

British Government Funded a Plan for International Censorship of Critiques of NATO

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Global Research, October 05, 2023

[Internationalist 360](#) 3 October 2023

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

In-depth Report: [UKRAINE REPORT](#)

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Ukraine War
Disinfo
Working Group



FINAL REPORT

20 February – 30 April 2023

A screenshot from the title page of a leaked 130-page [Final Report](#) of the Ukraine War Disinfo Working Group commissioned by the British [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office](#) (FCDO) and the U.K.-based [Zinc Network](#)'s [Open Information Partnership](#). Despite the studied 10 week period ending in April, the report was internally released earlier this month. The ten studied European regions are highlighted in blue. Leaked report from U.S. Special Ops contractor and NATO-partnered think-tanks defines criticism of NATO as disinfo. Recommends “coordinated action to pressure social media and digital market actors”.

A leaked [130-page report](#) made public here for the first time documents an international censorship campaign funded by the British government and led by a public relations contractor for U.S. Special Operations Forces. The basic strategy is to redefine “disinformation” to include even factual criticism of the U.S. military or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and then to exert “coordinated action to pressure social media and digital market actors” to “moderate” such speech. The previously secret report also recommends “intensifying cooperation among the intelligence agencies within the EU [European Union]”, which in the past has included Ukrainian intelligence conducting what it described as a “[multi-level special operation](#)” in Spain to arrest a critical journalist for treason over his YouTube broadcasts.

INTRODUCTION

This report provides an overview of nine weeks of monitoring of pro-Kremlin disinformation channels conducted by a coalition of 10 member organisations of the Open Information Partnership (OIP) across 12 countries in Eastern Europe: Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine. The participating organisations systematically collected and analysed data from select lists of known disinformation channels in each country, with a focus on online news portals, Telegram groups, and, in some instances, Facebook pages.

For the purposes of this report, disinformation is defined as:

- False or misleading information spread deliberately via Kremlin-backed or Kremlin-aligned outlets.
- Not-attributable, false, or misleading information which fits with existing pro-Kremlin narratives, aims or activities.
- Content based on verifiable information which is unbalanced or skewed, amplifies, or exaggerates certain elements for effect, or uses emotive or inflammatory language to achieve effects which fit within existing Kremlin narratives, aims, or activities.
- For the purposes of this report, disinformation also can be spread either organically through human ignorance and uncertainty or through poor journalistic standards, as long as the narrative in question verifiably originates with Kremlin-backed or Kremlin-aligned sources.

The monitoring data have been provided by OIP technical partner LetsData. They are drawn from 200 pro-Russian sources, which include five media outlets and 15 Telegram channels. These channels and outlets were selected OIP groups, based on their local expertise and knowledge of national disinformation landscapes.

A screenshot of the introduction to the leaked [final report](#) of Open Information Partnership's Ukraine War Disinfo Working Group. The term "disinformation" is defined to include large categories of verifiably true criticisms of Western governments, including those deemed "emotive" or to have originated from an anonymous source. Such a definition of disinformation is even more expansive than "malinformation", which is generally understood as factual information shared out of context.

The international effort is coordinated by the U.K.-based government public relations contractor Zinc Network, which [rose to prominence](#) more than two years ago as the subject of the [first piece](#) of investigative journalism to be forcefully labeled by Twitter as potentially obtained through hacking. Despite being based upon documents implicitly confirmed as authentic, the reporting was arguably panned by major U.S. outlets because of the embarrassing ties it revealed between Western intelligence agencies and prominent investigative journalism.

Based upon a fresh leak of a report internally released by the Ukraine War Disinfo Working Group of Zinc's Open Information Partnership (OIP) earlier this month, the author is independently concluding that the U.K. government-funded network of think tanks and investigative journalists has recommended a coordinated campaign to pressure social media companies and "digital market actors" into suppressing even factual criticism of NATO-aligned governments.

We are further revealing from public procurement records that Zinc Network received more than \$500,000 from a [direct contract](#) with U.S. Special Operations Command in Kenya and more than \$3 million from a [subcontract](#) with U.S. Army Europe and Africa under the

controversial U.S. intelligence contractor CACI. (Last month a federal judge [again refused](#) to dismiss a lawsuit against CACI regarding its alleged support for U.S. military [torture](#) in the Abu Ghraib prison.)

Much of the polarization surrounding The Grayzone's reporting centered on OIP's previous partnership with the influential investigatory nonprofit Bellingcat, whom Zinc [funded with more than](#) 65,000 euros between 2019 and 2021. Grayzone's 2021 publication noted that one of the potential Bellingcat trainers named in Zinc's documents was [Christiaan Triebert](#), who subsequently moved to the Visual Investigations team of The New York Times. Bellingcat's former director of training and research, [Aric Toler](#), recently joined the same team.

