

Disinformation as a Human Rights Abuse in the Context of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Introduction

Human rights-based approaches to disinformation have gained prominence in the agendas of governments, international institutions, and civil society in recent years. The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression has devoted several reports to the issue of disinformation that highlight the ways in which it negatively impacts human rights, democratic institutions, and development processes.

There has also been a significant increase in disinformation and the speed at which it is spread – often spiking during election cycles and armed conflicts, fueling attacks against minorities and marginalized groups, and tarnishing public discourse around the world. In addition, intentional manipulation of information, such as what is currently being experienced in Ukraine, has far-reaching implications for human rights. It threatens individuals’ rights to freedom of expression, thought, and political participation, and diminishes broader acceptance of democratic values by undermining citizens’ trust in institutions, degrading free and fair elections, and encouraging violence and repression.

The ongoing disinformation campaign being waged by Russia in the war against Ukraine aptly demonstrates this phenomenon. This campaign is a concerted effort to limit individuals’ rights to access information, form and express opinions freely, and more broadly, undermine democracy, promote violence, justify war crimes, and jeopardize safety and human lives. This represents a clear violation of the human right to freedom of expression and should therefore be considered in the process of the upcoming Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Russia.

Legal Backing

Disinformation and propaganda can be seen as violations of the right to freedom of expression under international law – particularly when they limit access to information, coerce or manipulate individuals, promote discrimination or hostility towards certain groups, threaten public health, interfere with the functioning of democratic societies, and violate the ability of individuals to receive and impart information. Disinformation and propaganda violate numerous articles of international human rights conventions, including, but not limited to:

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

§ Article 19: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

§ Article 19: “Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.”

§ Article 20: “Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.”

Evidence and Recommendations

I. Limiting Access to Information

According to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which is responsible for interpreting the ICCPR, the right to freedom of expression includes “the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers.” Disinformation and propaganda limit individuals’ access to accurate and truthful information which interferes with their ability to form and express their own opinions and is a clear violation of the right to freedom of expressionⁱ.

The Russian disinformation infrastructure, especially in Russian-occupied territories, works on multiple fronts to minimize the public’s access to information coming from non-Russian government sources. Physical access to information is restricted through internet shutdowns, blocking certain websites, and muffling of television and radio signals. Existing in this closed-off information environment for months (and in the case of Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, for 9 years), the residents of the occupied territories of Ukraine are deprived of the right to seek and receive information and ideas freely.

In cases where Russia is unable to maintain a monopoly on physical access to information, such as in non-Russian controlled areas of Ukraine and across Europe, it interferes with access by flooding the information spaces with contradictory fake narratives. This tactic creates confusion about what information and which sources can be considered accurate and undermines public trust in independent media and government sources – thus interfering with people’s right to freely seek out accurate information.

This approach has been especially effective during periods of crises as people experience increased levels of stress and uncertainty, which makes them more susceptible to disinformation. This is demonstrated particularly well in the case of Ukrainian refugees in Europe and the citizens of frontline areas.

A. Evidence - Narratives

1. False information to justify invasion

One of the most prominent narratives has focused on denying, justifying, and shifting blame for the war away from Russia and onto Ukraine and the West. Lacking access to other sources of information, citizens in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine are inundated with false narratives that inhibit their ability to form opinions based on facts. Examples of these narratives include:

- Ukraine has been terrorizing Donbas since 2014ⁱⁱ;
- Ukraine is the aggressor, or at least is “provoking” Russiaⁱⁱⁱ;
- The Russian invasion is a “special military operation”^{iv}.

2. False information about European reception of Ukrainian refugees

The tactic of promoting fake and contradictory narratives has worked especially well among vulnerable Ukrainian refugees who have fled to neighboring European countries. As many Ukrainians do not speak the language of their host country, they largely rely on informal sources for locally relevant information, such as social media groups and chats. These communities have been targeted by disinformation which seeks to confuse and frighten them, make them feel unwelcome, and even prevent them from seeking temporary protection. The goal of these narratives is to divide Ukrainians and host country residents who would otherwise be aligned by pro-democratic values. Examples of these narratives include:

- Europeans “hate” Ukrainian refugees and Ukrainians are being attacked by them;
- Europeans are protesting against Ukrainian refugees and demanding their deportation;
- Europe is “tired” of Ukrainian refugees^v;
- Ukrainian refugees in Europe are going hungry^{vi}.

