

# Facebook and Telegram as Tools of Information Warfare in the Context of Russia's Full-Scale Aggression against Ukraine

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## Abstract

This research explores how Ukrainians employ Facebook and Telegram as key instruments of resistance in the information warfare resulting from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The purpose of the study is to analyze the communicative and technical strategies used by Ukrainian social media users to counter Russian propaganda, circumvent content restrictions, and disseminate verified information in the context of hybrid warfare. The research aims to reveal the dynamics of digital mobilization and adaptation of Ukrainian users to the challenges of social media censorship and information manipulation. The study combines content analysis of Facebook and Telegram posts with semi-structured interviews of blocked Facebook users (N=60). The analysis covers the period from February 24, 2022, to May 28, 2023. The findings demonstrate the evolution of online resistance practices, the creative circumvention of platform restrictions, and the crucial role of social networks in Ukraine's information defense.

**Keywords:** information warfare, hybrid war, Facebook, Telegram, Ukraine.

## Introduction / Uvod

There is a large list of definitions and explanations of the war initiated by Russia against Ukraine, and their arguments differ in many respects, but they share a common basis: the Russian-Ukrainian war is a fourth-generation war 4GW, (Fourth Generation Warfare). The essence of the term, coined in the late 1980s by the American writer William Lind, is fully revealed through the Russian aggression context.



In his monograph “The Russian-Ukrainian Hybrid War: A Sociologist’s View”, Ihor Rushchenko (2015: 20-21) examined several terms coined to describe Russian aggression, including “hybrid war”, “mixed war”, “compound war”, “combined war”, “unconventional” or “non-standard war”, “criminal-terrorist war”, “war of controlled chaos” or “non-linear war”. One can delineate that the sociologist’s research does not touch on the events of the “great war”, i.e. after 24.02.2022, as the book was published in 2015.

One of the most widely used terms in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine is “hybrid warfare”, so we can use this term in our research. Information warfare is a mandatory and extremely important component of hybrid warfare. As the authors of the article “The Information War of the Russian Federation against Ukraine: Assessment of the International Community”, Dmytro Koval and Timur Korotkyi, emphasize, explaining the hybrid nature of the conflict, “its peculiarity is a sharp increase in the role of the information component, the self-sufficiency and importance that allows us to speak about a full-fledged information war, a war that not only justifies interference in the internal affairs of an independent states, justifies and makes aggression possible, but also a war that causes significant casualties” (Koval, Korotkyi 2014).

Ihor Ruschenko considers hybrid warfare as a social project, “because the aggressor has prepared the social base for invasion in advance, formed a ‘fifth column’ in the future theater of war, splits the social environment into warring groups, forms subjects of hostilities in the form of aggressive social movements, corrupt local elites, criminal mobs, etc.” (Rushchenko 2015: 22). The scholar thinks that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decision to start a war against Ukraine was not accidental or impulsive; on the contrary, it points to the opposite: “the invasion was preceded by a long preparatory stage” (Ibid: 103). According to Ruschenko, the war with Ukraine was inevitable in the context of Putin’s idea of “restoring the empire within the USSR borders”. He argues that the events around the Ukrainian island Tuzla in 2003 became the starting point, the event that showed Putin’s plans concerning Ukraine (Ibid: 106).

The Chief of the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, Kyrylo Budanov, also states that the Russian invasion in Ukraine was inevitable, and that preparations for aggression had started in 2007. “In 2014, they took advantage of a convenient moment for them, and in principle, we can see how it all developed. If the events of 2014 had not happened, it would not have changed anything. The war between the two countries was inevitable,” Budanov stressed (U GUR rozpovili pro pershe zaplanovane vtorgnennya rosii 1 2023).

In his turn, Georgy Pocheptsov emphasizes that Russia has already experience in conducting information wars and, as examples, he cites the Russian-Ukrainian gas wars, the Russian-Georgian war, and the Russian-Estonian cyber war (Pocheptcov 2014).

In this context, it is worth paying attention to the report by the Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Valery Gerasimov (Gerasimov 2013). The concept was later dubbed the Gerasimov Doctrine. Some experts think that Russian aggression against Ukraine fully corresponds to the logic of this concept. To illustrate, there are some eloquent quotes from this report:

“In the twenty-first century, there is a tendency to blur the distinction between war and peace. Wars are no longer declared, and once they start, they do not follow the usual pattern.”

“The emphasis of the methods of confrontation used is shifting towards the widespread use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures implemented with the involvement of the protest potential of the population. All this is complemented by covert military measures, including the implementation of information warfare and the actions of special operations forces. The open use of force, partly under the guise of peacekeeping or crisis management, is resorted to only at some stage, mainly to achieve final success in the conflict” (Gerasimov 2013). These quotations help to understand what is happening in Ukraine, even for those who are far from the epicenter of the conflict. But the Russian-Ukrainian war, which has been going on for ten years already, has demonstrated clearly that the Gerasimov Doctrine failed the test of Ukraine.

Concerning the information component of war, let's consider why Ukrainian society was so easily swayed by the Russian propaganda. Pochepcov provides certain explanations for this:

The fact that the population of Ukraine speaks two languages - Russian and Ukrainian, unlike Russians, who speak only Russian: “The Russian information product has fundamentally more opportunities for distribution than the Ukrainian one” (Pochepcov 2014).

Ukrainians consume “Russian TV series that impose the Russian model of the world”; Common history, and this makes it easier to influence Ukrainian society, as the “Common” is stronger than the “Different”;

Russia has long been at war with Ukraine in sci-fi literature and cinema.

This is the first time Ukraine has faced a war that is not easily recognizable as a conventional war (Ibid.).

To the above-mentioned, we would like to add some aspects that are seriously impacting Ukrainians' perception of pro-Russian propaganda narratives: Almost unrestricted access to the Russian television and such Russian social networks as Odnoklassniki and V Kontakte, used by a large part of the Ukrainian population (Minchenko 2014).

Over the course of history, a cliché has been formed about “brotherly” peoples, and not on parity principle. Russia has always positioned itself as the “older” brother, while Ukrainians have had a sense of inferiority through the generations.

So, before the war started and in the early stages, the Russian propaganda machine practically was the absolute winner. Over time, Ukraine, if not start to win in this field, but at least establish parity. However, the war continues, and so does the confrontation. Underestimating such an insidious enemy as Russia, with its unprecedented propaganda experience, would be a huge mistake. And Ukrainians are trying to avoid it.

Social media use is very important in this context. Therefore, this study focuses on two social networks - Facebook and Telegram the data from sociological

studies discussed below testify that these networks are the most popular not only among users in Europe and the United States, but also in Ukraine (Najchastishe novini pid chas vijni Ukraïnci otrimuyut' iz socmerezh – opituvannya «Opory» 2022; Dutton et al., 2025).

