SPOTLIGHT

JUNE 2022

UKRAINE

10 YEARS OF RAN

CONTRIBUTORS

Colin P CLARKE

Naureen C. FINK

Kacper REKAWEK

Colin PARRY

Marco RICORDA

Staszek CZERCZAK

Maria Giovanna SESSA

James HANN

Jacek PURSKI

Arije ANTINORI

EDITORIAL

THERE is growing concern among policy makers and practitioners alike about the potential security impact of the war in Ukraine on the EU and its Member States. With the propagation of mis- and disinformation about the war, the large-scale migration of refugees to neighbouring countries, the flow of 'foreign volunteers' to Ukraine to fight on both sides and a growing humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, many experts believe it is giving new opportunities for extremists and terrorists to radicalise and recruit.

In this Spotlight, leading experts analysing the conflict and practitioners from the RAN network, share their insights about first-hand experiences of the war and its potential consequences for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) across Europe. This Spotlight includes content on community sentiments towards the war, emerging narratives around migration and refugees, evolving disinformation narratives and the foreign volunteer challenge.

While there are no RAN Practitioners activities solely focused on the Ukraine war, the topic will be addressed in a number of Working Group meetings, webinars and other activities in the coming months of 2022. As an emerging topic, we welcome our readers to share any articles, papers, projects and programmes with us so that they might inform future activity.

As always, we want to hear from you! If you would like to contribute to future editions of Spotlight, or if you have ideas for an article, interview or feature, please get in touch with the RAN Practitioners communications team at **ran@radaradvies.nl**

The RAN Practitioners Staff

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

SPOTLIGHT
CONTENTS

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
THE CONSEQUENCES OF WAR

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

09—08

ARTICLE:
The consequences of war

Colin P. CLARKE and Naureen C. FINK

RUSSIA'S unprovoked invasion of Ukraine has already had disastrous consequences. But the death and destruction the world has witnessed is only the beginning. Inevitably, there will be medium and long-term consequences, some with significant implications beyond the duration of the conflict itself.

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
THE CONSEQUENCES OF WAR

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

From the return of foreign volunteers and mercenaries to their countries of origin, to dealing with the fallout from refugees and internally displaced persons, to supporting victims and survivors of sexual violence and atrocities there are major human security issues that will need to be addressed. Layered on top of these issues is the threat posed by disinformation, ubiquitous in modern conflict and often blending into legitimate media coverage. The longer the conflict draws on, the more likely it will generate grievances and conditions that can give rise to violent extremism, or create enabling environments for violent extremist groups to exploit, either in the conflict zone or in countries and communities observing developments. Experiences of combat and conflict can also affect motivations and ideological beliefs, and it is possible individuals experience a shift in motivations or ideology depending on developments during the war. Taken together, this portends an array of difficult challenges for efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE).

It remains important to note the grievances and narratives surrounding the conflict, as well as the actions of a bevy of violent non-state actors actively attempting to exploit the conflict for their own benefit. The international community should seek to draw on lessons learned from previous P/CVE engagement and consider if and how the good practices developed to deal with similar grievances and drivers might apply in this context. The international community should also consider what not to do, mindful of the risk of conflating conflict dynamics and actions legitimised in conflict with a counter terrorism paradigm.

As the conflict in Ukraine is still in relatively early stages, it is difficult ascertain whether and what forms of violent extremism may emerge from it. However, the mix of state and nonstate actors and the evolution of the conflict has already generated strong empathy and sympathy with and for Ukraine, reflected in the significant flows of refugees and volunteer fighters in the

first few weeks. There remains wide variation of the types of individuals traveling to fight in Ukraine — some are experienced combat veterans, but many are civilians with little or no training or even less awareness of the laws of war to guide their conduct. In general, when foreign volunteers enter a conflict, it tends to prolong the conflict and also make it more lethal. Those fighting in Ukraine are going to witness and potentially experience, first-hand, the horrors of the Russian way of war and have to navigate some of the legal and policy challenges where counter terrorism laws and frameworks may overlap with international humanitarian law. Most returnees will seek to head home and resume life as normal, many others will return with myriad ailments and grievances, including mental health challenges and post-traumatic stress disorder. Their experiences may also translate into dissatisfaction with the actions of their own governments, or hardened views against their adversaries and communities associated with them. Russia may also seek to foment unrest and violence by continuing to promote political polarisation, disinformation and violent right wing extremist groups in other countries to support their war aims.

Unlike the conflict in Syria, states cannot afford to wait until the conflict drags on for months or years before they begin preparing to deal with the P/CVE challenges that will result. Governments need to begin putting out clear guidelines and information regarding ways that volunteers can sign up for officially established organisations and proactively offer guidance of how to make a positive contribution through their own communities and in their own countries without having to travel abroad. Should communities note increased grievances and mobilisation with regard to issues relating to Ukraine, they should draw on related P/CVE initiatives dealing with individual grievances but also offering constructive alternative solutions and positive channels of engagement.

If predictions of a long and brutal battle are correct, the outflow of volunteers may continue to expand and evolve, creating and shaping new narratives. States need to start thinking now about the needs and risks to them and their citizens before they're blindsided. By now, there is a corpus of lessons learned and best practices that the international community can draw upon to forge a path ahead in anticipation for what happens next in Ukraine.

Colin P. Clarke is a Senior Research Fellow, and Naureen C. Fink the Executive Director, at The Soufan Center in the US, an independent non-profit organisation offering research, analysis, and strategic dialogue on global security challenges and foreign policy issues, with a particular focus on counter terrorism, violent extremism, armed conflict, and the rule of law.

"**Unlike the conflict in Syria, states cannot afford to wait until the conflict drags on for months or years before they begin preparing to deal with the P/CVE challenges that will result. Governments need to begin putting out clear guidelines and information regarding ways that volunteers can sign up for officially established organisations and proactively offer guidance of how to make a positive contribution through their own communities and in their own countries without having to travel abroad.**"

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

INTERVIEW
THE FOREIGN VOLUNTEER CHALLENGE

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

014—015

Interview:
The foreign volunteer challenge...

**Kacper
REKAWEK**

With growing concern among EU Member States about those who have travelled to fight in Ukraine, we spoke with Kacper Rekawek, Head of Defence and Security Programme, GLOBSEC Policy Institute in Bratislava, to gather his thoughts about the nature and scale of the phenomenon and what threat they might pose.

Can you characterise who is traveling to Ukraine?
You have to differentiate between the two mobilisations. The first was in 2014, at the beginning of the war. And this is probably the one that we should really be looking at and we probably haven't. This is where you have the genuine foreign volunteers, including extremists, people joining on both sides of the conflict.

On the Ukrainian side you had foreign volunteers joining the volunteer battalions, which started off as kind of crowd-sourced bottom-up organised forces, which were eventually and effectively integrated into the Ukrainian military and the National Guard. On the pro-Russian side you had foreign volunteers joining so-called militias, popular militias, which although are dressed up to be bottom-up, have a hidden Russian hand organising them.

Now fast forward eight years later, what you get is essentially concerned citizens of the world, and this is a quote from one of the recruiters who's saying, everybody who is liberal, conservative, Christian, democratic, socialist, should fight, because the people of Ukraine are suffering. As a result the mobilisation is 99 per cent on the Ukraine side.

On the Russian side, what you mostly see is guys who stayed over since 2014. There is no logistical capacity to bring in new people. It's really a logistical nightmare – you have to get yourself to Belgrade and then fly over to Russia. You have to have cash. There are a lot of rumours about bringing in Syrians and Central Africans but there is a lot of smoke and relatively little fire.

