



CRIMEAN  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
GROUP

# SUBMISSION TO THE CALL FOR INPUTS ON THE IMPACT OF DISINFORMATION ON THE ENJOYMENT AND REALISATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

To the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee  
By Crimean Human Rights Group,  
Civil Society Organisation from Ukraine

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**CRIMEAN  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
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The **CRIMEAN HUMAN RIGHTS GROUP (CHRG)** is a public non-profit organization of the Crimean human rights defenders and journalists, aimed at promoting the observance and protection of human rights in Crimea by attracting wide attention to problems of human rights and international humanitarian law in the territory of the Crimean peninsula, and the search for and development of mechanisms for the protection of human rights in Crimea.

CHRG has been documenting human rights violations, crimes against humanity, war crimes in the occupied Crimea, since 2014.

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# SUBMISSION TO THE CALL FOR INPUTS ON THE IMPACT OF DISINFORMATION ON THE ENJOYMENT AND REALISATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

To the **Human Rights Council Advisory Committee**

By **Crimean Human Rights Group**, Civil Society Organisation  
from Ukraine

## SUMMARY:

The submission examines the role of disinformation, in particular in the form of propaganda, and its detrimental impact on human rights, especially in coercive environments. It highlights how state-owned and state-controlled media outlets disseminate false narratives and manipulate facts to incite violence and human rights violations. The submission underscores the particular risks to vulnerable groups, such as minorities, activists, and civilians, who become targets of discrimination, persecution, and violence as a result of these distorted narratives.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

### **1. Strengthened international legal frameworks**

The time of soft instruments to promote truth as a primary method of combatting disinformation has passed. Instead, international treaties must be amended to draw a clear line between freedom of expression and disinformation and to allow for a complaint procedure against states or individuals that fail to comply with the relevant rules.

### **2. Enhanced monitoring**

Under the UN Human Rights Council or otherwise, monitoring mechanisms to track state-run and other mass disinformation campaigns must be enhanced. Regular reviews should be conducted at least in relation to states where such campaigns appear systematic.

Social media giants, such as Meta and X, should be subjected to stricter requirements to ensure greater transparency in their algorithms and take more active measures to flag false content, especially when disseminating state-sponsored content.



### 3. Increased accountability

UN agencies, as well as the International Court of Justice should be more proactive in addressing disinformation and its impact on the enjoyment and realisation of human rights when complaints or cases under their examination contain relevant information.

Disinformation that reaches the threshold of incitement to human rights violations, crimes against humanity, and/ or war crimes must be criminalised.

### 4. Continued support for independent media

Independent journalists and other free media must be supported, in particular when they conduct their activities in or report on the states where disinformation is on the rise, or in other fragile environments.

### 5. Established partnerships

Partnerships between international organisations, governments, and civil society groups to monitor and expose disinformation campaign can create a united front promoting fact-based and manipulation-free narratives.

Tech companies, in collaboration with international organisations, must play an active role in combating online disinformation.



## INTRODUCTION:

Increasing use of disinformation<sup>1</sup> in the modern geopolitical landscape raises significant concerns. Working on the ground in Ukraine and monitoring the relevant developments since 2014, our organisation observes growing tendency to instigate, aid and abet, and/ or justify human rights violations through disinformation, most often taking form of propaganda, in the context of the war waged by Russia, and beyond. Among many examples, in this submission, we decided to focus on the impact of state-sponsored disinformation, mostly propaganda, on the right to life, freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and the right to liberty and security of person.

**While structured differently for coherency of the narrative, this submission attempts to address several questions listed in the questionnaire, namely:**

- ?** Which forms of disinformation do you consider to be particularly problematic for human rights and why?
- ?** What do you consider to be the social and legal conditions that may contribute to disinformation and to the impact of disinformation?
- ?** Which social groups in vulnerable situations are particularly affected by disinformation? ... and
- ?** How does disinformation affect the standing of “human rights”— concepts, institutions, individuals that work for the protection of human rights?

<sup>1</sup> As per the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression “**Disinformation and Freedom of Opinion and Expression**” UN Doc. A/HRC/47/25, 13 April 2021, para. 15.