3. Deliberate discreditation of Ukraine’s evacuation campaign

A similar tactic has been used in frontline areas by Russia. Residents of these communities experience constant warfare and access to information is often limited due to blackouts. In August 2022, Ukraine launched a mandatory civilian evacuation campaign in territories with active hostilities and the greatest infrastructure damage caused by Russian forces. Russian propaganda was used to deliberately discredit this effort by spreading false messages intent on confusing and dividing citizens. Examples of these narratives include:

- Ukrainian authorities want to ‘clean’ the frontline area of civilians, and Ukrainian troops will later loot their homes^{vii};
- Ukraine has not prepared any housing for the evacuees^{viii};
- Ukraine is “forcefully evicting” the residents of Kramatorsk (Donetsk region) by cutting power, gas, and water in the city because Russians will take over these territories soon^{ix}.

These messages prevent access to accurate information, create confusion, and cast doubt upon the Ukrainian government’s communications about life-saving evacuations. This distorted information intimidates civilians into refusing evacuation from dangerous areas which often means death or hiding in bomb shelters for months without heating, water, and electricity amid ongoing hostilities.

B. Mechanisms

In terms of limiting access to information, Russia seeks to create an “information monopoly” where it alone controls the narrative. This is especially relevant for occupied territories and frontline areas. Russia targets telecommunications infrastructure in Ukraine – such as the attack on the Kyiv TV tower in the days following the full-scale invasion^x – in a clear attempt to deprive Ukrainian citizens of access to information and make them easier to manipulate.

While this strategy has not been successful across every region of Ukraine, it has been effective in Russian-occupied territories. For example, in Kherson region, the first oblast to come under Russian control, all internet traffic was re-routed through Russian networks, and access to Ukrainian online media and popular social networks was blocked^{xi}. In addition, Ukrainian TV

channels and radio stations were taken over and they began broadcasting Russian channels^{xii}. This has effectively prevented residents of these territories from accessing sources of information that are contrary to the narratives of the Russian government.

In the first months of the invasion, Russian troops also targeted Ukrainian regional centers by creating 120 Telegram channels for different townships or communities. While each channel was designed to resemble a source for local news, those channels were in fact used to disseminate Russian narratives and bolster support for the occupiers^{xiii}. These channels specifically targeted frontline and occupied areas.

C. Recommendations

We call on Russia to:

- Ensure uninterrupted access to diverse sources of information for the residents of the Ukrainian territories it currently occupies, thereby allowing people in those territories to make their own decisions about the war.
- Stop distorting information and thus interfering with citizens' rights to freely seek out accurate information.

II. Coercion and manipulation

The Human Rights Committee has also noted that the right to freedom of expression includes the right to express oneself “without interference” and “without fear of interference or attack.” Disinformation and propaganda are used to coerce or manipulate individuals into expressing opinions that they would otherwise not hold. This violates individuals’ rights to express themselves without interference or fear of attack.

Beyond simply blocking or disrupting access to accurate information, Russian disinformation efforts actively attempt to shape public opinion in Ukraine in a way that benefits Russia and that completely disregards the right of people to receive truthful information and form opinions without interference.

Russia’s approach is to cast everything that it is doing in a positive light, or “whitewash” its actions by continuously portraying Russia as the hero and protector and denigrating its opponents. For example, this has been done by implicating the Ukrainian government in atrocities they have not committed, while simultaneously undermining citizens’ trust in its capacities. In this way, Russia effectively interferes with public opinion about the events in Ukraine in an effort to manufacture acceptance of its unjustified invasion and the war crimes it has committed. This constitutes a breach of people’s freedom to form opinions without undue interference.

