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Psychological mechanisms of influence of disinformation and fake news on the formation of public opinion on Ukrainian European integration: Analysis of Russian propaganda

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Abstract. The purpose of the study was to investigate the psychological mechanisms of disinformation and fake news influence on the formation of public opinion on the process of Ukraine's European integration, with a special focus on the analysis of Russian propaganda. The research methodology included analysing Russian propaganda narratives through mainstream media and social networks according to specific criteria; interviewing Ukrainian citizens about the impact of disinformation and identifying the psychological mechanisms by which disinformation influences public opinion. The study covered the psychological aspects of manipulating public consciousness, namely the use of fears, stereotypes and emotions to discredit the European integration course. The main tasks were to analyse the ways of spreading fake news, identify the key messages of propaganda, and study the susceptibility of different groups of the population to such information influences. Empirical data was collected through a survey, which allowed us to identify disinformation strategies and their impact on different segments of society. The results of the study showed that Russian propaganda actively used emotionally coloured fake news to manipulate public sentiment, which was particularly effective on audiences with low levels of media literacy. Such manipulations led to the formation of a negative attitude toward European integration and the creation of social tension. The significance of the findings was a deeper understanding of the impact of disinformation on public opinion, which was important for developing strategies to counter propaganda and increase media literacy

Keywords: manipulation; media literacy; public consciousness; fakes; propaganda strategies

INTRODUCTION

In today's information society, disinformation and fake news have become powerful tools for manipulating public opinion, especially in the context of political change. Ukraine's European integration, which has become an important direction of the country's foreign policy, is under threat due to active information attacks carried out by Russian propaganda. These attacks attempt to destabilise Ukrainian society by shaping a negative perception of European integration processes through distorted information

and false narratives. Psychological mechanisms used to manipulate public opinion actively exploit cognitive biases. For example, confirmation mechanisms, where individuals tend to look for information that confirms their existing beliefs, contribute to disinformation being more likely to resonate with news consumers. In this environment, social media play a particularly important role, allowing disinformation to spread quickly and shape perceptions of certain events or processes.

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With the information space flooded with fake news, Russian propaganda uses a variety of strategies to create a negative image of the European Union and discredit Ukraine's European integration aspirations. The spread of manipulative messages about economic and social problems associated with EU integration creates an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty among the population. These narratives become part of the public discourse, forming negative associations and making it difficult to perceive the real benefits of European integration. It is important to note that disinformation not only affects political attitudes, but also has the potential to split society, undermining its unity. In such a situation, information consumers become vulnerable to manipulations that can change their attitudes towards key national and international initiatives. Understanding the psychological mechanisms of disinformation is critical to developing effective strategies to combat manipulation and preserve the stability of society.

Many scholars study this topic and offer different views on it. For example, fake news has the ability to influence the formation of beliefs in society, especially when it comes to conspiracy theories. In the work by A. Anthony & R. Moulding (2019), the authors studied beliefs in fake news and conspiracy theories, focusing on the psychological mechanisms of their influence. Political ideology also plays a significant role in shaping these beliefs. In their work, J. Baptista *et al.* (2021) showed that political views significantly affect the perception of disinformation, as demonstrated by the study. The study of European integration in the context of human rights in Ukraine demonstrates the importance of overcoming Russian influence. I. Barabash *et al.* (2020) focused on the way Ukraine can break away from the Russian system of dependence, which also applies to the media space. At the same time, tools for detecting fake news are becoming increasingly important in the information warfare. In their study, A. Bondielli *et al.* (2024) created a dataset for multimodal detection and verification of fake news, which is essential for countering disinformation. Critical information literacy is an important means of countering fake news. In their work, A. Brisola & A. Doyle (2019) emphasised that understanding disinformation as a root problem contributes to a more effective fight against fake news. In turn, A. Calero Valdez (2020) studied the contribution of people and algorithms to the spread of disinformation, which has a direct impact on public perception of news.