## Research methods / Istraživačke metode

In this research, the emphasis on the content and use of non-standard approaches in information providing is done, taking in mind that the enemy also has access to Ukrainiansocialmediaaccounts,onecanpresuppose that under certain circumstances and concerning certain information, messages must be understandable to the local consumer and be ciphered as much as possible for the aggressor.

The research objective is to study how Ukrainians use Facebook and Telegram to resist in the information war through the context of enemy access to Ukrainian content, as well as Facebook's internal policies concerning the blocking of pro-Ukrainian posts.

Sample description: The focus of the study is the Ukrainian segment of Facebook and Telegram audiences. These platforms are not chosen for research by chance. Facebook is a leader in the number of users in Europe and the United States, so Ukrainian content becomes potentially available to a wider foreign audience. In addition, Facebook is also popular in Ukraine, and the war theme is of high topicality for a global audience. The choice of Telegram is motivated by the fact that it is the most popular social network in Ukraine currently (Yak funkcionuyut' ta zavojovuyut' auditoriyu neinstitucionalizovani novinni telegram-kanali Ukraïns'kogo segmentu 2023: 4).

The content of social media messages is analyzed for the use of non-standard language constructions, symbols, and visual images that allow the authors) to convey messages in a coded form. Thus, the recipient has to decode the message for understanding. This allows, on the one hand, to transmit information in a way that makes it as inaccessible as possible to the enemy's understanding, and, on the other hand, not to violate the rules of the network and hence not to be blocked by the Facebook management. The content analysis was carried out from 24.02.2022 to 28.05.2023. Ten Telegram channels were investigated, in particular, [https://t.me/V\\_Zelenskiy\\_official](https://t.me/V_Zelenskiy_official); <https://t.me/voynareal>; <https://t.me/annamaliar>; <https://t.me/DeepStateUA>; <https://t.me/lachentyt>; <https://t.me/tlknewsua>; [https://t.me/war\\_monitor](https://t.me/war_monitor); <https://t.me/kpszsu>; <https://t.me/+bGpZFNsAYzAxNTli>, etc. 500 accounts of users who actively published posts about the war on their pages on Facebook were monitored.

Research methods: content analysis, interviews with Facebook users whose posts or accounts have been blocked due to pro-Ukrainian posts on the network since the beginning of the “great war” (February 2022) are analyzed.

## Research / Istraživanje

According to a survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology at the request of the civil network “OPORA” in May 2022, social media have overtaken traditional media in popularity (Najchastishe novini pid chas vijni Ukraïnci otrimuyut' iz socmerezh – opituvannya «Opory» 2022). Previous sociological surveys had

revealed a trend of growth in the audience of social media, but traditional media were still in the lead. The KIIS data shows that 76.6% of Ukrainians get their news from social media, and 61.2% from the Internet excluding social media). Television remains a source of information for 66.7% of respondents, radio - 28.4%, and print media - 15.7% (Krechetova 2022; also see Dutton et al 2025).

The results of a study conducted by the Rating Sociological Group in February 2023 also reveal a tendency that the role of social media as a main news source is increasing. Thus, when asked the question "From which sources do you receive social and political news most often?" (up to three options were available), 43% of respondents named national television (55% in November 2021); 41% chose "groups and channels in messengers" (Telegram, Viber), while in the previous survey, the number was only 11%; web pages - 36% vs. 47%; social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) have remained practically unchanged (36% vs. 35% in the previous survey); YouTube - 29% vs. 21%; friends or relatives (15% vs. 16%), radio - the figure remained at 9%; local television - 7% vs. 11%; national newspapers, magazines - 3% vs. 6%; local print media - 2% vs. 6% (Kompleksne doslidzhennya: yak vijna zminila mene ta kraïnu. Pidsumki roku 2023).

Social media use has also undergone significant changes. Before the "Great War", Facebook was the most popular among Ukrainians (56%). It was followed by Instagram and Viber, 25% and 24% respectively. Telegram was almost twice as far behind, with only 13% of respondents using it. The results of a KIIS survey conducted in May 2022 revealed that the largest number of respondents used Telegram (65.7%), YouTube (61.2%), and Facebook (57.8%) to receive news after the large-scale aggression. 48% of respondents used Viber, 29.1% - Instagram, 19.5% - TikTok, 8.9% - Twitter (Krechetova 2022).

Facebook is the leader in popularity among social networks in the United States and Europe. According to Statista data, in March 2023, 53% of all visits to social media in the United States were on Facebook. Twitter came in second place by a wide margin with 16%, followed by Instagram with 13.85% of the total number of visits (Leading social media websites in the United States as of March 2023, based on share of visits 2023). According to Statista data, as of June 2022, there were about 457 million Facebook users in Europe. Instagram comes next with 281 million users, followed by TikTok (227 million) and Twitter (9.2 million) (Number of users of selected social media platforms in Europe from 2017 to 2027, by platform 2023).

Therefore, information about the events of the Russian-Ukrainian war posted by users of the Ukrainian Facebook segment is potentially available for a global audience. And sometimes the content is specially created in English and in other foreign languages to convey information to non-Ukrainian-speaking FB audiences.

"In today's world, the information background is not just extremely important, but crucial. Therefore, for the governments of the leading countries, these "backgrounds" are important in demonstrating to the local population that the war is not going on somewhere far away in Eurasia, but the war is going on for the existence of civilization in itself. And in this sense, it is important to constantly demonstrate to the world all the horrors and atrocities of this war," as Yevhen Holovakha specifies (Holovakha 2023). The sociologist mainly places the responsibility for this activity on journalists working abroad and military correspondents, but the contribution of Ukrainian social media users is also important in this process.

The rapid growth of both the number and popularity of Telegram channels in the first days of the full-scale invasion can be explained by the extremely high demand of the population for up-to-date, easily accessible, and concise information about the military operations in simple language. Dry, short, but accurate messages of Telegram channels have become serious competitors to both TV (primarily the National Telemarathon “United News”) and Facebook, where it is not always easy to find information, for example, about the activity of enemy launchers at a given time in the abundance of analytics, reflections, and memes. A great number of Telegram channels fully met the demand for this kind of information for example: <https://t.me/DeepStateUA>; <https://t.me/lachentyt>; <https://t.me/tlknewsua>; [https://t.me/war\\_monitor](https://t.me/war_monitor); <https://t.me/+bGpZFNsAYzAxNTli>, etc).

Numerous Ukrainian Telegram channels share a lot of content from infotainment to education. For the most part, the content related to the full-scale Russian invasion is also posted among the relevant materials: Information about fundraising for equipment for the Armed Forces, stories of Ukrainian defenders, volunteers’ activities, and heartbreaking videos of soldiers meeting with their families.

However, taking into account the research objective, the focus is concentrated on the Telegram news channels, where the lion’s share of content is related to the “Great War”.

