



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Humour as a strategic tool against disinformation: Ukraine's response to Russia

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Introduction

Ukraine has been a target of Russian state-sponsored disinformation campaigns since at least 2013, preceding Russia's first military invasion.

The goal of these campaigns is to weaken the Ukrainian state and its international support, to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and national security. These efforts culminated in 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, using as pretext disinformation narratives that it had spread in previous years, such as an alleged need to "de-Nazify" Ukraine.

Ukraine has managed to resist Russian attacks on the battlefield and in the information space. In the first year and a half since the full-scale invasion, Kremlin disinformation campaigns failed to break unity inside the country or to have a significant impact on Ukraine's support from the West. Instead, Ukraine has reacted and exposed Russian information warfare – largely thanks to the capacity built since 2014. Both Ukrainian government and civil society actively communicated with the outside world via the digital space, using humour as a powerful tool to get their message across.

This paper examines Ukraine's use of humour as a tool of strategic communications and to counter Russian disinformation since 2014, with a focus on the post-full-scale invasion period. Drawing on numerous examples of Ukrainians using humour, as well as on interviews with Ukrainian and foreign experts, it explores the significance of memes and jokes in Ukraine's communication and anti-disinformation strategy.

It argues that humour was crucial for fostering unity inside the country against the Russian invaders, and for evoking solidarity with Ukraine among foreign audiences.

Humour and satire were used by both governmental and non-governmental Ukrainian actors as 'soft power' tools to reach out to wider-than-usual audiences, and to expose the absurdity of Russia's imperialist ideology and propaganda which prompted the invasion. They helped to ridicule failures of the Russian army, perceived as "the second strongest in the world" before the invasion, and "the second strongest in Ukraine" since. Ukraine supporters abroad also resorted to humour to call out lies of Russian officials and its disinformation online, as well as to raise funds for Ukraine.

However, as this research shows, not all of Ukraine's attempts at using humour have been successful. There were some notable failures to connect with foreign audiences, especially in the Global South. Gallows humour, which often helped Ukrainians cope with trauma, was seen as inappropriate by some people abroad. This paper offers expert advice on what can go wrong and how to avoid mistakes when using humour.

Ukraine's experience in resisting Russia's information warfare shows that humour can be an efficient tool to counter disinformation. Ukraine has been a pioneer in using "strategic humour" and pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable in diplomatic digital communication. That said, humour is not a silver bullet and should be used in combination with other tools.

Russian disinformation campaigns against Ukraine before and after 2022: an overview

It is an open secret that Russia is using systemic, state-sponsored disinformation campaigns to achieve its geopolitical goals in various parts of the globe.^{1, 2} Ukraine has been a primary target of such campaigns since at least late 2013. They intensified after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In November 2013, the Revolution of Dignity (pro-democracy, anti-corruption protests) started in Kyiv and spread across Ukraine. They culminated in February 2014 after dozens of protesters were killed by pro-government special forces in Kyiv and pro-Kremlin president Yanukovich escaped to Russia. In response to the victory of Ukraine's pro-democracy forces, Russia illegally annexed Crimean Peninsula in March 2014 and used its proxy forces to launch an invasion of Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Eastern Ukraine.

During the Revolution of Dignity, Russian state media started a massive disinformation campaign about protests in Ukraine. Protesters, who represented different regions and social strata, and spoke both Ukrainian and Russian, were branded as "Nazis". False information about Kyiv streets being trashed by marauders was disseminated by Russian government-controlled media.

Russia's partial invasion of Ukraine in 2014 went hand-in-hand with a huge disinformation effort. Russian government and media lied about the identity of soldiers who seized government buildings in Crimea, presenting Russian military personnel as "little green men" who came from nowhere. In order to stroke tensions in Eastern Ukraine and mobilize support for Russia, they tried to convince local residents that the Ukrainian government was going to infringe upon their rights and attack civilians. Russian TV, which was still accessible in Ukraine, broadcast propaganda about alleged crimes of the Ukrainian army.

¹ Bjola, Corneliu (2018). The Ethics of Countering Digital Propaganda. *Ethics & International Affairs* 32 (3) 305–15 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ethics-and-international-affairs/article/ethics-of-countering-digital-propaganda/DF393C0793F31EE0940E9208E24CB6A8>

² Kalensky, Jakub (2022). How to Defend Against Covid Related Disinformation. In: Gill, R., Goolsby, R. (eds) *COVID-19 Disinformation: A Multi-National, Whole of Society Perspective*, 165-199. Advanced Sciences and Technologies for Security Applications. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94825-2_7

Probably the most blatant example of this was a fake story about a “crucified boy”, aired by Russian main TV Channel One in July 2014. “Reporters” interviewed a woman who claimed that a 3-year-old boy was allegedly crucified by Ukrainian soldiers in the central square in Sloviansk, Donetsk region. It was established by independent journalists several weeks later that this had never happened and the woman who featured in a Russian TV report was a paid actor.

However, the Kremlin’s disinformation efforts to discredit Ukraine were not only targeting audiences in Ukraine and Russia; many Ukraine-related disinformation campaigns in and after 2014 focused on swaying the public abroad. Up until 2022, Russia was able to build a well-developed global infrastructure of state-sponsored media targeting foreign audiences, such as RT, Sputnik, TASS, in addition to a network of websites in different languages, and local outlets in various countries spreading Kremlin narratives.

One of the most prominent Russian disinformation campaigns prior to 2022 was related to the downing of the civilian Malaysian Airlines jet over Eastern Ukraine in July 2014. Almost 300 people, travelling on Flight MH17 from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, were killed. Russian state media and various online and social media channels came up with dozens of conspiracy theories about what might have caused the crash. Most of them blamed Ukraine for a missile attack on the aircraft, but more sophisticated conspiracies claimed that all passengers on board were already dead before the plane fell from the sky. A Dutch court [ruled in late 2022](#) that MH17 was shot down by a Russian missile on direct orders from the Kremlin.³ It took eight years to establish the truth in court, and, in all those years, Russian media and Kremlin’s foreign agents of influence continued to deny Moscow’s involvement and blame Ukraine.

