

TRUTH UNDER SIEGE

Kharkiv's Battle Against Russian
Disinformation



A fake news story about Russia's July 8th Attack on a children's hospital.

Introduction

As Russian attacks intensify on the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, locals face another dangerous threat: disinformation.

Russia's new military offensive in the northeastern region of Kharkiv in mid-May has been accompanied by an escalation in fake propaganda designed to confuse, demoralize, and frighten the population.

Disinformation has been central to Russia's war efforts against Ukraine, dating back to before the 2014 invasion. Local human rights defenders (HRDs) in Kharkiv have been at the forefront of Ukraine's fight against disinformation, tracking and debunking Russian-backed lies and conspiracies.

In recent weeks, Kharkiv has been the target of Russian disinformation that aims to create panic and undermine Ukraine's armed forces and leadership. Russia has also been spreading lies about its recent [July 8th attack](#) on a children's hospital in Kyiv, which killed dozens, including children, and injured even more.

Much of the latest wave of disinformation has been timed to coincide with fresh Russian advances into Ukraine towards the city of Kharkiv. On [May 10](#), 2024, Russia launched a [new offensive campaign](#) in the Kharkiv region, resulting in Russian soldiers [taking a series of villages on the road](#) between the Russian border and the major city of Kharkiv, which is about 25 miles inside Ukraine.

[Intense fighting](#) is under way between Ukrainian and Russian forces in and around villages and towns such as Vovchansk, Lyptsi, and Kupiansk. [The Institute for the Study of War](#) has consistently reported that the Russian army is aiming to get within artillery range of Kharkiv city, as Ukrainian forces continue counterattacks north and northeast of Kharkiv.

In June 2024, Human Rights First traveled to Kharkiv to document how HRDs are confronting Russian disinformation and providing reliable information to vulnerable populations near the front lines.

Locals told us various examples of propaganda and rumors and discussed how they are spread. Some rumors are relayed by word of mouth, often involving someone who purportedly heard something from a friend or relative who knows someone high up in the military or in the government. Such rumors escalate fast in a nervous city being regularly bombed.



Human Rights First's history in Kharkiv

Human Rights First has reported from the city of Kharkiv [since 2017](#) and has made over a dozen research trips to the Kharkiv region since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. We have produced numerous reports and dozens of articles on how local human rights defenders are documenting war crimes and providing aid to communities in the Kharkiv region, despite facing intense Russian aggression and immense dangers to their lives.¹

We have [worked closely](#) with journalists in Kharkiv who have been on the front lines of Kharkiv's battle against disinformation since the 2022 invasion. Local Kharkiv independent news outlet [Gwara Media](#) has mounted an intense and impressive campaign to counter the huge wave of disinformation from Russian propaganda outlets.

In June 2024, we visited Kharkiv to [document](#) how HRDs are responding to a new wave of Russian advances towards the city and are continuing to battle the floods of Russian disinformation.

The danger of disinformation

The spread of disinformation during conflicts is nothing new. Over a century ago, California senator Hiram Johnson [noted](#) that "The first casualty, when war comes, is truth." But rapid developments in technology, including social media and artificial intelligence (AI), have made disinformation a major global issue and threat to human rights.

This risk has been recognized for decades. In 1968, [at the first United Nations Conference on Human Rights](#), the topic of "Human Rights and Scientific and Technological Developments" was on the agenda. This sparked an animated and informed discussion among the 84 UN Member States present. This conversation led to a UN General Assembly Resolution calling for "constant attention" to the issue and the need to establish international standards that protect human rights as technology advances.

