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An infodemic of disinformation regarding COVID-19 in Ukraine

Introduction

During the years 2020-2022, Ukraine, like most countries in the world, was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The first officially confirmed case of infection with the then new virus was recorded in Ukraine on 3 March 2020. By the end of October 2022, almost 5.3 million cases had been detected in Ukraine and 110,000 people died as a result of the infection (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> 29 October 2022). The vaccination campaign against COVID-19 officially began in Ukraine on 24 February 2021 as reported by PHC¹ (2021). The Ukrainian state, as well as Ukrainian society, had to face not only the dramatic course and effects of the pandemic itself, but also an infodemic of disinformation regarding the disease, its origin, course, as well as the actions taken by the authorities to control or at least partially limit the scale of the disease.

After 2020, the information space of Ukraine, like the infospheres of other countries, became a kind of infodemic battlefield, which was filled and saturated with disinformation about the SARS-CoV-2 virus (Demczuk 2021). The term “infodemic” was introduced to public debate by David J. Rothkopf in a 2003 article published in “The Washington Post”, in which he compared the development of the SARS epidemic with the way information about the virus spread. In his analysis, he defined the infodemic as a phenomenon that is a combination of facts, fear, speculation, and rumours, which, reinforced thanks to new technologies, was spreading rapidly around the world, negatively affecting the economy as well as political, national and global security (Rothkopf 2003). D. Rothkopf

¹ PHC = Pulic Health Center of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine (Центр громадського здоров'я Міністерства охорони здоров'я України)

also noticed that the information about the disease itself influenced incomparably more people than did the epidemic that caused it (Zimmer 2020). A similar definition of infodemic has been used since the beginning of 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO), with the emphasis on an excess and oversaturation of information making it difficult or even impossible to effectively find and select true, reliable data and recommendations (WHO 2020).

This analysis is an attempt to clarify specific features of the infodemic in Ukraine, a summary of more than two years in which the information space in Ukraine was consistently saturated with varied (both in terms of form and content) disinformation about COVID-19. It should be noted that this is a country that has been at war with the Russian Federation since 2014, which means that virtually every piece of fake news infiltrating the Ukrainian infosphere should be treated not only as a simple disinformation mechanism in a given thematic area, but also as part of broader action aimed at, among other things, weakening the morale of Ukrainian society and the level of trust in state authorities. This is undoubtedly a feature that distinguishes the Ukrainian infodemic from similar processes that took place during the pandemic in other countries. In this regard, it is possible to put forward a working hypothesis that the Covid infodemic in Ukraine had, first of all, a clear external origin (it was largely a single-source). It was also highly adaptive in nature. This was a function of its role as part of a broader disinformation campaign and part of the hybrid war conducted by the Russian Federation against Ukraine and its inhabitants. Using the information sphere, manipulating messages and creating a false narrative are integral elements of any hybrid aggression (Gorbulin 2017: 19). In this context, the Covid infodemic in Ukraine may be an example of using a non-military factor as a weapon (that is, weaponisation of the infodemic). In order to verify the hypothesis adopted, the text uses analytical and descriptive methods, which is a universal tool for cross-sectional studies.

The basis of the analysis and the main source of key data is information collected as part of several projects aimed at counteracting disinformation and fighting fake news about the COVID-19 pandemic in Ukraine. The first of them, which is global in nature is the *CoronaVirusFacts Alliance*, in which Ukrainian organisations were also actively involved. It contains almost 1,500 records regarding the disinformation infodemic in Ukraine (Poynter Institute for Media Studies 2022). The second one, of a national nature, was *stopfake.org*, launched by lecturers, graduates and students of the journalism school of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy as a platform originally intended to verify information in connection with Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. During the two years of the pandemic, the project collected over 700 records with examples

of disinformation activities related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, this article also uses the resources of other fact-checking groups operating in Ukraine, such as: coronafakes.com, detecor-media.com and armyinform.com.ua. The clear dominance of Ukrainian sources and the use of analyses and studies produced primarily by Ukrainian institutions as the bibliographic basis of the article is deliberate. It allows for the presentation of the Ukrainian perspective, which is one of the main purposes of this article.