The goal of this, and other Kremlin disinformation campaigns related to Ukraine, was (and largely still is) the following:

1. to mislead foreign audiences about the real situation in Ukraine so that a confused public loses interest;
2. to deny Russia’s involvement in the annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas, and, since 2022, in committing numerous war crimes in Ukraine after the full-scale invasion;

³ Dutch court finds two Russians, one Ukrainian separatist guilty over downing of flight MH17 <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/17/europe/mh17-trial-verdict-intl/index.html>

3. to undermine international support for Ukraine, a country facing military aggression and violation of its sovereignty and borders by a powerful neighbour;
4. to distract the attention from the fact that the territory of a sovereign country has been illegally annexed for the first time in Europe since the World War Two;
5. to soften international reaction to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and depict sanctions against Russia as detrimental for countries imposing them.

Since its founding in 2015, [EU vs Disinformation](#), the EU Strategic Communications division countering pro-Kremlin propaganda, has collected more than 6,500 individual cases of Russian disinformation targeting Ukraine.⁴ This is over 40% of all cases in its database. Between 24 February 2022 and 1 July 2023, it identified 1,407 instances of Ukraine-related disinformation.

In general, since 2014, Russian disinformation about Ukraine revolved around several recurring narratives. Most of them are unfounded, but were mentioned in a speech by Russian president Putin when he announced the launch of a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Here are some main disinformation narratives:

- Ukraine is a country that is ruled by Nazis and needs to be de-Nazified;
- Ukrainian army and the government have been killing civilian population and "committing genocide" in Donbas since 2014;
- Ukraine is the same as Russia and it doesn't have a right to exist as an independent state;
- Ukraine discriminates against ethnic Russians and Russian speakers;
- Ukraine is a puppet of the West and a failed state, and therefore its current government needs to be brought down.

What was clear to much of the world since 2014 became crystallized after February 2022: Russia is using information as a weapon. The genocidal rhetoric about Ukraine on Russian state-controlled TV – where presenters, guests and journalists

⁴ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>

repeatedly denied its right to exist and dehumanizingly compared Ukrainians to “cockroaches” – resulted in real-life mass executions of Ukrainian civilians by the invading Russian military forces.

The rhetoric of Russian propaganda since the full-scale invasion was nothing new, Jakub Kalensky, deputy director of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) in Helsinki, Finland, told me.

“[Russian media said that] Ukrainians are the same as Russians; Ukraine is not a real state; Ukrainian is not a language; Ukrainians don’t have a right to exist and, if they do, then only as ‘little Russians’. [...] The narratives seem to be very much the same, but the tone [since the start of the full-scale invasion] has become more aggressive, genocidal, Nazi-like.”

To this day, Russian outlets – both traditional and widely popular online media – continue to depict Ukrainians as Nazis who deserve to be exterminated (or, in the best-case scenario, acceptable only as “re-educated Russians”), deny Russian war crimes, and incite hatred towards the West.

Russian disinformation campaigns [focus on influencing public opinion](#) in various countries to weaken international support for Ukraine and to encourage a return to “business as usual” with the Kremlin. They are partially successful, despite the fact that Russia’s war has terrible repercussions for many countries of the globe, whose food security is affected by the destruction of Ukraine’s agricultural facilities and grain stores.

While some steps have been taken to disrupt this massive-scale state-ordered disinformation effort by the Kremlin (for example, by banning RT in the EU, Canada and the UK), they are not nearly enough. At the time of writing, in September 2023, Russia continues to spread disinformation about its war against Ukraine globally, via its government-controlled media, which still operate in many countries (especially in the Global South), but also through a network of agents of influence and prominent amplifiers abroad. This has been facilitated by an increasingly lax approach to countering online disinformation of some Big Tech companies.

According to [an EU report](#) from August 2023, Russian propaganda about Ukraine flourished on Twitter (now known as X, following Elon Musk’s takeover).

Ukraine's response to Russia's full-scale information war

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military attack on Ukraine, and, at the same time, ramped up its information war. However, just as it did on the battlefield, Ukraine managed to resist and respond to Russian information aggression. Thanks to efficient communication by the government, but also to proactive use of digital tool by its vibrant civil society, Ukraine managed to mobilize significant support of the international community.

The role of journalists in exposing Russian atrocities in Ukraine is also hard to overestimate. Especially in the early stage of the invasion, foreign journalists were encouraged by the government to report freely from Ukrainian-controlled territories. The situation was very different in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine or in contested areas, where journalists were often seen as legitimate targets by Russian soldiers. More than a dozen journalists [have been killed](#) while working in Ukraine since February 2022. Among them are many experienced war reporters such as Maksym Levin, Pierre Zakrzewski, Brent Renaud and Arman Soldin.

The full-scale nature of the war on Ukraine was made obvious by Russia's willingness to use information as a weapon and to dedicate as many resources to fighting in the information space as on the battlefield. An important challenge for journalists, as well as for Ukrainian officials and civil society, was therefore not only to inform the public abroad about what was happening on the ground, but also to refute lies, conspiracies and disinformation coming from the Russian government, media, and agents of influence.

This was made manifest after dead bodies and mass graves of civilians were discovered in Bucha after the retreat of Russian occupying forces in April 2022. While reporters on the ground were filing photographic and video evidence of these horrific crimes, Russian officials kept denying they had ever happened and saying the images were staged. This narrative (questioning the Bucha massacre), was picked up not only by conspiracy-spreading foreign outlets, but even by some formerly [reputable journalists](#) in Western countries such as Italy.⁵

⁵ <https://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2022/04/21/news/le-fake-news-su-bucha-di-toni-capuozzo-spopolano-su-facebook-3930983/>

With the world's eyes focused on Ukraine, Ukrainian journalists and social media users seized the moment to reach out to a foreign audience. They were not only talking about their daily suffering and acts of bravery and resistance, but also about Ukraine's history, culture, art, and the incredible transformation the country has undergone since achieving its independence in 1991 – particularly since the 2014 Revolution of Dignity.

As some people I spoke with in the UK told me: Ukraine only became clear in their minds as a separate country – different from Russia and with its unique identity – just after February 2022. Millions of people discovered Ukrainians' bravery, creativity, and willingness to defend their freedom and democracy, even at the cost of their own lives.