¹ In May 2023, Human Rights First [reported](#) on how Tsyrukun, a village north of Kharkiv, survived Russian occupation. We released another [report](#) in June 2023 on the Russian occupation of the city of Izyum and surrounding villages in the Kharkiv Oblast. In July 2023, we worked with local NGO the Kharkiv Anti-Corruption Center to [report](#) on dubious contracts for the reconstruction of public buildings awarded by Kharkiv's authorities. In August 2023, we published a [report](#) from the frontline city of Kupiansk on how locals were holding out against the threat of a Russian re-occupation. In November 2023, we returned to the region and issued a [report](#) on how civilians in Kharkiv prepared for a bitter winter war as Russia renewed its bombing attacks on Ukraine's heating infrastructure. In January 2024 we [reported](#) from Kharkiv on the need for greater psychological support for civilians, and in March 2024 we returned to the region to [report](#) on demining efforts. In June 2024, we [reported](#) from Kharkiv on how HRDs are undertaking evacuations from villages under fire, and how the latest Russian advances have impacted the work of local activists.



While there is no universally accepted definition of disinformation, the UN [defines](#) it as the spread of inaccurate information that intends to deceive and do serious harm. It is distinct from [misinformation](#), which is the accidental spread of inaccurate information. Disinformation is spread by state and non-state actors, damaging a broad range of human rights, undermining responses to public policies, or amplifying tensions in times of emergency or armed conflict. A [danger to democracies](#) around the world, disinformation has been used to interfere in foreign elections, create chaos, and sow distrust in public institutions.

International bodies and governments have been grappling with how to combat disinformation. In 2022, in response to a resolution from the UN General Assembly, the UN Secretary-General released a [report](#) on countering disinformation for the promotion of human rights.

In 2018, European Union (EU) Institutions published an [Action Plan Against Disinformation](#). This plan [included](#) bolstering the EU institutions' ability to detect and expose disinformation, strengthening coordinated responses through a [Rapid Alert System](#), promoting media literacy, and supporting independent media and quality and journalism. That same year, the EU published a [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#), establishing self-regulatory standards for social media companies to fight disinformation, which was [revised and updated](#) in 2022 with 34 signatories.

Part of the challenge of tackling disinformation is international cooperation and global governance. Recent efforts to promote international alignment on AI, such as the [Bletchley Declaration](#) and the [G7 Hiroshima AI Process](#), emphasize that AI is already being used to amplify the spread of disinformation. At the G7 Summit in Rome in June 2024, Pope Francis [warned](#) of the risks of AI, disinformation, and interference in elections.

Social media companies also have an essential role to play in combatting disinformation, as their online platforms and algorithms [fuel and intensify](#) the spread of disinformation. While many social media giants have invested in [operations to address misinformation](#) and disinformation, experts and policymakers [criticize](#) them for not doing enough.

In 2023 under the EU's Code of Practice on Disinformation, Meta, YouTube, Twitter (now "X"), TikTok, and other social media companies provided reports on how they've been addressing disinformation on their platforms. It marked an important step, but many NGOs, fact-checking organizations, and EU leaders [expressed disappointment](#) and criticized the reports' lack of transparency, including missing data mandated by the Code of Practice.

The issue of disinformation is so vast and complex that there is no quick or simple solution. However, there are various [tools](#) that research suggests are effective, including supporting local journalism and fact-checking organizations, investing in media literacy in schools, and labeling social media content, such as whether the content is state-sponsored, whether it links to another source, or whether it has been fact-checked.



A powerful Kremlin weapon

Disinformation is one of Russia's most powerful tools for wielding influence outside its borders.

During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Russia carried out a sophisticated [disinformation campaign](#) to polarize public and political discourse in the United States and undermine the integrity of the U.S. electoral process. The [EU and its member states](#) have also been victims of Russian disinformation campaigns in recent years, particularly during election cycles.

For years, Russia has been using disinformation to undermine Ukraine's autonomy and justify its full-scale invasion. HRDs in Ukraine have been [confronting Russian disinformation](#) since 2014, battling narratives that seek to mislead and undermine their work. In the months leading up to the 2022 invasion, Ukraine and other countries were [already warning](#) the world about a Russian propaganda campaign. Fact-checking organizations mobilized quickly and have been continually working to debunk Kremlin disinformation.