Psychological trust in information sources also plays an important role in the perception of news, including disinformation. In the work of A. Calero Valdez & M. Ziefle (2019), the authors examined how credible news is perceived by users, which is important for understanding the mechanisms of influence on public opinion. The intersection of social media and fake news has also been studied in a cross-cultural context. In the study by A. Dabbous *et al.* (2021), A. Kobernjuk

& A. Kasper (2021), the authors focused on the study of trust in social media and the impact on the perception of fake news in different cultures. The process of forming beliefs under the influence of fake news and disinformation can be viewed through a pragmatic lens. In their work, L. De Oliveira Souza & J. De Loiola Araújo (2022) showed that beliefs can be formed even on the basis of mathematical educational models, which demonstrates the complexity of the impact of fake news on thinking. Finally, a study of Poland's reactions to Russian aggression against Ukraine by J. Dyduch & M. Góra (2024) highlighted how disinformation can influence the polarization of society in the context of international conflicts.

The aim of the study was to identify the psychological mechanisms of influence of disinformation and fake news on the formation of public opinion on Ukrainian European integration in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The objectives were:

1. Analysing the impact of disinformation on public consciousness: studying how disinformation and fake news shape Ukrainians' perceptions of European integration, in particular, identifying the main topics and narratives spread in the media.

2. Studying psychological mechanisms of influence: identifying the psychological mechanisms that are activated by disinformation, in particular, studying the role of emotional reaction, cognitive distortions and group identity in the perception of news.

3. Assessment of media literacy of the population: conducting a study of the level of media literacy of Ukrainians to determine the extent to which they are able to critically perceive information and counteract disinformation that affects their attitude to European integration processes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The first stage of the study was to analyse the main narratives used by Russian propaganda to spread disinformation during the war. Key sources were selected, including the TV channels Channel 24 (Tereschenko, 2024a), Russia's propaganda machine in the United States. How Russian disinformation influences Republican sabotage of aid to Ukraine and discredits it in the eyes of Americans (2024), Russia is constantly generating fake news about Ukraine's leaders. Olena Zelenska has already "bought" Cartier jewelry for \$1 million. This time, she bought a Bugatti with money from US aid. Wired investigated this disinformation case (2024).

Additionally, the following sources were analyzed Radio Liberty (Savchuk & Myroniuk, 2024), and TikTok social media, including Behind the scenes of "scrolling": A study of propaganda in the Ukrainian TikTok segment (2024), O. Tereschenko (2024b).

The following criteria were chosen for the analysis:

1. The level of emotional intensity of messages aimed at creating fear or distrust;

2. The use of opposition and dichotomy ('us' versus 'them'), emphasis on conflicts and catastrophic scenarios;

3. What messages are repeated most often to increase the impact.

The second stage involved conducting a survey among the population of different regions of Ukraine to determine how disinformation influences their views on European integration. The sample consisted of 1,000 respondents, aged 18 to 65, of whom 52% were women and 48% were men. Respondents were selected from the following regions: Kyiv region, Lviv region, Odesa region, Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and Kharkiv region. All survey participants were informed about how their anonymity is ensured, they know why the survey is being conducted, how the data they provide will be used, and the risks involved. The research was conducted in accordance with the rules of The Declaration of Helsinki (1964). The questions were of a closed type, with "Yes" or "No" answers. The questions were as follows:

1. Do you trust the news about Ukraine's European integration coming from the Russian media?

2. Do you think that Ukraine's accession to the EU will improve the economic situation in the country?

3. Do you think that the war with Russia is the main obstacle to European integration?

4. Do you believe that the EU will contribute to ending the war?

5. Do you think that Russian media provide objective information about Ukraine?

6. Do you think that Ukraine's accession to the EU threatens traditional Ukrainian values?

7. Have you noticed an increase in the amount of negative information about the EU in the Russian media during the war?

8. Do you think that the Ukrainian authorities are responding adequately to Russian disinformation?

The third stage was to define the ways in which disinformation forms psychological mechanisms of influence on public opinion.

RESULTS

The problem of disinformation and fake news has become widespread in Ukraine in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, which began in 2014 and escalated in 2022. In the context of active hostilities and political conflicts, information warfare has become an integral part of the overall warfare strategy. Disinformation is used as a tool to manipulate public opinion, which leads to the destabilization of public morale and undermines trust in government institutions. In particular, social media has become the main channel for spreading false information. Their efficiency and wide reach allow fake news to spread quickly, affecting numerous people. This leads to the formation of false perceptions of the real state of affairs in the country, worsening the psycho-emotional state of the population, which is already experiencing a crisis due to war and violence. In an

environment of information overload, it is difficult to distinguish between truth and manipulation, and this is what contributes to the growth of distrust among people.