Telegram channels that inform the Ukrainian audience about current events of the Russian-Ukrainian war can be classified according to several criteria:

- by ideological orientation pro-Ukrainian and those working in the interests of the enemy; there are no completely apolitical ones left in the context of a full-scale invasion;
- by time of origin pre-war and war: alongside the channels that had been operating long before the “great war”, a large number of new ones appeared after 24.02.2022. At the same time, the owner of one of the most popular “military” channels, Ihor Lachenkov, emphasizes that in the first few days, the audience of almost all TV channels increased exponentially also (Lachenkov 2022);
- by content exclusively military and a wide range of issues, thematic, but also covering partly the war issues;
- by geography Ukrainian and foreign;
- by region all-Ukrainian and local;
- by owner official and unofficial;
- by sources of funding available advertising content and donations.

The list of criteria can be continued, dividing Telegram channels depending on the format of information presentation, their size of audience, etc.

One can mention that the Ukrainian audience of social media is extremely active not only as consumers of information, but also as active participants in the information war confrontation by distributing pro-Ukrainian content. Under “pro-Ukrainian content we mean the content that is directed to support Ukraine in the war against the aggressor, Ukrainian sovereignty, national identity, culture, as well as resistance to the anti-Ukrainian Russian propaganda. And, as before 24 February 2022, Ukraine was significantly losing to Russia in the information war, the situation was drastically changing in a few months.

To describe the resistance of Ukrainians on the Internet in a more formalized way, the “fighters” of the information front can be divided into several groups according to the types of their activities on social media. One can speak about two types: *the technical support group* and *the communicative group*. Each of these subgroups combines several types of activities.

Under the technical aspect, we mean the activities of pro-Ukrainian users on the Internet aimed at disrupting or preventing the spread of Russian propaganda content.

The communicative aspect involves actions aimed at maximizing the dissemination of relevant information, refuting untrue and propagandistic narratives, exposing Russian fakes, and providing an objective situation to the Russian segment of Internet users.

The technical group includes:

“Spammers” - their main task is to disrupt (information channels that promote propaganda narratives by sending mass messages. The meaning of the messages in this case does not play a special role, however the number and instantaneousness of the posts are important. Of course, one user is not physically able to “put down” a channel. Therefore, to achieve their goal, Ukrainians began to unite either situationally by chance, one-time, for a specific task, purpose, etc., or to organize themselves into more or less stable permanent groups;

“Hackers” - their main task is to gain unauthorized access to networks, databases of state bodies, and odious users of the aggressor country to either obtain non-public secret, confidential information or, on the contrary, to publish pro-Ukrainian content on the enemy’s platforms. Hacking activities also involve the possibility of organizing into certain groups to increase efficiency.

Communicative group covers:

“Informers” - their activity involves the maximum dissemination of ready-made content: media materials, messages from Telegram channels covering military topics, posts on social media by the state leadership, opinion leaders, or other users, etc., on personal pages in social media or other available web-recourses. In most cases, the user acts independently, without association with others. This mechanism is actively used, in particular, to disseminate information on fundraising, volunteering, and other socially useful information;

“Creative producers” - in this case, we are talking about users who create their own unique personal content: reflections, photos, videos, graphics, memes, etc. The main thing is to supply the relevant, original, and creative content, which can be picked up by “informants” in the future and distributed to the audience that is in many times wider than the producer’s circle. Producers usually create materials on their own, but there are also communities of creative users that bring authors together to inspire each other, share ideas, and achieve even greater efficiency through synergy.

“Polemicists” - although, according to sociological surveys, the vast majority of citizens of the aggressor country support the actions of its leadership in the war in Ukraine, some Ukrainian users are still trying to convey the real situation to Russians by communicating with Russian users on the network platforms available to them.

“Internationalists” - in this case, we are talking about users’ activities aimed at an international Internet audience. Ukrainians who are fluent in foreign languages create and distribute content for Internet users in different countries. The messages present either translations of ready-made content or their own unique content, and the main task is to share it with a larger audience, written in an understandable language. “Internationalists” and “polemicists” usually act independently, although there are certain platforms where they can communicate and share experiences.

This classification is preliminary, and one user can initiate several activities.

One can stress that in wartime, the issue of information delivery becomes even more multifaceted and ambiguous. The information component of hybrid warfare constantly generates the following questions for journalists and users who provide the information to the public: How can the information published affect the military? Will it harm the military? Will it present a threat to the civilian population?

This does not mean that the information should be transformed into propaganda. However, some requirements concerning the objective coverage of events are impossible to meet. The example is a bit hyperbolic, but it clearly illustrates what we mean. Let us consider the requirement to maintain a balance of opinions and points of view and imagine the situation when a Ukrainian who has just lost his/her family, home and all property as a result of a Russian missile attack, hears the opinion by the representative of the aggressor country, regardless of whether it is the president or the operator who launched the missile. Should they be allowed to speak? A journalist, a blogger, a leader of opinion publishing information for a wide audience cannot be “outside the situation” under these circumstances.

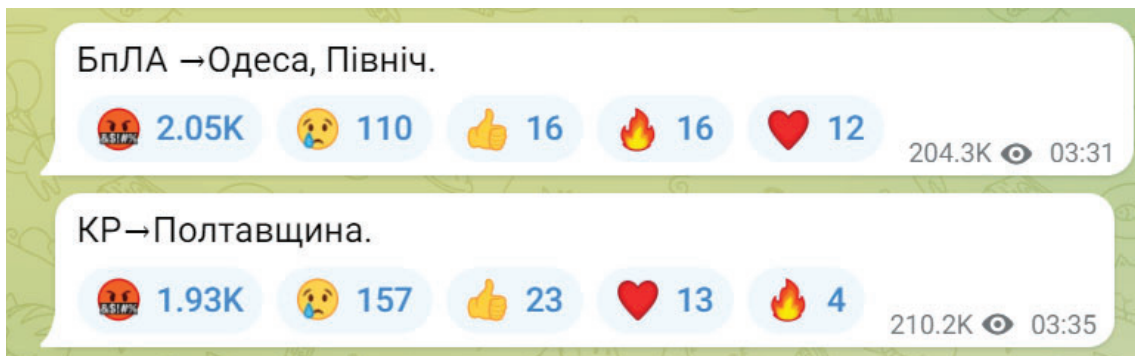
At the same time, there are cases at the beginning of the “Great War”, there were many more, but even in the second year of the full-scale invasion, certain situations arise) when some Telegram channels, trying to ensure the promptness and sensationalism of their content, neglected one of the most important criteria of journalism - faithfulness.