An important, albeit unexpected feature of Ukraine's communication with foreign audiences was the extensive use of humour, satire and memes. Corneliu Bjola, Associate Professor in Diplomatic Studies at the University of Oxford, told me: "If you asked Western audiences what they knew about Ukraine one year ago, I don't think they knew much. Humour introduced Ukrainians in a positive way."

Bjola believes the use of humour helped evoke global solidarity with Ukrainians after the invasion. "There is an element of resilience, there is something interesting about this country and these people, if they're still able to make good jokes, despite the bad situation in which they have found themselves," he said.

A brief history of Ukrainian humour in response to Russian disinformation

In the international press, there is a tendency to present Ukrainian war humour against the backdrop of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky's former career as a comedian.

Before winning the election in 2019, he was the protagonist of a hit TV comedy series, *Servant of the People*. And Zelensky's comedy group, Studio Kvartal 95, has been performing political satire shows for years.

However, the real situation is more nuanced than that: humour and satire have been used widely as acts of defiance against Russian aggression since 2014. And it has been used by many – not just the president or the government – long before Zelensky came to power. It became a real phenomenon that united all segments of Ukrainian society: social media users, journalists, and officials alike.

There is also a long tradition of using humour and satire in Ukrainian literature and popular culture – especially during hard times. One historic example is Ivan Kotliarevsky's *Eneida*, a burlesque epic poem and satirical interpretation of Virgil's *Aeneid*. It was the first literary work in the modern Ukrainian language, published in 1798 in Tsarist Russia, which controlled parts of modern-day Ukraine. Ukrainian was widely spoken by the local population, but the publishing of books and education in Ukrainian was restricted by the Russian empire and ultimately fully banned in 1873.

Another example that illustrates Ukrainians' historic attitude to humour is a quote from a poem by early 20th century writer Lesia Ukrainka: "I laughed in order not to cry". This attitude has been adopted by many generations of Ukrainians. Humour helped to keep people's spirits up throughout Ukraine's tragic and turbulent history, which has – in the 20th century alone – been marked by five attempts to proclaim independence, two world wars, Stalin's artificial famine Holodomor and communist repressions, all of which killed millions of Ukrainians.

Therefore, it was not entirely unexpected that Ukrainians would resort to humour when yet another tragedy was unleashed on them by Russia's war. It was there in 2014, despite Ukraine being completely unprepared for both conventional war and Russia's information warfare. As with many things in Ukraine, it started from bottom up: first citizens and civil society spontaneously responded with satire, then

the media and, finally, the government reacted, integrating humour as part of its strategic communications.

As Maksym Kyiak from Foreign Policy Council (FPC) ‘Ukrainian Prism’ wrote:

“During the first phases of the war, civil and military volunteers, and the Ukrainian diaspora took the place of the official Ukrainian authorities’ in countering Russia’s attack both on the battlefield and in the information space, where a horizontally organized Ukrainian civil society ‘had to combat Russia’s vertically constructed propaganda machine’.”

Fact-checking organisations emerged for the first time in Ukraine in 2014 as a response to Russian invasion and a massive inflow of disinformation. One of them, Stop Fake, became a pioneer in detecting and debunking Russian propaganda, working first for the Ukrainian audience, and then expanding to include different language editions on its website. Stop Fake was a model for other similar organisations across the EU that emerged in the following years, as an awareness grew about the danger Kremlin disinformation machine poses for the West.

Alongside fact-checkers, who worked to verify and debunk Russian disinformation about Ukraine in a serious and reliable tone, came Ukrainian social media users and traditional media: reaching out to wider audiences to warn them about Russian propaganda using humour, memes and satirical TV shows.

Following the Russian aggression of 2014, there was an increase in number of political satire shows. FPC’s Kyiak names various political satire TV shows that emerged aiming to mock and counter Russian propaganda, including *LIEF News* and *Antizombie* on ICTV Channel, *VestiKremlia (KremlinNews)* and *Vesti.ua* on Channel 24, and *JuntaNews* and *VataNews* on Espresso TV. Most of them were short-lived.

On YouTube, political satire channel *Toronto TV* has been gaining popularity with 869,000 subscribers as of September 2023. It has been increasingly focused on exposing and ridiculing Russian disinformation about Ukraine, especially after the full-scale invasion.

The Ukrainian government also began to use humour in its communication strategy, especially in the international arena. Ukraine got its official Twitter account in May 2016 and has produced a lot of memorable and viral content since.

As [Yahoo News](#) wrote:

“@Ukraine has been engaging in “twiplomacy” in a similarly self-deprecating, sardonic tone, making consistent use of GIFs and emojis. Some tweets highlight Ukraine’s natural beauty and national holidays (“#BeautifulUkraine”), while others enter the diplomatic fray, at times sarcastically trolling official Russian accounts.”

In one famous 2017 tweet, Ukraine’s account reacted to Putin’s assertion that Franco-Russian relations date back to an 11th century French queen whom he called “Russian Ani”. @Ukraine promptly responded to the Russian revisionism, clarifying that it was in fact “Kyiv Rus” Princess Anna (also known as Anne de Kiev), who married French King Henry I in 1051... when Moscow did not yet exist.

Ukraine / Україна @Ukraine

When [@Russia](#) says Anne de Kiev established Russia-France relations, let us remind the sequence of events

1051: Anna Yaroslavna (Anne de Kiev) was a French queen consort as wife of Henry I in 1051-1060. The famous Reims Gospel, which was used during coronation ceremonies of the French royals, originally was Anna’s own book from the library of her father Yaroslav the Wise, the Grand Prince of Kyiv.

1051: Meanwhile, in Moscow...

7:02 AM · May 30, 2017

258 replies 5,612 retweets 7,410 likes 17 bookmarks

Screengrab of May 2017 Twitter exchange

An exchange with Russia’s official account followed, outlining Russia’s attempts to appropriate the history of Ukraine and spread historical falsehoods.



Screengrab of May 2017 Twitter exchange

Yarema Dukh, who was in charge of Ukraine’s official Twitter account at the time as a member of Ukraine’s presidential administration communications team, told me: “These tweets had some fantastic engagement: even the BBC and CNN reported about it. That’s when we realised using humour really works.”

Yarema recalls that the idea to create Ukraine’s official Twitter account was driven by a desire to counter Russian disinformation with the limited means Ukraine had.

