

**BEHIND THE HEADLINES**

Ukraine's Propaganda War: International PR Firms, DC Lobbyists and CIA Cutouts

Dan Cohen reveals the network of foreign strategists, Washington DC lobbyists, and intelligence-linked media outlets behind Ukraine's public relations blitz.

by *Dan Cohen*

HELP US FIGHT THE DECLINE OF INTERNET FREEDOM

Shadowbanning, suspension, DDoS attacks, and online content manipulation: independent news media is fighting a rise in attacks on internet freedom. We're in a time where it is increasingly difficult to have your voice heard. Mint Press News is always adapting to find the best way to be there for you.

FOLLOW US

SUBSCRIBE

March 22nd, 2022

By **Dan Cohen**

WASHINGTON DC — Since the Russian offensive inside Ukraine commenced on February 24, the Ukrainian military has cultivated the image of a plucky little army standing up to the Russian Goliath. To bolster the perception of Ukrainian military mettle, Kiev has churned out a steady stream of sophisticated propaganda aimed at stirring public and official support from Western countries.

The campaign includes language guides, key messages, and hundreds of propaganda posters, some of which contain fascist imagery and even praise Neo-Nazi leaders.

Behind Ukraine's public relations effort is an army of foreign political strategists, Washington DC lobbyists, and a network of intelligence-linked media outlets.

Ukraine's propaganda strategy earned it praise from a NATO commander who told the *Washington Post*, "They are really excellent in stratcom — media, info ops, and also psy-ops." The *Post* ultimately conceded that "Western officials say that while they cannot independently verify much of the information that Kyiv puts out about the evolving battlefield situation, including casualty figures for both sides, it nonetheless represents highly effective stratcom."

Key to the propaganda effort is an international legion of public relations firms working directly with Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to wage information warfare.

According to the industry news site *PRWeek*, the initiative was launched by an anonymous figure who allegedly founded a Ukraine-based public relations firm.

"From the first hour of war, we decided to join the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to help them distribute the official sources to show the truth," the nameless figure told *PR Week*. "This is a hybrid war: the mix of bloodily struggling fight with a huge disinformation and fake campaign lead by Russia [sic]."

According to the anonymous figure, more than 150 public relations firms have joined the propaganda blitz.

The international effort is spearheaded by public relations firm PR Network co-founder Nicky Regazzoni and Francis Ingham, a top public relations consultant with close ties to the UK's government. Ingham previously worked for Britain's Conservative Party, sits on the UK Government Communication Service Strategy and Evaluation Council, is Chief Executive of the International Communications Consultancy Organisation, and leads the membership body for UK local government communicators, LG Comms.

"We've been privileged to help coordinate efforts to support the Ukrainian Government in the last few days," Ingham told *PROvoke Media*. "Agencies have offered up entire teams to support Kyiv in the communications war. Our support for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine is unwavering and will continue for as long as needed."

With an anonymous Ukrainian figure joining two of the top public relations figures in the Kiev government's propaganda blitz, Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs distributed a dossier folder (archived) with materials instructing public relations agencies on "key messages," approved language, content for debunked propaganda constructs, far-right and Neo-Nazi propaganda.

The folder is run by Yaroslav Turbil, described on his LinkedIn page as "Head of Ukraine.ua — Ukraine's digital ecosystem for global communications. Strategic Communications & Country Brand Promotion." Turbil has worked at multiple "civil society" organizations closely linked to the U.S. government and interned at Internews, a U.S. intelligence-linked organization that operates under the guise of promoting press freedom.

[illegible]

4/43

Despite the story being proven as fake, the dossier contains a propaganda video promoting it.

Another folder in the dossier is run by Ukrainian MFA graphic artist Dasha Podoltseva and contains hundreds of propaganda graphics submitted by artists in Europe and the United States.