The issue of *sensationalism of information*, in addition to the need for its verification, should include an assessment criterion on a “*good benefit/harm*” scale. In this regard, it is appropriate to recall the Hippocratic principle of “*Primum non nocere*” English: First, do no harm. Unique and vivid video and photo footage of enemy missiles being shot down by air defense systems would definitely make the Telegram channel more interesting and attractive, but at the same time, it can help the aggressor to adjust the fire and destroy these systems in the future. At the beginning of the “Great War”, there was an overwhelming amount of such content in almost every Telegram channel. However, over time, representatives of the country’s security bodies and defense forces drew attention to this problem. Former Deputy Minister of Defense of Ukraine Hanna Malyar publicly appealed to all social media users not to distribute video and photo materials from the places of “arrivals” in order not to correct the enemy’s fire (Minoborony prosyty’ ne povidomliaty tochni miscia obstriliv, shob ne koreguvaty vogon’ rosijskyh vijsk 2022). She also explained with examples that early reports from the front could even lead to the disruption of potentially quite successful military operations (Neoficijni povidomlennia u socmerezah zirvaly vijskovu operaciju v Severodonetsku - Malyar 2022).

We consider Malyar's opinion extremely important: 80% of intelligence information is obtained from open sources (Minoborony prosyt' ne povidomliaty tochni miscia obstriliv, shob ne koreguvaty vogon' rosijskyh vijsk 2022).

Therefore, it is possible to trace the dynamics of how the content of Telegram channels and approaches to content presentation have changed. As noted above, at the beginning of war, Telegram channels disseminated all the information they received according to the principle "as much as possible" without thinking about the consequences, trying only to create sensational content. Later, the rhetoric changed drastically. Eloquent video and photo materials were replaced by very concise messages: "Threat of S-300 launches from Belgorod region", "Activity of launchers", "Activity of tactical aviation in the South", "Missile release", "Stand down". For the sake of brevity, schematic notations can be used instead of longer sentences. For example, instead of writing that missiles or UAVs (Unnamed Aerial Vehicle) are flying towards a certain city, a directional arrow can be put and the name of the city can be written.

For example see Fig.1:



**Figure 1** Telegram message of the "Monitor" channel. It means that drones are moving in the direction of Odessa, Northern Ukraine, and cruise missiles are flying in the direction of Poltava / **Slika 1**. Telegram poruka kanala "Monitor". To znači da se dronovi kreću u smjeru Odese, sjeverne Ukrajine, a krstareće rakete lete u smjeru Poltave.

At the same time, some Telegram channels ask their subscribers not to film or post air defense operations during each alert and state that the data on the results of the shelling must be published only after the relevant authorities provide official information about this occasion.

In pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels, the caps lock is used in exceptional situations - when it is necessary to urgently draw the audience's attention to the danger: TLK news channel the main source of monitoring hostile activity for residents of Kharkiv and the region) on 14.05.2023 during another S-300 attack on the Kharkiv region - "RAKETA", "SECOND", "THIRD" ⚠️⚠️⚠️. The use of a caps lock in this case is fully justified, as the time from the launch of the missile from Belgorod to its approach to Kharkiv takes several minutes.

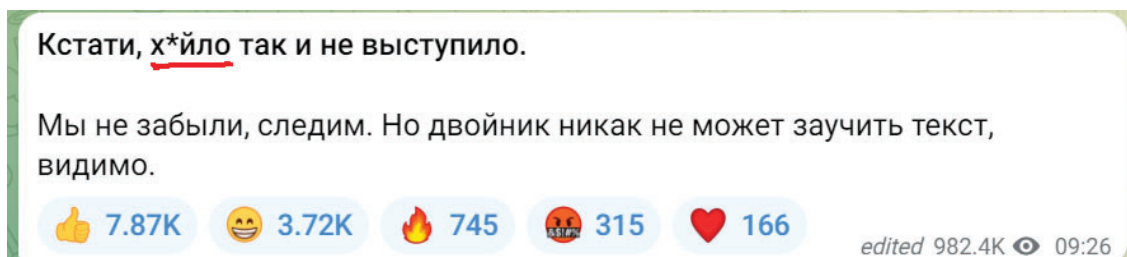
For many social media users, the use of a caps lock is an important marker in general. Text written in capital letters using constructions such as "SHOCK!", "SENSATION!", "THEY TRIED TO HIDE IT!" is usually exploited either by openly pro-Russian sources or by those who mimic Ukrainian sources and try to promote hostile propaganda narratives. A similar marker is the use of many exclamation points at

the same time. In this way, the authors of the messages try to appeal to the reader's emotions, blocking critical thinking and adequate perception of information.

A characteristic feature of the Ukrainian segment of Telegram is that some Telegram channels are in Russian, but the content of the messages clearly indicates a pro-Ukrainian position.

Simplification of grammatical constructions is also a constitutional characteristic of social media communication. The Ukrainian segment of Telegram is no exception. The lack of punctuation, ignoring the need to use a capital letter at the beginning of a sentence, and even misspellings are widespread. Moreover, this is a common practice not only in users' comments, but also in the posts of authors in Telegram channels that directly or indirectly position themselves as media. It should be noted that some mistakes from a formal point of view are tailor-made to demonstrate the author's attitude to the content. For example, the name of the aggressor country is constantly spelled with a small letter in a large number of Telegram channels, as well as the names of leaders of the neighboring state: *rf* instead of Russian Federation, *huilo*, *putin* instead of V. Putin.

For example see Fig. 2, 3.

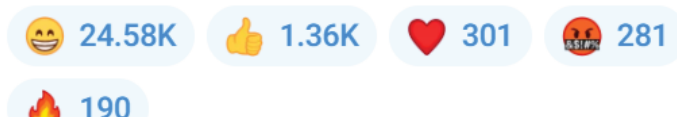


**Figure 2** This is the message about the Russian President Vladimir Putin. In the post he is called by an obscene word highlighted in red - Huilo - from the song of Kharkiv football fans, which appeared in 2014. / **Slika 2.** Ovo je poruka o ruskom predsjedniku Vladimiru Putinu. U objavi nazvan je opscenom riječju označenom crvenom bojom – Huilo – iz pjesme harkivskih nogometnih navijača, koja se pojavila 2014. godine.

⚡ **МВД рф** объявило в розыск Залужного.

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**Figure 3** In the message, the acronym “Ministry of Internal Affairs” is written in capital letters, and the name “rf” Russian Federation is written in small letters highlighted in red). / **Slika 3.** U poruci je akronim “Ministarstvo unutarnjih poslova” napisan velikim tiskanim slovima, a naziv “rf” (Ruska Federacija) napisan je malim tiskanim slovima (označen crvenom bojom).

Offensive language. The use of profane and invective vocabulary is fixed in a large number of both authors' posts and users' comments. These include foul language, schematic constructions created with emoticons for example, emoticons depicting a pig and a dog placed in a row, which read as "pig dogs" - a swear word for Russians by Ukrainians), and offensive memes. For the most part, Telegram channels do not prohibit the use of such language, and there is no third-party monitoring or restrictions. "What is the emotion, are the words. When a person is angry and uses obscene vocabulary, he or she is freeing himself or herself from anger," explains Orysia Demska (Demska 2016).