“We understood we would never have budgets similar to those Russia has for its propaganda and disinformation machine. Creating state-sponsored media didn’t look like a right way to go either. So our idea was to reach the widest audience with information about Ukraine, having a very small budget.”

Currently, Ukraine's official Twitter (X) account has 2.3 million followers, with some of its humorous tweets becoming truly iconic.



Screengrab of tweets posted in June 2020 and December 2021

Ukrainian use of humour since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022

The predominant emotion during the first days of Russia's full-scale war was not fear, but anger. Ukrainians were angry that Russia dared to invade, bomb Ukrainian cities, deny Ukrainians' right to exist. Ukrainians were not afraid of Russians and rose to resist partially driven by this anger: by outrage, by shock and determination to defend what is rightfully theirs – their country, their lives, their loved ones, their property and their freedom to choose how to live and whom to be partners with.

Due to historical links, geographical proximity and widespread knowledge of Russian language, Ukrainians understood the internal Russian context much better than many foreigners did. They knew about corruption, inefficiency, poverty and moral decay in Russia. When the Russian army – unexpectedly for most of the world, but not for Ukrainians – started to show exactly these traits, and its attack on Kyiv and northern Ukraine failed, Ukrainians used humour to mock and ridicule it.

In the very first days of the Russian invasion, several acts of resistance became powerful symbols of the Ukrainians' outstanding bravery and courage in the face of a reportedly bigger, better-equipped enemy.

The first was a radio conversation between a Ukrainian border guard on Serpent Island in the Black Sea, and an officer from an approaching Russian warship, demanding Ukrainians' surrender. "Russian warship, go f*ck yourself," was the response from a Ukrainian border guard, and it immediately became a meme. The audio went viral, and the story was covered by major international media. Later, Ukrainian mail services released a stamp which sold out in hours and is now a precious item on every philatelist's collection.



Stamp released by Ukraine Mail Services to commemorate Serpent Island incident

Another symbolic act of resistance was captured on video in Henichesk, in the southern Kherson region, which Russian troops managed to occupy in the very first days of the invasion.

The local population organised protests and didn't hesitate to show their attitude to the invaders initially (before Russians launched large-scale persecution and torture of Ukrainians there). In a video that went viral, an elderly Ukrainian woman asks a Russian soldier:

“What are you doing here? You are invaders, you are fascists... At least put some sunflower seeds in your pockets so that something good can grow out of you when you die here.”

This conversation was a powerful demonstration that Ukrainians, even in Russian-speaking Southern parts of the country, were not willing to live under Russian occupation or greet invading soldiers with flowers, as the Kremlin – and even some foreign observers – expected. A sunflower became one of the symbols of Ukrainians' resistance, with many foreign dignitaries and social media users using it to show their support for Ukraine.

Probably the most impressive collection of memes on social media was produced by Twitter account [Ukrainian Meme Forces](#). Established in February 2022, it now has more than 300,000 followers and its content often goes viral.



Screengrab of a meme posted on Twitter by Ukrainian Meme Forces

Sometimes, jokes that originated from Ukrainian citizens on social media were later repeated by government officials. For example, in this interview with American TV presenter David Letterman, president [Zelensky told him a joke](#) that had been making the rounds in Ukraine for a while.

*“Two Jewish guys from Odesa meet up. One asks the other:
‘So what’s the situation? What are people saying?’
‘What are people saying? They are saying it’s a war.’
‘What kind of war?’
‘Russia is fighting NATO’.
‘Are you serious?’
‘Yes, yes! Russia is fighting NATO.’
‘So how’s it going?’
‘Well, 70,000 Russian soldiers are dead. The missile stockpile has almost been depleted. A lot of equipment is damaged, blown up.’
‘And what about NATO?’
‘What about NATO? NATO hasn’t even arrived yet.’”*

Another joke that originally went viral on Ukrainian social media was later repeated by the [NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg](#):

“The starting point is that the Russian army used to be the second strongest in the world. And now the Russian army is the second strongest in Ukraine.”

Meanwhile, Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelensky uses thinly veiled satire addressed at Russia in his video messages, recorded and published daily since the start of the full-scale invasion. He also often resorts to humour in communication with international media.

During a press briefing with the prime minister of Denmark Mette Frederiksen in August 2023, Zelensky was asked whether Ukraine was ready to swap any of its territories for prospective NATO membership – a scenario that has been repeatedly rejected by the Ukrainian government and citizens since the start of the full-scale invasion. Zelensky answered:

“We are ready to swap Belgorod.”

The audience gasped before bursting into laughter: the joke was understandable to Ukrainians and people deeply familiar with the local context, but it might have been harder to decipher for others.

Belgorod is a region in Russia, bordering Ukraine, populated by many ethnic Ukrainians and where pro-Ukrainian insurgents have been challenging local authorities for a while. Zelensky's Belgorod quip is an example of an "in-joke": something Ukrainian audiences can easily relate to, but that might be less understandable for foreigners.

Another example of a similar in-joke is the *bavovna* (cotton) meme: a cotton flower is frequently featured in various memes shared by Ukrainians and even foreign officials, such as [the UK former ambassador to Kyiv](#).



Examples of memes deriding Russia's use of a word with dual meaning (cotton, bang) to explain the demolition of their weapons stores.