Zinc Network and Bellingcat did not respond to detailed requests for comment sent two days before publication. Additional emails to the two official public accounts associated with OIP bounced due to the author's email address not being on a pre-approved list, but both Zinc and its OIP team confirmed receipt directly before the requested response deadline. This article will be updated if any of the organizations provide a post-publication comment.

The former head of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's [short-lived](#) Disinformation Governance Board, Nina Jankowicz, has also [prominently advertised](#) their role as a member of OIP's advisory board. Much of the [concern](#) surrounding such a content moderation board within DHS stemmed from fears that it could become a tool for suppressing even factual critiques of the U.S. Government — an overt aim of the newly public OIP report.

The findings presented in this report represent the views of the authors and participating organisations. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Open Information Partnership.

Technical support for this project was provided by LetsData (Ukraine).

Contributions to this report were provided by:

- Media Initiative Centre (Armenia)
- Civic Resilience Initiative (Baltics – Russian language)
- Press Club Belarus (Belarus)
- Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria)
- Georgia's Reform Associates (Georgia)
- Political Capital (Hungary)
- Watchdog.md (Moldova)
- FakeNews (Poland)
- Adapt Institute (Slovakia)
- Detector Media (Ukraine)

A screenshot from the second page of the leaked [final report](#) of the Ukraine War Disinfo Working Group which details the distribution of narrative analysis tasks to eleven different organizations.

The Ukraine War Disinfo Working Group's study was largely outsourced by Zinc to eleven separate organizations: the Ukrainian narrative surveillance firm [LetsData](#) led the social media data collection and network analysis, while each of the ten Eastern European regions of study was handled by a separate think tank. For example, analysis of Ukraine was assigned to [Detector Media](#), whose [2020 annual report](#) listed the U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, the U.S. Agency for International Development, OIP, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark as funders.

The number one target of Detector's campaign in Ukraine, journalist and politician Anatoliy

Shariy, has been twice [charged](#) with [treason](#) by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU). The first charge, for posting a map of Ukraine to his YouTube channel which excluded Crimea and the Donbas, resulted in his [brief arrest](#) in Spain as a result of what the SBU itself [described](#) as a “[multi-level special operation](#)”. The second charge was [announced](#) in July through the SBU’s Telegram channel, based on an accusation that Shariy provided filming advice to Russian intelligence.

Key actors

1. Anatoliy Shariy:

Background: Anatoliy Shariy is a Ukrainian blogger and political commentator known for his pro-Russian stance. He gained popularity through his blog and YouTube channel, where he often spreads conspiracy theories and anti-Ukrainian narratives. Shariy has faced accusations of treason by the Ukrainian Security Service. Shariy has a significant online following, with more than 1 million subscribers on his Telegram channel and millions of views on his YouTube videos.

Examples: In this [post](#) Anatoliy Shariy discusses how Ukraine is preparing for the counteroffensive, which is expected to take place soon. The West says it's providing Ukraine with everything necessary to win this part of the war but, Shariy argues, the US told the same when supporting Afghanistan. According to Shariy, anti-Western coalition might win, whatever the US says and delivers to Ukraine. The publication is defeatist in tone, urges to question the prospects of a Ukrainian victory. and undermines trust in Ukraine's Western partners. It also portrays the US as an unreliable actor that is only interested in securing its own geopolitical leading position, for which Russia and China are trying to compete. Shariy often presents opinions that are not disinformation per se, however, they often coincide with the Russian rhetoric on Ukraine being simply a pawn of the US that tries to target Russia and will do so, sacrificing the lives of Ukrainians.

Another example is the [post](#) states that the Ukrainian soldier executed by the Russian forces after declaring "Glory to Ukraine" is not a serviceman of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The video was widely shared online and caused substantial public outrage, however, Shariy claims that the man in question was simply tricked by someone into telling a line for a production video and then he was killed for supposedly an unknown reason. "The hero died immediately after birth." This case would be the worst shame in recent years, as it is 90% fake. – declared Anatoliy Shariy. By this message he accuses Ukraine of producing disinformation and undermines the reputation of executed soldier as well as waters down a Russian war crime.

A screenshot from Detector Media’s list of “Key actors” for “pro-Russian” narratives in Ukraine from page 125 of the [final report](#) of Open Information Partnership’s Ukraine War Disinfo Working Group.