Some feature generic “no war” messages, while dozens of other images celebrate “The Ghost of Kiev” – a heroic Ukrainian pilot who turns out to be non-existent – and the phony “Snake Island 13” incident.

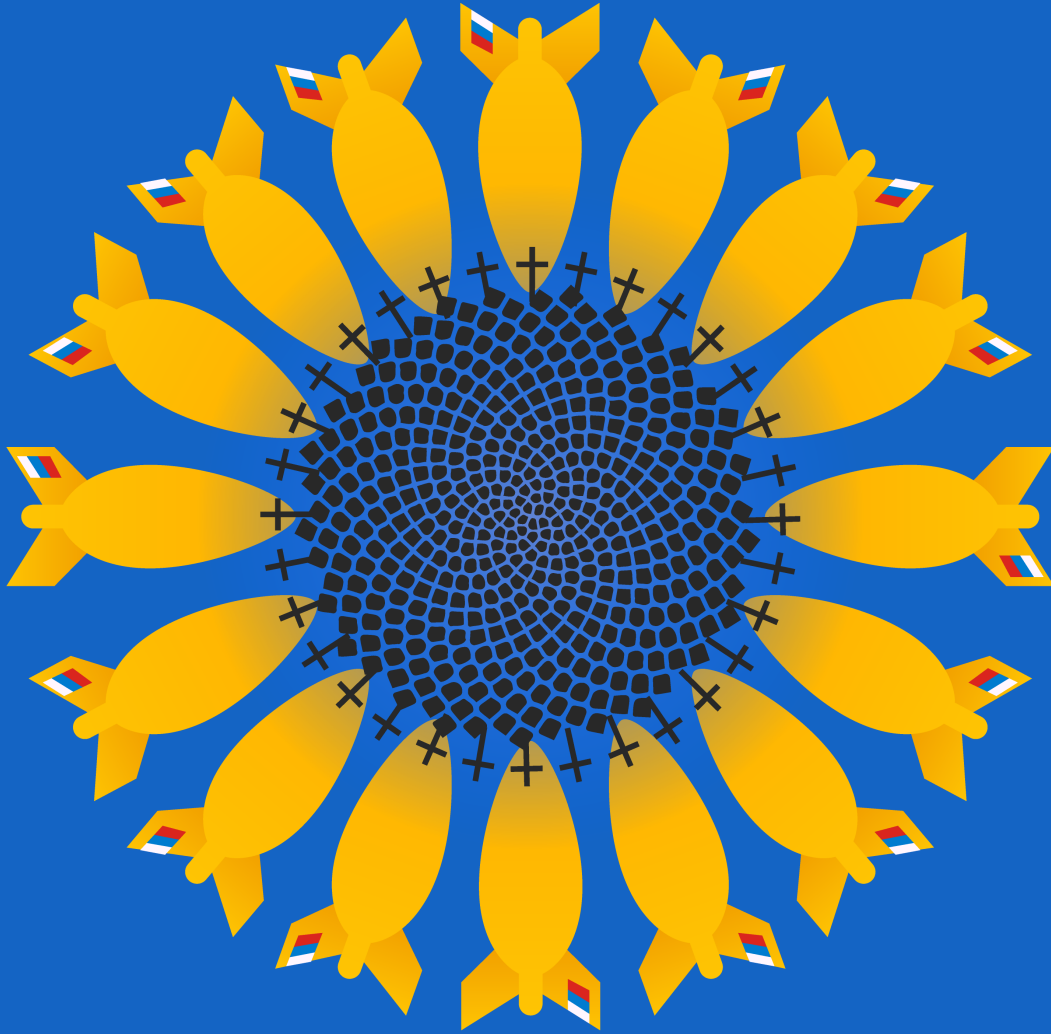
Many use xenophobic and racist language, and some are explicit in their praise of prominent Ukrainian Neo-Nazis, including C14 leader Yevhen Karas, the Right Sector fascist paramilitary, and the Neo-Nazi Azov Battalion. Multiple images call for “Banderite smoothies” – a reference to Molotov cocktails named for the late OUN-B commander Stephan Bandera, who collaborated with Nazi Germany in the mass murder of Jews and ethnic Poles during World War II. Another image depicts a book titled the: “Encyclopedia of Incurable Diseases,” listing Russia, Belorussia, North Korea, Syria, and Eritrea.