The infodemic in Ukraine

The structure of disinformation narratives

The first fake news in Ukraine about COVID-19 appeared at the end of January 2020. Some Ukrainian media then provided incorrect information about the alleged detection of the first case of SARS-CoV-2 virus infection in Ukraine (Zhaha, Slipchenko 2021). Over the next ten months of the pandemic, over 250,000 messages related to COVID-19 that bore the hallmarks of disinformation were detected in the Ukrainian internet ecosystem (media, blogs, forums, social networks and instant messengers). These data come from a report prepared by *SemanticForce* at the request of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) at the end of 2020 (<https://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/ukraine>, 20 May 2021). Based on the results obtained in the study, a map of disinformation narratives was created, which consisted of seven main thematic areas, namely fake news about medical masks, disinformation denying the actual level of epidemic threat, conspiracy theories, fake news about vaccinations, pseudoscientific advice, fake news about COVID-19 detection tests and disinformation about infections and quarantine.

Importantly, in late 2020 and early 2021, the most popular source of information about the pandemic in Ukraine was the Internet, especially social networks (42% of responses in the study conducted by *SemanticForce*). In second place were television channels (26% of responses), while in third place were instant messenger groups (22% of responses). Generally, during the period discussed in this study, every third Ukrainian citizen did not use official sources of information at all, and the level of trust in the Ministry of Health of Ukraine in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic was at the level of 28%. In the second half of 2021, the Ukrainian Centre for Strategic Communications and Information Security (CKS) presented another collective study on disinformation, which directly linked the Covid infodemic in Ukraine with propaganda activities undertaken by the Russian Federation (Ukrainian National

News Agency 2021). The data included in the report cover the period from March 2020 to March 2021 and were collected by several Ukrainian analytical centres and fact-checking teams.

The structure of disinformation narratives about COVID-19 in Ukraine presented below is universal, regardless of what sources of information are analysed at a given moment in terms of infodemic threats. Significantly, in the case of Ukraine, manifestations of the infodemic and outright disinformation could be observed even in programs broadcast by the country's leading television stations such as Inter, "1+1", "ICTV", and "STB". In late 2020 and early 2021, Ukrainian television officially criticised the Ukrainian authorities for abandoning the production and use of the Russian COVID-19 vaccine, spread conspiracy theories about the origin of the coronavirus, deprecated the sense of using protective masks, and speculated on the safety of vaccines offered by Western companies. (Putsyata 2021: 55).

The structure of (COVID) disinformation narratives in Ukraine according to CKS is as follows:

Conspiracy theories

- The coronavirus does not exist, and international organisations that talk about the threat of an epidemic want to make money from Ukrainians.
- The coronavirus is a global conspiracy.
- The coronavirus is a mechanism by which governments want to control population size and actions.
- Coronavirus spreads via 5G technology.
- Bill Gates wants to implant chips in people in order to control them.

False information about vaccines

- The government wants to "vaccinate" everyone with low-quality vaccines.
- Politicians do not tell the whole truth about the vaccine.
- 'Covishield' is of low quality, even African countries have abandoned this product.
- The vaccine causes "mutations".
- The vaccine poses a threat to health and life, which is why doctors refuse to vaccinate.
- COVID-19 vaccinations is carried out for purposes of population control.

Disinformation aimed at discrediting Ukraine as a state, as well as the Ukrainian health care system

- Ukraine is unable to protect its citizens against the pandemic.
- Ukraine cannot provide vaccines to its citizens.
- The vaccine will be "tested" on Ukrainians.
- Ukraine should use the Russian Sputnik V vaccine, but "external curators" do not allow it.
- Health care reform is ineffective and does not bring results.
- "Sorosiata" (lit. 'Soros piglets' – agents working for George Soros) interfere in the activities of Ukrainian health care.
- The West treats Ukraine as a market for its own vaccines.
- The Ukrainian vaccine is just a pre-election PR stunt.
- Ukrainian authorities are manipulating coronavirus statistics.

Very interesting conclusions can also be reached by analysing how the topic of the pandemic was used for propaganda purposes in areas beyond Kyiv's control. The so-called infosphere of the unrecognised republics in eastern Ukraine was saturated by Russian propaganda with a large amount of manipulated information, through the help of which they tried to demonstrate the alleged advantage of Russia and the republic authorities over Ukraine and Western countries in the fight against the pandemic. Disinformation spam present in separatist media contained numerous "examples" intended to confirm Ukraine's institutional failure during the pandemic, the disastrous state of the health service and a high level of corruption in the structures responsible for fighting COVID-19. Additionally, propaganda in the occupied territories of the "republics" intensively linked the development of the pandemic with the alleged activation of military activities by the Ukrainian army, the aim of which was to divert the attention of the inhabitants of Ukraine from the growing problems caused by the scale of COVID-19 cases (DII-Ukraine 2021).