Where are these rumours coming from and are any of them true?
It's an attempt by Russia to say we also have foreign friends. Yes there are videos from Syria with people bumping fists and waving Russian flights. But this propaganda. Even if some experts see such convergence as a fascinating research topic.

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

INTERVIEW
THE FOREIGN VOLUNTEER CHALLENGE

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

But the big question is, does Russia have the money to bring people from Syria to Ukraine. That's the issue. The second issue is the logistics. How will you fly them in? Flying out of Russia is now pretty complicated. And the last question we need to ask ourselves is the extent to which these guys would be of value as a fighting force. Someone wrote on Twitter, you get what you pay for. These are not crack troops.

If there are a shortage of troops, particularly the longer the war goes on and if Russian declares a total war, then there is the possibility of Russia dragging people into the conflict from all sorts of places, such as Syria and Belarus. There are moves to do that but we haven't seen the numbers, we haven't seen them on the front lines.

Are these people members of the Syrian armed forces or extremist groups?
The main thing is that Russia conducts its warfare in a chaotic manner. Much of what they do is sub-state. So you don't know who these guys are. Are they volunteers? Are they fighters? Are they the regular army? Russia's been doing that for hundreds of years. But whoever they are, we can't pretend that they're some kind of viable major fighting force with huge experience. They wouldn't stand a chance against the Ukrainian army, which is mechanised and which has seen a lot of fighting.

But given the attrition of the war, particularly surrounding the most prolonged battles like Mariupol or around Donbas, Russia could rely on troops who are expendable, such as the TikTok warriors from Chechnya, as they're being called, troops from the Donetsk People's Republic or Lugansk People's Republic. So they might invite others to join because that would mean another 20-40,000 cannon fodder.

What's the legitimacy of these 'foreign volunteers' traveling to Ukraine to fight in the war?
Volunteering is not illegal in most of the countries of the EU, but in most countries you cannot be a foreign terrorist fighter. But these individuals are traveling to join the territorial defence of Ukraine.

For a decade plus we've been focusing on just one type of people going abroad, foreign terrorist fighters. Those returning from Ukraine after 2014, which was a smaller number, were more radical customers. Member States were in a bit of flux as to what to do. They would arrest these guys, then they would have to release them after 48 hours because they suddenly found out that they haven't done anything illegal. You cannot pin mercenary stuff on them. You cannot really pin terrorism on them. War crimes may be, but they didn't have the evidence.

What should we be doing in preparation for people's return?
There's a couple of things. One thing is something which I think Germany is already doing, which is they're trying to prevent extremist people from going. My advice would be to stop as many as you can. Secondly, I think the big thing would be to make life a bit more difficult for some of the organisations out there, who are recruiting and hosting them, to network and to travel to Europe, to the Schengen zone.

Thirdly, we have to think about what support we give to veterans, because that's what many of them are. They fought in the army, they are former military men. So we have to consider new approaches to dealing with them, approaches which aren't based on existing EXIT models. And we have to accept that with most of the returning volunteers they probably won't be interested at all.

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
COMMUNITY SENTIMENTS TOWARDS THE WAR

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

018—019

ARTICLE:
Community sentiments towards the war

Colin PARRY

EVENTS, both inside and outside of a Member State, such as the Ukraine war, can have a significant impact on domestic communities. Such events can affect the attitudes and behaviours of communities and individuals towards one another, giving new opportunities for violent extremist groups to radicalise and recruit.

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
COMMUNITY SENTIMENTS TOWARDS THE WAR

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

The military invasion of Ukraine by Russia has prompted a widescale public reaction across EU Member States in opposition to the invasion, with large numbers of groups and individuals showing solidarity with the people of Ukraine and the mobilisation of support for the humanitarian crisis.

However, several emerging themes are circulating designed to target young Muslims vulnerable to the suggestion that the conflict is an example of the West's hypocrisy, with regard to how they are treating this conflict compared to conflicts outside of Europe. These young people are already being exploited for potential recruitment purposes, especially those who could hold anti-NATO sentiments. The following memes are an example of this:

With news suggesting that President Putin is calling upon 'volunteers' from Syria to join Russian forces in the fight in Ukraine, there is now a very real and present danger from violent Islamist extremist influences and corresponding responses from violent right wing extremist groups.

With the proliferation of disinformation, misinformation, conspiracy theories and fake news, as well as polarising and radicalising extremist narratives, the Ukraine war has the potential to be exploited by groups from all communities who prey on vulnerable young people through the spread of their propaganda and recruitment narratives.

Colin Parry is the cofounder of The Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Peace Foundation in Manchester, which provides support to survivors of terrorism and delivers programmes to promote peace in schools and communities.

The proliferation of such propaganda, disinformation and recruitment material is increasingly deployed on encrypted channels and private messaging platforms which cannot be identified through normal quantitative research approaches or social media analysis tools alone. The impact of dis- or misinformation and violent extremist narratives is often only identified after it has already circulated through private messaging channels.

Given the potential impact of rapidly changing events on domestic communities, Member States should consider conducting their own qualitative research exercises that will determine the changing sentiment of young people in communities to the Ukraine war. This research exercise should ascertain two things: the nature and scale of dis- or misinformation and recruitment narratives which are being proliferated about the Ukraine crisis; and, the impact that such recruitment narratives and dis- or misinformation are having on young people from different communities.

By regularly testing the changing sentiment of young people, this exercise will serve as an 'early warning system' which will uncover any emerging grievances and issues of concern. In so doing, this exercise will equip policy makers and practitioners with even deeper insight into the attitudes of young people and become a regular barometer of the impact of information on them.

Becoming a regular 'sentiment test', such an approach could provide early signs of changes to wider community sentiment to the Ukraine war, point to emerging issues and add depth to the findings of online analysis in exposing the impact of dis- or misinformation and recruitment narratives on communities across the EU.

ARTICLE
**MIGRATION NARRATIVES AND THEIR GOVERNANCE:
ESSENTIAL TO UNDERSTAND FOR BETTER
COMMUNICATION**

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

022—023

Marco RICORDA

ARTICLE:
Migration narratives and their governance: Essential to understand for better communication

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
**MIGRATION NARRATIVES AND THEIR GOVERNANCE:
ESSENTIAL TO UNDERSTAND FOR BETTER
COMMUNICATION**

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

During his recent visit to Malta, Pope Francis spoke in favour of migrants and in particular, encouraged Europe's embrace of Ukrainian refugees fleeing war. Making very interesting comparisons with Saint Paul's shipwreck on the island in 60 A.D, in his visit at the Ħal Far's Peace Lab the Pontiff said "... we see another kind of shipwreck taking place: the shipwreck of civilisation, which threatens not only migrants but us all. How can we save ourselves from this shipwreck which risks sinking the ship of our civilisation? By conducting ourselves with kindness and humanity. By regarding people not merely as statistics... for what they really are: people, men and women, brothers and sisters, each with his or her own life story." In this powerful intervention, the Pope raises attention to a very important element of migration policy making: migration narratives, communication and related story-telling.