Journalism monitor [NewsGuard](#), which produces trust ratings for more than 7,500 news and information websites all over the world, [revealed](#) how pro-Russian disinformation [flooded social media feeds](#) in the U.S. and Europe in early 2022, despite platforms' increased moderation efforts. It has a dedicated [Russia-Ukraine Disinformation Tracking Center](#), covering 555 websites that spread Russia-Ukraine war disinformation and the top myths they publish.

In 2022, Kremlin-backed conspiracies echoed many trends from the 2014 invasion. They [include](#) lies such as "Ukraine is a Nazi country," "Ukraine is not a real country and it belongs to Russia," and "Ukraine is committing genocide against Russian-speaking residents." Other popular conspiracies involve the U.S.: "The U.S. is using Ukraine to fight a war with Russia," and "The U.S. has a bioweapons lab in Ukraine."

Recent monitoring of Russian disinformation in Ukraine reveals a new trend of attempting to undermine trust in the Ukrainian military and President Volodymyr Zelensky. Ukrainian intelligence [has identified](#) a Russian information campaign called "Maidan-3" that specifically aims to spread doubt about Zelensky's legitimacy as president. They have projected that these disinformation operations will peak from late May to July 2024. The timing of this disinformation campaign is intentional, as Zelensky's elected term would have [normally concluded in May 2024](#), but under the country's martial law, no elections can be held.

Other recent conspiracies portray Western companies as exploiting Ukrainians, as Kremlin-backed disinformation on Ukraine often involves anti-West and anti-U.S. messaging.

"Russian disinformation is sophisticated and poses a real challenge, even for experienced fact-checkers," says Madeline Roache, UK managing editor of NewsGuard in London. "Since the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022, Russia has employed new tactics. There are now



more fake fact-check news sites that target specific Ukrainian cities and videos that use news logos from real Western media organizations.”

Kharkiv activists’ fight for truth

Kharkiv’s location just miles from Russian-occupied territory makes it particularly vulnerable to Russian disinformation. Many villages and towns outside of the city were taken by Russian forces at the start of the 2022 invasion, and were subjected to months of [Russian occupation](#) and propaganda.

From the early days of the 2022 invasion, Kharkiv was flooded with Kremlin-backed disinformation. Journalists in Kharkiv began receiving thousands of requests a day from locals asking if all sorts of rumors were true.

In response to these requests, Gwara Media set up the [bot Perevirka](#) (Ukrainian for audit) to detect fake news. With this bot people can submit “any news in Ukrainian or English, and within 24 hours you will find out whether you can trust the chosen publication.” Thanks to the bot, they can process tens of thousands of requests.

The bot also analyzes [trends in disinformation](#). During August and September of 2022, they processed 7,600 requests to verify reports, including those designed to spread mass panic. For example, the title of one intentionally misleading report was this: “The Kremlin will take revenge for Crimea. Will strike with a local nuclear weapon. 3-4 days.”