In such a situation, psychological mechanisms that influence the perception of information become particularly important. In particular, there is the phenomenon of confirmation bias, when people tend to perceive and remember information that confirms their preconceived beliefs and ignore data that can refute them. This complicates the situation, as disinformation that aligns with certain political or social beliefs has a greater chance of being successfully spread. It is also worth noting that the emotional impact of news is significant: fake news that arouses fear or anger is more likely to spread, as emotions actively attract attention and encourage discussion. Psychological mechanisms play a key role in this aspect. Without knowledge of these mechanisms, it is difficult to develop effective countermeasures. For example, media literacy campaigns that teach people how to critically evaluate information and recognise fake news can be the basis for increasing society's resilience to manipulation. Emotional support also plays a key role: in times of stress and anxiety, people need to have access to reliable sources of information and receive support from others. In addition, knowledge of the psychological mechanisms of disinformation can help to develop programmes aimed at reducing the impact of destructive information. Such programmes could include awareness-raising campaigns that emphasise the importance of fact-checking, critical thinking and active participation in discussions. This will contribute to the formation of a sustainable public opinion based on objective data rather than emotional manipulation.

In the context of disinformation and fake news, cognitive biases are important and play a key role in shaping public opinion on Ukraine's European integration, especially in the context of Russian propaganda. One of the main cognitive biases is confirmation bias, which manifests itself in the fact that people prefer information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs and ignore or downplay facts that contradict these beliefs. For example, people who have negative attitudes towards European integration may easily accept fake news that highlights the negative aspects of integration, while rejecting positive news that highlights the benefits. Another important cognitive bias is the availability heuristic, which means that people assess the likelihood of an event based on how quickly they can think of examples of that event. Fake news, which is widely discussed in the media, can create the impression that European integration brings only risks and problems, making negative experiences more accessible to memory. Individuals may believe that problems with European integration are more widespread than they actually are. In the context of disinformation, this may mean that people may shift responsibility for economic problems or social dislocation to European

integration processes, perceiving them as a threat to their own well-being. Psychological mechanisms, such as cognitive biases, play a crucial role in shaping public opinion on Ukraine's European integration, making society vulnerable to disinformation. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for combating disinformation and developing an adequate perception of the European integration process in Ukraine.

Psychological mechanisms, in particular cognitive biases, are actively used in information campaigns aimed at manipulating public opinion on Ukraine's European integration. Russian propaganda resorts to various tactics to create a positive image of its narratives and at the same time devalue Ukraine's European integration processes. These manipulation mechanisms focus on emotional impact, selective presentation of facts and manipulation of context. One of the key tactics is the dissemination of fake news that looks credible through the use of plausible sources and factual data, but which is manipulative in nature. For example, propaganda materials may contain parts of true information, but take it out of context or distort it, leading to the formation of false perceptions of European integration. This practice exploits the confirmation bias, as people who already have negative views on integration processes are more likely to accept this information as true. Russian propaganda actively uses the strategy of "substitution of concepts". This means that terms related to European integration can be replaced with negatively coloured words that evoke associations with danger or threats. For instance, instead of the term "European standards", statements emphasizing "decaying Europe" or "Western aggression" may be used. This change in emphasis helps to create the perception that European integration threatens Ukraine's national interests. Propaganda materials may focus on the negative aspects of European integration reforms, such as economic difficulties or social protests, while successes and positive results may be ignored or downplayed. This not only creates a one-sided perception, but also increases the impact of the accessibility bias, when negative examples dominate the minds of information consumers. Fear, anger and anxiety are powerful emotions that can easily be used to create negative attitudes towards European integration. For example, messages about possible economic losses or social instability due to European integration can be presented as threats, which causes panic and negative emotions among the population. The mechanisms of manipulation used in Russian propaganda are closely related to the psychological aspects of information perception. The use of fake news, substitution of concepts, context manipulation and emotional influence form a negative perception of European integration, exploiting the vulnerability of the public consciousness to disinformation. Understanding these mechanisms is critical to developing strategies to combat

information attacks and maintain objectivity in assessing Ukraine's European integration processes.