## STATE-OWNED AND STATE-SPONSORED SOURCES OF DISINFORMATION:

In our monitoring, we focus primarily on such forms of disinformation as fabricated and misleading content and propaganda, as well as hate speech and incitement to violence and genocide, whether coming from state actors or other public statements. Since 2022, the role of states in spreading disinformation became a particularly serious concern.

For example, the Russian Federation, in preparation to and with the outbreak of its full-scale war on Ukraine, started to exploit a carefully designed system wherein disinformation, especially propaganda, generated by the state is delivered to the audience through the state-owned and state-controlled media.

Notably, in the current Russian media landscape, almost all media are state-owned or state controlled, whether television or radio channels, or newspapers. Television, which was the main source of information for 65% of Russians in 2024,<sup>2</sup> attracts the majority of viewers to Russia-1, run by the state-owned broadcasting company, and NTV, run by the state-owned energy corporation Gazprom.<sup>3</sup> Radio, which still has an audience of over 30 million<sup>4</sup> and remains especially popular among those aged 55 and older,<sup>5</sup> is controlled in a similar way, namely by the state through direct ownership or via Gazprom.<sup>6</sup>

Somewhat different is the situation with print and internet media, only a fraction of which is directly owned by the state.<sup>7</sup> However, this does not characterise such media as free and independent. The reality is that for decades, its funding has originated from different pro-governmental oligarchs rather than from the state budget directly.<sup>8</sup>

In rare cases when financial control may be insufficient or lacking, censorship laws ensure impossibility of publications or statements diverged from the official narrative. Since 2010s, various such laws were adopted to suppress the dissenting voices, most importantly the laws banning any internet media for distributing “*inaccurate information*”;<sup>9</sup> and criminalising an expression of “*clear disrespect*” on the Internet of the state, its authorities, flag or constitution,<sup>10</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Levada-Center, [The Role of Television and the Internet as the Main Sources of News and the Top Most Popular Russian Journalists](#), 7 June 2024.

<sup>3</sup> BBC, [Russia Media Guide](#), 6 March 2023. For the viewership distribution, see Statista, [Share of average monthly viewers in the total TV audience aged four years and older in large cities of Russia in 2024](#), by channel.

<sup>4</sup> RBK, [New Twist on the Air: Technology and Media](#), 11 February 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Levada-Center, [The Role of Television and the Internet as the Main Sources of News and the Top Most Popular Russian Journalists](#), 7 June 2024.

<sup>6</sup> BBC, [Russia Media Guide](#), 6 March 2023; Media Landscapes, [Russia](#).

<sup>7</sup> For example, Rossiyskaya Gazeta. See BBC, [Russia Media Guide](#), 6 March 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Royal United Service Institute, [Pulling the strings of the Russian mass media](#), 19 November 2007; Index of Censorship, [A complete guide to who controls the Russian news media](#), 9 December 2013; Politico, [Russia's Media Is Now Totally in Putin's Hands](#), 5 April 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Federal Law No. 31-FZ, 18 March 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Federal Law No. 30-FZ, 18 March 2019.



distribution of “*knowingly false information*” on the activities of the Russian Armed Forces and calls to impose sanctions on Russia or appeals against deployment of its Armed Forces in the interest of the state<sup>11</sup> (also known as the “*fake news*” law).<sup>12</sup>

Under any circumstances, such a system would be problematic because by controlling television, radio, newspapers, and digital platforms, the government ensures that its narrative governs the public sphere and dissenting voices are silenced. During the war, state dominance over media is instrumentalised to rationalise the hostilities and demonise the adversary thus justifying violence against them or even war crimes. Undoubtedly, this is Russia’s rationale behind introducing the relevant restrictions since 2021, if not earlier. As soon as on the first day of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the government ordered that all media “*use information and data obtained only from official Russian sources*” when covering the war.<sup>13</sup> Failure to comply with this obligation resulted in “*a systemic and widespread pattern of unjustified restrictions on expression related to the war in Ukraine*”, in the words of the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>14</sup>

In practice, it means that any disinformation, especially propaganda of war and justification of violence against civilians, that originates from the Russian governmental officials, is promptly distributed on the state-owned and state-controlled media, which amplify it on air, in print and on social media. The process is uncomplicated, given the absence of any alternative, easily accessible sources of information and strict censorship laws.