I ❤️ NLAW



“I love NLAW” – Next Generation Light Anti-tank Weapon, provided by western governments to the Ukrainian military

@ Oleksandra
Korchevska



бабця каже москалям:
«ти ховайся по полям,
щоб, як помреш від війська,
ріс соняшник український».

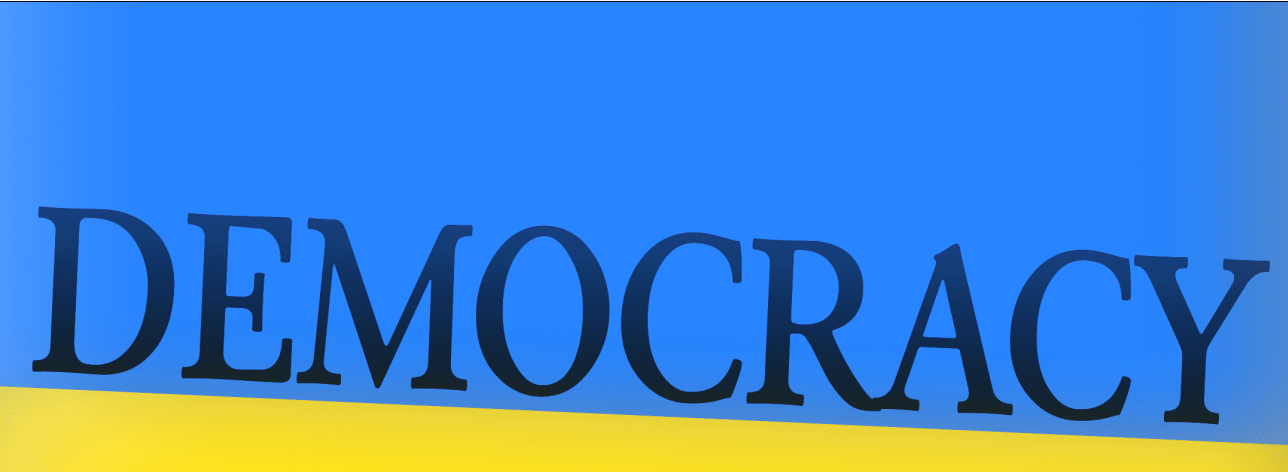
Graphic implying fertilizing the fields with bodies reads, “Grandma advice to Moskovites: Hide in the fields, When you die in hands of our army, Sunflowers will grow better”