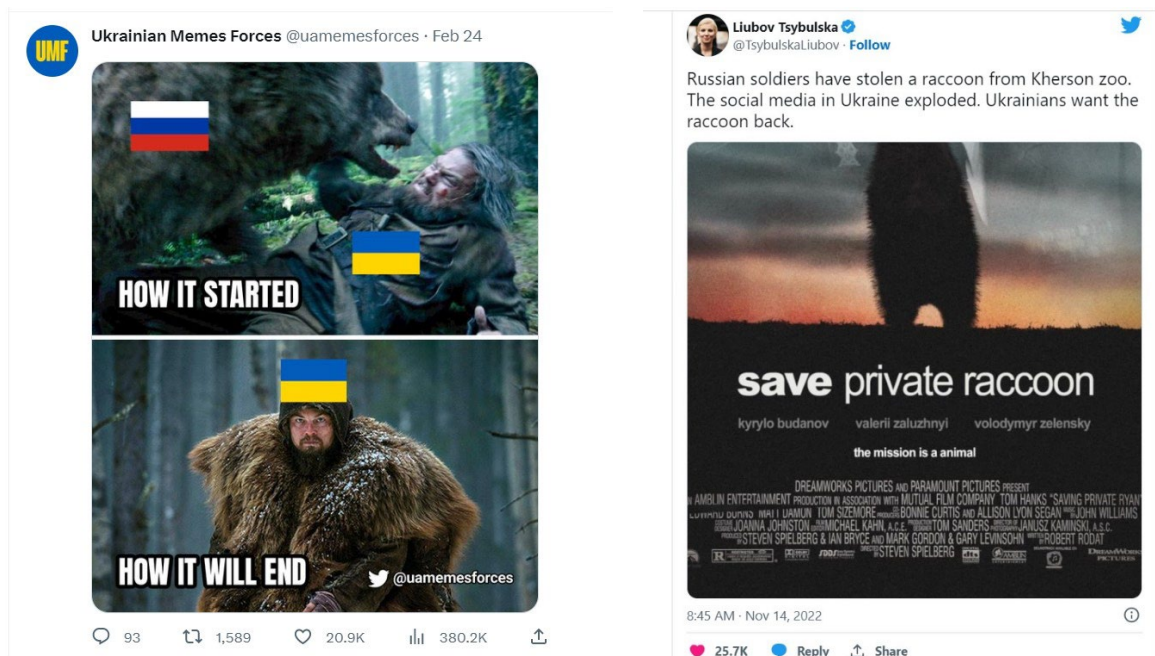
It has become a euphemism for the explosion of Russian military objects in the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine. *Bavovna* is a word play meme that [emerged](#) in reaction to Russian officials' attempts to downplay the significance of Ukrainian long-range artillery strikes on Russian military targets in occupied Crimea in the summer of 2022.

They used a word *khlopok* (a bang, a clap) to refer to explosions and said they were caused by someone illegally smoking next to ammunition depots, not by Ukrainian strikes. The word *khlopok* in Russian means both 'a clap' or 'a bang'... but also 'cotton' (with a different accented syllable).

The Ukrainian translation of *khlopok* is *'bavovna'*. By referring to *'bavovna'* in Crimea and elsewhere in the Russian-controlled territory of Ukraine, people were making fun of Russian media and officials who hide their military failures, invent ridiculous excuses, and use double-speak to distort facts.

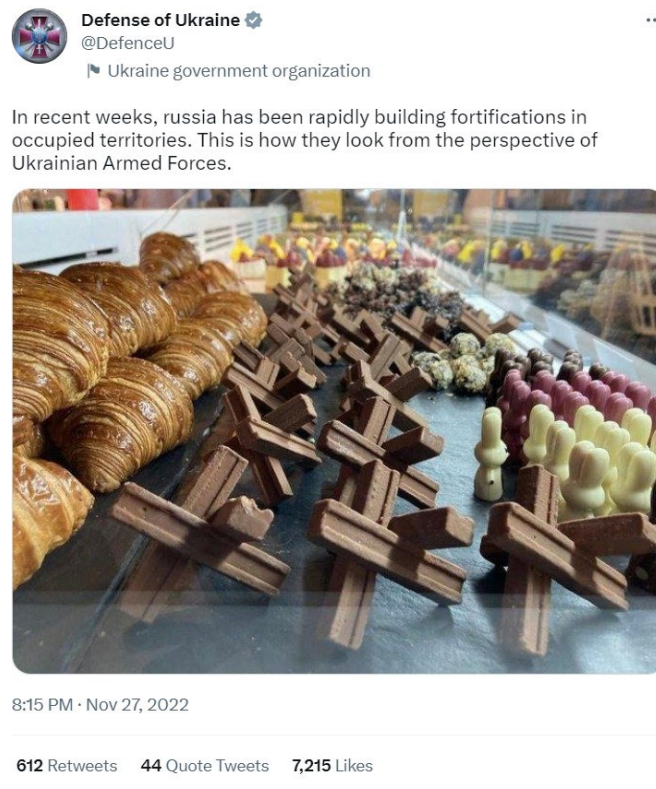
The word *'bavovna'* in reference to strikes on Russian military targets has firmly entered the vocabulary of Ukrainians and is still used by social media users, officials and [the media](#).

It's not all in-jokes: Ukrainians have also been skilful in the use of memes and cultural codes that are familiar to global audiences to reach out to them and mobilise support. References to cult movies like *The Revenant* and *Saving Private Ryan* worked well in this respect.



From left: Screenshots from The Revenant showing actor Leonardo Di Caprio being attacked by a bear, then wearing the bear's skin by the end of the movie. And (right) the movie poster for Saving Private Ryan is adapted to show a Raccoon's torso, with the title changed to "Save Private Raccoon"

Ukrainian official accounts, for example the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (@MFA_Ukraine) and Ministry of Defence (@DefenceU), frequently shared content on X (Twitter) that was understandable and appealing to international audiences.



A tweet from the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine shows a display case at Honey Café bakery in Kyiv, selling chocolate versions of anti-tank hedgehogs. The tweet says (paraphrased) "this is how your fortifications look to us".

A member of a volunteer group who creates this type of content for Ukraine's government social media accounts, Nadiya (real name changed to protect identity), told me:

"The idea was to put an utmost effort into ensuring that support for Ukraine would not falter. We understood that humour was key to achieve this goal. We just reflected what the Ukrainian society was doing. It was crying and laughing, and creating some fantastic content at the same time [...] We wanted to show that Ukrainians are closer to the West than many think, that we are a part of the same cultural sphere. We listen to the same music, we know your heroes, we read the same books. Therefore, war in Ukraine is much closer than you think."

While this Western-centric approach taken by Ukrainians is questionable (and in fact, attempts to engage with audiences in the Global South have been less successful, as discussed below), they indeed managed to inspire many foreign social media users to use humour as a tool to express support to Ukraine, and counter Russian disinformation online.

It resulted in a creation of NAFO (the North Atlantic Fella Organization, which is a play on NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization), described by [Politico](#) as a “shit posting, Twitter-trolling, dog-deploying social media army taking on Putin one meme at a time”.⁶



An example of a NAFO dog meme, which borrows from the Shiba Inu dog meme

Twitter cartoon dogs are used to call out lies of Russian officials and ridicule Kremlin’s disinformation about Ukraine and the war, all while raising money for the Ukrainian military.