Infodemic of disinformation in Ukrainian channels of the application Telegram

From the point of view of this analysis, the dynamics of the infodemic that is dealt with in the Ukrainian segment of the Telegram messenger is deserving of special attention. In recent years, this messenger has significantly increased its market share and has become one of the basic sources of information for many citizens of both Russia and Ukraine. According to research conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), at present Telegram is, next to Viber and Facebook Messenger, the third most frequently used communication tool in Ukraine (KIIS 2021). Since Russia launched its full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, the importance of this medium has increased immeasurably, and the messenger has become one of the pillars of Russian disinformation strategies (Ling 2022). Importantly, Telegram is not an ordinary messenger. Users of this application can create their own channels completely anonymously and post virtually any type of information on them. From the very beginning, Telegram has been characterised by a very liberal approach to the content posted by users on their channels and there is almost no element of control or moderation. Therefore, the messenger is an ideal tool for spreading disinformation about topics such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Commissioned by the Ukrainian portal *detector-media*, in the period from July 2020 to February 2021, the "Let's data" company collected and analysed

over 440,000 entries shared in the Ukrainian segment of the Telegram messenger. An examination of the results reveals a noticeable and far-reaching similarity (in terms of content) between disinformation about COVID-19 posted on individual channels in the “Ukrainian” Telegram and fake news disseminated in Ukraine by other types of media. Common themes include claims that Ukraine has completely failed in its vaccination efforts, as well as the often repeated accusation that the Ukrainian side gave up the Russian vaccine solely for political reasons, even though using it was completely logical, profitable and could save the lives of many Ukrainian citizens. Fake news was also frequently disseminated in Ukrainian channels in the Telegram application, emphasising that the West treats Ukraine only as a market for its own vaccines, even those of allegedly lower quality. From many “sources” on the messenger, it was possible to learn that the Ukrainian authorities were manipulating epidemic statistics, and the COVID-19 vaccine was actually being used to control society and is an instrument of advanced social engineering (Ілюк 2021: 9-13).

Russian sources, Ukrainian infosphere

The development of the pandemic in Ukraine was also widely written about and discussed in Russia itself. On more than one occasion, disinformation about Ukraine, disseminated on a vast scale in Russian sources became a specific pattern of infodemic manipulation which could later be found in what was theoretically the “Ukrainian” infosphere. Content about Ukraine available, for example, in the Russian press was very often compiled in an almost exemplary way, consistent with the basic definition of infodemic proposed by D. Rothkoph in 2003. True information, such as the sceptical attitude of Ukrainian citizens towards vaccination, was combined with partial confirmation in facts (independent purchase of oxygen by patients and their families) and completely false content such as the mass flight of Ukrainians to Russia in search of an effective vaccine (Burkovskiy 2020).

References to Russian sources were present in the Ukrainian information space, even in a very direct form. For example, in December 2021, during an anti-vaccination demonstration in Kyiv, demonstrators used banners with a QR code on them, which contained a direct link to the website of the Russian political party “United Russia”. The analysis of Russian sources, as well as “Ukrainian” channels spreading disinformation about the coronavirus, makes it possible to conclude that in a situation where a given medium constructs a message not with a Ukrainian recipient in mind, but for a recipient in the

Russian Federation or residents of the occupied territories, the content of the given information changes dramatically. Primitive, negative and fear-inducing disinformation is replaced by a balanced propaganda message encouraging, for example, vaccination and criticising the views of coronavirus sceptics and anti-vaxxers.