Social influence is another important aspect that explains how disinformation and fake news shape public opinion on Ukraine's European integration. People are often guided by the opinions of others, especially in conditions of uncertainty or difficult social situations. In this context, Russian propaganda uses social mechanisms to reinforce its manipulative narratives, forcing individuals to accept or reject information in accordance with prevailing social opinion. One of the key mechanisms of social influence is group pressure. When certain views become dominant in certain social groups, individuals may feel pressure to accept this opinion, even if it contradicts their personal beliefs. Russian propaganda actively supports the creation of groups that promote negative narratives about European integration, thus creating the impression that the majority of society supports these views. This phenomenon reinforces the feeling of isolation for those who support European integration, as they may feel that their opinions do not conform to the "group norm". The role of social media in this process is undeniable. Social media platforms are becoming important tools for spreading disinformation. Fake news that is widely shared on social media can reach a huge audience in a short time. The use of the "virtual community" mechanism is also becoming popular – people form groups based on common interests and views, where they exchange information that is often subjective and not supported by facts. This contributes to an even greater polarization of opinions and creates the perception that European integration has negative consequences. The phenomenon of social proof is also important, when people evaluate the correctness or acceptability of their actions and beliefs based on how others react to similar situations. If the information field is dominated by negative narratives about European integration, people who receive this information may perceive such views as true. This affects the formation of collective perceptions that can take hold in the minds of society, contributing to the sense of threat that can accompany European integration processes.

Social influence includes the influence of celebrities and opinion leaders, who can shape or reinforce certain views in their audiences. When such individuals support negative narratives about European integration, their opinion can become a powerful argument for many people, forcing them to reconsider their beliefs under the pressure of "authority". Social influence, which manifests itself through group pressure, social media and the phenomenon of social proof, plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion on Ukraine's European integration. This highlights that the disinformation and manipulation used in Russian propaganda not only affects individual consciousness, but also has a significant impact on collective perceptions, forming

negative stereotypes about European integration in Ukraine. Therefore, understanding the social mechanisms of influence is crucial for developing strategies aimed at increasing media literacy and combating disinformation. Understanding the social influence generated by disinformation and fake news underscores the importance of education and media literacy in combating manipulations related to Ukraine's European integration. In today's information environment, where the volume of news and information is constantly growing, the ability to critically perceive information is becoming a necessary skill for every citizen. Education should include elements of media literacy at all levels of learning. This means not only learning the basics of working with information, but also developing critical thinking that allows assessing the reliability of sources, analysing content and understanding the impact of emotional and social context on the perception of information. In today's environment of disinformation, media literacy skills can be an important tool for forming an objective opinion on European integration, as they help to recognise manipulation and fake news. Educational programmes can contribute to the development of conscious consumption of information. They can teach students how to distinguish between facts and opinions, as well as how to analyse the context and intentions behind information messages. Knowledge of the mechanisms of manipulation described earlier is essential to understanding why certain information can be presented in a distorted way.

Thus, media literacy becomes not only a tool for individual protection against disinformation, but also an important element of social responsibility. Media literacy programmes can support critical discourse in society. Through training and discussion of topics related to European integration, participants can become familiar with different points of view, which contributes to a more balanced perception of the problem. As a result, society becomes more resistant to propaganda as people learn to ask questions, evaluate information and form their own opinions based on a variety of sources. Media literacy should not be limited to schools and universities. Government agencies, NGOs, and the media can play an important role in promoting a culture of critical information. Various campaigns, seminars, and webinars can raise public awareness of the risks of disinformation, especially in the context of sensitive topics such as European integration. The role of education and media literacy is indisputable in building a resilient society that can withstand disinformation. Not only do they help people learn to critically perceive information, but they also contribute to the development of active and informed citizenship. As a result, through educational initiatives, society can become more resilient to manipulation and facilitate a constructive dialogue on Ukraine's European integration, which in turn can