The massive humanitarian exodus from Ukraine has upended global expectations of how quickly European host communities can welcome people fleeing war. The number of Ukrainians who fled to Poland within the first two weeks of the invasion surpassed the number of Venezuelans received by Colombia over a five-year period. Despite the potentially destabilising pace and volume of arrivals from Ukraine, the policy response has been overwhelmingly supportive. So has the public response, with public opinion polling pointing to high support for Ukrainians across Europe. A fact that may be surprising to readers is that in Europe attitudes to immigration are not becoming more negative. Rather, they are notably stable and, in recent years, have become more positive. The recent outpouring support to welcome Ukrainian refugees in Europe seems to be a clear manifestation of these attitudes.

When talking about migration narratives it is possible to identify mainly three levels of governance, often unrelated and hardly communicating with each other: The international, national, and local level. The first one pertains to international organisations, important players in the design and implementation of

migration policy. International organisations, which operate at the intersection of nation-states, tend to reflect their vision on how cross-border or internal mobility should be managed. Their approach to narratives include diverse elements intertwining with each other, such as a positive appreciation of migration as a natural, human, historical phenomenon, the reference to universal principles, namely human rights, and an emphasis on the benefits of migration for both host societies and migrants. This realm though is also strongly influenced by the "silos effect" among the internal departments of international organisations, and most controversially "communication bubbles" where like-minded, international staff working in specific neighbourhoods of cities hosting international organisations (i.e. Brussels, Geneva, Washington) create narratives that are somewhat detached to the realities of the majority of citizens and seem unable to analyse, conceive or even acknowledge how alternative narratives develop.

The second level is that of states and national governments as central actors in the storytelling of migration and policy implementation. In this framework, in Europe, migration is mainly depicted as a challenge in response to which quick and practical solutions have to be put forward. The increased salience of migration in political discussions contributes to such emotional activation. And this is why state narratives tend to be securitarian and focused on irregular (uncontrolled) immigration, rather than migration as such.

What about the local level? Is it possible to scale-up local narratives, by giving them prominence at the international level? Local authorities and practitioners can actively contribute to reducing the gap between perceptions and reality. Cities, due to their proximity to citizens, are in a unique position to foster a pragmatic, evidence-based and rights-based debate on migration, which is imperative not only to raise awareness in local communities but also to adopt effective inclusion policies.

Many are the issues at stake when it comes to the impact of migration narratives on policy-making. One of these is

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
MIGRATION NARRATIVES AND THEIR GOVERNANCE:
ESSENTIAL TO UNDERSTAND FOR BETTER
COMMUNICATION

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

the problematic cleavage between these different levels of governance, which translates into a fragmented and multifaceted discourse. Specific attention should be given to this matter, in order to foster fruitful discussions among the different actors involved in the storytelling of migration.

The current Ukrainian refugee crisis has triggered a remarkable outpouring of support. In fact, the attitudes and tones towards Ukrainians fleeing the war appear to be somehow aligned, both at the international and at the national and local levels. Even media coverage seems to put across a different nuance, compared to the one which has been used to report on other refugee crisis over the last years. It is also true though that this does not necessarily mean that these attitudes will remain stable, since European hospitality may wear out over time, and tensions could arise. This is why promoting a solid understanding between the actors involved in the storytelling of migration, as well as developing a common knowledge about the diverse implications and effects of migration narratives on policy-making, must be encouraged and pursued at all levels of governance.

Marco Ricorda is the Communication Officer for the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) in Valletta.

"The current Ukrainian refugee crisis has triggered a remarkable outpouring of support. In fact, the attitudes and tones towards Ukrainians fleeing the war appear to be somehow aligned, both at the international and at the national and local levels. Even media coverage seems to put across a different nuance, compared to the one which has been used to report on other refugee crisis over the last years."

RAN SPOTLIGHT
POLARISATION

In a Spotlight publication published in April 2022, RAN practitioners and experts from outside of the network, shared their insights on the polarisation challenge facing EU Member States today, and some of their work in addressing it. The Spotlight included content on the impact of events such as the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenge posed by violent left wing and violent right wing extremist influencing efforts, and approaches to creating a share identity and building community resilience. You can read the Spotlight in full here.

SPOTLIGHT

APRIL 2022

POLARISATION

10 YEARS OF RAN

SPOTLIGHT
POLARISATION

ARTICLE
POLARISATION: A SHORT INTRODUCTION

APRIL 2022
POLARISATION

ARTICLE:
Polarisation: A short introduction

EU MEMBER STATES are increasingly concerned about polarisation tearing their societies apart. The many discussions on the topic within policy-making institutions and in the media reflect these concerns. In these debates, however, polarisation often remains undefined and is viewed through a one-sided negative frame. Polarisation is thus at risk of becoming a catch-all term that lumps together all kinds of disagreements, tensions and conflicts. When we take a look at the growing body of research on polarisation, a more nuanced perspective emerges. For policy-makers and practitioners who want to develop effective strategies to deal with polarisation, it is useful to take on board insights from this literature.

Annelies PAUWELS and Maarten van ALSTEIN

SPOTLIGHT
POLARISATION

ARTICLE
RECIPROCAL RADICALISATION AND POLARISATION DYNAMICS IN THE VLWAE SPHERE

APRIL 2022
POLARISATION

ARTICLE: Reciprocal radicalisation and polarisation dynamics in the VLWAE sphere

THE CHANGING landscape of violent extremism requires specific and tailored responses from EU Member States to address the threat of this phenomenon in all its forms, including the polarisation dynamics in society triggered by violent events. Furthermore, the existence of transnational online extremist communities greatly increases the potential for emulation. This demonstrates how ideological drivers of radicalisation are frequently mixed with individuals combining elements from various extremist ecologies to create their divisive narratives and their ideological ecosystem.

Francesco FARINELLI

RAN PRACTITIONERS
PODCAST

The latest episode of RAN Practitioners' podcast series, 'RAN in Focus', takes a look at the nature of the current polarisation challenges in Europe today. The programme discusses the impact of recent events, such as the Ukraine crisis, and approaches to dealing with it. The podcast hears from three experts, including Anna Triandafyllidou from the BRaVE project, Bjorn Wansink from Utrecht University, and Anneli Portman, the co-chair of the RAN LOCAL Working Group. You can listen to the podcast in full here.

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
**DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS
ABOUT REFUGEES**

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

034–035

ARTICLE:
Disinformation and fake news about refugees

**Staszek
CZERCZAK**

A THIRD night shift in a row can be tiring. But somehow I feel I have to be strong. After two months working with refugees – mainly women and children – I understand (as much as it is possible in such a short time) how to behave, what to say and what is inappropriate. Expanded curiosity, unnecessary questions and words may be harmful. I have to be gentle and alert. Refugees' wounds and suffering are still so fresh, that I can sense them.

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
**DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS
ABOUT REFUGEES**

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

"On 24th of February, when the war started, right away I knew I had to do something to help. At the same time I was afraid and ashamed of feeling fear. As an activist working in field of countering hate and issues involved with radicalisation, I knew that this will be the new form of social work. Poland is a country, that has not directly delt with refugees."

That is why I do not ask about the war and what they had left behind. I already know that they are weary to those subjects. They sometimes tend to talk about it themselves — then I listen to them patiently and carefully. I try to be sympathetic and not talk too much. But what can one say if their husbands are in a war zone in an unequal fight against an empire, which in name of nationalistic reasons had attacked their country — Ukraine? What is there to say when their houses are being burned to the ground, while soldiers are murdering and raping their brothers and sisters. And they themselves were forced to experience the dreadful and uncertain fate of a refugee.