Thus, the analysis of the activities of pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels during the first 15 months of the "great war", reveals the following:

- Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion, the content and approaches to filling the feed have gone through dramatic changes: information has become more structured, better verified, and evaluated for harm to the military and civilians;
- The presentation of information is built according *ABC principle* of business communication (the information must be brief, clear, and accurate);
- The widespread use of profanities both in the author's posts and in the comments to them presents the constitutional feature of military discourse in social media.

Facebook use occupies a special place in Ukrainians' confrontation in information war with the Russians. By February 2023, the Ukrainian audience of Facebook comprised 13.7 million users (Za rik Facebook utrativ 2 mil'joni ukrains'kih koristuvachiv, a Instagram – udvichi bil'she 2023). The total number of daily users of the network in the world by February 2023 reached 2 billion (Kil'kist' koristuvachiv u Facebook syagnula dvoh mil'yardiv 2023).

The social network Facebook is positioned as a space for freedom of speech and pluralism. However, in the case of Ukraine, there are many cases where this is only "positioned," but there is a different picture in reality.

The following picture (Fig.4) is the quintessence of the feelings and impressions of some Ukrainian Facebook users, who not only express resentment at such actions of the network's administration, but also incriminate its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, of being very loyal to Russia.



**Figure 4** Zuckerberg on the Background of the Kremlin, the Caption in Russian “To work as Comrade Putin says thank you!” / **Slika 4.** Zuckerberg na pozadini Kremlja, natpis na ruskom “Raditi kao što drug Putin kaže ‘Hvala!’”

Warnings from the network, blocking of content, or even accounts are widespread in the Ukrainian segment of FB.

Ukraine at the state level and individual users at the local level are trying to resolve this issue, but while examples of individual positive solutions to the situation are occasionally found, a strategic approach has not been developed yet.

Nevertheless, this study also examines another component of the issue of posting pro-Ukrainian content on the social network. The phenomenon of why Ukrainian Facebook users, aware of the potential consequences of their posts, continue to post “risky” messages on their pages, and what non-standard approaches are used to circumvent Facebook’s blocking algorithms, presents the research objective.

Thus, our objective is to interview the Ukrainian Facebook users aged 18 and over whose posts, accounts, or even comments are blocked by the network administration. The key issue is to identify the blocked content related to the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

## Results and Discussion / Rezultati i rasprava

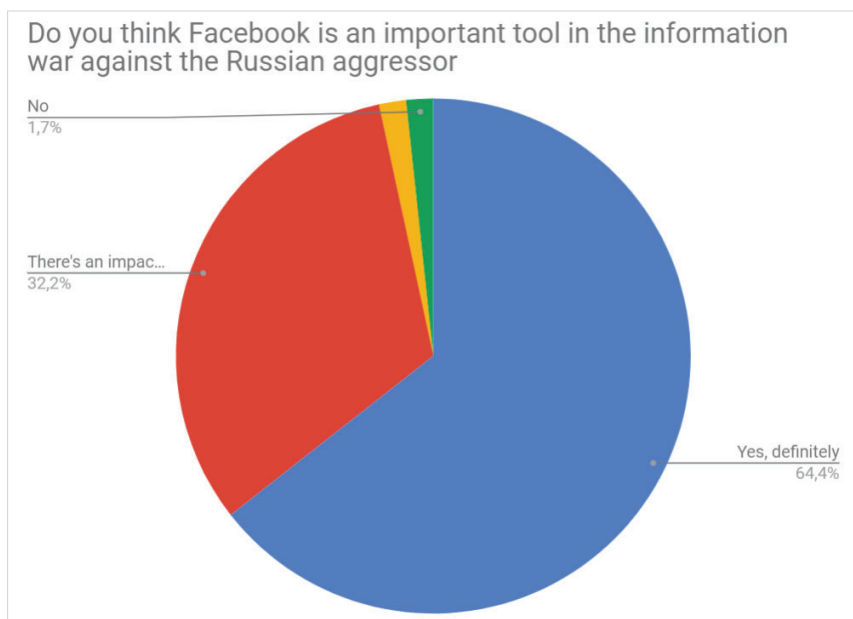
The sample covers interviewees. The FB demographics are the following:

- Age. Facebook users aged 35-50 make up the largest part of the respondents - 56.1%; 50 years and older - 28.1%; 18-35 - 15.8%;
- Job. Almost 31% of the research participants work in the field of communication and media, 18.2% - education, 7.3% - computer technologies, 5.5% each choose public administration and jurisprudence, almost 4% each - defense and medicine, and a little less than 2% - science and sports. A fifth of respondents (20%) chose the answer “Other” to the question about their field of activity;

- Gender. Almost 60% of respondents are men, slightly more than 40% are women. Taking in mind the fact that the interview is conducted only among those Ukrainians who had been blocked at least once, and the preliminary communication with potential respondents who claimed not to have been subject to Facebook sanctions, it can be concluded that men are more likely to share or write a "risky" content.

**Question:** "Do you think Facebook is an important tool in the information war against the Russian aggressor?"

Almost  $\frac{2}{3}$  of respondents answered "Yes, definitely" to this question, while a third believes that it has an impact, but it is overestimated (see Fig.5). "Facebook is gradually losing its leadership position, especially in Ukraine, rapidly losing ground to Telegram, which has become the main communication platform for the free exchange of information," one respondent commented. His words are confirmed by sociological data, according to which the Ukrainian Facebook audience has decreased by 2 million users during wartime (Za rik Facebook utrativ 2 mil'joni ukrains'kih koristuvachiv, a Instagram – udvichi bil'she 2023).



**Figure 5** Facebook as a Tool in Information Warfare / **Slika 5.** Facebook kao alat u ratovanju informacijama

**Question:** "How many times have you received a warning or been temporarily blocked on Facebook because of pro-Ukrainian content?"

The results of answering this question are of particular interest, as slightly less than half of the respondents (47.4%) said that their content was blocked from 1 to 5 times. This may indirectly indicate that the user consciously posted information knowing that such content could be blocked. 29.8% of respondents reported being blocked in one case, and 22.8% - more than 5 times (see Fig.6).