Russian disinformation strategies also actively attempt to create an illusion that Russia’s actions in the war hold popular support in Ukraine and abroad. In this way, they capitalize on their audience’s conformity bias, and manipulate them into accepting and expressing opinions of the alleged majority. Even those who are not fully convinced by these narratives are affected in that they do not feel safe expressing opinions that differ from the perceived majority. This clearly violates the right to freedom of expression in its purest form.

A. Evidence - Narratives

1. The Corrupt, Inept, and Evil Ukrainian Government

According to Russian disinformation, the Ukrainian government’s intentions are malicious and controlled by the West. This was well illustrated in Russian disinformation around the helicopter crash in Brovary in which the leadership of the Ministry of Internal Affairs died. On the one hand, it was portrayed as a “purge” operation to get rid of Zelensky’s loyalists, which signified an intensification of an internal power struggle, but on the other hand, the helicopter was said to have crashed due to procurement negligence and corruption^{xivxv}. By promoting several, sometimes conflicting, narratives, Russia creates confusion which contributes to a general distrust of the government, and makes it is easier to coerce and manipulate Ukrainians. Other examples of these narratives include:

- The Ukrainian government are Nazis^{xvi};
- The Ukrainian army commits atrocities— including deliberately killing children^{xvii}, using civilians as “human shields”^{xviii}, and shelling civilian infrastructure^{xix};
- Ukraine is attacking its own citizens to “set Russia up”^{xx}.

2. Russia as the Protector and Hero

In contrast to Ukraine, Russia is portrayed as a noble protector of Russian speakers and traditional values. These narratives seek to manipulate the truth to make Russia's actions seem righteous and to justify their decision to invade Ukraine.

For example, Russia is portrayed as a power for good in the occupied territories where it is working hard to remedy the “mismanagement” and “atrocities” of the Ukrainian government by efficiently providing humanitarian aid^{xxi} and restoring access to essential services^{xxii}. Even when Russia engages in questionable acts, like shelling critical infrastructure in Ukraine with the goal of depriving civilians of heat, water, and electricity, they alter the truth to portray their actions in a positive light – i.e., as a necessary evil^{xxiii}.

These narratives fail to mention that the Russian invasion is internationally recognized as unprovoked and unjustified, and that the very reason that the occupied regions require humanitarian aid and must be reconstructed is due to Russia's actions. By crafting this alternate reality of a bad, inept Ukraine versus a good and efficient Russia, disinformation coerces people into believing in Russia's strength and even supporting Russia.

Examples of these narratives include:

- Russia is fighting evil and Nazism that have taken over Ukraine^{xxiv};
- The goal of the “special military operation” is the protection of the people of Donbas^{xxv};
- Russia is protecting the true Orthodox faithful against the Ukrainian “sects and satanism”^{xxvi}.

3. Using Sensitive Issues to Justify Child Abductions in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Similarly, the manipulation of information is used to justify the illegal deportation of Ukrainian children from the occupied territories to Russia, which the International Criminal Court (ICC) has recognized as a war crime^{xxvii}. Russian propaganda deliberately exploits the sensitive topic of children's lives and safety to sway emotions, justify its full-scale invasion, and avoid accountability for other human rights abuses. Additional examples of these narratives include:

- Russia's full-scale invasion is revenge for the children of Donbas;
- The children of Donbas are Russian children;
- Ukraine and the West are contributing to the murder of Donbas children, and this is why they need to be ‘saved’ (i.e., deported);
- Donbas children have a better life in Russia than in Ukraine^{xxviii}.

4. Everyone supports Russia

To foster even greater support for Russia, including public expressions of support, disinformation narratives currently suggest that being on Russia's side is the status quo and is the opinion of the majority.

Across Europe, there are allegedly protestors numbering in the thousands demonstrating against supplying arms to Ukraine and support lifting sanctions against Russia (i.e., from Slovakia^{xxix}, France^{xxx}, the Netherlands^{xxxi} etc.). Similarly, in the occupied territories, Russian forces are supposedly welcomed with open arms and cities like Kherson^{xxxii}, Mariupol^{xxxiii}, and Kupiansk^{xxxiv} are celebrating their renewed unity with Russia. Meanwhile, in the rest of Ukraine, the residents are allegedly “waiting for reunification” with Russia^{xxxv}. Even Ukrainian soldiers

taken prisoner by Russia are said to prefer joining the invading forces^{xxxvi}.