On 24th of February, when the war started, right away I knew I had to do something to help. At the same time I was afraid and ashamed of feeling fear. As an activist working in field of countering hate and issues involved with radicalisation, I knew that this will be the new form of social work. Poland is a country, that has not directly delt with refugees. I was active in this field because of the work of the CODEX Foundation. During the migration crisis that affected Europe in the last decade I have researched the sentiments of Polish violent right wing extremists towards Islamic followers, and have increased my understanding having participated in numerous RAN Practitioners events. The prior crisis seemed so far away, although there were anti-Islamic protests in Poland. This time Russia's attack on Ukraine came suddenly and brought over three million refugees from the eastern border to Poland.

Not a couple days have passed, when the Foundation and people involved in it knew that we are obliged to react and that our reaction will expand far beyond the frames of countering radicalisation and hate. We knew we have to help people escaping from violence, rape and destruction. At that point I was not aware that several days later I shall have the responsibility of taking care of a large group of women and children, while working for a local government. I and my fellow companions from CODEX Foundation take pride in that work.

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
**DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS
ABOUT REFUGEES**

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

Yet I could not forget our day-to-day job – the work involved with raising awareness about radicalisation and countering violence motivated by hate and prejudice. Moreover my experience and intuition did not fail me – in the first hours of the war social media and some news channels were filled with fake news and disinformation regarding Ukrainian refugees, causing incitement of Poles against Ukrainians.

It is obvious - that to counteract disinformation, fake news and its result, which is violent radicalisation, one must be aware of those phenomena. One has to try to understand the logic behind such information and narratives created by its propagators.

The local government of my city, Gorzów Wielkopolski, supports refugees in many ways – it arranges places to sleep, food, organises places in kindergartens and day-care, as well as medical services. It has solved legal issues, helped find people jobs and arranged free public transportation. In order to make these procedures possible, Gorzów issued nearly 3.000 personal identification numbers to refugees.

It is wonderful and I am very proud. I am equally proud of the way my countrymen are part of the support system. A thousand families from my city have taken Ukrainian refugees to their homes. This part of Polish society have shown great empathy to help, and have not been affected by disinformation and fake news. Unfortunately there is a growing part of society which gives in to such disinformation and fake news.

Let's have a look at what sort of messages have had such a strong impact on people in the situation of crisis. I intentionally mentioned the help to Ukrainian refugees from the local government of Gorzów Wielkopolski. I mentioned this because this help is being used by people spreading fake news and disinformation against the refugees. I shall not analyse here who these people or groups are, but I may mention that they are tied to both violent right wing groups and those who have for the last two years propagated disinformation and fake news about the COVID-19 pandemic.

What are these narratives and what are the fears of these people? It has a couple layers - i.e. economical and historic (using difficult Polish-Ukrainian history). They are all equal in power but the economic issues are the strongest. The comments about the city supposedly giving away apartments from public resources, taking away opportunity from local people, who have been on waiting lists for years. That is false – because the city does not give such apartments to refugees. It is popular to say that Ukrainians are medically treated without waiting in long queues, which Polish people can only dream of. It is also said that the Ukrainian refugees get greater benefits compared to Polish people, who get scraps. And one of the most pathetic examples – one which incites the society against Ukrainians – is that they can use public transportation for free.

I would like the people affected by these narratives to listen to Luda and her son Timur's story. I had a chance to get to know them at my work in the refugee centre. They showed me pictures of the remains of their home, bombed by Russians at the beginning of this war. I wonder whether the people believe in these vulgar and cruel narratives would like to walk in Luda and Timur's shoes. Would they prefer to drive around in public transportation for free and sleep in some gymnasiums with hundreds of unknown people in a distant city in exchange for leaving or losing their love ones in a war zone? I shall leave this rhetorical question here.

Another popular narrative which incites Polish people, is one that reminds them of their history – about a time when UIA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army) murdered in Wołyń hundreds thousands of Poles during the WWII. As if children, grandchildren or grand grandchildren had any influence on their ancestors. There are also conspiracy theories – such as the one claiming that in place of Ukraine and Poland there is to arise a so called New Israel, a paradise for the Jewish people. Wolodymyr Zelensky's Jewish roots are being mentioned as evidence of this. Moreover such narratives suggest the likes of WHO and the UN act hand-in-hand with Putin achieve this.

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
**DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS
ABOUT REFUGEES**

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

One may write much more about disinformation and fake news but it has been just two months of this crisis. The CODEX Foundation monitors such disinformation every day to draw conclusions and try to counteract. The Foundation has been working since the beginning of this war to ensure that the millions of refugees feel safe and protected. Ewa, the vice president of the Foundation, volunteered to take care of the refugees in the city's refugee centre. Robert, a former policeman, after finding out that there is a policewoman in one of the refugee centres, gathered his work colleagues to help her and organised an apartment for her to stay. George, provides refugees with fruit and sweets. Collectively we feel it is our duty and privilege.

I must emphasise that facing the wave of disinformation and fake news being propagated, which is supposed to turn society against Ukrainians refugees, it is worth to recall the words of a famous Polish artist, that "there are more people of good will than not".

Staszek Czerczak is the founder and leader of the CODEX Foundation in Gorzów Wielkopolski, which helps young people leave racist or other extremist movements. You can read more about Staszek later in this publication.

"It is obvious – that to counteract disinformation, fake news and its result, which is violent radicalisation, one must be aware of those phenomena. One has to try to understand the logic behind such information and narratives created by its propagators."

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
**FROM THE INFODEMIC TO THE INFO WAR: THE
EVOLUTION OF DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES AND
CHALLENGES AHEAD**

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

INFODEMIC

ARTICLE:
**From the infodemic
to the info war:
the evolution of
disinformation
narratives and
challenges ahead**

**Maria
Giovanna
SESSA**

DISINFORMATION is ancillary to information as it adapts to match audience-dividing issues that have high salience in the public debate. Therefore, from an almost exclusive focus on the pandemic in the last two years, the infodemic is now tackling the war in Ukraine.

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
**FROM THE INFODEMIC TO THE INFO WAR: THE
EVOLUTION OF DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES AND
CHALLENGES AHEAD**

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

The article addresses this twist in the information disorder, currently populated by pro-Russia and pro-Ukraine positions. However, a necessary disclaimer lies in the power unbalance between these information war players. Being ideological, Russian-state disinformation is often unfalsifiable. For instance, the claim that Russian actions were instigated by the perceived threat of NATO's enlargement cannot be dismissed or confirmed. Simultaneously, Ukrainian propaganda functions as a pushback that tries to boost morale and consolidate a sense of national identity for a young country that needs its heroes (e.g. the ghost of Kiev).

Narrative evolution and parallelisms: the virus and the war
The extensive study of connections between the Ukraine war and COVID-19 is analysed in the first EDMO BELUX investigation, "From Infodemic to Information War". This research is a quali-quantitative assessment of narratives evolution as observed through fact-checked disinformation and a case study of 225 Dutch speaking Telegram channels that went from spreading COVID-19 conspiracies to pro-Russian content. This section reviews the narratives extracted from an analysis of verified content of two International Factchecking Network initiatives: #UkraineFacts and the CoronaVirusFacts Alliance Database.

In the early stages of a crisis, disinformation fills the information vacuum and related feelings of uncertainty by seeking to startle the audience. In late February 2022, decontextualised visuals of war scenes appeared online to suggest that the conflict was advancing faster than anticipated, while fabricated claims that COVID-19 had already reached Europe, spread in January 2020. Old photos of helpless children, parents, and seniors have been shared both in the context of the recent geopolitical and health emergencies for likes and clickbait, despite the existence of real victims.