RITUAL SERVICES



#ЯДякуюЗСУ

2022
МІС



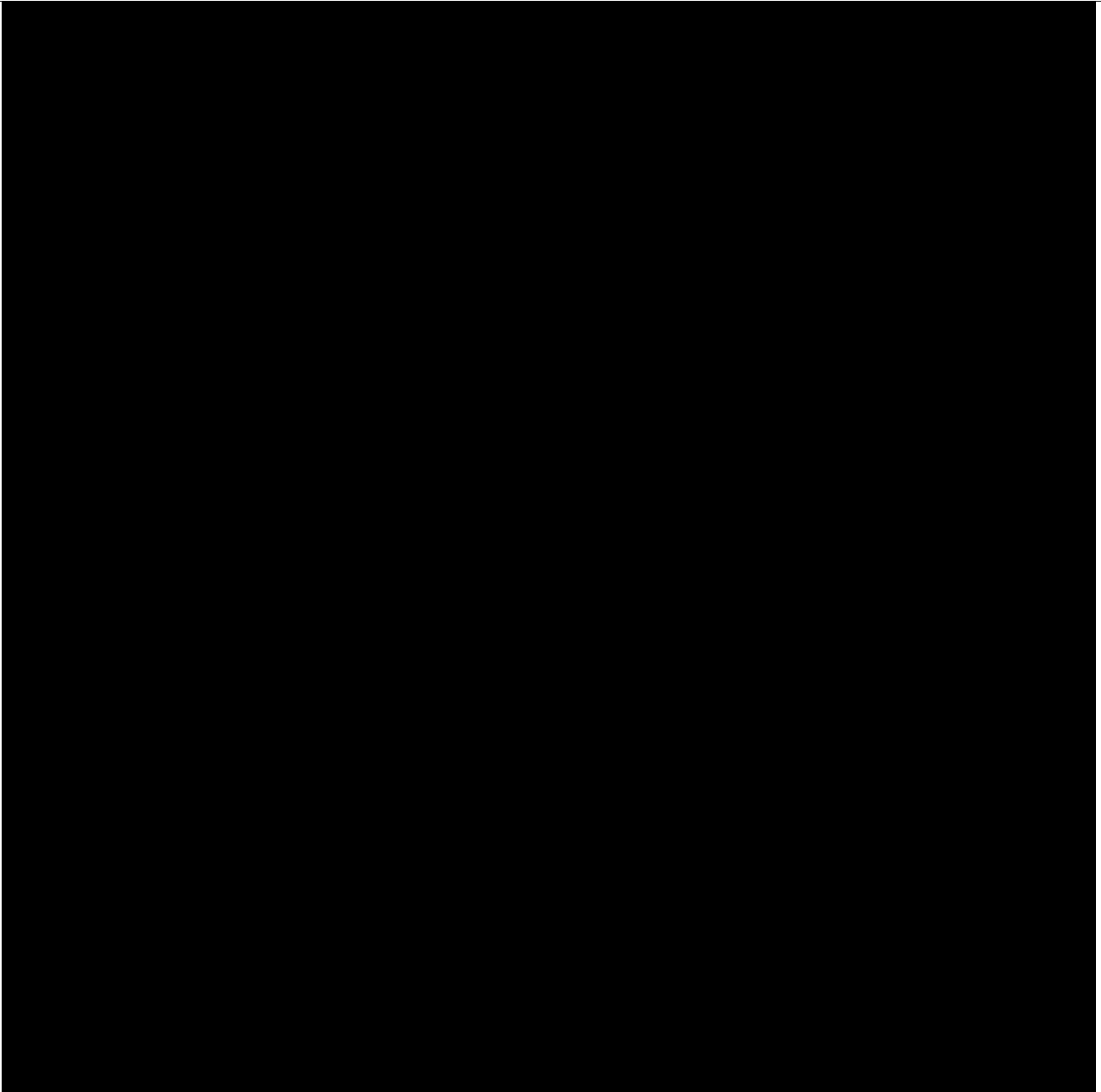
“Thank You Ukrainian Army” with an Azov Battalion Wolfsengel patch emblazoned on the sleeve”

“The Encyclopedia of Incurable Disease: Russia, Belorussia, North Korea, Syria, Eritrea”

“Against Moscovian Occupation.” Moscovian is a xenophobic term used to describe Russians

**Graphic calling Czar Nicholas, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, and Vladimir Putin incarnations of the same
“Mental Moskovian Dragon”**

“Bandera Smoothie”



“Putin’s orcs got whipped” – Orc is a xenophobic term for Russian used by Ukrainian nationalists



Flag of Neo-Nazi paramilitary Right Sector. Red represents “blood” and black represents “soil”

Ukraine or Valhalla – a reference to the where heroes of Norse mythological go after death, a theme commonly appropriated by neo-Nazis

A call for a no-fly zone over Ukraine with an image of a building used by the Neo-Nazi Azov Battalion that Russia bombed

"Evhen Karas. Our positive news. #Thank_You_Ukraine Army". Karas is a leader of the C14 neo-Nazi gang, who boasted that "We have fun killing."