This popular support for Russia is allegedly confirmed by the results of pseudo referenda in the occupied territories – which states, according to Russian sources, that 98% of residents of Luhansk oblast voted to join Russia. They have additionally used these “results” to justify the invasion of Ukraine as being “legal under international law”^{xxxvii}.

B. Mechanisms

One of the most popular tactics of Russian manipulation is the “blame game” that assigns blame for all of Russia’s actions to Ukraine and the West. Ultimately, this absolves Russia of blame and creates just enough plausible deniability to manipulate the global conversation. Additionally, so called “false flag” narratives further this idea. Through “false flag” narratives, Russian media or authorities announce that they have uncovered Ukraine’s plans to use banned weapons or attack civilian infrastructure, even though these plans are driven by the Russians. This allows Russia to continuously shift blame for its actions to Ukraine, thus manipulating the public into questioning the Ukrainian position and even supporting Russia.

Especially useful in the “blame game”, but also in Russia’s overall disinformation tactics, is the sudden “discovery” of official documents, which supposedly prove the disinformation narrative true. Most often, these documents are fake or edited to justify the Russian disinformation; at first glance, false information is not always easily identifiable as fake, and the documents often succeed at furthering the legitimacy of the disinformation. For example, this tactic was used to prove that 70% of Mariupol residents were pro-Russian – numerous alleged documents of the Ukrainian Armed Forces suggested as much. However, the documents contained several mistakes which pointed to the fact that they were indeed fake^{xxxviii}.

III. Recommendations

We call on Russia to:

- Stop propagating false narratives of the Ukrainian government as evil and corrupt, and Russia as the protector and hero, which undermines Ukrainian’s confidence in their government and shifts their support to Russia;
- Stop creating and disseminating fake information and shifting blame to Ukraine as a means of justifying Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and denying any responsibility.

III. Creating a Climate of Fear

Disinformation and propaganda are used to create a climate of fear, in which people are afraid to express their true opinions. For example, people may be afraid to speak out against the authorities for fear of retaliation. At the same time, a “climate of fear” creates a constant stressor and contributes to overall confusion and uncertainty, and under such conditions, an individual’s ability to discern accurate information and form opinions is affected. These factors interfere, directly or indirectly, with freedom of expression.

In Ukraine, Russian propaganda thrives on fear – for example, by drumming up fears of escalation, against which only Russia can protect Ukrainian citizens, while also instilling fear of the Ukrainian army and cultivating discrimination from Ukrainian society at large. This acts to discourage individuals’ expressions of dissent against Russia, while also interfering with the public opinion of Ukraine among the residents of occupied territories and thus is a violation of these people’s rights to freedom of expression and opinion.

The same narratives also interfere with public opinion in the rest of Ukraine, and especially target Russian-speaking Ukrainians and ethnic minorities. Disinformation leads them to believe that there are rampant prejudices in Ukrainian society, while also suggesting that they will be persecuted based on their beliefs and ethnicity; this effectively robs them of the ability to form opinions without interference and limits their freedom of expression.

A. Evidence - Narratives

1. Russia is in an existential war against “the West” that is about to escalate

By portraying Russia’s opponent in the war as not only Ukraine, but the entire “collective West”^{xxxix}, disinformation takes on a decidedly “existential” character. Instead of Russia attacking its much smaller neighbor, suddenly the narrative shifts to “Russia against the world”. This reinforces the narratives of Russia as the protector and hero and instills a fear of annihilation in Ukrainian citizens in Russian-occupied territories – which only aligning with Russia can protect them against.

At the same time, the alleged fight against “the West” allows Russian propaganda to capitalize on fears of escalation. This narrative acts on multiple fronts – it seeks to scare Ukrainians in the occupied territories into submission and undermine their resolve to fight by promoting the decision to defend their country as a gateway to more violence and even World War III^{xl}.