Detector’s primary target, journalist Anatoliy Shariy, has twice been charged with treason by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU). Shariy was temporarily arrested in Spain last year through what the SBU labeled a “multi-level special operation” in response to posting a map of Ukraine to his YouTube channel which excluded the occupied regions of Crimea and the Donbas.

[Leaked emails](#) from the Twitter Files revealed that the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) forwarded requests from the SBU to Twitter which included a demand to censor both Shariy and Canadian journalist Aaron Maté. Maté is perhaps the second most prominent [contributor](#) to The Grayzone behind founding editor Max Blumenthal, whom OIP names alongside Columbia professor [Jeffrey Sachs](#) as an influential American figure in “pro-Russian” narratives in Belarus. The SBU’s request for Twitter to censor Shariy and Maté came one year after Grayzone’s exposé of Zinc’s Open Information Partnership.

The OIP working group’s recent recommendation of “coordinated action to pressure social media and digital market actors” to censor even factual journalism is laid out in the leaked

final report. The first page of its introduction defines disinformation to include even verifiable criticisms of NATO, with two such explicit categories including “Content based on verifiable information which...uses emotive or inflammatory language” and “Not-attributable...information which fits with existing pro-Kremlin narratives, aims or activities”. Under a non-partisan extension of this system, the [U.S. Congressman-endorsed](#) online [troll army](#) known as the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO) would have its communications labeled as disinformation, regardless of the veracity of its individual arguments. But OIP’s targets are instead influential journalists who report critically on NATO.

The basic methodology of the report was to collect 50 postings each week using keyword searches on individually selected “pro-Russian” information sources in each of the ten studied regions, typically taking 35 of the 50 posts from social media such as Telegram and Facebook and 15 from online media outlets. U.S. Army Cyber Command has similarly been purchasing bulk copies of the public content of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as part of its mission to protect the “[NATO brand](#)”, as was [revealed](#) by the author in April.

(Twelve pages of the Ukraine War Disinfo Working Group’s final report were [made public](#) six days ago on LinkedIn by the Lithuanian non-profit [Civic Resilience Initiative](#) (CIR), which handled the Baltics region for the group. [Several weekly reports](#) from OIP’s study were also [published](#) by Political Capital, the Hungarian think tank tasked with monitoring narratives in its own country. While of a similar format, the weekly reports do not contain, for example, the final report’s noteworthy recommendation of a coordinated pressure campaign against social media companies and “digital market actors”. CIR’s twelve pages similarly are focused on the Baltics and do not contain the full report’s more controversial definitions or recommendations.)

A weekly keyword search was run in each country against these lists of channels, pages and portals and samples of 50 posts were collected. These samples were selected based on two criteria: the first is source type, with 70% of posts coming from Telegram (or 35% Telegram and 35% Facebook) and 30% from web portals. The second is the number of views, with half of the posts from each source (media outlet, Telegram, and Facebook) having the highest number of views overall that week. The other half of the sample in each category was randomised in order to diversify the content and increase the capacity to identify germinating pro-Russian narratives. These posts were then coded according to a set list of primary narratives and an evolving list of secondary narratives. For this report, overall insights (i.e. not those found in the country-specific sections) are based on the total dataset collected and analysed by LetsData rather than these weekly 50 post samples.

LetsData adheres strictly to privacy and security principles, using only publicly accessible data. The data was prepared and processed using Python, with libraries like spaCy, Torch, and Scikit-Learn. Techniques from Natural Language Processing were applied to identify discourse patterns, and the text-processing approach employed content and network analysis, including topic modelling and narrative dynamics.

Disclaimer: The phrase "the West" is used throughout to showcase the language of pro-Russian sources, however, we encourage you not to use it outside of the context of describing malign information influence. This may fuel the narrative that the so-called "collective West" exerts undue control over Ukraine. We recommend specificity: Europe, the EU, the US, NATO.

A screenshot from the ninth page of the leaked final report of the Ukraine War Disinfo Working Group commissioned by the Zinc Network’s Open Information Partnership with funding from the U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. The contained text explains the group’s methodology for

surveilling “pro-Russian narratives” on select Telegram and Facebook accounts, as well as in targeted media outlets, through a partnership with the Ukrainian company [LetsData](#).

The leaked U.K. government-funded report explicitly warns against usage of the phrase “the West”, arguing that “This may fuel the narrative that the so-called ‘collective West’ exerts undue control over Ukraine.” On the other hand, the final pages of the report argue that “intelligence agencies across Europe can and should do more and they require a more unified approach [emphasis theirs]”. The group further recommends “Improving and intensifying cooperation among the intelligence agencies within the EU with the focus on malign foreign information influence.”

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