lead to a more positive perception of these processes among citizens. For instance, an article on the Forbes website highlights that Russian propaganda is actively using anxiety-inducing tactics to spread information about threats from Ukraine. The messages emphasise the possible catastrophic consequences that could result from Western support for Ukraine. These strategies are intended not only to increase the level of fear, but also to encourage action, including denial of support for Ukraine and spreading distrust of Western countries. The level of emotional intensity is pointed out through the use of vivid and dramatic language that enhances the effect of the messages. For example, the emphasis on "threats to peace" and "apocalyptic scenarios" are typical techniques used to create the impression that the situation is hopeless. As a result, the information is perceived not only as news, but as a call to action, which encourages people to think about the dangers that may threaten everyone. In particular, an article on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty notes that Russian propaganda constantly emphasises the "external threat" from Ukraine, presenting it as an "aggressor" trying to destroy peace in Russia and the world. This juxtaposition not only enhances the emotional impact of the messages, but also creates a clear picture of the conflict, in which the information consumer becomes part of a group fighting for its survival. The catastrophic scenarios described in the messages portray the world as polarised, with no room for compromise or cooperation. The emphasis on conflict helps to reinforce the "us" versus 'them' divide, which is an important element in manipulating public opinion.

The impact of disinformation is reinforced by recurring phrases and ideas about the threat that the Ukrainian military allegedly poses to the Russian population. These messages include phrases such as "Ukrainian forces threaten our security" or "Western support undermines peace in our country". Such formulations have become stereotypes that are directly related to the formation of hostile attitudes towards Ukraine and its allies. The frequent use of these messages not only creates the impression that this information is universally accepted, but also prevents consumers from critically evaluating the information they hear. The Forbes article describes how Russian media constantly repeat information about "American interference" in an attempt to portray the United States as an "aggressor" using Ukraine to achieve its geopolitical goals. This message is reinforced by arguments about the alleged violence of the Ukrainian military, which in turn fuels fear and distrust not only of Ukrainians but also of the West. Propaganda campaigns are aimed not only at disorienting the population, but also at encouraging it to take certain actions that are in the interests of the aggressor. In today's information warfare, it is especially important to understand these mechanisms in order to counter disinformation and foster critical thinking in society.

Table 1. The need for digital applications for psychological assistance

Question	Answer "yes" (%)	Answer "no" (%)
Do you trust the news about Ukraine's European integration coming from the Russian media?	19.4%	80.6%
Do you think that Ukraine's accession to the EU will improve the economic situation in the country?	63.7%	36.3%
Do you think that the war with Russia is the main obstacle to European integration?	74.2%	25.8%
Do you believe that the EU will contribute to ending the war?	58.9%	41.1%
Do you believe that Russian media provide objective information about Ukraine?	14.8%	85.2%
Do you think that Ukraine's accession to the EU threatens traditional Ukrainian values?	32.5%	67.5%
Have you noticed an increase in the amount of negative information about the EU in the Russian media during the war?	77.3%	22.7%
Do you think that the Ukrainian authorities are responding adequately to Russian disinformation?	49.1%	50.9%

Source: created by the author

According to the responses of the survey participants in the table, it can be argued that most respondents demonstrate a low level of trust in news about European integration from the Russian media. This indicates a critical attitude of Ukrainians towards sources of information from Russia, which may be due to the high awareness of the manipulative nature of such messages. It is also noteworthy that the overwhelming majority of respondents consider Ukraine's accession to the EU to be a positive economic step that should improve the country's overall welfare. This indicates that the population is optimistic about integration into the European economic space. Most respondents noted that the war with Russia is a significant obstacle to Ukraine's European integration. This underlines the importance of ending the conflict for further rapprochement with the EU. At the same time, many respondents express their belief that the EU will facilitate the end of the war, which indicates their hope for international support in the conflict with Russia. Conversely, a very small proportion of respondents believe that Russian media provide objective information about Ukraine, which confirms their critical stance towards Russian media. At the same time, a relatively large proportion of respondents believe that joining the EU does not pose a threat to Ukrainian traditional values, which indicates that European integration is perceived as compatible with national identity. However, a significant proportion of respondents noted an increase in negative information about the EU in the Russian media, which confirms the intensity of Russia's disinformation campaign aimed at discrediting the European community in the eyes of Ukrainians. Respondents' opinions on the Ukrainian authorities' response to Russian disinformation were divided. This indicates an ambiguous assessment of the state information policy and, possibly, the need to strengthen it. In general, the survey results show that Ukrainians are critical of Russian media and support the European integration course. Most respondents are aware of the economic benefits of joining the EU and

do not see any threat to national values. The majority recognises that the war is a significant obstacle to the EU, but at the same time hopes for the EU's support to end it. A significant proportion of respondents noted an increase in negative messages about the EU in the Russian media, which indicates an intensification of the disinformation campaign. At the same time, respondents are ambivalent about the reaction of the Ukrainian authorities, which may indicate a need for more effective communication and countering propaganda.