The former president of Estonia declared that he was “a fella”, and a former Ukrainian defence minister thanked them for their support, tweeting the movement’s slogan “NAFO expansion is non-negotiable”.

NAFO’s popularity spilled over offline, too: the first official NAFO Summit was held in Vilnius just ahead of the NATO summit in July 2023.

Another meme-spawning fundraising initiative, Saint Javelin, was launched by a Canadian-Ukrainian former journalist, Christian Borys. On X, Saint Javelin has [more than 170,000 followers](#).

⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/article/nafo-doge-shiba-russia-putin-ukraine-twitter-trolling-social-media-meme/>

Saint Javelin does not only makes memes online; it manufactures merchandise with them. The most famous example of this is the brand's logo, Saint Javelin of Ukraine: an icon-style picture of Virgin Mary holding a Javelin portable anti-tank missile, one of the first Western weapons supplied to Ukraine.



Saint Javelin's logo, a play on the Virgin Mary iconography featuring an anti-tank missile launcher

Since its creation in early 2022, Saint Javelin has raised and donated over \$2 million in support of Ukraine, according to its founder.

Why humour works

So what does humour do and how can it help in both strategic communications and to combat disinformation? The experience of Ukraine shows that there are at least six ways.

1. Humour can unite and serve as a coping strategy internally

Life goes on – even during war, Ukrainians found out – and mental health needs as much attention as physical health. FPC’s [Kyiak writes](#) that jokes and memes that people share on social media help to foster sense of unity and belonging, and to cope with terrible reality of war.⁷

2. Humour can attract wider audiences and raise awareness about an issue

“Comedy is very disarming: you talk about sensitive issues in a very disarming way that you cannot if you’re making them seriously,” Priyank Mathur, former scriptwriter for *The Onion* and co-author of a viral video [I Want to Quit ISIS](#), told me.

“The content most likely to go viral online is humorous – human beings like that; they like sharing it even more than angry content. It’s fun, it’s a way of bringing new audiences into the discussion that wouldn’t normally talk about these things.”

In Ukraine’s case, people who might not ordinarily be interested in international affairs, politics or Ukraine could become curious to learn more after seeing a meme or a joke on social media.

Researchers argue that humour can also be an important tool to raise awareness about disinformation. According to Kalensky’s “four lines of defence” against disinformation principle, humour can serve in the second line of defence, which is raising awareness about an issue. (The other three lines of defence are documenting the threat, repairing weaknesses that disinformation actors exploit, and imposing costs on them.) He writes:

“It is necessary to move beyond the small circle of government officials and experts focused on the topic [of Russian disinformation], and try to

⁷ Kyiak, Maksym. Case Study: Use of humour for solidarity, denigration and stress-relief in the Ukrainian media during the Russian aggression in 2014-2016. In: Ozoliņa, Zaneta, Skilters, Jurgis et al. *StratCom laughs: in search of an analytical framework*: 122–139. <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/stratcom-laughs-in-search-of-an-analytical-framework/201>

raise the awareness among broader audiences as well. One proven way to attract wider audiences is through humour. In fact, the ridiculous nature of some of the falsehoods spread by disinformers may provide a lot of ammunition for jokes and ridicule.”

3. Humour is a soft power tool that helps to win people’s hearts and minds

Ukraine’s experience shows it is possible to mobilise international support using humour. Showcasing Ukrainians’ bravery in resisting Russian invasion – their resilience and creativity, in spite of the atrocities of war – helped evoke solidarity across the world.

“Humour and war: they don’t necessarily come together easily,” said Corneliu Bjola, Associate Professor of Diplomatic Studies at the University of Oxford. “War is traumatic; it’s suffering, it’s a lot [of grief]. So using humour in this case, you know, is not very intuitive. Of course, you have the stories about the bombardments and everything that comes through the news media. But when you [...] use these kinds of memes – especially with cultural frames, like from *The Simpsons* or from movies that Western audiences are quite familiar with – then you know it’s easy [for audiences] to absorb that type of information. [...] Ukraine just said: ‘You know what? We are like you. So when you support us, you are supporting yourselves’.”

He believes there are three distinct features of how Ukrainians used humour in their digital diplomacy:

1. Humour was used to undermine the perception of Russia and its army as a superpower; to ‘dilute’ threats coming from Russia, in particular, its nuclear blackmail;
2. Humour was used to introduce Ukraine and Ukrainians to Western audiences in a positive way;
3. The use of humour was decentralised, meaning it wasn’t mandated by the government, but was often bottom-up, spontaneous and funny.

Using humour is also a way to evoke sympathy and build trust. A source that is seen as funny by the audience is also perceived as more likeable and reliable. Conversely, information coming from that source is perceived as more trustworthy.⁸

⁸ Yeo, Sara K, McKasy, Meaghan. Emotion and humor as misinformation antidotes

4. Ridiculing the enemy makes it less scary, helps to counter fears and bolsters bravery

Especially in the first days of war, humour helped many Ukrainians overcome a sense of panic and fear. It highlighted the failures of the Russian army which turned out not to be as strong as many have expected. As Ukrainian psychologist Svitlana Royz wrote:⁹

“We laugh together, and it unites us. We were afraid, and now we ridicule [Russians]. We lower our tension. We alleviate our pain. We try to take back control with the help of humour and jokes.”

For the external audience, humour helped belittle the myth of Russian military might, underlining that its threats and blackmail were often hollow.

5. Humour exposes the absurdity of Russian disinformation and imperialist narratives

In Ukraine’s strategy to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation, humour has been often used to ridicule and expose the absurdity of Russian narratives. Putin’s failed intention to take Kyiv in three days generated a ton of memes.



Collage of pictures of Putin and Zelensky on the phone, arranged as a comic panel that suggests Zelensky has phoned Putin to taunt him over his failure to seize Kyiv

<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2002484118>

⁹ Royz, Svitlana. [On aggression, gallows humour, dead Russians, dehumanization... and the meaning of life](#)

Countless other jokes were produced to ridicule Russia's claims about the need for the "[de-Nazification](#) of Ukraine".¹⁰

The questionable motivation of Russian soldiers to fight in Ukraine also became a subject of intense mocking. "Ukraine has been one of the most savvy and excellent countries when it comes to use of social media to counter mis- and disinformation," former *Onion* editor Mathur told me. "Ukraine should be well-suited to expose the absurdity of Russian ideology."