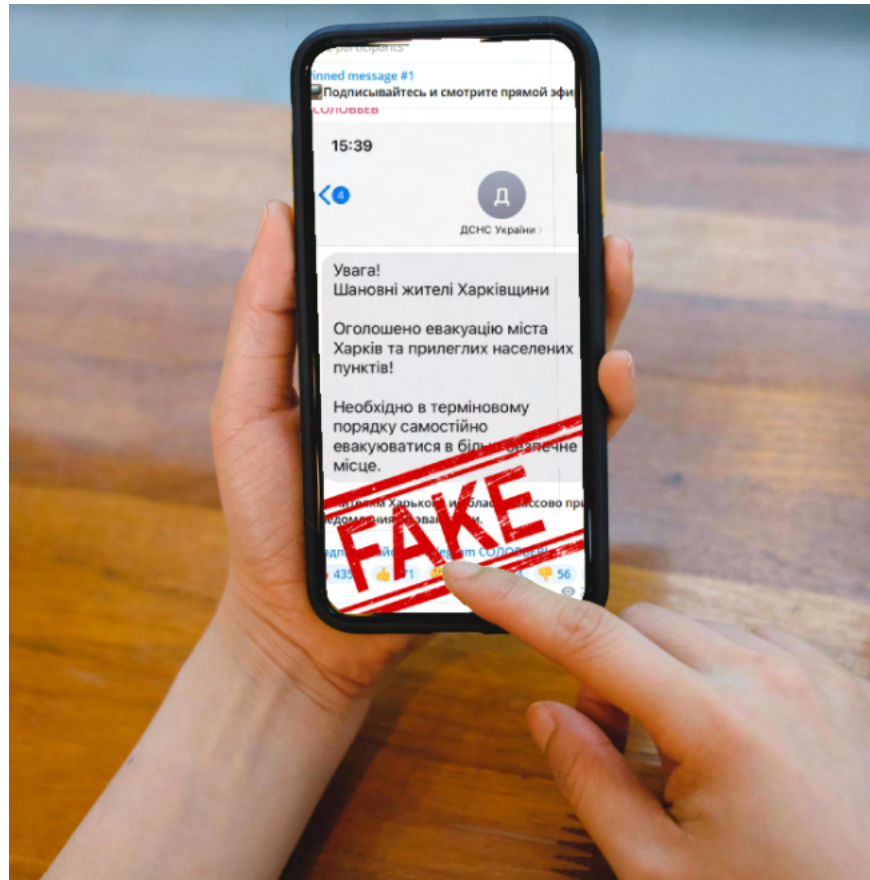
In a [disinformation analysis](#) covering fall 2022 to summer 2023, Gwara Media found that the most popular Russian-backed narrative in the Kharkiv region was “Ukraine is losing the war,” pushing stories about the inevitable occupation of Kharkiv and catastrophic losses of Ukrainian forces.

As a new Russian offensive that began in May 2024 rages on, HRDs have been combating lies about evacuation orders and teenagers being forced to join Ukraine’s army.

The “Fact-Checking” section of their website includes debunked news stories like, “[The State Emergency Service calls on residents of Kharkiv and the region to self-evacuate](#)” and “[Fake 'Reinforcements' were sent to five cities of Ukraine.](#)”

One recent Russian tactic is to create fake news sites that target local Ukrainian cities. The website “News-Kharkov.ru” appears to be a Russian-backed disinformation site that focuses on Kharkiv.





A fake evacuation order in Kharkiv debunked by Gwara Media.

One fake news story from the site: “Russia killed a large group of French fighters in a January 2024 missile strike in the northeastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv,” was [debunked as Russian disinformation](#). There was no evidence that Russia killed a large group of French fighters in a January 2024 missile strike in the northeastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv.

HRDs also document various lies about attacks on civilians in Kharkiv. In June 2024, following an airstrike on a five-story building, Russian media reported the building as a Ukrainian military camp, a lie according to HRDs who said mostly elderly people lived in the building.

Gwara Media debunked [another fake story](#) that claimed Ukrainian military personnel were present at a Kharkiv shopping center that was destroyed by a Russian missile strike on May 25, 2024. Journalists fact-checked the story and found that all of the 19 casualties and 48 injured were civilians.

Nazar Hlamazda, a disinformation analyst at Gwara Media, said, “After the increased shelling in March 2024, Russian propagandists began to actively spread two theses: the first was that every missile strike on any infrastructure was damage to a military object, for



instance, the [attack on the TV tower](#), which the Russians immediately called a 'strategic object of the Ukrainian Air Defense.'"

The second was spreading the idea that Kharkiv will "surrender" to the Russian military. This was built on absurd theories. For example, as workers repaired the Kharkiv-Poltava highway, rumors spread that city authorities were preparing to escape from Kharkiv.

Russian disinformation campaigns in Kharkiv have proven to be agile, reacting quickly to changes in the war and supporting specific military pushes. Hlamazda said that this latest wave of disinformation began on May 10, when the most recent wave of Russian advances began, and lasted until early June.

"The Russians immediately started a campaign to create panic in the city, with the main target being the Kharkiv authorities. For example, on May 10 the Russians reported that Governor Synegubov (the governor of Kharkiv) had fled to Poltava, and the next day spread fake news that the mayor's office, the regional council, and the regional military administration were taking documents from the region. The news also falsely claimed that they had captured the village of Lyptsi, on the road to Kharkiv city."