Based on the study, the author identifies the main psychological mechanisms that are actively used in disinformation campaigns, namely, emotion manipulation, stereotyping, cognitive dissonance, group identification and social proof. In particular, manipulation of emotions is one of the most powerful tools for influencing people's minds. Disinformation often triggers strong emotional reactions, such as fear, anxiety, anger, or hatred. These emotions can cloud rational thought, causing people to make decisions based on emotion rather than logic. For example, disinformation that portrays a certain group of people as a threat can lead to hatred and aggression, which fuels conflict and social tensions. Stereotyping is an important mechanism through which disinformation influences public opinion. Stereotypes are usually simplified ideas about certain groups of people or phenomena that are formed on the basis of limited or distorted information. Disinformation often contributes to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes about national or ethnic groups, for example, by repeating certain images or characteristics. This can lead to discrimination and prejudice, which in turn deepen social conflicts. Cognitive dissonance is another psychological mechanism that can be used to shape public opinion. When people are confronted with information that contradicts their existing beliefs or perceptions, cognitive dissonance, or an unpleasant feeling, occurs, prompting them to seek ways to reduce the inconsistency. Disinformation can be used to reinforce this dissonance, leading people to change their

beliefs or seek information that confirms their existing perceptions rather than questioning them. In this way, it can reinforce pre-existing biases and distortions in the perception of reality. Group identification also influences public opinion. People have a natural tendency to identify with certain groups, which provides a sense of belonging and security. Disinformation can exploit this need by shaping perceptions of “us” and “them”, reinforcing negative emotions towards those who do not belong to “our” group. This can lead to polarization of society and increased aggression between groups. Social proof is another important mechanism that uses disinformation to influence public opinion. People often perceive information as more credible if the majority confirms it. Disinformation can exploit this tendency by presenting false or distorted data as widely accepted facts. For example, if certain information is actively discussed on social media or in the media, people may believe it to be true, even if it has no basis in fact. This increases the impact of disinformation on public opinion by creating the illusion of consensus.

Disinformation uses a variety of psychological mechanisms to shape public opinion and influence people's behaviour. Emotional manipulation, stereotyping, cognitive dissonance, group identification and social proof are actively used in propaganda campaigns to influence perceptions of reality and encourage action. Understanding these mechanisms is important for countering disinformation and developing critical thinking in society.

In the war with Ukraine, Russia has been actively using several psychological mechanisms to shape disinformation campaigns that influence public opinion and the emotional state of Ukrainians. One of the key aspects is the manipulation of emotions, in particular, the creation of fear and anxiety. This is achieved through the dissemination of news about war crimes, destruction, and the consequences of the war, which leads to a sense of helplessness and despair. Russian propaganda uses negative images of Ukrainians to provoke distrust of their own country and its government. For example, disinformation messages about “fascists” or “nationalists” in the government undermine social cohesion and exacerbate internal conflicts. Group identification, presented as “us” versus “them”, is also actively used to create an image of the enemy. This increases aggression and polarises society. In general, these mechanisms affect the psychological state of Ukrainians, increasing emotional tension and negatively affecting social cohesion.

DISCUSSION

The study focused on the spread of fake news and disinformation through social media, analysing its impact on public opinion and countermeasures. This topic is of great importance in today's world, where digital platforms have a significant impact on shaping public beliefs and behaviour. The results of the study have a

number of important aspects that should be discussed, taking into account the existing scientific literature. The study found that the use of social media to spread fake news has a significant impact on shaping public opinion, especially in times of political tension or crisis. This confirms the findings of B. Gjerazi & P. Skana (2023), S. Miller *et al.* (2024), F. Zhao (2023), who analysed the politically motivated spread of disinformation and found that it is aimed at manipulating public opinion. Similar results were also obtained in studies by I. Hansen & D. Lim (2018), who drew attention to cyber interference during electoral processes. A key feature of the study was the use of machine learning to analyse fake news, which allowed for a better understanding of the emotional aspect of texts and their similarity to headlines, as described by Q. Guo *et al.* (2023). Technologies such as TieFake allow automating the process of detecting fake news, which is critical in an information overload.

