

BRIEF

RUSSIA'S ATTEMPTS TO
UNDERMINE MOBILISATIONRUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE SERIES 2
NO. 5

| MARYNA VOROTYNTSEVA |

Russia conducts information and psychological operations to undermine and discredit Ukraine's mobilisation, damage the morale of Ukrainian citizens, and weaken their willingness to defend their state. In support of these efforts, the Russian military and special services distribute both real and fake photographs and video content on social networks. In addition, the Russian special services use current and former male citizens of Ukraine who have voluntarily switched sides to produce malign content. The recent discussions about and promulgation of new laws related to Ukraine's mobilisation have offered Russia further opportunities to spread disinformation.

Russia's attempts to discredit Ukraine's mobilisation cannot be considered separately from its wider information and psychological operations. They are a key part of a strategy that seeks to destroy Ukrainian society's trust in the military-political leadership and armed forces, and to create tension between the military and civilians and distrust of the military in the political leadership. Related efforts include the large-scale destruction of Ukraine's energy system, aimed at creating despair, scepticism in the ability of the armed forces to protect civilian society, and a wish to leave the country. This, in turn, affects the willingness and motivation of citizens to become soldiers.

CONTEXT ...

On 24 February 2022, thousands of men queued at the military commissariats (TCAR, *voenkomat*). In the first months of the full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian army was augmented

with hundreds of thousands who had volunteered to defend their country or were called up for military service.

In summer 2023, however, journalists found that the head of the Odesa TCAR had accrued significant wealth apparently related to corrupt schemes to avoid mobilisation. This story of expensive cars, vacations, and real estate in European resorts resonated in the information field, and in response, President Zelenskyy dismissed all the regional TCAR heads. At the same time, Ukraine's counteroffensive in the southeast was failing to meet expectations, the *Verkhovna Rada* was considering lowering the conscription age from 27 to 25, and mobilisation arrangements were being widely discussed. This context provided opportunities for Russian propaganda. Information and psychological operations aimed at undermining mobilisation and the readiness of citizens to join the armed forces soon became visible.

Russia aims to destroy Ukrainian society's trust in the military-political leadership and armed forces

... AND CONTENT

Telegram channels controlled by the Russian special services, which have targeted Ukraine since 2018, were the first platforms to be used in a campaign that painted Ukraine's mobilisation as 'illegal' and 'violent.' These channels began to publish videos of often dubious quality, claimed to be shot in secret by eyewitnesses and showing TCAR representatives grabbing men off the streets to physically force them to TCAR offices.

These videos resonated and were also distributed on social networks (in particular, TikTok) with comments referring to ‘meat hunting.’ They mostly feature cities in eastern, southern and central Ukraine (e.g., Kharkiv and Odesa) where Russia focuses efforts to undermine morale, related to its fake narrative that ‘historically Russian cities’ are targets for Ukrainian air attacks. The videos also emphasise that ‘forceful mobilisation’ rarely takes place in Ukraine’s western areas, supporting Russia’s narrative about discrimination against certain Ukrainian regions (in particular, where much of the population considers Russian to be their native language) and the privileged position of others. Both narratives have been present in Russian propaganda since at least 2004. Furthermore, they promote narratives that Ukraine is acting illegally and ‘sending its citizens to their deaths.’ They never say that Russia first attacked Ukraine in 2014, that a full-scale invasion took place in 2022, that Ukraine has suffered tens of thousands of casualties, that Russia kills and tortures civilians and prisoners of war, and that Ukraine’s mobilisation is necessary precisely to repel Russia’s aggression.

Some of the videos are real. But fake videos alleging ‘hazing’ (*dedovshchina*) in the Ukrainian army and attacks by Ukrainian servicemen on

The Russian military regularly publishes videos of the torture and execution of Ukrainian prisoners of war

civilians (especially women and certain religious groups, particularly Muslims) are also circulated on social networks by anonymous accounts. These efforts too aim to undermine the motivation of citizens to join the armed forces, intimidating them by highlighting potentially harmful situations. Russian military personnel also regularly publish videos of the torture and execution of Ukrainian prisoners of war. While these clearly violate international law, the rules and customs of warfare, and basic human decency, the cruelty with which the Russian army treats captured military personnel and civilians in the occupied territories has the psychological effect of intimidating citizens and making them flee or hide from mobilisation.

In November 2023, the Ukrainian MoD’s Main Intelligence Directorate announced that Russia had begun a new information and psychological operation ‘Maidan-3,’ with a \$250 million budget for the promotion of narratives on Telegram alone.¹ The operation aimed, among other things, to promote the message that President Zelenskyy would lose legitimacy by May 2024. Between December and May, Zelenskyy’s ‘illegitimacy’ was also promoted alongside the narrative about ‘illegal mobilisation’ in Ukraine: ‘Ze-mobilisation.’ The operation had already had some effect by the time the first official public comments on the preparation of new mobilisation rules were made in December 2023. The lateness of public communication and the reluctance of public figures to take responsibility for any decisions that may have negative consequences led to the significant distortion of perceptions of this issue in Ukrainian society.

