

## INFORMATION SECURITY OF THE PODKARPACKIE VOIVODESHIP IN THE FACE OF DISINFORMATION ACTIVITIES OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION (2022-2025)

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### ABSTRACT

*The article analyses the nature, scale and effects of hybrid and disinformation activities directed at Polish with particular emphasis on the Podkarpackie Voivodeship in the years 2022–2025.*

*Based on a review of national and international reports, media analyses and case studies (cybersecurity incidents in local government offices, narratives about border crossings with Ukraine and Rzeszów-Jasionka airport, local information campaigns on refugees), the article identifies the main threat vectors, assesses regional vulnerabilities and formulates operational and strategic recommendations for regional authorities, local governments and NGOs.*

### KEYWORDS

*Disinformation, hybrid warfare, cybersecurity, Russian Federation, regional information resilience.*



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### INTRODUCTION

Information security is one of the key pillars of modern security on a national and regional scale. In the era of globalization, the flow of information has intensified and, thanks to new technologies and social media, it has become possible to quickly influence wide groups of recipients. This phenomenon, in addition to the obvious communication benefits, also raises serious security threats, including vulnerability to disinformation, information manipulation and hybrid actions aimed at the stability of states and societies. (Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów, 2023).

After the full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine in February 2022, Poland, as Kyiv's closest ally and a logistical and military hub to support the West, found itself in an unprecedented focus of attention for the activities of hostile services and propaganda centers (Menkiszak, 2022). The Podkarpackie region – bordering directly with Ukraine, with an extensive border and transport infrastructure (including the Rzeszów-Jasionka airport, rail, road and pedestrian border crossings in Medyka) was of particular

importance, constituting facilities for humanitarian and military operations. The Russian Federation's hybrid actions towards Podkarpacie include both operations in cyberspace targeting local government institutions and critical infrastructure, as well as information operations aimed at shaping public opinion by spreading false narratives about the presence of allied troops, assistance to refugees, as well as the security of the region itself. The Kremlin, using its experience in conducting information wars, seeks to weaken public trust in state institutions, polarize society, as well as undermine Poland's credibility as a member of NATO and the European Union.

At the same time, the Podkarpacie region, due to its peripheral nature and limited resources of local governments in the field of cybersecurity and media education, is becoming particularly exposed to the effects of disinformation campaigns. Between 2022 and 2025, numerous examples of this type of activity were recorded, ranging from attempts to hack into the IT systems of municipal offices to organized narrative campaigns on social media aimed at inducing fear and information chaos.

The aim of the article is a comprehensive analysis of the nature, scale and effects of the Russian Federation's disinformation activities directed against the Podkarpacie Voivodeship in the years 2022-2025. The main research problem focuses on the question: how do the disinformation activities of the Russian Federation affect the information security of the Podkarpacie Voivodeship and what adaptation mechanisms are used by Russian propaganda campaigns in relation to specific local conditions? The thesis that the authors have tried to prove assumes that Russian disinformation activities against the Podkarpacie Voivodeship are characterized by a high degree of adaptation to specific local conditions, using in particular historical memory, social sensitivities and the strategic location of the region as a logistics hub for supporting Ukraine in the narrative used.

The study was conducted using methodological triangulation, combining qualitative analysis with elements of a quantitative approach. The following research methods and tools were used: analysis of documents and secondary sources - a systematic review of national and international reports on information security was carried out, including documents of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), reports of the European External Action Service (EEAS), analyses of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and CERT Polska documents concerning cybersecurity incidents; media analysis - systematic monitoring of publications in Polish and foreign media, social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter/X, Telegram) and news portals in the years 2022-2025 was used, with particular emphasis on content related to the Podkarpacie Voivodeship. Both official media publications and content published by users on social media were analyzed. Three key cases were selected for the case study and analysed in detail: 1. disinformation campaigns concerning refugees in Przemyśl in 2022, 2. manipulations related to the air incidents of September 2025, and 3. historical narratives using the memory of the Volhynia Massacre in the context of contemporary Polish-Ukrainian relations. For the narrative analysis,

a discourse analysis method was used to identify the main narrative threads, rhetorical techniques, and persuasive strategies used in Russian disinformation campaigns.

The study covered the period from 24 February 2022 (the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine) to September 2025. The territorial scope focuses on the Podkarpackie Voivodeship, with particular emphasis on border cities and municipalities, such as Przemyśl, Medyka, Korczowa and the functional area of the Rzeszów-Jasionka airport. The difficulties faced by the authors of the study were related to the limited availability of data on disinformation campaigns, due to their often classified nature. An important factor was also the dynamics of the analysed phenomena, which made it difficult to fully assess them over time, as well as the need to use only open data sources (OSINT) due to the lack of access to classified materials of the secret services. An important factor is also the "fog of war" that accompanies commanders, soldiers and researchers during military operations.

