". The article attempts to portray the incident as a Ukrainian false flag operation intended to trigger World War III. It mentions the downing of MH17 which it claims was the first of a series of Anglo-Ukrainian false flag operations. Other articles highlight Russia's denial, and the conflicting reports about the origins of the missile. The conflicting reports focused on the statements of President Zelensky and prominent western commentators who were quick to blame Russia for the incident.

## Next Steps

RRM Canada will continue to expand our monitoring of the digital information environment as it relates to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.

<sup>15</sup> George Soros has been the focus of a number of conspiracy theories, often centering on his supposed leadership of a secret cabal that includes Jewish people as well as Freemasons and the Illuminati. For more see here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Soros\\_conspiracy\\_theories](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Soros_conspiracy_theories)

<sup>16</sup> While RRM Canada has no evidence that Global Research is directly linked to the Kremlin or any other state actor; however, NATO's StratCom CoE and numerous academics, researchers and think-tanks have noted the outlets alignment with Kremlin narratives. The US Global Engagement Center describes the outlet as "a Canadian website that has become deeply enmeshed in Russia's broader disinformation and propaganda ecosystem. Its large roster of fringe authors and conspiracy theorists serves as a talent pool for Russian and Chinese websites. Its publications also provide a Western voice that other elements of the ecosystem can leverage to their advantage."

<sup>17</sup> Myrotvorets is a controversial database of individuals its authors consider to be "enemies of Ukraine". The database is publicly accessible and often "doxes" individuals, containing private information, such as home addresses of individuals listed. The site has seen repeated requests from the UN, G7 ambassadors, the EU and human rights groups to close it down. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myrotvorets>

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