Another narrative that is expected to increase concerns the negative othering of migrants, especially where migration is a polarising topic. As in the past two years, migrants from the MENA region were portrayed as virus-spreaders and careless of containment measures, we are now encountering hoaxes that portray Ukrainian refugees as violent and majorly non-white males.

Pro-Russian positions have employed numerous conspiracy theories to justify the invasion of the neighbour country. To begin, Putin denounced an alleged genocide in Donbas and announced his intention to 'de-nazify' Ukraine, from which manipulated images of Zelensky wearing a svastika followed. Similarly, pandemic-related debunks have dubbed the virus a global depopulation plan and planned genocide. Antivaxxers resorted to a similar 'reduction ad Hitlerum' by comparing their alleged discrimination to that of Jews and the vaccination campaign to Nazi-era passes.

According to another Russian-supported narrative, US-funded biolabs are present on Ukrainian territory, a conspiracy that blinks an eye to QAnon and deep state fantasies that were already fuelled by unproven claims that COVID-19 was created in a Wuhan lab.

Denialism is the final category and the one that best evidences how disinformation in the post-truth era looks to sow doubts on what is true or false and pollutes the public debate. For instance, the footage of climate activists and an actor on set while in death body bags were used respectively to portray war and coronavirus victims as fakes.

Concluding remarks: challenges and recommendations
The ongoing conflict and (hopefully) fading pandemic present unprecedented challenges for counter-disinformation efforts, starting from the risk of losing momentum given people's short attention span. As hoaxes and conspiracies play on pre-existing mistrust in government and institutions, malign actors can weaponise them further to try and break European relations (e.g.

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
**FROM THE INFODEMIC TO THE INFO WAR: THE
EVOLUTION OF DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES AND
CHALLENGES AHEAD**

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

where migration is polarising) or the transatlantic alliance (e.g. blaming the U.S. for biolabs). At some point, the Kremlin may pivot away from merely denying the existence of the conflict and victims to push the conspiracy conception that truth is relative and unknowable or the assumption that responsibility for the war is equally shared.

Overall, since disinformation engages a polyphony of platforms, communities, and languages, we need a synchronised ensemble of voices to respond to the threat. Collaborative responses need to pool together different stakeholders (i.e. field experts, policy-makers, and civil society) to turn the intentions outlined in toolboxes as the Digital Services Act into real changes. These goals will be reached only if an accountability and sanctions regime is enabled, which could be achieved through obligations for platforms to provide justifications on how content decisions are made, algorithms are distributing disinformation, and through a guaranteed and reliable access to data.

Maria Giovanna Sessa is a Senior Researcher at EU DisinfoLab in Milan, an independent non-profit organisation focused on tackling sophisticated disinformation campaigns targeting the EU, its Member States, core institutions, and core values.

"Overall, since disinformation engages a polyphony of platforms, communities, and languages, we need a synchronised ensemble of voices to respond to the threat. Collaborative responses need to pool together different stakeholders (i.e. field experts, policy-makers, and civil society) to turn the intentions outlined in toolboxes as the Digital Services Act into real changes."

RAN SPOTLIGHT
CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES AND DISINFORMATION

RAN SPOTLIGHT
CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES AND DISINFORMATION

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

RAN SPOTLIGHT
CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES AND DISINFORMATION

In a Spotlight publication published in December 2021, RAN practitioners, Working group leads and experts from outside of the network, shared their insights on the evolving challenge posed by conspiracy narratives, fake news and disinformation. The Spotlight included content on the impact of conspiracy narratives on violent left wing and violent right wing extremist (VRWE) narratives, the role of conspiracy narratives in VRWE and effective counter measures. You can read the Spotlight in full here.

SPOTLIGHT

DEC 2021

CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES & DISINFORMATION

FAKE
FACT

10 YEARS OF
RAN

SPOTLIGHT
CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES & DISINFORMATION

ARTICLE
DISINFORMATION AS A GATEWAY TO EXTREMIST AGENDAS

DEC 2021
CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES & DISINFORMATION

ARTICLE:
Disinformation as a gateway to extremist agendas

Francesco FARINELLI

Whilst news-focused historians have noted that accusations around 'fake news' date back to the advent of newspapers themselves in the seventeenth century, the current threats posed by disinformation in EU communities appear to have been strengthened by the growth of the internet, taking on an additional degree of intensity since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic brought about a new wave of fear, anxiety and doubt as it endangered people's lives, affecting everything from job security to social interactions and health concerns. In this environment, disinformation and its effects on radicalisation processes have spread almost as quickly as the virus itself...

SPOTLIGHT
CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES & DISINFORMATION

ARTICLE
THE NEXUS BETWEEN CONSPIRACY BELIEFS AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

DEC 2021
CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES & DISINFORMATION

ARTICLE:
The nexus between conspiracy beliefs and violent extremism

Bettina ROTTWEILER & Paul GILL

Increasingly, we are witnessing a seeming convergence between belief in conspiracy narratives and ideological extremes. This is most clearly evidenced by recent right-wing terrorist attacks in Hanau, Halle, Christchurch, El Paso, Pittsburgh and Poway. Each perpetrator's manifesto referenced conspiracy narratives such as the 'great replacement theory' or white genocide. This is further highlighted by the US Capitol attack on January 6, 2021, which demonstrated an increasing synergy between far-right extremist groups and QAnon adherents engaging side-by-side in anti-government violence...

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

RESEARCH
IS THE RUSSIAN (DIS)INFORMATION MACHINE
STALLING?

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

Is the Russian (dis)information machine stalling?

James HANN

RESEARCH

IN DECEMBER 2021, Digitalis launched its Disinformation Investigations Unit – a team of analysts focused on tracking, analysing, and understanding dis- and misinformation, focusing on predominantly text-based social media platforms like Twitter, Reddit, Gab, and Parler. The Unit uses a combination of open-source research tools and proprietary technologies on the Digitalis platform. From the outset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Digitalis has been collecting social media data connected to apparent pro-Russian propaganda campaigns. As the Russian war effort continues to stall, we pose the question – are information operations stalling too?

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

RESEARCH
IS THE RUSSIAN (DIS)INFORMATION MACHINE STALLING?

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

Is the Russian (dis)information machine stalling?
In this article, we analyse the reach of the Twitter hashtag campaign #своихнебросаем (most commonly translated to #we don't abandon our own). Despite the Russian government's restrictions and bans on mainstream social media platforms, Twitter is still accessible to Russians via an onion service the platform launched on the TOR network.