When it comes to countering disinformation, several studies have proven that using humour can be at least as efficient as fact-checking and debunking. As [Boukes and Hameleers](#) put it: "The format of satire is very suitable to point out inconsistencies and false argumentation in political rhetoric. Research has also repeatedly shown that satire contributes to factual learning about political topics."¹¹

According to polls in the U.S. quoted by [Yeo and McKasy](#), 30% of Americans said they learned something about politics from satirical programmes such as *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Saturday Night Live*.

Humour – especially satire and sarcasm – encourage more elaborative information processing. Boukes and Hameleers argue that "a relatively high amount of cognitive energy is required to fully comprehend satire, which implies that less cognitive capacity is available to counter-argue the message."

Satire is also able to "transport people into a storyline, which may lower the motivation to actively disagree with the message". Therefore, humour and satire are efficient tools to expose the absurdity of disinformation and increase the audience's resilience to it.

Mathur believes humour can be used to change the "almost pro-Russian" attitude of audiences in certain Global South countries. It can help to find, "something that the public would agree with completely, something that would build *trust*". The rule of

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/Ukraine/status/1496716168920547331?s=20&t=OKbBsq8F3SacZ4oSKTwpXw>

¹¹ Boukes, Mark, Hameleers, Michael. Fighting lies with facts or humor: Comparing the effectiveness of satirical and regular fact-checks in response to misinformation and disinformation <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/03637751.2022.2097284?needAccess=true&role=button>

thumb in using humour, according to Mathur, is to minimize the number of people who are not laughing. The type of humour matters, too.

“In a war, if you make fun of the enemy, it’s good to rally internal support; but to get external support, just making fun is not enough – especially for countries like India or Pakistan,” he said. His advice to Ukrainians? “Don’t just make fun of the Russians – highlight the absurdity [of imperialist ideology] in a funny way.”

6. Humour is a gateway to a bigger story and a tool against fatigue

Behind every joke or meme, there is a story to tell. Humour makes an opportunity not just to laugh, but to think about the bigger picture. In the case of Ukraine, it helped to spark audience’s interest in the context and a desire to learn more about the country, its history and culture.

The Anne de Kyiv example (see page 12) is a good illustration of that. What started as a tweet debunking the Russian president’s attempt to appropriate this historical figure as Russian, became a chance to share Ukrainian history. Yarema Dukh, who managed Ukraine’s account at the time, said that a feature of humorous content is not just to make people laugh, but “to tell the history of Ukraine, to present our point of view, to remind people of the war and Russians’ actions. It is a way to bring Ukraine back into the world media headlines.”

Humour is also a tool to combat war fatigue. Nadiya, who is making content for Ukrainian officials’ social media accounts, said that as the war drags on, it becomes more difficult to keep the international media attention focused on Ukraine.

Showcasing only Russian atrocities to maintain support is not what works in the long run.

“Many people would want to turn away [from gory content] eventually, it is a natural reaction. So we decided we needed a different approach and we saw that humorous videos really work. Russians get angry because you are showing them you’re not afraid, you’re laughing your enemy in the face. And to foreigners, you are demonstrating your confidence in this way. Our main message from the beginning is: Ukraine is able to win, so your support must not stop. It is like saying: see, Ukraine is winning in communications, so it can win on the battlefield too.”

When humour backfires

Ukraine’s experience also comes with a caveat: humour can backfire. Here are six situations when it can do so.

1. Failure to grasp the local context of your audience

An example of a meme that went down badly was one using the image of Hindu goddess Kali – superimposed over an explosion cloud in a pose resembling Marilyn Monroe above a subway grate, holding her skirt down. It was published on the Twitter account of Ukraine’s Ministry of Defence and sparked [a vehement backlash](#) from Indian government officials and other social media users.



Screengrab of tweet by the Ministry of Defence that invoked Hindu goddess Kali

“This is an assault on Hindu sentiments across the world,” tweeted Kanchan Gupta, India’s senior advisor to the Ministry of Broadcast and Information, in response.

The meme was designed without taking into consideration the potential reaction it might cause among Hindu followers who worship Kali. It proved that while Ukrainians may be adept at appealing to audiences in the West (because of stronger ties and better understanding of the context), there’s still a lot of work to do in communicating with the non-Western world.

Countries of the Global South in general, India among them, have taken a more cautious approach to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, declaring political neutrality, and continuing to do business with Russia. If Ukraine wants more solidarity from the

countries there, it will need to adjust its diplomatic efforts and communication strategy – including its use of humour – accordingly.

Oxford's Bjola agreed that Ukraine's communication with the Global South had not been as successful as with the Western world. Still, he said humour used in a smart and respectful way can be a good solution to introduce Ukraine's plight to those audiences as well. "In the Global South, it is less about introducing the nation as about introducing the war, telling people: 'hey, this is a colonial war'." He conceded, however, that trying to pair the theme of colonial war with humour would be "a challenge to a certain extent".

2. Inappropriate or questionable source of jokes: always punch up

An example of this is a [video of Ukrainian soldiers](#) seen dancing on the frontline, which became viral on X and TikTok.¹² Seen as morale-boosting content inside Ukraine, it sparked questions from foreign users as to whether it was appropriate.

Some people expressed doubts about whether the war in Ukraine was really that bad if soldiers can afford to have fun and record such videos of themselves. Others, mostly U.S. political actors with a certain agenda, used it as a pretext to question aid provided to Ukraine at the expense of taxpayer money.

Not everyone should make jokes, according to Mathur: "If soldiers make comedy, people will feel disoriented", he said, referring to the controversial video. "In the early stage of war, Ukraine was seen as an underdog. You could have soldiers making memes and get away with it. Now, the perception is that Ukraine is stronger, so the use of humour should be adapted accordingly. Jokes should be directed at the more powerful; comedy should punch up."