2. Threat posed by the Ukrainian Armed Forces and Government

Ukrainian authorities are portrayed as a much more imminent threat than the West. The goal of such narratives is to strengthen an overall feeling of fear and promote Ukrainian distrust towards their government and the armed forces. Examples of these narratives include:

- The residents of de-occupied territories will be prosecuted as collaborators^{xli} – even those who simply received humanitarian aid from the Russians^{xlii};
- People are being “hunted down” and violently mobilized in all regions of Ukraine^{xliii};
- Mobilization summonses are issued to minors^{xliv}.

3. “Russophobia” and other forms of discrimination

A great contributor to the “climate of fear” is the continued insistence of Russian disinformation that Ukraine’s government and society actively discriminate against any ethnicity that is not

Ukrainian. This perceived discrimination also extends to language and religion – aiming to instill a fear of persecution in various minority groups who have peacefully lived in Ukraine for generations. Russian disinformation does not limit itself to ethnic Russians or Russian speakers. It extends to, for example, the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia. Examples of these narratives include:

- After the de-occupation of Kherson, Ukrainian Armed Forces capture and killed all Russian speakers^{xlv};
- Russian orthodox church clergy are being persecuted and the believers will be next^{xlvi};
- Mobilization disproportionately affects Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine^{xlvii};
- The Ukrainian government is mobilizing Hungarian Ukrainians in order to “get rid of them”^{xlviii}.

B. Mechanisms

It is important to recognize that Russian disinformation did not suddenly appear on February 24, 2022, but was preceded by years of Russian efforts to perpetuate propaganda and disinformation, and upon which their wartime campaigns were built. For example, the war against the West narrative that frames Ukraine as a “puppet of the West” dates to the Revolution of Dignity in 2013. By building upon already existing narratives and playing the long game, propagandists ensure that the narratives do not appear “out of the blue,” but are rather attempting to “confirm” their own past allegations. Years of repetitive propaganda establishes a picture in people’s minds of Ukraine as a Western-controlled, Russian-hating entity, and helps reinforce disinformation.

III. Recommendations

We call on Russia to:

- Stop inciting fear with an attempt to restrain people’s ability to freely form opinions without interference, and ultimately limit their freedom of expression.

IV. Incitement of Discrimination, Hostility, and Violence

Disinformation and propaganda actors often resort to hate speech and other discriminatory language to reduce social cohesion and even promote violence. This contributes to the overall climate of fear and distrust in society, while also presenting a real threat to people’s health and

safety. Moreover, as noted previously, along with propaganda for war, advocacy of national, religious, or racial hatred are types of propaganda that are explicitly forbidden under international law and human rights treaties.

Russia has consistently resorted to the use of hate speech and discriminatory language in the war against Ukraine, breaking multiple international conventions. In some cases, this has included direct calls to violence and promotion of hostility. In other cases, it has simply exacerbated pre-existing stereotypes about various groups to sow division in society. In all cases, this constitutes a violation of human rights of Ukrainians and, particularly marginalized groups who are targeted by disinformation.

A. Narratives

1. Dehumanization of Ukrainians

Previous sections of this report showcased the various ways in which Russian disinformation has sought to villainize and dehumanize Ukrainians by painting them as violent aggressors, Nazis, satanists, and even child murderers. This is only the first step in the strategic dehumanization of Ukrainians. By portraying the country as decidedly and irrevocably “evil”, Russia has sought to justify the invasion of Ukraine, and legitimize violence against the Ukrainian people purely on the basis of their nationality, which is one of the features of genocide.

Russian disinformation also directly calls for violence, in direct contradiction to international human rights law, as follows:

- Ukrainian “refugees” coming to Russia should undergo “filtration” to get rid of “nationalists” and “radicals”^{xlix};
- Ukraine needs to undergo “denazification”, which oftentimes seems to suggest ethnic or political cleansing of the Ukrainian population^l.

The narrative of “filtration” is especially concerning. Upon being promoted by the Russian state media and officials, it was also adopted and widely used by Russia’s army in the occupied territories of Ukraine. Any person in possession of Ukrainian symbols or suspected of having pro-Ukrainian views can be detained, beaten, and tortured. There have been instances of forced disappearances and deportations based on such “filtration”^{li}.

