

OVERVIEW OF DISINFORMATION ABOUT CORRUPTION IN UKRAINE

VOX CHECK

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NARRATIVES: BEFORE AND DURING THE FULL-SCALE INVASION

Until February 24, 2022, corruption in Ukraine was also one of the main topics in disinformation campaigns. Corruption was actively discussed in Ukrainian society, including in the political environment, even before 2022, so it was a logical choice for information attacks by both Russians and Ukrainians (mostly pro-Russian).

Three main narratives in the period up to 2022:

- **“The Ukrainian government is totally corrupt”**. This narrative included fakes and manipulations, alleging that all representatives of the Ukrainian government were involved in corruption schemes. One of the leading theses was “The Ukrainian state cannot function without corruption”. By spreading the narrative, disinformation actors discredited both individuals (then-politicians, officials, anti-corruption officials) and limited themselves to general statements about the corruption of all those in power.
- **“Ukraine is the most corrupt country”**. This narrative includes the fake that Ukraine ranks first in the world or in Europe in terms of corruption. The “ratings” could also be falsified with a focus on specific politicians, such as the fake that former President Petro Poroshenko was one of the three biggest corrupt officials in the world.
- **“Anti-corruption bodies in Ukraine do not work”**. The narrative is based on discrediting the anti-corruption reform in Ukraine and any anti-corruption bodies/initiatives/activists. Often, the goal was not only to cause distrust in anti-corruption activities, but also to create the impression that anti-corruption activists themselves are corrupt. In addition, this narrative was combined with the narrative of “external governance over Ukraine”: that Western countries support anti-corruption initiatives to establish control over the Ukrainian state.

After the full-scale invasion, the abovementioned narratives were preserved, but an important change occurred: the military context was added to all narratives, old and new. Not only the Ukrainian political authorities but also the military and volunteers are more often accused of corruption. In addition, given the significant amount of Western aid, many fakes emphasize that international aid is being stolen.

Thus, the narrative **“Ukrainian authorities are totally corrupt”** has expanded to **“Ukraine's military and political leadership are totally corrupt”**.

Russian propaganda has repeatedly spread fakes about the Zelenskyi family's purchase of real estate, expensive cars, or jewelry. For example, Zelenskyi allegedly bought a hotel in France for €88 million or Hitler's ceremonial limousine for \$15 million. Russian disinformation also lied about Olena Zelenska buying a Bugatti for €4.5 million or spending \$1.1 million on precious jewelry from Cartier in the United States. The publications directly indicated or implied that all of this was obtained with stolen funds (own or received from Western partners).

In addition to the political leadership, Russian propaganda intensified its attacks on the military. Fakes were spread about Valerii Zaluzhnyi receiving \$53 million for giving up his political ambitions, and his daughter allegedly owning villas in the Canary Islands and Chile. Fakes were also spread about Oleksandr Syrskyi. For example, his wife Tamara Kharchenko allegedly bought luxury real estate in London.

The **“Western aid is being stolen in Ukraine” narrative** is not entirely new, but it has become particularly relevant after 2022. Since the West allocates a large amount of money and equipment to help Ukraine, this has become one of the targets for discrediting.

A fake has been spread online that the United States had blocked \$6.2 billion in aid to Ukraine because of corruption in the Presidential Office. Russians have repeatedly spread the lie that Ukrainians are selling Western weapons to terrorists or other criminal groups.

Fakes have been spreading that a new report by the Pentagon's inspector general ranks Ukraine as one of the most corrupt countries or that the Pentagon is demanding an audit of all weapons transferred to Ukraine before Trump comes to office.

The narrative "The military system in Ukraine is totally corrupt" became one of the main narratives during the full-scale invasion. Currently, the military has the highest level of public trust. Therefore, it is important for Russian propaganda to discredit them, particularly through the association with corruption.

When spreading the narrative, they try to discredit well-known military commanders. The most recent example is the fake that allegedly the command of the Azov Brigade organized a corruption scheme to purchase apartments in Kyiv.