“Bandera smoothie for friends of Putin”

Foreign extremists flock to Ukraine

The dossier also contains a link to a Ministry of Foreign Affairs page called “Fight for Ukraine,” which provides instructions for foreigners who wish to join Ukraine’s Neo-Nazi-infested armed forces – termed the “International Defense Legion of Ukraine.”

Following Zelensky’s call for foreign fighters to form a brigade, fighters from all over the world, including the U.S., UK, Canada, Australia, Spain, Colombia, Brazil, Chile, and more have traveled to face Russian forces. Others with no combat training or experience have arrived for “war tourism” – what one British soldier called “bullet-catchers.”

Official Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs recruitment graphics from the dossier

Official Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs recruitment graphics from the dossier

While the Ukrainian government says tens of thousands have answered their call, some commentators expressed doubt at those figures, calling it a “PR exercise.”

However, the foreigners who have traveled to Ukraine have encountered a much more severe reality than they anticipated.

Russia’s air force bombed military installations adjacent to where the foreign fighters were sleeping. Having fled to neighboring Poland, a Spanish fighter described the bombing as a “message” that could have killed thousands.

Similarly, an American fighter who hid in an ambulance to escape the frontlines warned that Ukrainian authorities were killing foreigners who decided not to fight, calling it a “trap.”

Correct wording

One document inside the dossier delineates acceptable language on the conflict with Russia as determined by the Ukrainian government.

“Such Russian clichés like ‘referendum in Crimea’ or ‘will of the people of Crimea’ are absolutely unacceptable,” the document states, in reference to the 2014 overwhelmingly successful referendum to separate from Ukraine.

The document deems unacceptable the terms “Civil war in Donbass,” “Internal conflict,” “Conflict in Ukraine” and “Ukrainian crisis” to describe the Ukrainian military’s war with the breakaway republics of the Donbass region. This, despite the fact that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights estimates that 14,200 people, including 3,404 civilians, have been killed in internal fighting in Ukraine since 2014.

In place of these phrases, the document calls for the use of the terms “Armed aggression by the Russian Federation in Donbass, international armed conflict, Russian war against Ukraine, Russian-Ukrainian conflict armed conflict.”

Key Messages

Another document titled “Key Messages” contains specific propaganda claims that were widely disseminated in mainstream western media, but which have since been discredited. One section claims the “entire Europe was put on the brink of nuclear disaster, when the Russian troops began shelling the largest in Europe Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Power Plant.”

However, International Atomic Energy Agency’s director-general, Rafael Mariano Grossi, said that the building hit by a Russian “projectile” at the Zaporizhzhia plant was “not part of the reactor” but instead a training center. Russian troops also left Ukrainian workers to continue operating the plant.

Another section thanks Turkey for the decision “to block the access of Russian warships to the Black Sea.”

However, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan closed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to all military vessels, preventing both NATO and Russian vessels from accessing the Black Sea.

Among the document’s key messages is a statement of gratitude to the “Anti-war demonstrations held by citizens of many nations throughout the world demonstrate strong support to Ukraine in defending against Russia.”

This refers to large pro-Ukraine demonstrations in Europe which have featured calls for the U.S. and NATO to establish a no-fly zone over Ukraine and shoot down Russian military aircraft, potentially transforming the conflict into a world war between nuclear-armed powers.

“Despite Russia’s propaganda, there is no discrimination based on the race or nationality, including when it comes to the crossing of the state border by foreign citizens,” claims the Ukrainian document.

However, numerous videos and reports have documented Ukrainian authorities preventing Africans from fleeing the fighting. Even the *New York Times* – hardly a bastion of Kremlin propaganda – published a report documenting these racist practices.