The hashtag #своихнебросаем was originally used by state-funded media to garner support for the Kremlin's narrative on the conflict and has since undergone a significant change in context, seeing an apparent shift in participating users and associated hashtags in favour of more pro-Ukraine narratives.
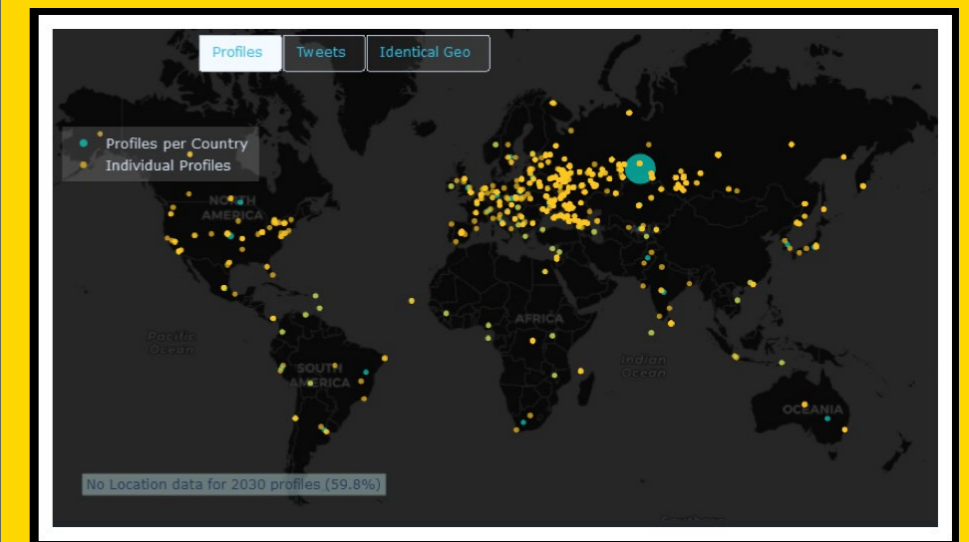
Digitalis collected data over three one-week periods from 01 to 08 March, April, and May which provided a timeline of activity consisting in total of 16,469 tweets. This data was collected using our Twitter Insights platform, which collects tweet and user data. The platform then runs automated analytics searching for evidence of coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) and other signs of inauthentic amplification and activity.

#своихнебросаем (#we don't abandon our own)

Analysis of the hashtag's initial use in the first week of March 2022 shows an overwhelmingly pro-Russian narrative and support from participating pro-Russian users. The top three most-prolific users were 'Ivan Budko' (@XZ6yXFoKa8DO7bf)[1], 'Vasily Fomin' (@VasilijFomin163)[2], and 'Denis Okunev' (@g01QiNSt5Tyt4TB)[3]. These users display strong pro-Russian views in their posts and activity, repeatedly sharing nationalistic memes, video content and posts aligned with Kremlin narratives. Two of these usernames (@XZ6yXFoKa8DO7bf and @g01QiNSt5Tyt4TB) also appear to be computer generated as they consist of 15 randomised characters – a feature very commonly seen in inauthentic influence campaigns.

Between 01-08 March 2022, the hashtag was used in 9,026 tweets, peaking on 05 March 2022 with 1,693 tweets. Of the total, 3,895 (43.1 per cent) were original tweets indicating high levels of potentially organic traction. Generally, the higher the ratio of retweets to original tweets, the higher the likelihood that bot accounts and amplifying networks occupy a disproportionate share of participating tweets in a hashtag campaign.

While it must be stressed that geolocation data from Twitter can be manipulated by users, available data identifies that over 68.4 per cent of users providing any user location data claim to be based in Russia. The diagram below is a snapshot from our dashboard of the analytics for the March 2022 usage of this hashtag.

1 https://twitter.com/XZ6yXFoKa8DO7bf
2 https://twitter.com/VasilijFomin163
3 https://twitter.com/g01QiNSt5Tyt4TB

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

RESEARCH
IS THE RUSSIAN (DIS)INFORMATION MACHINE STALLING?

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

By 01-08 April 2022, the volume of pro-Russian narratives within the hashtag dataset had dropped considerably. Overall volume fell to 4,669 tweets, of which just 605 (12.9 per cent) were original, indicating a significant drop in organic traction. The available user location data also dropped, showing 40 per cent of users as being located in Russia.

In this dataset, the top three most prolific users had also been completely replaced by pro-Ukrainian accounts, '🇺🇦Ukraine Under Attack' (@InvestorHumbl)[5], 'ALETTAHA💎🙆💜😇' (@ALETTAHA)[5], and 'Julia Shporina' (@joliejouraachen)[6]. This shift in context was repeated in third party engagement too, where the top two most retweeted posts show anti-Russian messaging regarding failure to support Russian veterans from WWII[7], as well as tweets calling out the Russian government over its apparent failure to tackle raging wildfires in Siberia[8].

During the period 01-08 May 2022, the number of tweets using the hashtag #своихнебросаем had further reduced, dropping to 2,774, a volume reduction of 69.2 per cent compared with the same period in March. Again, the percentage of original tweets within this dataset fell, dropping to 11.5 per cent, indicating a likely reduction in organic traction. The number of users in Russia also declined to 36.5 per cent (based on available geolocation data).

The Russian state, and specifically the disinformation architecture it uses to disseminate pro-Kremlin narratives, relies heavily on satellite television and talk shows to reach its intended domestic audience. Yet a growing part of this audience is now engaging with key narratives on social media platforms. To what extent is the Russian state committed to continuing to wage information operations on them? Will they continue to utilise existing troll and bot networks to push aligned narratives, or will we simply see a continued clampdown on access to mainstream technology platforms?

Our analysis identified a significant reduction in volume and aligned accounts within an (initially) overwhelmingly pro-Russian

James is a Managing Director at Digitalis and Head of Digital Risk, specialising in the integration of digital intelligence with online reputation management. He supports law firms, public and private companies, and governments.

hashtag campaign. One potential reason for this could reflect a decision by the Russian disinformation machine to demobilise its Twitter bots and trolls on the platform due to unmanageable levels of anti-Russian sentiment. The perceived risk to the domestic status quo posed by the platform might leading instead to restrictions and ultimately a ban. To what extent piecemeal access to Western social media continues to play a role in shaping the narrative remains to be seen. Digitalis continues to monitor and investigate for evidence of Russian disinformation efforts.

To learn more around Digitalis' work on understanding disinformation please reach out to James at: james.hann@digitalis.com.

4 https://twitter.com/InvestorHumbl
5 https://twitter.com/ALETTAHA
6 https://twitter.com/joliejouraachen
7 https://twitter.com/coastnumbern/status/1509987127567818755
8 https://twitter.com/jag_vil_ha_mer/status/1510217582053314565

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
POTENTIAL STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
CHALLENGES LINKED TO VIOLENT NARRATIVES
AND DISINFORMATION

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

ARTICLE:
Potential strategic communications challenges linked to violent narratives and disinformation

Arije ANTINORI

AFTER days of increasing uncertainty, tension and anxiety along the Ukrainian border, a never-ending "media tsunami" of data, information, news and contents related to the Russian military invasion of Ukraine swept the (cyber-)social ecosystem already affected by the long-term effects of the infodemic viralisation, both at national and global level.

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
**POTENTIAL STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
CHALLENGES LINKED TO VIOLENT NARRATIVES
AND DISINFORMATION**

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

The extremist-violent infospheres have reacted to such a conflict giving life to: completely new narratives, narratives inspired by World War II rhetoric, narratives developed from the mixing of traditional and emerging ideologies. All of them create an interpretative framework based on a dichotomic vision of life, which is provided to the global audience in order to (falsely) reduce complexity. This also represents a potential high risk of violent extremism contamination for both non-violent activism and 'hacktivism'.

This makes EU citizens more vulnerable to violent narratives and media considering the torn social fabric Member States as a result of the uncertain (post-)pandemic economic scenario. The situation is even more worrying for the European 'screenagers', always browsing the internet, who have never before witnessed a war on this continent.

Experience sharing and identity seeking guide the behaviour of people in the (cyber-)social ecosystem. Violent extremists are using the Russian invasion of Ukraine to exploit emotional communication and digital empathy on social media platforms, to inflame the debate. This strategy aims to coagulate traditional militants as well as new ones, followers and sympathisers into the same infospheres already affected by the twenty-year process of "mediamorphosis".