Another popular topic is corruption in military procurement. Disinformation reports either completely invent corruption stories or take real corruption schemes out of context. For example, with reference to real corruption cases, generalizations are spread that "any military procurement is not without corruption" or "all Ukrainian officials, like the defendants in this particular case, steal in the defense sector."

This narrative also covers the topic of mobilization. There are indeed many examples of corruption in the Territorial Center of Recruitment and Social Support in open sources. But, as with military procurement, disinformation consists of either completely fictitious stories or manipulative generalizations based on real problems. This includes generalizations such as "all Territorial

Center of Recruitment and Social Support employees without exception are involved in corruption" or "the mobilization process is 100% non-transparent and corrupt".

In the new ***narrative "Charity foundations steal donations and engage in wasteful spending"***, Ukrainian charities have also been targeted by Russian information attacks for their support of the Defense Forces. At the same time, according to a study by the Molfar OSINT community, only 36% of the cases of information attacks on foundations they analyzed had a direct Russian trace.

In particular, fakes were spread that the Prytula Charitable Foundation did not purchase Spartan armored vehicles, that Prytula himself demanding a bribe, and that he purchased three apartments in 2023 at the expense of the foundation's donors.

Fakes were also spread about the Come Back Alive Foundation. In particular, Russians published falsehoods that 70% of the funds of the Come Back Alive Foundation were stolen, and that the foundation has \$8 million in cryptocurrency and does not spend it on the needs of the army.

As in the previous narratives, the fakes attack specific foundations and individuals and try to create a negative image of all volunteers in general.

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METANARRATIVE IN THIS TOPIC

The metanarrative can be defined as “Ukraine is the most corrupt state”. In this way, Ukraine is presented as a failed state that should not be supported because it will lose anyway. “Support” is not only about Western aid, but also about internal events, such as donations for volunteers, assistance to the military, or citizen engagement in anti-corruption initiatives. Disinformation is spreading to convince people that every sphere of Ukraine is incredibly corrupt and that this support is meaningless.

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TARGET AUDIENCES

Disinformation narratives about corruption in Ukraine are aimed at both Ukrainian and Western audiences.

By spreading these narratives inside Ukraine, they are trying to sow disbelief in society, destroy its internal unity, exacerbate existing conflicts, and undermine trust in the government. According to the propagandists, this should weaken Ukraine's ability to resist Russian aggression. Allegedly, if the issue of corruption is more acute than the war in the public's mind, then “the Ukrainian government is worse than the enemy.” This means that the efforts of citizens should be directed at fighting it first and foremost, not the aggressor, Russia. In addition, widespread corruption should reduce the desire to donate to the army, either because of fears that the money will not reach the recipient or because of the belief that corrupt officials, not ordinary Ukrainians, should pay.

By spreading these narratives to the West, the Russians are trying to undermine their partners' trust in Ukraine and, as a result, force

them to reduce or even stop their assistance to Ukraine. They say that if Ukraine is stealing aid, it should not be supported. In addition, the high level of corruption and unwillingness to fight it should demonstrate to Western leaders that Ukraine is undemocratic and unable to implement the reforms necessary to join the EU and NATO. In this way, propagandists are trying to convince them that Ukraine should not be accepted into these organizations.

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CHANNELS AND METHODS OF DISTRIBUTION

Russia, with its state and non-state actors, is the main stakeholder in spreading narratives about corruption in Ukraine. Russians do this through all possible channels:

- Russian television;
- Russian government agencies and high-ranking officials;
- on the platforms of international organizations (in statements by Russian diplomats);
- a network of pseudo-experts broadcasting to an international audience;
- social networks (widespread in Ukraine – Telegram, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok);
- pro-Russian websites that mimic foreign online media.

Propagandists use different platforms to promote disinformation narratives. From official ones, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or MPs, to anonymous channels or a network of pro-Russian speakers in the West. Messages aimed at Western audiences are also spread in European languages.

At the same time, Ukrainian citizens are also involved in the dissemination of narratives, either intentionally or unintentionally. In the case of Ukrainian bloggers and politicians who openly demonstrate a pro-Russian position, information attacks are clearly ordered. In the case of opposition, but not pro-Russian Ukrainians, it is difficult to prove this order.