Humour cannot mask reality, it should reflect something about reality, adds Bjola. That's why the video with dancing soldiers was seen as contradictory: "*the images of Ukraine under bombardment and Ukrainian soldiers dancing just don't go well together.*"

3. Gallows humour may be incomprehensible or offensive for some

Gallows humour has been widely used by Ukrainians. While it worked well for the internal public and foreigners sympathetic with Ukraine, it was not the case with neutral/undecided audiences.

¹² <https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1599644738189070337>

An example: shark memes that appeared following a video of a shark killing a Russian tourist on a beach in Egypt. It was seen as inappropriate and offensive by some foreign commentators and Russian opposition. For many Ukrainians, who have been living under constant Russian bombardments for more than a year and lost their loved ones and homes, the meme was acceptable (although there was some criticism of it inside Ukraine as well).

As psychologist Svitlana Royz explained:¹³

“This type of joke – about death – is an attempt to take back our strength and power. [...] It is a chance to take back from the adversary our energy, which has been lost because of fear and pain. It’s a chance to stay sane. Because what is happening (and I mean Russian propaganda) is insane. Our jokes are rationalising this insanity. I am laughing and I am appalled at myself at the same time: it is difficult to sustain such ambivalence. I know that in a war, enemies should be killed, so they won’t come to our land again. And by laughing, I take back power, I ridicule danger, I laugh, and it’s if I was taking a painkiller. ”

4. Risk of oversimplifying or giving the wrong impression about the severity of situation

Steven Buckley, political communication and social media researcher at the University of West England believes that memes can oversimplify the geopolitical reality of war Russia unleashed on Ukraine. They can, “remove any nuance from what is a deeply complex and constantly evolving situation... hurt a public’s wider understanding and hence damage efforts to seek solutions to the problems this invasion has caused,” he told [VICE](#).¹⁴

5. Humour may create false expectations

Ukraine’s use of humour may have also created expectations of a constant supply of this type of content and disappointment if it doesn’t deliver, experts said. There is a danger that using humour might create the wrong impression that Ukrainians are not really suffering that badly in a war and therefore don’t need support.

¹³ Royz, Svitlana. On aggression, gallows humour, dead Russians, dehumanization... and the meaning of life

<https://www.facebook.com/svetlanaroyz/posts/pfbid0vbrTf8ibn4NCMyQkcZpoUA1tF4wHukGNPL5vjiurXt1CatHawEC7qAKeLdXtvpSML>

¹⁴ <https://www.vice.com/en/article/epxq3j/russia-ukraine-invasion-memes>

It's a vicious circle in a certain sense: humour is used by Ukraine to show confidence in victory, but a false perception of over-confidence and that "Ukraine is already winning" might discourage people from helping more.

Audiences "hooked" on humour might also turn away when jokes aren't forthcoming from Ukrainian sources: "people sense that you are less confident about yourself and that can backfire," Bjola said.

6. Emotions caused by humour can be short-lived and might not lead to a long-lasting change of views

People like to laugh and appreciate good jokes, but that doesn't necessarily lead to a change of their views and behaviour, said Igor Rozkladai, deputy head of the Ukrainian Centre for Democracy and Rule of Law and media expert.

It is unclear whether the Ukrainians' use of humour will have long-lasting consequences. Positive emotions caused by jokes are short-lived, unless followed up by a bigger, nuanced story.

Humour can be a gateway to lasting interest and support to Ukraine if it nudges the audience to discover Ukrainian history and culture in more detail. But when humour remains the only way to remind the public, which has since switched to other topics, that the war in Ukraine still continues, it can be quite problematic.

Conclusion

The resilience of the Ukrainian population has been made manifest through the use of humour by its government officials, citizens and the media. And Ukraine's experience in response to Russia's full-scale invasion shows that humour, irony, satire and sarcasm can be powerful tools to boost unity inside the country and increase solidarity from a wider world. Humour was instrumental in mobilizing support from other countries and in exposing Russian propaganda and disinformation about Ukraine.

Ukraine has been building its capacity to use humour as a strategic communications tool since Russian first invasion in 2014. After Russia launched the full-scale war in February 2022, this often grassroots effort was multiplied by many new actors joining it. Foreign supporters of Ukraine stepped in to expose lies of Russian officials in social media, resulting in a creation of NAFO movement. The use of humour by the Ukrainian government officials also pushed the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in digital diplomacy.

Numerous jokes and memes have been created that will remain in the historical record of this war, such as the "Russian warship" meme, "sunflower seeds in a pocket", "bavovna" (cotton), and others. However, humour should not overshadow the terrible reality of war Ukrainians have to face daily until this day. It should not distract attention from the need for Ukraine to win and Russia to be held accountable for its war crimes.

Humour helped Ukrainians cope with the trauma of war and preserve mental health. For foreign audiences, especially in the West, it helped to introduce Ukraine as a country that is a part of the same cultural space, has similar values, and is worthy of support. Witty jokes and creative memes opened a window for many to discover Ukrainian history and culture. Satire helped to expose the absurdity of Russian imperialist ideology and propaganda narratives the Kremlin used to launch its invasion of Ukraine.

However efficient, humour is not a silver bullet in strategic communications. It should be used with respect and an understanding of target audiences to avoid misperceptions and being seen as offensive.

Humour should reflect the reality and be universally comprehensible to be efficient. The choice of messenger also matters: not everyone should use comedy.

Ukraine's experience and wider research shows that humour is a good tool to counter disinformation. But it can't be only one. It is useful for raising awareness with a wider audience, but should be used in combination with other tools, such as pre-bunking, de-bunking, fact-checking, programmes promoting media literacy, greater awareness about state-sponsored disinformation campaigns and accountability for disinformation actors.

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Interviewees

- Corneliu Bjola, Associate Professor of Diplomatic Studies, University of Oxford
- Jakub Kalensky, deputy director at the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Helsinki)
- ‘Nadiya’ (not real name), former head of StratCom Ukraine, part of a group of content creators for the Ukraine’s ministry of defence, foreign ministry and Ukraine official Twitter accounts
- Priyank Mathur, founder and CEO of Mythos Labs, former scriptwriter for The Onion
- Yarema Dukh, co-owner of strategic communications agency, former member of Ukraine president’s communication team, a mastermind behind ‘Ukraine’ official Twitter account (2016-2019)
- Igor Rozkladai, deputy head of Centre for Democracy and Rule of Law, Ukrainian media expert