ACTORS

The main actors in Russia’s information and psychological operations against Ukraine include Russian military propagandists (*voencors*) who operate within the Russian army. Mostly, they perform the function of direct intimidation and disinformation, e.g., publishing footage of torture, executions, and other alarming photos and videos. They also formulate Kremlin narratives in a form accessible to readers.

Anonymous Telegram ‘news’ channels, meanwhile, spread disinformation and gossip. For example, one essential element of efforts to undermine mobilisation is the spreading of rumours about ‘betrayal,’ such as Kyiv’s intentional surrender of territory to destroy powerful military units or to separate military structures. This kind of gossip regularly appears in the anonymous Telegram channels controlled by the Russian GRU, which were discredited in Ukraine as early as 2021. Similar information also appears in TikTok accounts. On this platform, anonymous or fake media accounts mostly promote anti-mobilisation narratives such as the ‘illegality of Ze-mobilisation,’ the ‘illegal closing of borders,’ and ‘corruption,’ as well as rumours and fake news about political unity in Ukraine. Their main

approach is emotional manipulation through fake photos and videos.

Finally, some former and current citizens of Ukraine who have volunteered to work for the Russian special services target Ukrainians on Telegram, YouTube, and TikTok. They also mainly promote anti-mobilisation narratives, including themes that only the poor are mobilised while the rich pay bribes to be protected in Ukraine or to flee abroad. They also seek to provoke conflicts between the military and civilians, claiming that those engaged in mobilisation do not fight themselves, but are ‘rear rats, sending us to death.’ They spread the ‘meat hunt’ narrative and call on men to leave Ukraine illegally.

A more recent trend involves the Russian special services hiring unemployed people on Telegram and the Darknet to burn military vehicles parked in the big cities and present this as ‘Russian resistance in Ukraine.’

NEW LAWS, NEW PRESSURE

In 2023, the TCARs lacked digital databases, had outdated data about conscripts, and faced long queues. Men in the big cities often had to spend several days, sometimes weeks, standing in line. Legislative changes were clearly required, but during the drafting process Russia has sought to use Ukraine’s democratic procedures and freedom of speech against Ukraine itself. Draft laws were prepared and discussed in parliament and society over a long period, allowing plenty of time and space for criticism. Public criticism by the President of the then Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, General Zaluzhnyi also provided openings for Russian narratives. The result has been increased informational pressure on Ukrainian society.

Nonetheless, laws were passed in January 2024 to create a single electronic register of those liable for military service and in February 2024 on the demobilisation of conscripts—i.e., young men who were called up to serve in the army before the start of a full-scale invasion, but were not demobilised due to the war.² In March, the status of limited fitness for military service was cancelled and in April, the law on lowering the conscription age from 27 to 25 years came into force.³ Also in April, a law was passed on

strengthening mobilisation.⁴ In May, laws were introduced giving permission to draft convicts, and increasing fines for those who evade military service.⁵ The new law on mobilisation in Ukraine entered into force on 18 May.⁶ Within four months, Ukraine thus carried out a comprehensive update of the legislative framework for all aspects of mobilisation.

Russia has used Ukraine’s democratic procedures and freedom of speech against Ukraine itself

In parallel with these tools of coercion, Ukraine also introduced tools of support. In May, new forms of military registration documents were approved, and a mobile application, Reserve+, was launched, to allow conscripted citizens to update their data in just a few minutes. In two months (18 May – 16 July), more than 3 million conscripts updated their data in Reserve+. In total, approximately 4.5 million—about half of the men in Ukraine and about 80-90% of those who can be mobilised—have used the service.⁷ Ukraine also encouraged citizens to mobilise voluntarily to units of their choice according to their military or civilian profession rather than await formal mobilisation. The armed forces can now plan properly for the draft based on an understanding of how many people of a certain age and level of training can be counted on.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the destruction, occupation, and social and economic problems caused by the war, Ukraine’s information field remains quite diverse and highly politicised. More than 70% of citizens use Telegram channels as a key source of information and 30% use social networks exclusively. Television use is noticeably decreasing, while the use of TikTok is increasing.

The power of Russian disinformation in social networks is also growing. Hundreds of thousands of bots, a vast number of anonymous accounts, deepfake videos, and automated comments are all part of the reality of the information war. Even so, at a press conference on 15 July, President Zelenskyy was able to report that, “The military says that [mobilisation] is going according to plan” (although adding that Ukraine lacks training centres to train the mobilised). It has been reported that during 2024 the armed

forces will need to mobilise fewer than the originally estimated 400-500 thousand people, but the Ukrainian authorities have not disclosed exact figures. In any case, the number of active personnel has long exceeded one million.

A major problem, however, is that Ukrainian legislation does not provide for demobilisation. This is not only unsatisfactory for serving soldiers but could also provide further fuel for Russia's disinformation efforts.