By criticizing the Ukrainian government, the military, volunteers, and anti-corruption activists, opposition users may inadvertently (i.e., through misinformation rather than disinformation) reinforce Russian attacks. For example, this applies to generalizations that all Ukrainian politicians/military/volunteers are corrupt.

Information attacks about corruption in Ukraine can take many forms:

- fake publications, websites that pass off as genuine products of well-known Ukrainian or Western media;
- mass mailing of messages using bots;
- commissioned investigations into specific politicians/volunteers/military/anti-corruption figures;
- taking real corruption stories out of context: individual cases of corruption are turned into generalized theses ("everyone steals in Ukraine", "no anti-corruption initiatives work", etc.).

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REASONS FOR THE POPULARITY OF THE TOPIC

The problem of corruption in Ukraine has always been actively discussed in Ukraine. Numerous opinion polls confirm this. According to a survey conducted by the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption in 2021, Ukrainians ranked corruption among the top three social problems. A study conducted by the USAID/ENGAGE activity in 2024 showed that Ukrainians consider corruption to be a serious national threat, second only to war. Embezzlement is a concern for the public, as it is primarily a matter of misappropriation of Ukrainians' money that goes to the

state budget in the form of taxes or to charitable foundations in the form of donations. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, attention to this issue has become more acute. First, there is an understanding in society that most of the money should be spent on the needs of the Defense Forces: purchasing weapons, equipment, etc. Therefore, the misappropriation of these funds weakens the Ukrainian army and moves Ukraine away from victory. Second, in October 2024, the Rada passed a law on tax increases. Therefore, society is closely monitoring whether their funds are being used for their intended purpose.

Also, according to a 2023 survey by Transparency International Ukraine, embezzlement and the return of corruption schemes are concerns for Ukrainians in the reconstruction process. The revealed facts of embezzlement negatively affect Ukraine's support by international partners, which also reduces the army's defense capability. In addition, most citizens want Ukraine to join the EU and NATO, and one of the requirements on the way to this is to reduce the level of corruption.

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CONSEQUENCES OF SPREADING DISINFORMATION (REAL AND HYPOTHETICAL)

Real

1. The spread and trust in the abovementioned narratives could lead to a weakening of Ukraine's defense capabilities. The distrust of the public will grow in the actions of the military and political leadership and anti-corruption bodies. Trust in any public services will also be threatened.
2. This, in turn, will lead to the spread of negative and panicked thoughts about the country's future. Citizens may lose motivation to fight for a "totally corrupt" country, which will reduce the number of people willing to mobilize.

3. Ukrainians will donate less to the Defense Forces, because "why, if everything is stolen?"
4. In addition, the spread of narratives about the enormous scale of corruption in Ukraine will negatively affect the perception of Ukraine abroad. Western officials will see support for Ukraine as inappropriate and a waste of resources, which will, in turn, lead to a reduction or suspension of assistance from international partners.
5. Citizens in the West will lose their desire to support Ukrainians, both politically and financially. Politicians can sometimes be guided by public opinion, which creates the problem for Ukraine mentioned in the paragraph above.
6. Investors will not come to the country even after the war is over, which will negatively impact reconstruction.

Hypothetical:

1. Because of their despondency, Ukrainians are likely to decide to leave the country. Thus, in the long run, Ukraine will lose its able-bodied population, which will reduce state budget revenues and exacerbate the demographic crisis.
2. Messages about the "terrible" level of corruption in Ukraine may increase domestic corruption, saying, "if the authorities can steal with impunity, why not me?"
3. Subsequently, propaganda messages about corruption, which is supposedly impossible to overcome, will lead to public tolerance of real cases of embezzlement. Ukrainians will develop a resistance to such news. Due to the lack of public reaction, the number of real cases of bribery and embezzlement will increase.
4. The public may begin to advocate for reducing funding for anti-corruption agencies due to their alleged "inactivity" and become less supportive of anti-corruption initiatives.
5. If the abovementioned theses become popular, Ukraine's chances of joining the EU and NATO may be reduced.