The importance of the study is that it expands the knowledge of the impact of fake news on society and demonstrates how modern technologies can be used to combat this problem. Fake news is not only misleading, but can also lead to real social consequences, such as political instability, social conflicts and economic losses. As noted by X.J. Lim *et al.* (2024), Y. Sohn *et al.* (2024), the spread of disinformation through social media is becoming an increasingly urgent problem, as numerous users do not have sufficient critical thinking skills to verify information. The results are also consistent with the research of A. Martín García & A. Buitrago (2022), who pointed out that journalists face new challenges in the face of the growing number of fake news. Their analysis confirmed the need to develop new strategies to combat disinformation, including the use of automated fact-checking tools. Comparing the results with other studies, there are several important differences. For example, the study by L. Maschmeyer *et al.* (2023), which analysed disinformation campaigns during the conflict in Ukraine, focuses on ‘hybrid warfare’ and the use of social media as a tool for manipulation. The study did not focus on military conflicts, but confirmed the general trend of using social media to spread disinformation for political purposes. Another important aspect is the comparison of the study with the work of Y. Tsfati *et al.* (2020), who investigated the reasons for the spread of fake news in the mainstream media. They emphasised that most fake news penetrates the mainstream media due to the lack of sufficient control over information. The study demonstrated that social media is a much faster and larger platform for spreading disinformation, as it does not have the same thorough fact-checking as traditional media.

The study by S. Tejedor *et al.* (2024) provided a systematic review of research on fact-checking and countering fake news in the social sciences. Their work highlighted the need for comprehensive strategies that combine technological and social aspects to counter

fake news. The study supports this view, as we found that machine learning technologies are an effective tool for detecting disinformation, but they should be combined with educational programmes aimed at increasing users' critical thinking. Despite the general convergence with many studies, our research also revealed several discrepancies. For example, the study by E. Muriel-Torrado & D.B. Pereira (2020) argued that behavioural factors, such as lack of motivation to verify information, are the key reason for the spread of fake news. At the same time, our study showed that the emotional aspect of the news, in particular its headline, significantly affects the speed of its spread. This indicates that emotions play a bigger role in the spread of fake news than previously thought. The study by L. Schaewitz & N.C. Krämer (2020) drew attention to the importance of the timing of disinformation correction and the format of its presentation. They argued that timely correction can significantly reduce the impact of fake news on users. The study, however, found that even after fake news is refuted, a significant number of users continue to believe in the false information, which highlights the limitations of existing approaches to combating disinformation.

Russian propaganda is actively using disinformation and fake news to influence public opinion on Ukraine's European integration. The main goal of such campaigns is to create a negative image of the European Union, foment doubts about the benefits of European integration, and fuel pro-Russian sentiment among the Ukrainian population. Fake news spread through Russian media and social media often relates to economic losses that Ukraine allegedly faces from cooperation with the EU, threats to sovereignty, and distorted information about the social and cultural consequences of integration. One of the key psychological mechanisms of disinformation is confirmation bias, where people tend to accept only information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs. Pro-Russian media exploit this bias by spreading news that increases fears or distrust of European integration. Another important mechanism is the illusory truth effect: the more often information is repeated, the more it is perceived as true, even if it is fake. The use of emotions also plays an important role. Disinformation aimed at arousing fear, anger, or anxiety has a stronger impact on the perception of information than rational arguments. For example, fake news about "threats to national identity" in the context of European integration appeals to fears of losing cultural heritage and traditions. Russian propaganda also actively uses polarization techniques, emphasizing the differences between European and pro-Russian groups in Ukraine. This reinforces the split in society and makes public opinion more vulnerable to manipulation.