Here, within the extremist infospheres, the digitalised ideologies have the power to strongly connect action and representation, triggering vulnerable individuals to violent action. Currently, the popularisation of extremism, by the means of (cyber-)social engagement, fosters the continuous creation of heterogeneous connective movements, instead of collective ones. Furthermore, it causes the proliferation of lone actors. Both two entities are characterised by volatility, unpredictability and explosiveness. The pandemic and infodemic have fostered the weaponisation of citizens in the post-truth era. They have accelerated the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, in particular by the means of ambiguous user-generated content. Today,

a significant "memedemic", as the global production and dissemination of memes, is spreading in the (cyber-)social ecosystem, especially within the extremist infospheres. In fact, the purpose and strategic necessity of the militarised use of memes lies in their ability to directly weaponise digital citizens. Therefore, memes have become an organic part of information warfare strategies and tactics.

Violent extremist narratives inspired by traditional ideologies such as negationism, revisionism, male supremacy, conspiracism and vigilantism, overlap/merge with new ones as cancel culture, wokism, incelism and "conspireactionism". These narratives trigger new and increasingly sophisticated forms of (cyber-) deviant and criminal behaviour.

In the last few years, some foreign powers have developed a significant capacity to produce multi-dimensional one-shot cognitive attacks together with medium and long-term disinformation campaigns through social mobile media with the aim of re-shaping reality and influencing people's behaviour at individual, community and citizen level.

One of the main potential P/CVE strategic communication challenges is represented by the need to develop strategies to deal with the systemic threat posed by propaganda disseminated through traditional media with the aim to reach the masses, widely used in the Russian-speaking environment, and "propulsion" which is based on globalised individualisation by the means of mobile devices. A near-future crucial challenge will be the potential extremist and foreign powers exploitation of metaverse platforms, characterised by the convergence of entertainment, gaming, information dissemination and education. Here, the "information radicalisation" boosted by the Malicious Use of Artificial Intelligence (MUAI), such as deepfakes, will give life to new forms of converging and overlapping hybrid and "immersive" violent narratives.

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
**POTENTIAL STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
CHALLENGES LINKED TO VIOLENT NARRATIVES
AND DISINFORMATION**

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

Strategic communication in the (cyber-)social ecosystem must be considered as an increasing existential domain both for EU Member States and peoples. It represents a pillar for digitalised democracy more and more vulnerable to foreign threats, increasingly connected and/or converging with domestic ones. Therefore, from a strategic communication perspective, it is crucial to understand that the (cyber-)social security represents the key-concept of security in digital democracy, and its vulnerabilities highlight the progressive convergence between public security and national security as a substantial change in citizens life.

Prof. Arije Antinori *is a criminologist and sociologist of deviance, who coordinates the Criminological – Crisis and Media Communication Laboratory of the University of Rome "La Sapienza".*

"Inspired by World War II rhetoric, narratives developed from the mixing of traditional and emerging ideologies. All of them create an interpretative framework based on a dichotomic vision of life, which is provided to the global audience in order to (falsely) reduce complexity. This also represents a potential high risk of violent extremism contamination for both non-violent activism and 'hacktivism'."

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

INTERVIEW
THE INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SAFETY

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

Interview:
The Institute of Social Safety

Jacek PURSKI

We spoke with Jacek Purski, founder of the Institute of Social Safety in Poland, about how the Ukraine war has affected his work.

Tell me a little bit by yourself, your organisation and the work that you do.
The Institute of Social Safety is an organisation that deals with radicalisation and extremism. We do a lot of work that is linked with the P/CVE, a bit of campaigning, but mainly educational work. We are focused on the first line practitioners – we train teachers, police and local municipalities, among others, to help them to understand radicalisation in Poland and how to prevent it. So among our team members, there are academics, social scientists, former soldiers and former police officers.

We mainly deal with violent right wing extremism (VRWE), but also recently new forms of, individual problem-orientated extremism as well. We do monitoring and research, we do educational work and training, we develop nationwide strategies and we build local multi-sectoral groups of experts who are working in municipalities – from the police, city councils and NGOs. So we are active on many levels, in different fields.

How has the Ukraine war affected your organisation?
The war in Ukraine has changed a lot here in Poland, here in Warsaw. Almost everyone who is involved in the work of the Institute of Social Safety is somehow involved in helping the Ukrainian refugees. Some people are volunteering at the railway station. Some people are doing translation. Some people are preparing new educational programmes. Some are hosting Ukrainian refugees in their homes. So it has had a big influence on our lives and our day-to-day activity.

It has impacted our research, which is focused on foreign volunteers. We are in contact with our Ukrainian friends who are there. We are trying to support them in their endeavours by monitoring the situation. It has also prompted us to develop new programmes which are focused on the region.

The situation has made our work even more important. We need to educate people about fake news and conspiracy theories, which are being propagated both in social and mainstream media – where are they coming from, how are they are

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

INTERVIEW
THE INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SAFETY

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

distributed, how are they attacking Polish and European society, and what's the influence on people?

How has the Ukraine war affected the P/CVE environment in Poland?

Quite a number of violent right wing extremist Facebook profiles that were anti-vaccine, anti-Asian, anti-COVID, have switched to propagate anti-Ukrainian propaganda. We are seeing this a lot. We are looking at how we can adopt and adapt existing tools from a number of different European projects to monitor the situation and understand and tackle the links between violent right wing extremists and anti-Ukrainian narratives.

In the coming years Poland will be similar to the Baltic States, with access to very important information and data. Poland is a good place to monitor and report on the situation, to talk about the scientific approach to what is happening in this part of Europe. We feel that this is becoming an important piece of work.

How has the war emboldened violent right wing extremist groups?

War is a situation in which extreme organisations feel comfortable. War also gives these groups an opportunity to find relevance. The violent right wing extremist groups in Poland have reacted differently. It has polarised their narratives Some of them are propagating anti-Ukrainian propaganda. Some of them are intentionally trying to engage new audiences by demonstrating support for and empathy towards Ukrainian refugees. These are groups that, even just half a year ago, were very racist, xenophobic and anti-refugee.

So it is difficult to judge in which direction they will go in the coming years. But I also feel that the war has created a feeling of chaos and these groups have reacted accordingly. So sooner or later, I would expect a more serious blowback from the violent right wing extremists here in Poland.

What message would you like to leave for the RAN Practitioners network?

The coming months will be very crucial to the stability of the region, but also whole Europe. I therefore think it's the right moment to show solidarity and to have a closer look at the violent right wing and how these movements have been fuelled from the East – what were the real aims of violent right wing narratives in recent years in all of our societies across Europe?

What I mean by this is simply that it is important to monitor the situation and to take seriously the need to combat violent right wing extremism, the threat which has been growing in recent years with the COVID pandemic. But I think that the difficult times are in front of us. So we need to show solidarity, conduct more research, do more monitoring, and carry out more social work.

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
**TACKLING DISINFORMATION WITH COUNTER-
NARRATIVES: WHAT LESSON CAN WE USE FOR THE
WAR IN UKRAINE?**

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

069—060

Nikola HOŘEJŠ

ARTICLE: **Tackling disinformation with counter-narratives: What lesson can we use for the war in Ukraine?**

Over the past three years the Society and democracy research institute (STEM) and its partners have been experimenting with new communication approaches to the distrustful and strongly anti-migration groups in Czech society. Through the systematic application of sociological research, value-based communication and counter-narratives, it is possible to circumvent entrenched prejudices and stereotypes.