One message says that “On 16 March, the Russian forces dropped a bomb on a drama theatre where up to 1300 civilians were being sheltered. The number of casualties is still unknown.”

However, as Max Blumenthal reported the explosion appears to be the result of a false flag operation designed by the Neo-Nazi Azov Battalion and aimed at triggering a NATO intervention.

NATO-backed troll farms

Another anonymously-penned investigation shows how Ukrainian public relations firms have used targeted advertisements to astroturf Russian internet and social media networks with messaging calling to economically isolate Moscow and “stop the war.” This effort is led by Bezlepkin Evgeny Vitalievich, who uses the alias Evgeny Korolev, along with Pavel Antonov of the Targetorium organization. From behind his Korolev pseudonym, the Ukrainian information warrior composed a post on his Facebook page (now private) boasting that his firm’s Facebook ads achieved 30 million hits in three days.

At the same time, Facebook has blocked Russian state-owned media outlets from running ads and monetizing content. Several fake accounts for media outlets like *Russia 24* have sprung up, burying the authentic account under a series of impostors. Facebook has also marked statements from Russian officials, including the Ministry of Defense, as “false.”

This campaign has reportedly been carried out upon recommendation from StopFake, a self-described “fact checking” outlet that is funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, Atlantic Council, Czech and UK foreign ministries, and the International Renaissance Foundation, which is funded by billionaire George Soros’ Open Society Foundation.

StopFake was hired by Facebook in March 2020 to “curb the flow of Russian propaganda” but was found to be employing multiple figures closely tied to violent Neo-Nazis. The journalist who co-authored the exposé received death threats and ultimately fled Ukraine.

Those revelations have apparently not prevented Facebook from relying on the organization for censorship guidance.

Meanwhile, Russian hackers located a public Google document (since made private, uploaded here) detailing the propaganda operation, which has been distributed in Telegram channels of “creative farms.”

“Here you can find links to Ukrainian media that need promotion, bot accounts with logins and passwords from which anti-war messages and messages with fakes about the Ministry of Defense were sent to users, theses and specific instructions on which posts and which audiences to embroider,” the investigation reads.

Another campaign is run by Nataliya Popovych, the founder of the public relations agency, One Philosophy, in Kiev. Popovych's LinkedIn profile shows she has worked with the U.S. State Department and advised former President Petro Poroshenko. She is also co-founder and board member of Ukraine Crisis Media Center, a propaganda arm funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the National Endowment for Democracy, the U.S. Embassy, and NATO, among many others.

A *Campaign Asia* article profiles several public relations firms involved in the effort. Among them is Richard Edelman, CEO of Edelman PR. Edelman is also a member of the Atlantic Council's Board of Directors and the World Economic Forum.

"Geopolitics has become the new test for trust. We saw this with the allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang and the war between Ukraine and Russia has only reinforced it," he said, linking the U.S. propaganda campaign surrounding China's deradicalization campaign for Uyghur Muslims.

PR approved media outlets

An article in *PRWeek* profiles several figures partaking in what they describe as a "PR army" that is "fighting on the informational frontline" against Russia's "barbaric genocide of Ukrainians."

"Propaganda is the same as real lethal weapons," declares Marta Dzhumaha, PR manager at healthcare company BetterMe.

Julia Petryk, head of public relations at MacPaw, offers a list of approved media outlets, authored by her colleague Tetiana Bronistka, a former employee of Ukraine's Prosecutor General's Office. The list includes Russian and English language sources, as well as Telegram channels. However, these "verified sources that objectively cover what is happening in Ukraine" are anything but independent. Most of them are tied to the U.S. and European governments and billionaire foundations.