For example, Dmitrii Medvedev, the Deputy Head of the Russian Security Council stated in his public social media channel in June 2022 that “*Ukraine will not exist. [...] it [Ukraine] should not be on the map. There should be another country. There should be Russia*”.<sup>15</sup> On the same day, this statement was cited on the national television (state-owned platform Smotrim.ru) with an estimated audience of 15 million.<sup>16</sup>

In another example, Russian authorities and media used the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack to fuel hatred towards Ukrainians, justify an escalation of hostilities and mobilise fighters on the Russian side. Although ISIS assumed responsibility for this attack,<sup>17</sup> Ukrainians were portrayed as terrorists by the President Putin, Head of the Federal Security Service Bortnikov, and Head of the Security Council Patrushev in their statements that the terrorists were recruited by Ukrainian intelligence, that Ukrainians disguised as ISIS carried out the attack, or that Ukraine, with the US assistance, was behind the attack. Spread on the national media and controlled social networks, statements quickly transformed into calls to destruct Ukraine and exterminate its citizens as terrorists who deserve no mercy.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Federal Law No. 32-FZ, 4 March 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Washington Post, [In Putin’s Russia, ‘fake news’ now means real news](#), 11 March 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Roskomnadzor, [Statement](#), 24 February 2022.

<sup>14</sup> ECtHR, *Novaya Gazeta and Others v. Russia*, Application Nos. 11884/22 and 161 others, [Judgement](#), 11 February 2025, para. 118.

<sup>15</sup> Meduza, [Medvedev: Who Said that Ukraine will Exist on the World Map in Two Years?](#), 15 June 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Crimean Human Rights Group, [Database entry](#).

<sup>17</sup> AP News, [Russia says 60 dead, 145 injured in concert hall raid; Islamic State group claims responsibility](#), 23 March 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Crimean Human Rights Group, [Russia Generated New Narratives to Justify Genocide of Ukrainians](#), 10 April 2024.



All in all, endorsement and amplification of the official narratives on conventional and social media are significant elements of the broader strategy to sustain support for military efforts and extreme violence against Ukrainians. Through this coordinated use of media and emotional manipulation, the Russian government perpetuates a climate of hatred and violence, presenting war crimes and seemingly genocidal actions as morally justified.



## DISINFORMATION AND COERCIVE ENVIRONMENTS:

While all forms of disinformation have negative impact on the enjoyment and realisation of human rights, we would like to draw your attention to its effects in the situations of pre-existing coercion and increased vulnerability of many groups, namely belligerent occupation.

Indeed, since the occupation of Crimea and parts of eastern Ukrainian regions in 2014, propaganda of war and violence against those in disagreement with the official state position (on any matter) have been on the rise. For example, an article using words such as “*grant suckers*”, “*heads sticking out of manure*”, “*Ukrainian TV garbage*” dehumanises some of the most vulnerable groups, namely journalists and human rights activists who criticise Russia in Crimea.<sup>19</sup> Same year, UN Monitoring Mission reported 81 credible allegations of human rights violations affecting 167 people, including violations of the freedom of expression.<sup>20</sup>

Another publication targeted LGBTQI+ in the occupied parts of eastern Ukrainian regions, claiming that they are “*inspired perverts*” who motivate “*to shoot in that [their] direction*”.<sup>21</sup> By then, homophobic laws were enacted in the Russia-occupied territories and persecution of and violence against LGBTQI+ was widely reported.<sup>22</sup>

In relation to the territories occupied since Russia’s full-scale invasion, our analysis of the Russian conventional and social media reveals that to normalise the idea that Ukrainians can be exterminated, Russia employs propaganda and manipulation, such as blurring the lines between civilians and combatants, dehumanising Ukrainians, using World War II terminology, and justifying aggression by presenting it as a military necessity.