As we are trying to apply this insight to the current challenges here are several possible routes and dead-end streets we have discovered in our practical communication work.

Getting around the defence mechanisms
Although the reasons are far more complex, disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories can contribute to radicalisation and hate speech. Once people form their strong worldview on a specific issue, it is hard to reach them with fact-checking or debunking. The debate becomes just about values and emotions.

This was the case of the so-called European migration crisis of 2015 and its perception in the Czech Republic. The country was spared any impact of the crisis and the situation was described best by a joke that we have more members of parliament elected on anti-migration platform than actual asylum seekers from MENA. However, the migration from MENA has been for many years a number one topic and turned into such a toxic issue, that it almost resulted in a referendum on Czech membership in the EU, or 'Czexit'.

Under such circumstances it was almost impossible to have a meaningful and open discussion about migration, EU and related issues. And even the pro-EU politicians started to avoid these issues.

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

ARTICLE
**TACKLING DISINFORMATION WITH COUNTER-
NARRATIVES: WHAT LESSON CAN WE USE FOR THE
WAR IN UKRAINE?**

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

Under control

When we researched the reasons for such a fear (bordering with panic), we discovered that apart from deep suspicion towards Islam and latent racism, there was another component for that attitude. And that was general distrust of institutions, resentments toward elites, strong feeling of vulnerability and lack of solidarity and community. In other words – once you start suspecting your sheriff of corruption and incompetence, you become much more worried about the outside world. And since it is your own sheriff who you cannot get rid of, your worries turn to a quest to find a scapegoat. Naturally this process was vastly exploited by populist politicians and disinformation sources.

So, in our communication platform for anti-EU citizens we started to tackle this feeling of insecurity and vulnerability. We started to show Czech nationals as a part of EU institutions that are here to protect Europe. For example, in the context of Frontex. And we have learned for example, that Czech citizens do not trust Czech police. The only way that might trust them is if there were regular men and women in uniforms, who live ordinary lives and are relatable.

It is risky, but sometimes it needs to be

Understandably such strategy brings many risks and downsides. First, it puts the focus on security and threats, not on the plight of the refugees, their tragic condition and hence empathy. It is deepening the framing of security risk and dehumanising the refugees.

But one has to bear in mind we experimented with this strategy at a point, when the Czech government was too afraid to accept 14 pre-selected orphaned minors from a refugee centre in Greece. Without assuring the militant anti-refugee minority in the Czech society, that thinks EU is "deliberately working on spreading of Islam", that there is someone relatable in charge of the situation, there was no chance to getting any other facts and messages to them.

Of course this is not the only strategy. Other ways to approach conservative groups in the society is showing refugees in symbolic situations they like, such as security-related jobs and helping professions. However, what all these attempts have in common is reflecting on values this group wants to express by falling for the anti-migration populism.

Ukraine: rationalisation and fear of chaos

This brings us to the challenge we are facing today. STEM has done an analysis for the Czech government that shows deep worries behind the current solidarity with Ukrainian women and children fleeing the terrors of war. On the one hand, over 70 % of Czechs agree with helping refugees from Ukraine and Czechs are opening their flats and wallets to those in need. On the other hand, many are afraid of economic consequences and think the government's efforts are not well organised. Surprisingly more people oppose such symbolic aid for the refugees such as free Zoo or free public transport, than more costly financial aid and assistance centres.

Again, the underlying fears are than manifested and rationalised in sharing rumours and fake news. The trust in institutions, or rather distrust, exacerbated by the pandemic, is a fertile ground to conspiracies about the real reasons behind the aid to those endangered by the war.

Pragmatic, transparent and not sentimental

What can be done? After discussions with policy makers and authorities, it clearly seems that after the "heroic phase", the sceptical part of public needs both more connection to the stories of refugees on the one hand, and more pragmatic tone of voice from the authorities on the other. Apart from about 10 % of those who oppose helping refugees out of principle, there are about 20-30 % of the society, whose approach is "let's keep helping, but...". This comes not from the hatred towards refugees or Ukrainians, but from the fear of losing their place in the society and control over their live. As much as we fear these talks about security to not fuel the fire, we see that for some groups there is no way around this issue.

ARTICLE
**TACKLING DISINFORMATION WITH COUNTER-
NARRATIVES: WHAT LESSON CAN WE USE FOR THE
WAR IN UKRAINE?**

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

"Understandably such strategy brings many risks and downsides. First, it puts the focus on security and threats, not on the plight of the refugees, their tragic condition and hence empathy. It is deepening the framing of security risk and dehumanising the refugees."

Nikola Hořejš *is a psychologist and Programme Director at Society and Democracy Research Institute (STEM) based in Prague, Czech Republic. He has been researching public opinion on disinformation, climate change, EU, Russia and other world threats.*

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

RAN PROFILES
PRACTITIONERS

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

PROFILES:
Staszek CZERCZAK

As a teenager Staszek Czerczak became involved in right wing extremist activity and subsequently joined a neo-fascist group of football hooligans in Poland. Having left the group, Staszek has spent most of his adult life devoted to countering discrimination, intolerance and hatred. In this time, he has been a member of the Institute of Social Safety, an associate of the "NEVER AGAIN" Association and more recently founded the CODEX Foundation.

The CODEX Foundation was established to help young people leave racist or other extremist movements, focusing on restoring these people to society and presenting them with a way to live a different life — with the respect for the law and with respect for common rules. The CODEX Foundation was created precisely to show the way out of extremism and to help entangled people and their families to start the so-called "normal life", without hatred, violence and contempt.

Staszek is an expert in youth engagement, develops innovative EXIT strategies for those looking to leave extremist organisations, trains teachers, the police, prison officers and border guards on radicalisation, is an active member of the RAN Practitioners network, and publishes papers and articles on the subject.

the

peacemakers

over

you

Lord open
your heart

have

mercy

God,
I pray that you bring peace to the
and peace to the hearts of the
in Ukraine. I pray that other people
will bring unity and

SPOTLIGHT
UKRAINE

HIGHLIGHTS
UKRAINE

JUNE 2022
UKRAINE

080—081

Highlights:
RAN Activity on Ukraine

For more information about RAN Practitioners activities please visit the Calendar on the RAN website **here**.

RAN REHAB
Working Group meeting
02-03 June
'Rehabilitation in an open setting'

Small scale meeting
14 June
'Support tool for families dealing with conspiracy narratives'

RAN C&N
Working Group meeting
16-17 June
'Digital frontrunners in P/CVE work'

RAN POL
Working Group meeting
16-17 June
'Anti-government extremism and hostility against the police in Europe'

RAN LOCAL
Working Group meeting
16-17 June
'How to deal with the local impact of online extremist activities'

RAN HEALTH
Working Group meeting
20-21 June
Personality disorders and mental illnesses with implications in P/CVE

RAN POL
Working Group meeting
22-24 June
'The challenges of anti-authorities extremism for police'

LIBRARY:
DISCOVER MORE

IF you would like to discover more about the topic of youth engagement you can get in touch with the RAN Staff, take a look at the RAN Collection of Inspiring Practices or read through some of the latest RAN papers.

You can read more about the Ukraine war and its impact on P/CVE in a paper published by the Institute for Economics & Peace (2022), entitled 'Ukraine Russia Crisis: Terrorism Briefing'.