Further research could focus on improving algorithms for detecting disinformation, as well as developing educational programmes to improve the information literacy of the population. In addition, it is necessary

to study the behavioural aspects of social media users to better understand how they perceive and disseminate information. As noted by I. Hasiuk (2022), D. Obadã & D. Dabija (2022), environmental brands often fall victim to disinformation, and research into this phenomenon can help to more effectively counter disinformation campaigns in the field of environment and sustainable development. Another area for further research could be to analyse the impact of fake news on different social groups. For example, W. Yanhong & M. Hasrina (2024), V.C.L.L. Valle (2024) investigated the impact of environmental risks on trust in fake news. Such studies can help identify how different social, economic, or political factors affect the perception of disinformation. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that fake news has a significant impact on shaping public opinion, especially in times of political tension. The study confirms the importance of combining technological solutions with educational initiatives to effectively combat disinformation. At the same time, it revealed a number of discrepancies with other studies, which indicates the complexity of this phenomenon and the need for further research.

CONCLUSIONS

The study determined how Russian propaganda uses these psychological mechanisms to influence public opinion in Ukraine regarding European integration. The survey results showed that a significant part of the population distrusts Russian media and understands the manipulative nature of disinformation aimed at Ukraine's European course. Only a small percentage of respondents (19.4%) trust news from Russian sources about Ukraine's European integration, which indicates that citizens are highly aware of manipulative tactics. However, a significant percentage of respondents noticed an increase in negative information about the EU in the Russian media during the war, which confirms the use of a strategy to create fear and distrust of Western institutions. An analysis of the answers to other questions showed that most citizens believe that joining the EU is economically beneficial for Ukraine, but a significant percentage (74.2%) of respondents see the war as the main obstacle to European integration. This suggests that disinformation has not been able to radically change the overall positive attitude towards the EU, but rather creates fear and concerns about the consequences of the conflict, thus trying to slow down the process of European integration. In addition, within the "us" versus "them" narrative, the Russian media often portray the EU as a threat to traditional Ukrainian values, although the majority of respondents deny this. The results show that Ukrainians partially doubt the adequacy of the government's actions to counter disinformation. This may indicate that, despite an understanding of the manipulative nature of propaganda, effective communication between the government and society needs to be improved. Russian propaganda, in

particular through disinformation, tries to raise doubts and fears among Ukrainians about European integration, but most citizens are critical of such messages.

A limitation of the study was the inability to cover all regions of Ukraine, which could have provided more representative results on the impact of disinformation on public opinion. Further research perspectives include analysing the impact of disinformation on young people, who are an active audience of social media, and

studying the long-term effects of propaganda on the formation of persistent stereotypes about Ukraine's European integration.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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Психологічні механізми впливу дезінформації та фейкових новин на формування громадської думки щодо української євроінтеграції: аналіз російської пропаганди

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Анотація. Метою дослідження було вивчення психологічних механізмів впливу дезінформації та фейкових новин на формування громадської думки щодо процесу євроінтеграції України, з особливим акцентом на аналіз російської пропаганди. Методологія дослідження включала аналіз нарративів російської пропаганди через основні ЗМІ та соціальні мережі за конкретними критеріями; опитування громадян України щодо впливу дезінформації та визначення психологічних механізмів, за допомогою яких дезінформація впливає на формування громадської думки. Дослідження охоплює психологічні аспекти маніпуляції суспільною свідомістю, а саме використання страхів, стереотипів та емоцій для дискредитації євроінтеграційного курсу. Основними завданнями стали аналіз способів розповсюдження фейкових новин, визначення ключових меседжів пропаганди, дослідження сприйнятливості різних груп населення до таких інформаційних впливів. Емпіричні дані були зібрані через опитування, що дозволило виявити стратегії дезінформації та їх вплив на різні верстви суспільства. Результати дослідження показали, що російська пропаганда активно використовувала емоційно забарвлені фейкові новини для маніпулювання настроями громадськості, що особливо ефективно діяло на аудиторії з низьким рівнем медіаграмотності. Такі маніпуляції призводили до формування негативного ставлення до євроінтеграції та створення соціальної напруги. Значення отриманих результатів полягало у глибшому розумінні впливу дезінформації на громадську думку, що було важливим для розробки стратегій протидії пропаганді та підвищення медіаграмотності населення

Ключові слова: маніпуляція; медіаграмотність; громадська свідомість; фейки; пропагандистські стратегії