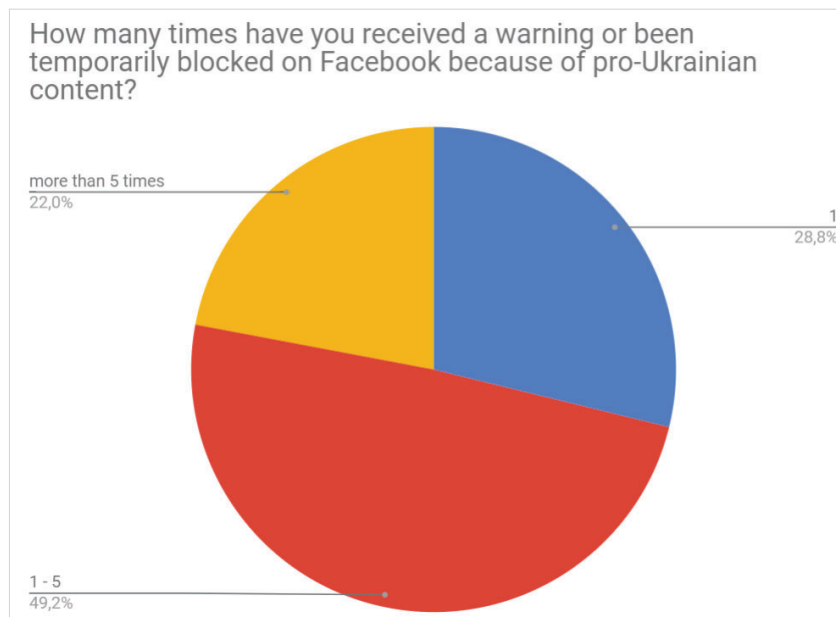


Figure 6 Number of Blocks for Pro-Ukrainian Content / Slika 6. Broj blokiranih objava proukrajinskog sadržaja

**Question:** “What type of content was the warning or ban related to?”

Most of the blocked content was in text form - 42.4%. Respondents had the opportunity to choose multiple answers, given that some respondents had been sanctioned by Facebook more than once. Thus, almost a quarter of respondents (25.4%) said that their text and photo content was blocked, while a fifth (18.6%) had all three types of content under FB sanctions (see Fig.7).

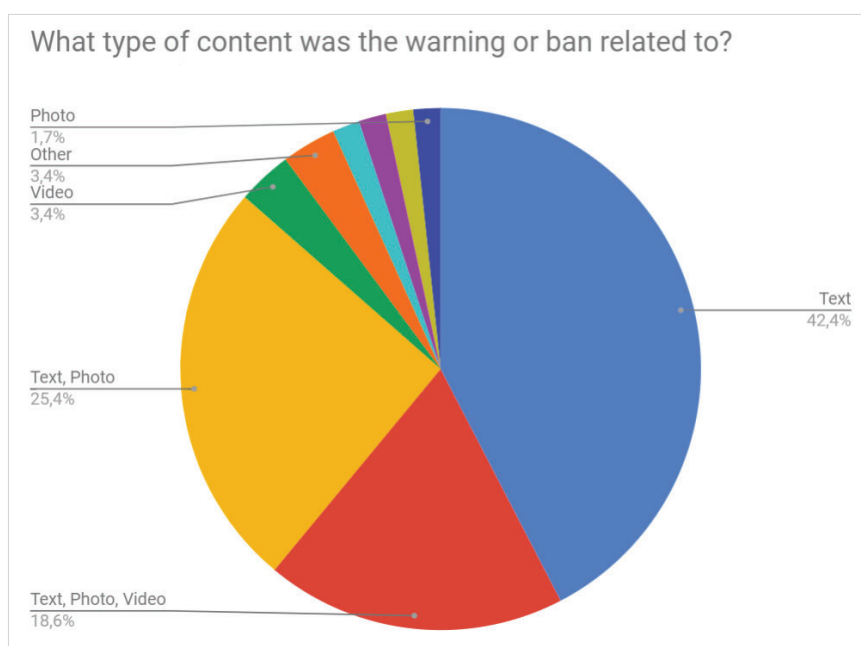
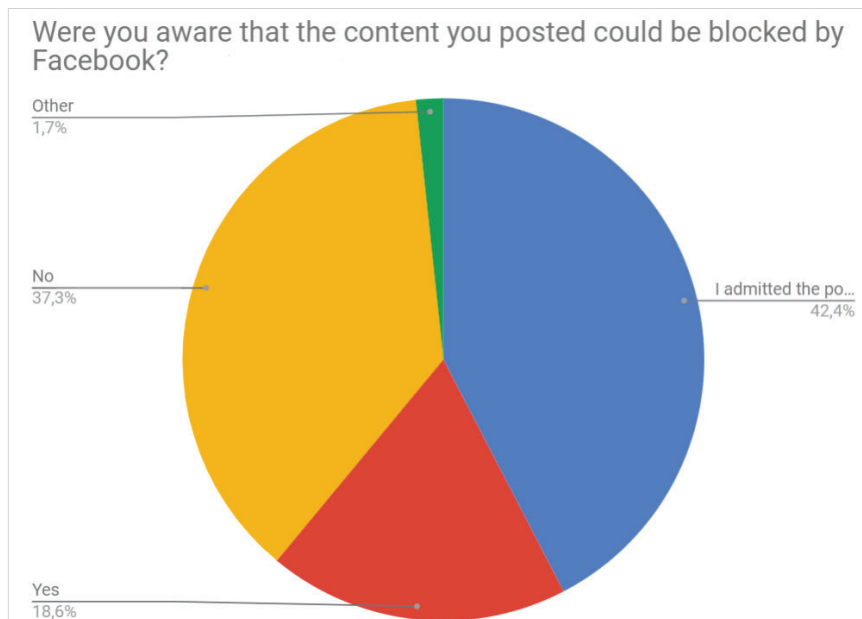


Figure 7 Types of Blocked Content / Slika 7. Vrste blokiranog sadržaja

**Question:** "Were you aware that the content posted by you could be blocked by Facebook?"

This question is interesting from several perspectives. Firstly, the answers to this question partially give an understanding of whether Ukrainians consciously post content that is controversial from the point of view of Facebook management. Almost a fifth of the respondents (18.6%) answered the question in the affirmative, 42.4% - admitted the possibility that the publication could lead to blocking, and slightly less, 37.3% - did not understand the risks (see Fig.8).



**Figure 8** Ukrainians' Perception of the Risk of being blocked / **Slika 8.** Ukrajinska percepcija rizika od blokiranja

But are Ukrainians really so insecure that they cannot predict what content might be blocked? It is difficult to find a definitive answer, but it is true that sometimes Facebook can block the most unexpected and innocent post. The screenshot below (Fig. 9) provides an eloquent example - a blocked photo from the contributor's archive of her child's baptizing. In the photo, a mother in an embroidered shirt holds her son in her arms in a traditional Ukrainian shirt - vyshivanka. The text of the post is on the scan. It is impossible to understand what exactly caused concern for the Facebook administration.



Most often, Facebook blocks posts by Ukrainians on the topic of the Russian-Ukrainian war because of so-called “hate speech”. However, some users emphasize that Ukrainians have the right to “hate speech”, namely in the current situation. One of the interviewees was blocked by the social network several times. The user notes that Facebook does not block her for publishing unverified facts, but it does block her for swearing very quickly. “It’s very annoying, I don’t even want to post there,” she says. Simultaneously, she adds that Facebook is essentially the only platform for exchanging opinions in the global surrounding.