ENDNOTES

¹ Головне управління розвідки МО України [Main Intelligence Directorate of the Defence Ministry of Ukraine] (@DIUkraine), "[Заява Комітету з питань розвідки при Президентові України](#) [Statement by the Intelligence Committee under the President of Ukraine]," Telegram, 27 February 2024; Ukrainska Pravda (@УкраїнськаПравда), "[Затримання Ткача в Польщі / Російський "МАЙДАН-3" / Макрон готує Європу до війни з РФ? | УП.Підсумки](#) [Tkach detained in Poland / Russian Maidan 3 / Is Macron preparing Europe for the war with Russia | UP.Pidsumky]," YouTube, 27 February 2024, 13:40.

² David Arakhamia, Petro Poroshenko, Mykhailo Tymaliuk, et al, [Проект Закону про внесення змін до деяких законів України щодо удосконалення порядку обробки та використання даних в державних реєстрах для військового обліку та набуття статусу ветерана війни під час дії воєнного стану](#) [The Law on Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine on Improving the Procedure for Processing and Using Data in State Registers for Military Registration and Acquiring War Veteran Status During Martial Law] (Kyiv: Verkhovna Rada, 2023); Volodymyr Zelensky, [Проект Закону про внесення змін до глави XII "Прикінцеві положення" Закону України "Про військовий обов'язок і військову службу" щодо строків строкової військової служби](#) [The Law on Amendments to Chapter XII "Final Provisions" of the Law of Ukraine "On Military Obligation and Military Service" regarding the terms of conscription] (Kyiv: Verkhovna Rada, 2024); President of Ukraine, [Указ Президента України №149/2024. Про звільнення в запас військовослужбовців строкової військової служби](#) [Decree of The President of Ukraine No. 149/2024 on the release of conscript military servicemen into reserve] (Kyiv: President of Ukraine, 2024).

³ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, "[Закон України Про внесення змін до деяких законів України щодо забезпечення прав військовослужбовців та поліцейських на соціальний захист](#) [The Law on Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine on Ensuring the Rights and Social Protection of Servicemen and Policemen]," *Vidomosti of Verkhovna Rada* No 22 (2024); Denys Shmyhal, [Проект Закону про внесення змін до Закону України "Про військовий обов'язок і військову службу"](#) [The Law on Amendments to the Law of Ukraine "On Military Duty and Military Service"] (Kyiv: Verkhovna Rada, 2023).

⁴ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, "[Закон України Про внесення змін до деяких законодавчих актів України щодо окремих питань проходження військової служби, мобілізації та військового обліку](#) [The Law On Amendments to Some Legislative Acts of Ukraine Regarding Certain Issues of Military Service, Mobilisation and Military Registration], *Vidomosti of Verkhovna Rada* No 19 (2024).

⁵ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, President of Ukraine, [Закон України Про внесення змін до Кримінального, Кримінального процесуального кодексів України та інших законодавчих актів України щодо запровадження інституту умовно-дострокового звільнення осіб від відбування покарання для безпосередньої їх участі в обороні країни, захисті її незалежності та територіальної цілісності](#) [The Law On Amendments to the Criminal and Criminal Procedural Codes of Ukraine and other legislative acts of Ukraine on the introduction of the institution of conditional early release of persons from sentence for their direct participation in the defence of the country, the protection of its independence and territorial integrity] (Kyiv: Verkhovna Rada, President of Ukraine, 2024); Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, President of Ukraine, [Закон України Про внесення змін до Кодексу України про адміністративні правопорушення щодо удосконалення відповідальності за порушення правил військового обліку та законодавства про оборону, мобілізаційну підготовку та мобілізацію](#) [The Law on Amendments to the Code of Ukraine on Administrative Offenses Regarding Improvement of Liability for Violation of Military Registration Rules and Legislation on Defence, Mobilisation Training, and Mobilisation] (Kyiv: Verkhovna Rada, President of Ukraine, 2024).

⁶ Stepan Smyshliiiev, "[Новий закон про мобілізацію набув чинності: що змінюється](#) [The new law on mobilisation takes effect: what has changed]," *DW*, 17 May 2024.

⁷ Editorial Board, "[Мобілізаційний резерв Скільки чоловіків ще можна мобілізувати і чому потрібно залучати в ЗСУ більше жінок](#) [Mobilisation reserve. How many men can still be mobilised and why should more women be recruited into the Armed Forces.]" *Texty.org.ua*, 4 March 2024.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARYNA VOROTYNTSEVA

Maryna Vorotyntseva is Senior Expert in the Operational Support Branch at NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga, Latvia.

 ICDS.TALLINN
 @ICDS_TALLINN
 ICDS-TALLINN
 WWW.ICDS.EE



Disclaimer: The views and opinions contained in this paper are solely of its author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the International Centre for Defence and Security or any other organisation.

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND SECURITY
63/4 NARVA RD., 10120 TALLINN, ESTONIA
INFO@ICDS.EE

ISSN 2228-2076