2. Using discriminatory language to undermine social cohesion

In addition to more overt discriminatory language and hate speech aimed at Ukrainians, Russian disinformation leans into harmful prejudices and stereotypes to reduce social cohesion and sow division in society. By targeting the most vulnerable groups in society (i.e., religious and/or ethnic minorities, members of the LGBTQIA+ community etc.), disinformation directly endangers individuals that identify with these groups – opening them up to persecution, discrimination, and ostracism. Most often, Russian propaganda juxtaposes Russia’s unique ability to protect “traditional values” against Western degradation.

A popular target of Russian propaganda are Ukrainian refugees abroad, most of whom are women and children. Several narratives portraying them in a negative light are spread both in Ukrainian and host countries’ social media, with the goal of engendering discrimination against this vulnerable group. Some examples of these narratives include:

- Ukrainians that are fighting for “Western values” are openly homosexual^{lii};
- Ukrainian refugee women are engaging in sex work in host countries, and breaking up families^{liii};
- Ukrainian refugees are lazy, ungrateful, and aggressive^{liv}.

II. Mechanisms

Russian disinformation relies heavily on its network of “opinion leaders” and pseudo “experts” who grow their personal wealth by promoting false, discriminatory, and manipulative information. “Political technologists” and other pseudo-scientists appear on the news or are often cited by the media justifying Russia’s actions. They provide “unique” analyses of history, geopolitics, language, and culture that aligns with the state’s position on these matters, and their status as “scientists” is used to legitimize propagandist narratives.

Russia has been very successful in weaponizing culture and religion to magnify their messaging. Religious leaders and the Russian Orthodox Church spread hatred and false information to their congregants – denigrating Ukrainians and ensuring that Russian moral superiority and innocence in the war hold up in the eyes of the public. Propaganda influences every aspect of Russian culture including through film, television, and music and is quickly exported abroad. This ensures that disinformation messages are internalized by most consumers of Russian-language content, including residents of Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries.

III. Recommendations

We call on Russia to:

- Stop targeting Ukrainians with dangerous, hate speech and disinformation and abide by the norms of international law, which prohibit hate speech, incitement to violence and discrimination;
- Desist from using and promoting genocidal rhetoric against Ukrainians and stop state-sponsored channels from spreading violent rhetoric abroad.

V. Interfering in the Ukrainian public’s health and safety

Far from abandoning the tactics tried and tested during the pandemic in its post-invasion disinformation campaign in Ukraine, Russia has built on its COVID-19-era experience and even doubled down on some past narratives.

Heightened levels of uncertainty and fear deeply impact Ukrainians’ ability to make decisions about their own health and safety. This is made ever more challenging when disinformation narratives are deliberately spreading medical disinformation.

With these disinformation narratives, Russia not only blocks access to vital information and contributes to a climate of fear – it also puts people’s lives in more danger, than being in an active war zone warrants, by providing information about health and safety that is plainly inaccurate. This not only breaches people’s right to receive information and not be interfered with when forming opinions – it is dangerously near violating their right to life.

A. Narratives

1. Access to Healthcare

Russian disinformation uses lies and manipulations (i.e., extrapolations of facts and real events) with the intent to cause harm. Narratives intentionally seek to create barriers to accessing medical services. By painting all Ukrainian institutions as corrupt, dangerous, and incompetent, disinformation narratives create fear and uncertainty which discourages Ukrainians from seeking medical care, undermines healthcare infrastructure in Ukraine, and puts people’s lives at risk.

Russia continuously tries to persuade Ukrainians that their healthcare system is deficient by insisting that:

- The healthcare reform ‘killed’ Ukrainian medicine, and is now in a ‘catastrophic’ state, and completely unaffordable for the population^{lv};
- The healthcare system is overstretched and unable to provide services to those who need them – i.e., there are shortages of drugs^{lvi} and ambulances (which are being used by the Army)^{lvii}, and planned hospitalizations are canceled to accommodate the needs of the Armed Forces of Ukraine^{lviii};
- Outbreaks of infectious diseases, like cholera^{lix}, are imminent in Ukraine due to the poor state of medicine.