The following screenshot (Fig. 10) demonstrates the dramatic difference between the approaches and content posted on Facebook and Telegram. This post was reprinted in almost every pro-Ukrainian Telegram group or channel. But as soon as it was posted on Facebook, the network immediately hid it from the other users. The user Victoria Gerasimenko-Kravchenko, whose post was hidden, appealed to the social network office for an explanation, but has yet received none.

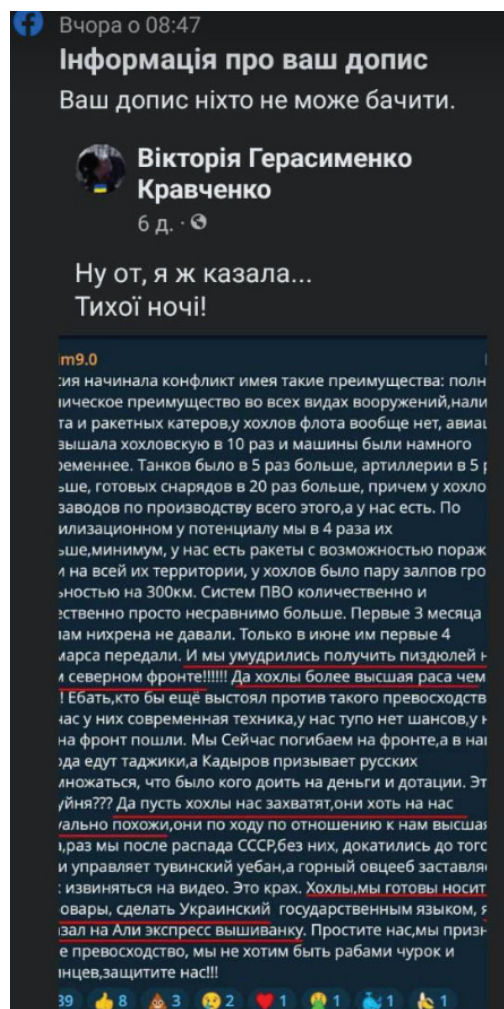
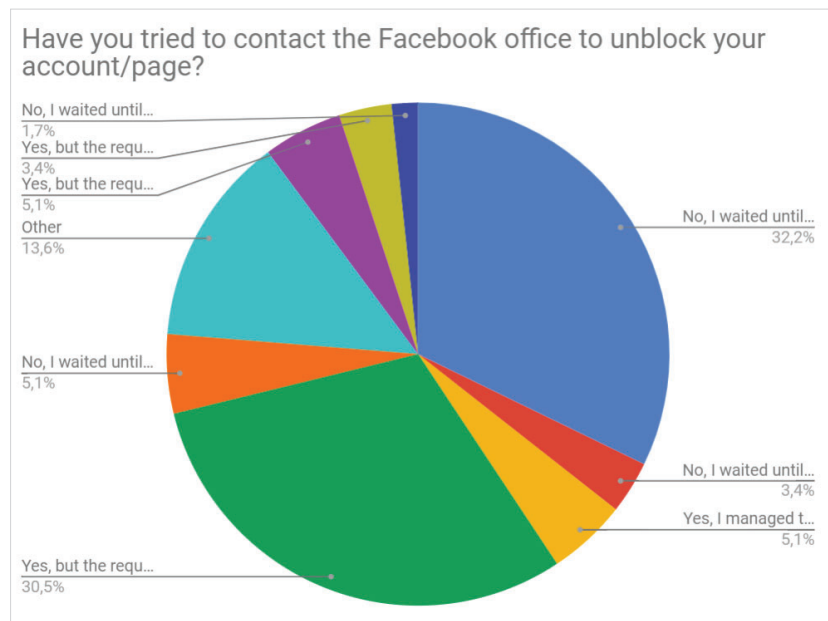


Figure 10 Screenshot concerning the Information about Post’s Blocking / Slika 10. Snimka zaslona s informacijama o blokiranju objave

**Question:** “Have you tried to contact the Facebook office to unblock your account/page?” One can specify that Ukrainian Facebook users whose posts or pages are blocked do not always contact the network for clarification or to unblock them. Among the

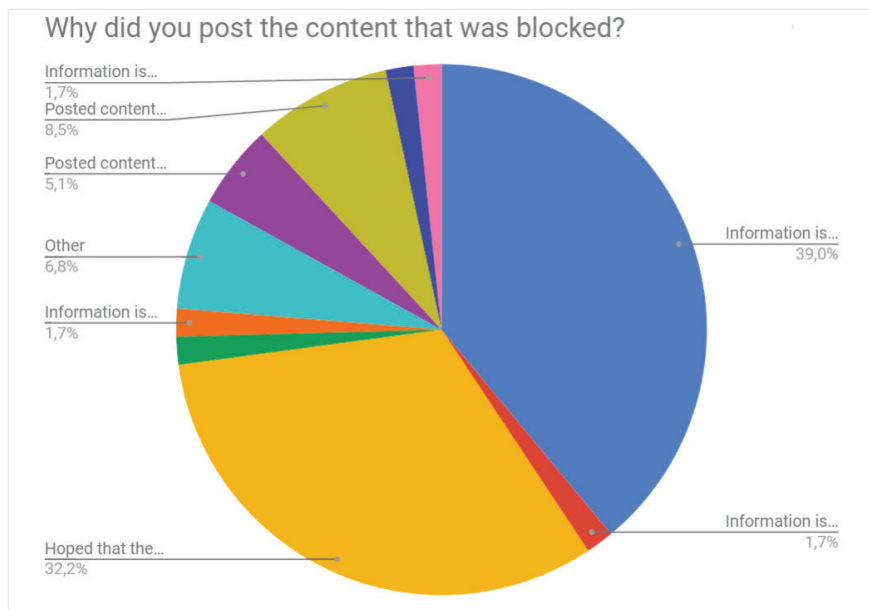
respondents, 32.2% chose only the answer: “No, I waited until the blocking period expired”; 30.5% chose the answer “Yes, but the request was rejected”, and only 5.1% of respondents indicated that they managed to get it unblocked. Respondents who had been blocked more than once emphasized that they acted differently depending on the situation: 5.1% said that they had experience of contacting the network, which remained unanswered, and a successful solution when the content was unblocked; the same number of respondents - 5.1% - chose two options, including waiting for the deadline to pass and contacting Facebook to request unblocking, but the request was rejected. 13.6% of respondents chose the “Other” option, but did not specify what exactly it was (see Fig.11).



**Figure 11** Have you Tried to Contact the Facebook Office to Unblock your Account/ Page? / **Slika 11.** Jeste li pokušali kontaktirati *Facebookov* ured kako biste odblokirali svoj račun/stranicu?