Russian and pro-Russian sources of information – the dichotomy of propaganda messages

Message directed to Ukraine	Message directed to Russia
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vaccinations mean death • the vaccine is extremely dangerous • Ukrainian authorities are trying to mutilate children as part of a new phase of vaccination • vaccinations are a form of coercion that violates human rights • appeals such as “think and give up vaccination” • spreading fake news and conspiracy theories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vaccination is necessary to limit the spread of coronavirus • vaccination is completely safe, and “Sputnik-M” will be produced for children • appeals encouraging vaccination at every level of citizen-state communication • Russia delivers vaccines to various parts of the world, saving many lives

Source: Centre for Counteracting Disinformation at the National Council of National Remembrance Council (<https://cpd.gov.ua>)

Ukrainian society vis a vis the pandemia and infodemia

In early May and late June 2020, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) published one of the first sociological studies in Ukraine, in which respondents were asked about the origin of the coronavirus and its spread around the world. The majority of Ukrainian citizens surveyed believed that the coronavirus was of artificial origin (66%) and as many as 37% of respondents believed that it was not only specially developed, but also deliberately disseminated in order to reduce the world’s population or against some particular country. The remaining 29% of those who believed in the artificial origin of the coronavirus limited themselves to stating that it had been grown in a laboratory, but that its spread had been accidental. Only 18% of respondents believed that the coronavirus originated naturally and later spread naturally around the world (KIIS 2020).

In turn, in an August 2021 survey, only 23.4% of surveyed Ukrainian citizens mentioned the vaccine as an effective protective mechanism against COVID-19. Practically the same result was achieved by preventive measures, such as taking vitamins (22.3%). Most respondents gave the first place in this specific ranking to washing their hands after coming home (54%). The survey

results clearly confirmed that Ukrainian society had a negative attitude towards vaccination against COVID-19 at that time. Over 56% of respondents openly admitted that they were not vaccinated and did not intend to take even a single dose of the preparation. As a result, as reported by DIF² in September 2021, the vaccination rate in Ukraine did not exceed 20% in any age group (DIF 2021).

When asked about the reasons for not getting vaccinated, those surveyed in Ukraine first pointed to the insufficient level of vaccine safety (in their opinion) (from 43% to 57% depending on the age group), and then to the occurrence of side effects (from 38% up to 49% depending on the age group), as well as pressure from state structures (from 21% to 36% depending on the age group). Fourth on the list of reasons for refraining from vaccination was the belief that it would not protect them from catching COVID-19 (from 26% to 35% depending on the age group) (DIF 2021). In general, Ukrainian society, in late 2021 and early 2022, was also characterised by a high level of scepticism towards vaccines, and none of the official campaigns promoting prevention against the coronavirus were able to change this situation. According to data from the end of October 2022, 16.1 million citizens in Ukraine received at least one dose (calculating from the beginning of the vaccination campaign) of a COVID-19 vaccine. Just over 2.5 million were vaccinated with the first booster dose, and 75,000 received the second (PHC 2022).

Summary

It is impossible to say clearly how many coronavirus sceptics and vaccine opponents in Ukraine were victims of the infodemic of disinformation about COVID-19, which was inspired and directed by Russia. Undoubtedly, the Covid infodemic in Ukraine was different from similar trends that shaped the information space of other countries around the world in 2020-2022. From the very beginning, the COVID-19 infodemic in Ukraine was one of many areas of massive propaganda influence, the main goal of which was and remains to weaken and discredit the Ukrainian state as such. Covid disinformation was therefore not a plan in itself, but a very significant escalation of the hybrid component of Russian aggression against Ukraine, which has been ongoing since 2014. It can also be said that the fight against fake news regarding COVID-19 in Ukraine was a kind of prelude to actions, which this country was

² DIF = Ілко Кучерів Democratic Initiatives Foundation (Фонд Демократичні ініціативи імені Ілька Кучеріва)

forced to undertake in the information sphere after 24 February 2022. The successes that Ukraine has achieved in the information war with Russia after this date lead to the conclusion that Kyiv has learned well the lessons of the infodemic in the years 2020-2021.

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Keywords: infodemic, disinformation, COVID-19, Ukraine, Russia

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyse the phenomenon of infodemic in terms of disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic that shaped the Ukrainian infosphere in the years 2020-2022. The considerations contained in the text focus mainly on the specific features of the issue, and are an attempt to answer the question of how much disinformation regarding COVID-19 in Ukraine differed from analogous trends shaping the internal situation and the infosphere in other countries around the world. The article presents a working thesis that the covid infodemic in Ukraine had, first of all, a clear external provenance (largely a single-source), as well as a highly adaptive nature, as a function and element of a wider disinformation campaign carried out by the Russian Federation towards Ukraine and its inhabitants. The analysis presented made it possible to identify the main elements characteristic of the disinformation infodemic in Ukraine and confirm the dependence of the phenomenon analysed on an external factor, that is the influence of the Russian Federation.