During mid-May, the disinformation messaging focused on suggesting Kharkiv city's defenses were desperately weak, with teenagers being recruited into the Ukrainian army. It also exaggerated the state of defensive lines near the border, alleging that there were no fortifications at all – which is a lie.

New laws on conscription to the military have come into force in Ukraine, and many locals in Kharkiv said there is a lack of clarity about the new rules, and exactly who is exempt. Russian [propaganda is amplifying the confusion by claiming](#) Ukrainian women are being drafted, and that a senior military official in Kharkiv [is proposing draft laws be applied to 17 year-old boys](#). Neither of these things are true. On May 31st Gwara Media debunked a [fake news story](#) alleging that a women's military unit was being trained in Kharkiv Oblast to be sent to Vovchansk, a small city under heavy Russian fire.

This most recent disinformation campaign has lasted into June but has since faded as the Russian offensive has been halted.

In mid-June 2024, Human Rights First discussed the latest wave of Russian disinformation with a couple dozen teenagers at a school in the village of Krasnokutsk, in the Kharkiv region. "One recent Russian fake news scam was that women over 18 were being conscripted into the Ukrainian army. Of course, it's not true," said Anastasia Iziumova. Other students said that older people in the community were more susceptible to the propaganda than young people, who are more discerning about the Telegram channels they use.

Several told Human Rights First about a fake news story at the start of the full-scale invasion when many people believed a rumor that Russian agents were marking village buildings for sabotage, leading to villagers scouring the streets searching for markings.



Some even used drones to look for the signs. The rumor spread fast across the country and was widely believed. Even local authorities in Krasnokutsk were urging people to find which buildings had been marked, but the story turned out to be fake.

These types of rumors continue to spread at high speeds in a region under constant bombardment and saturated with Russian-backed disinformation.

The recent deadly Russian attack that took place on July 8th on a children's hospital in Kyiv was also followed by a wave of [pro-Russian propaganda](#). Ukrainian authorities [reported](#) that 42 civilians were killed, including five children, and over 190 were injured in the attack on Okhmatdyt Children's Hospital.



The scene following Russia's airstrike on a children's hospital in Ukraine. Courtesy of Denys Glushko.

Bellingcat, an investigative media group, [found](#) that in the aftermath of the strike, social media accounts known for spreading disinformation, including the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, falsely claimed that the missile that struck the hospital was American-made and that it had been launched from a Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile system. Gwara Media also [debunked](#) a lie that the hospital was a military hospital, another Russian attempt to justify a war crime.

These lies following the July 8th children's hospital attack are reminders of how essential fact-check organizations are as Russia continues to attack and strike civilians.



Conclusion

HRDs in Kharkiv are at the forefront of battling Russian disinformation and have been quick to mobilize since the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. Activists are responding to local concerns and rumors, and debunking myths at impressive rates as Russian-backed propaganda floods the Kharkiv region. Recent Russian advances present yet another challenge for HRDs combatting disinformation, highlighting the necessity of their work in a region under Russian fire.

Recommendations

Donors and allies should support local independent media organizations, like [Gwara Media](#) in Kharkiv, who are fact-checking and debunking Russian-backed propaganda.

International bodies and governments should continue to combat disinformation at the local, national, and international levels, using a range of mechanisms, including promoting media literacy and supporting fact-checking organizations and independent media.

Social media companies should do more to tackle disinformation, not only by removing harmful and misleading content, but by pursuing [structural changes to algorithms](#) that promote misinformation, investing in more resources to address disinformation [in languages beyond English](#), and being more transparent with governments, fact-checking organizations, and NGOs about disinformation on their platforms.



Mission Statement

Human Rights First works to create a just world in which every person's intrinsic human rights are respected and protected, to build societies that value and invest in all their people. To reach that goal demands assisting victims of injustice, bringing perpetrators of abuse to justice, and building institutions that ensure universal rights.

Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization based in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

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