2. Spreading False Information about Real Health and Safety Risks

Continuing the legacy of COVID-19-related disinformation, Russia persists in sowing chaos and confusion about existing risks to Ukrainians’ health and safety. Once again, this narrative contributes to fostering overall distrust of the Ukrainian medical system, which is painted as either useless or downright malicious. Moreover, by spreading information that is blatantly false about matters pertaining to health, Russia jeopardizes the entire public health system in Ukraine and beyond, and puts people’s lives at risk.

Many of the old COVID-19 narratives still appear in the Ukrainian information space, mainly promoting anti-vaccination sentiments. For example, there was one fake news story stating that Pfizer “admitted” to lying about the benefits of vaccination^{lx}, which was picked up and spread by the Russian media. Another narrative suggested that Monkeypox is a side effect of vaccination^{lxi}.

It was in fact the continued dissemination of health-related disinformation amid the chaos of war that contributed to a rapid decline in vaccination rates in Ukraine. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Europe, out of 35 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines delivered in Ukraine since the beginning of the pandemic, only 4 million doses (11%) have been utilized after the February 24, 2022 invasion. Due to low vaccination rates, there is also a risk of a measles outbreak. These are real risks threatening the health, safety, and livelihoods of Ukrainians, and spreading disinformation that contributes to these risks constitutes a violation of human rights.

B. Mechanisms

Russian propaganda often relies on manipulation, rather than outright falsifications; spreads misleading information through otherwise legitimate Western experts and media; and/or cites reliable-sounding sources that manipulate small portions of a larger story – creating narratives that are rooted in fact, but that falsify key pieces of information.

For example, in promoting the narrative that COVID-19 was created in a US lab, Russian media quoted American academic Jeffrey Sachs. While Sachs had indeed noted that he had “suspicions” regarding the artificial origins of the virus, these claims were not backed up by any evidence; in addition, Sachs is an economist, and thus cannot be considered an authoritative expert on viruses^{lxii}.

C. Recommendations

We call on Russia to:

- Stop spreading false information which may jeopardize Ukrainian’s health and safety and put their lives in danger.
- Ensure free access to accurate public health and safety information in all territories it occupies.

Conclusion

Disinformation is a threat to a peaceful democratic society, even in the best of times. In times of war, it becomes a dangerous and lethal weapon, which Russia uses without regard, as it intentionally jeopardizes human rights to freedom of expression and opinion. Russian propaganda actively violates Ukrainians’ rights to receive and impart information freely, form opinions without undue interference, and express opinions without fear of persecution. In addition, Russia has actively propagated messages that incite violence and discrimination. These tactics have not only violated international law, but have also put lives in jeopardy.

This report outlines the breaches of various international human rights conventions and thus fall fully under the scope of the Universal Periodic Review of Russia. Using this mechanism, we call on Russia to:

1. Ensure uninterrupted access to diverse sources of information for the residents of the Ukrainian territories it currently occupies, thereby allowing people in those territories to make their own decisions about the war.
2. Stop distorting information and thus interfering with citizens' rights to freely seek out accurate information.
3. Stop propagating false narratives of the Ukrainian government as evil and corrupt, and Russia as the protector and hero, which undermines Ukrainian's confidence in their government and shifts their support to Russia.
4. Stop creating and disseminating fake information and shifting blame to Ukraine as a means of justifying Russia's invasion of Ukraine and denying any responsibility.
5. Stop inciting fear with an attempt to restrain people's ability to freely form opinions without interference, and ultimately limit their freedom of expression.
6. Stop targeting Ukrainians with dangerous, hate speech and disinformation and abide by the norms of international law, which prohibit hate speech, incitement to violence and discrimination.
7. Desist from using and promoting genocidal rhetoric against Ukrainians and stop state-sponsored channels from spreading violent rhetoric abroad.
8. Stop spreading false information which may jeopardize Ukrainian's health and safety and put their lives in danger.
9. Ensure free access to accurate public health and safety information in all territories it occupies.

Sources

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