The relevant statements can broadly be grouped into several categories, including that Ukrainians as a nation do not exist; Russia must seize part of or entire Ukraine to eliminate the nationalists and fascists; Ukrainians who do not support Russia must be persecuted or deported; extermination of Ukrainians is a response to their armed resistance to Russia and/ or means to achieve Russia’s military objectives; Ukrainian authorities in the occupied territories must be persecuted or eliminated.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Politnavigator, [Strong overwhelming sadness: “Voice of Truth” is not heard in Crimea](#), 3 September 2018.

<sup>20</sup> UN Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, [Report on the situation of human rights in the temporarily occupied Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine 13 September 2017 to 30 June 2018](#), para. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Russian Spring, [“LGBT in every house!”: Kyiv perverts break into Donbass](#), 19 May 2021.

<sup>22</sup> ADC Memorial, [Violation of LGBTI Rights in Crimea and Donbass](#), 2016; Osservatorio balcania caucaso transeuropeo, [LGBT in Donbas: Back to the USSR](#), 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Crimean Human Rights Group, [Who Calls to Persecute Ukrainians in Occupied Territories, and How?](#), 21 August 2024.





The theme that is prevalent in the occupied territories is that Ukrainians who do not support Russian must be persecuted or deported. For example, on state TV, pro-Ukrainian civilians in occupation are portrayed as enemies who either surrender, i.e. adopt pro-Russian views, or must be “*sent to basements*”, i.e. detained and tortured, or deported.<sup>24</sup>

This propaganda is seemingly directed at civilian population under occupation and Russian military. The former is to subdue civilians and when possible, to urge civilian men in the occupied territories to protect their families by spying on the movement of the Ukrainian troops and transferring this information to the occupying administration. The latter supports or even encourages the troops to mistreat civilians who are shown to be an enemy almost as much as those carrying arms. For instance, when the Armed Forces of Ukraine regained control over the city of Kherson, one of the explanations delivered to the Russian public was that violence against disloyal civilians had been insufficient.<sup>25</sup>

Separately but relatedly, Russian propagandists incite persecution of the representatives of Ukraine’s local administrations and the government who remained in the occupied territories. In one example, using World War II “*us against them*” wording, host of the most popular TV channel called for arrest of pro-Ukrainian mayors and their 20-year imprisonment in labour camps should they refuse to cooperate.<sup>26</sup>

Public calls to persecute Ukrainians based on their national or political identity are extremely dangerous as such that justify or even provide moral grounds for the commission of human rights violations, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide in the territories under occupation. Importantly, this is not a “what-if” situation; all those violations and crimes in Russia-controlled territories have been reported systematically since 2014, with a significant increase in 2022.<sup>27</sup> While this submission is not intended to demonstrate links between specific instances of propaganda and human rights violations, the overall connection between the two should not be underplayed.

<sup>24</sup> Sergey Mardan on the [Solovyov.Live Programme](#), 4 June 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Sergey Mardan on [social media](#), 26 December 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Igor Korotchenko on [Russia-1](#), 11 March 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, [Report](#), UN Doc. A/78/540, 19 October 2023; UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, [Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine \(1 September – 30 November 2024\)](#), 31 December 2024.





## CONCLUSION:

Through the ownership of and control over media platforms, the enactment of restrictive laws, and the proliferation of disinformation, governments can silence dissent and pave the way for widespread human rights abuses. The examples above are specific to Russia's war on Ukraine but the problem extends far beyond, Ukraine being only one of several states greatly affected by Russian propaganda and Russia being one of many states that fight truth and promote violence through disinformation.

If dismissed as inconsequential, the described scenario will sooner or later repeat itself in other settings, as Russia already calls to wage war against the EU and US using disinformation tactics perfected in Ukraine.<sup>28</sup>

If taken seriously, however, the problem can be resolved. International organisations, states, and civil society groups must unite to strengthen legal frameworks, promote media literacy, and ensure transparency within digital platforms. By enhancing accountability and fostering greater international cooperation, we can begin to mitigate the impact of propaganda on human rights and prevent the erosion of fundamental freedoms.

<sup>28</sup> Crimean Human Rights Group, [Who on Russian TV Calls for Aggressive War Against EU and USA: Monitoring Results](#), 27 June 2024.



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