**Question:** “Why did you post the content that was blocked?”

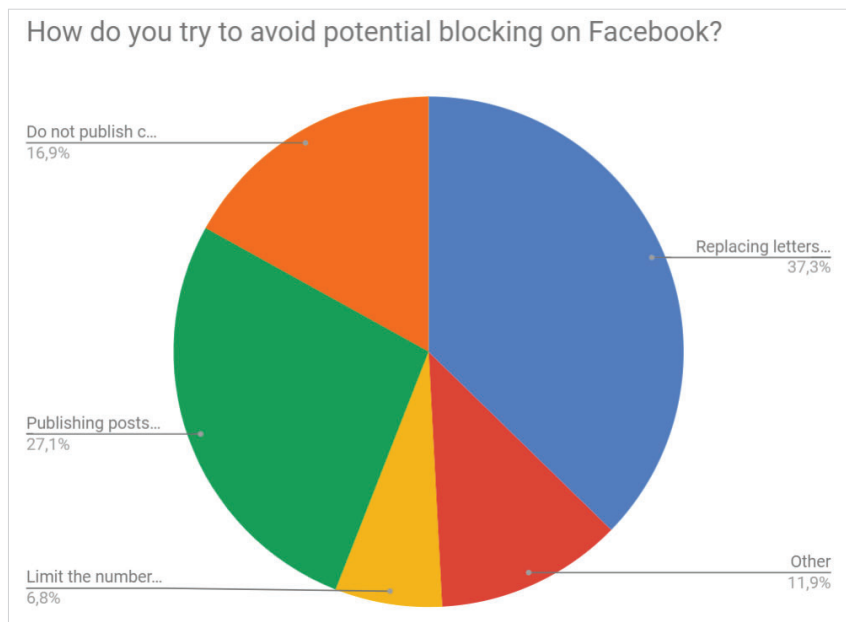
The answers to this question are the most interesting, as they demonstrate the motivation of Ukrainians to use all available tools to the maximum in countering Russian information aggression. 39% of respondents chose only one answer - “I decided that information is more important than the risk of being blocked”. 32.2% of respondents said they hoped that the information would not lead to the blocking; 8.5% posted content emotionally, without thinking about the possibility of being blocked; 6.8% chose the option “Other” without thinking about the response. 13.6% of respondents marked multiple answers (see Fig.12).



**Figure 12** Why did you Post the Content that was Blocked? / **Slika 12.** Zašto ste objavili blokirani sadržaj?

**Question:** “How do you try to avoid potential blocking on Facebook?”

The willingness of the Ukrainian audience to risk being blocked in exchange for the opportunity to post information that they consider important does not mean that Ukrainians are not looking for ways to circumvent potential sanctions. Among the most common ways is replacing letters in words or spelling them backwards. The most common example is *yansur*, or “Russians”, as Ukrainians derogatorily refer to citizens of the aggressor country. While the phrase “Russians” has long been included in Facebook’s algorithms, the reverse spelling is still not blocked. Among the interview participants, this option was chosen by 37.3%; 27.1% named “publishing posts exclusively in Ukrainian” as a precautionary measure content in Ukrainian is much less likely to receive massive complaints from Russian or pro-Russian users, which can lead to blocking; 16.9% of respondents said they do not publish content that could lead to blocking; 6.8% limit the number of people who can see the post; 11.9% of respondents chose the “other” option, but did not elaborate on their options for avoiding blocking, which is absolutely logical given that the war is still ongoing and Facebook use continues to be an important tool in it (see Fig.13).



**Figure 13** How do you try to Avoid Potential Blocking on Facebook? / **Slika 13.** Kako pokušavate izbjeći potencijalno blokiranje na *Facebooku*?

To summarize the activity of Ukrainians on Facebook in wartime, the following should be highlighted:

The Ukrainian Facebook audience tends to accuse the social network of disloyalty towards Ukrainians, with the most radical users even suspecting influence from the Russian Federal Security Service (abbr.: FSB); In recent years, the Ukrainian audience has been moving away from Facebook, but the social network remains influential and popular among the Ukrainian segment of this social net.

Ukrainians use Facebook more in the information confrontation with the Russian aggressor.

Patriotic Ukrainian Facebook users are aware of the risks of being blocked by the social network, but are also willing to take risks to convey information to the widest audience as much as possible.

At the same time, Ukrainian users are looking for ways to circumvent Facebook's blocking algorithms inventing non-standard, creative approaches.

## Conclusions / Zaključci

Information warfare is one of the most important components of countering the Russian aggressor in hybrid warfare. Russia has a vast, long-term experience in conducting information war and other hostilities, which it fully exploited both in preparation for the attack on Ukraine and continues to use currently. At the beginning of the "great war", Ukraine was significantly less professional than the aggressor in this area, but in a short period of time, Ukrainians were able to adapt to the situation, consolidate the information front, and make a worthy rebuff to

the Russian propaganda machine. Social networks have become one of the main tools for Ukrainians in the war with Russia. The peculiarities of Facebook's internal policy and the access of Russian agents to Ukrainian content have forced Ukrainian social media users to look for non-standard models and approaches to publishing information, to take the risk of being blocked by Facebook, but to publish information that is important from their point of view.

## Limitations / Ograničenja

Of course, it is impossible to fully explore the topic as the war is still ongoing and it seems still impossible to predict its end. This means that the processes will continue to develop and evolve. On the other hand, Ukrainian social media users cannot be completely open and sincere until the victory, as they do not want to disclose information that could be used by the enemy.

We also think that defragmentation is needed to better understand the phenomenon of how Ukrainians managed to form a powerful network movement in a relatively short period of time that is able to withstand the well-organized and state-controlled Russian propaganda machine.

This study presents only the first step, a focus and a starting point for further research tracing the situation in its dynamics.

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# Facebook i Telegram kao alati informatičkog rata u kontekstu agresije Rusije na Ukrajinu u punom opsegu

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## Sažetak

Ovo istraživanje proučava kako se Ukrajinci koriste Facebookom i Telegramom kao ključnim instrumentima otpora u informacijskom ratu koji je nastao kao posljedica ruske sveobuhvatne invazije na Ukrajinu. Svrha je studije analizirati komunikacijske i tehničke strategije kojima se ukrajinski korisnici društvenih mreža koriste za suprotstavljanje ruskoj propagandi, zaobilaženje ograničenja sadržaja i širenje provjerenih informacija u kontekstu hibridnog rata. Istraživanje ima za cilj otkriti dinamiku digitalne mobilizacije i prilagodbe ukrajinskih korisnika izazovima cenzure na društvenim mrežama i manipulacije informacijama. Studija kombinira analizu sadržaja objava na *Facebooku* i *Telegramu* s polustrukturiranim intervjuima s korisnicima Facebooka kojima je račun blokiran (N = 60). Analiza obuhvaća razdoblje od 24. veljače 2022. do 28. svibnja 2023. Rezultati pokazuju evoluciju praksi otpora na internetu, kreativno zaobilaženje ograničenja platformi i ključnu ulogu društvenih mreža u informacijskoj obrani Ukrajine. Ključne riječi: informacijski rat, hibridni rat, *Facebook*, *Telegram*, Ukrajina.