She also lists several Russian-language websites:

- Novaya Gazeta – Tied to and reportedly funded by the National Endowment for Democracy
- Meduza – Funded by the government of Latvia, OAK Foundation, Open Society Foundation oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorovsky, and Sweden
- Dozhd – SREDA foundation, European Commission
- Holod Media – Offshoot of Meduza – praised in PBS and CNN as “independent media”
- Proposed that Leningrad should have been surrendered to the Nazis in World War 2 and has complained that they are called a “fifth column” for being funded by western powers
- BBC Russia – British government media
- Current Time TV – Created by CIA-founded propaganda outlet Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in collaboration with Voice of America
- Censor – funded by, editor in chief Yuri Butusov, former advisor to the Minister of Defense of Ukraine
- 200RF – A Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website that claims to publish publishes photos and documents of the Russian soldiers captured and killed in action

Among the Telegram channels listed are:

- Radio Svoboda – CIA-founded propaganda organ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
- Espresso TV, largely owned by the wife of former Ukrainian member of parliament Mykola Knyazhytsky
- Censor.net, formerly the largest media site in Ukraine, whose motto is “To bring down Russia”, and whose owner operates a “parade of international trolls.”

Intelligence operations

While the public relations firms distribute content, CIA cutouts and billionaire foundations run the media outlets they derive it from. At the core of this operation is a project called the Russian Language News Exchange that was the product of a network of opposition media outlets founded in 2016 that operate in post-Soviet countries, as revealed by an investigation by the Russian media agency, *RIA FAN*.

In July 2021, a group of journalists flew to Warsaw for media training after being exempted from coronavirus-related restrictions and quarantine orders by Poland's top medical authorities.

Among the six journalists were Andrey Lipsky, deputy editor-in-chief of *Novaya Gazeta*, and Yuliia Fediv, CEO of Hromadske TV media, one of the most-watched networks in Ukraine.

Hromadske's financial reports show it is funded by numerous governments and foundations, including the U.S. embassy in Ukraine, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the European Endowment for Democracy, and Free Press Unlimited. Silicon Valley billionaire Pierre Omidary was also involved in creating the outlet.

Hromadske recently hosted a commentator demanding genocide of ethnic Russians in the Donbass, saying it is populated with 1.5 "superfluous" people that "must be exterminated."

The training, held behind closed doors from July 19 to July 21, was titled "Media Network 2021+" and closely tied to Mediaset, also known as the Russian Language News Exchange, a network founded in 2015. Russian Language News Exchange's website is sparse, with little available information on its activities – apparently made private since the publication of *RIA FAN*'s investigation.

While it claims to be independent, Russian Language News Exchange is a project of Free Press Unlimited, funded by the Dutch government and the European Commission.

Today, it includes 14 media outlets that act as "nodes," cross-publishing each other's articles in various countries.

The website's introductory video is hosted by Maxim Eristavi, a former *Radio Free Europe* reporter and founder of Hromadske. Today, he heads the Millennium Leadership Program at the NATO and arms industry-backed think tank, the Atlantic Council.

Since its inception, Mediaset has coordinated between outlets in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine. In March 2021, Mediaset expanded with the Colab Medios Project, created through the Free Press Unlimited Viable Media for Empowered Societies (VIMES) program. This program created training for journalists and saw articles from the El Salvadoran outlet *El Faro* published in *Euroradio* (Belarus), *Coda* (Georgia), and *Ziarul de Garda* (Moldova).

On March 4, several days after Russia launched its military offensive, a new project called the Media Lifeline Ukraine was created.

The next day, Free Press Unlimited held an emergency conference for Ukraine featuring Hromadske co-founders Maxim Eristavi and Nataliya Gumenyuk. The meeting called to raise 2 million euros for the project. "Only with ongoing external support, will local media entities be able to continue to do their work," its introductory page asks.

Days later, Free Press Unlimited announced a partnership to support a new joint project of Reporters Without Borders and its Ukrainian partner, the Institute for Mass Information, called The Lviv Press Freedom Center. The Institute for Mass Information is headed by USAID communications officer Oksana Romaniuk and funded by USAID and the UK government.

Washington DC lobbyists wag the dog

While public relations firms and intelligence-linked propaganda operations target the public, Washington DC lobbyists are agitating in Congress to extend the war in Ukraine

Daniel Vajdich, a registered foreign agent and lobbyist for the Ukrainian Federation of Employers of the Oil and Gas Industry, the largest in Ukraine, is working on behalf of Volodymyr Zelensky to lobby members of Congress to approve more weapons shipments to Ukraine. Now the head of Yorktown Solutions, he previously advised Ted Cruz and Scott Walker's campaigns and is a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.

"Stingers, Javelins, and let's figure out the fighter aircraft issue," he told *Politico*, claiming Russia is attempting to carry out a "genocide" and "depopulate certain areas of Ukraine."

Vajdich also wrote Zelenskyy's March 16 speech to U.S. Congress, in which he quoted Martin Luther King Jr. 's 'I Have a Dream' speech to call for a no-fly zone over Ukraine.

Ukrainian Permanent Representative at the United Nations Sergiy Kyslytsya's February 23 speech to the United Nations General Assembly was written by DC lobbying firm SKDKnickerbocker Managing Director Stephen Krupin, a former senior speechwriter to President Barack Obama who worked extensively on Biden's 2020 campaign.

Most prominent among the registered lobbyists promoting Ukrainian government and business interests is Andrew Mac, who also contributed to writing Zeleneksyy's speech to Congress. Mac registered as a lobbyist for Zelensky in 2019 and runs the Washington DC office of Ukrainian law firm Asters Law.

The lobbying firm Your Global Strategy, founded by Shai Franklin, who has been affiliated with numerous Zionist organizations including the World Jewish Congress and Anti-Defamation League, is also using its influence with local officials in the U.S. Franklin has set up meetings between Kharkiv Mayor Ihor Terekhov and U.S. mayors, including Eric Adams in New York City, Michelle Wu in Boston and Lori Lightfoot in Chicago. He is also attempting to set up a meeting between U.S. officials and the mayors of Odessa and Kiev. A media outlet owned by the mayor of Kiev's wife recently featured a presenter calling for genocide against Russians, beginning with children.

Franklin said he's working with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's administration to help set up virtual meetings between mayors of Odessa and Kiev and U.S. counterparts.

Maryland-based lawyer Lukas Jan Kaczmarek is also working on behalf of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense to increase U.S. weapons shipments, specifically seeking to arrange shipments of guns from Kel-Tec CNC Industries based in Cocoa, Florida, to the city of Odessa, Ukraine.

Former U.S. ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul described the network of public relations professionals and lobbyists surrounding Zelenskyy. "These are people around Mr. Zelenskyy who are like the intermediaries and interlocutors. They've been interacting with the American elites and American media for a long time," he said.

McFaul and John E. Herbst, former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine and senior director of the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center, act as informal advisors to Zelenskyy. McFaul told *Politico* that he speaks to Ukrainian government officials "probably everyday," and "has helped them make connections with NBC or MSNBC producers."

McFaul recently told *MSNBC*'s Rachel Maddow that "Hitler did not kill German-speaking people, facing accusations of Holocaust denial.

Zelenskyy also held a "strategic video call" with McFaul before he spoke to House democrats.

With a powerful Russian military fighting alongside DPR and LPR forces, the Ukrainian military's defeat seems to be imminent unless the United States and NATO directly confront Russian forces, a scenario President Biden has already ruled out. Lobbyists nevertheless persist in their campaign to portray the Ukrainian military as underdogs scoring blow after blow against Russian hordes. In doing so, they help extend the war and continue the carnage.

Feature photo | Image by Ada Rajkovic

***Dan Cohen** is the Washington DC correspondent for Behind The Headlines. He has produced widely distributed video reports and print dispatches from across Israel-Palestine. He tweets at @DanCohen3000.*



Republish our stories! MintPress News is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 International License.