## 1 HAZARD CHARACTERISTICS

The years 2022–2025 were characterized by the intensification of the Russian Federation's hybrid activities towards Polish and, more broadly, towards NATO and EU countries. The turning point was Russia's invasion of Ukraine (February 2022), which triggered a wave of disinformation operations and cyberattacks targeting countries supporting Kyiv. Poland, due to its geopolitical location and key role in the logistics of support for Ukraine, has become the target of particularly intensive activities. Analyses by the CSIS and the EU's EEAS show that the number of manipulation operations and cyber-attacks has steadily increased and that their nature has become increasingly coordinated and multidimensional (Jones, 2024).

Russian disinformation was aimed at undermining trust in state and local government institutions, weakening support for Ukraine and creating a sense of threat among citizens. Social media (e.g. Facebook, X/Twitter, Telegram), low-credibility portals and bot networks were used for this. Narratives about the loss of sovereignty, the threats posed by refugees, and the alleged economic costs of the war played a special role.

In addition, cyberattacks are also used, which include both intelligence activities and sabotage attempts. The most commonly used are spear-phishing, software vulnerabilities and attacks on poorly secured systems of local government and public institutions. Some of the attacks were aimed at obtaining data for later information operations, e.g. publishing stolen documents in a manipulated form (CERT Polska, 2023).

In the analyzed period, cyberattacks were increasingly combined with information activities. The data obtained was selectively published in the media and then amplified by propaganda networks, which increased its credibility and reach. Such "mixed operations" increased the difficulty of identifying sources and complicated the state's response (Hybrid Threat Trends, 2024).

Due to the specific nature of the region's vulnerability, as a border region and logistics facilities for aid and military operations (Rzeszów-Jasionka airport, transport corridors, border crossings in Medyka, Korczowa), it has become the focus of interest of Russian activities. Local narratives focused, among others, on the alleged loss of control over the airport and the "militarization" of the region (FIMI Report, 2025).

An important aspect from the point of view of ensuring information security are the personnel and technological limitations of local governments. Many smaller municipalities in the Podkarpackie region have limited financial and human resources in the area of cybersecurity, which makes them vulnerable to attacks. Small local incidents could then be exploited in disinformation narratives (Financial Times, 2024). In addition, the region has a strong attachment to tradition and local identity, which has been used in disinformation narratives. Historical and national themes were often invoked to create antagonism towards refugees and NATO's activities.

In the short term, hybrid intensity is expected to remain high. We should expect an increasing combination of cyberattacks with disinformation, a wider use of AI-based tools for content generation, and further adaptation of narratives to the local context (e.g. concerns about border security and the economic costs of war).

## **2 ANTI-EMIGRATION NARRATIVES IN PRZEMYŚL (2022)**

In the first weeks of the war, false information about crimes allegedly committed by refugees was spread online. This content was exaggerated or completely fabricated and was intended to provoke social unrest and anti-Ukrainian sentiment. According to fake news in Przemyśl, "dark-skinned refugees raped women" (Bednarek, 2022). The purpose of this fake news was to "build a sense of danger" or pro-Russian statements. As a result of disinformation activities, a dangerous rumor began to spread that dark-skinned refugees - by default, not directly affected by the war - began to attack Polish women and even rape them. A false message about the potential danger posed by refugees from African and Asian countries crossing the Polish-Ukrainian border circulated online for several days before escalating. Disinformation was reproduced and disseminated in a professional manner in order to arouse violent social emotions. However, the mere sowing of content in social media would not have provoked a strong reaction if it had not been for the fact that the topic was picked up by far-right circles. As a result, in Przemyśl, "patrols" of pseudo-fans organized, as one of the residents called it, a "hunt" for people with darker skin color.

The first reports of refugees from outside Ukraine were visible on social media as early as February 26. They were most often published by anonymous accounts. Among them were screenshots from private correspondence (without naming the authors), for example, with the following content: "Maybe you will be able to publicize the case, you have a greater reach... I have contact with a friend from Lviv, who wrote that Poles should not be deceived

because black people are following the crowd of Ukrainian refugees... y from the Belarusian border (Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey). I contacted my friends from customs, they were ordered by the government to let them through without verification (...) they trample women and children, one of them allegedly did not survive...". More and more of them appeared by the hour. They circulated on: Twitter, Telegram, Facebook, Messenger.

It was this impression that was used to build the belief that there are a lot of refugees from Africa and Asia on the border (Mierzwińska, 2022). In fact, citizens of non-European countries were also fleeing Ukraine, the information about the mass threat they posed was untrue. The police have repeatedly emphasized that there has been no increase in crime in the Przemyśl district and in the Podkarpackie region and at border crossings in Podkarpackie.

The disinformation narrative was prepared professionally, in accordance with the latest methods used by the Kremlin. Today, Russia is manipulating the society with false information that is not easy to verify. More often than not, it exaggerates the significance of individual real incidents, creates a false picture of the whole from random photos or recordings, and provides selective data without full context. This is exactly how the narrative about the threat posed by refugees from Africa and Asia was built. At the same time, it must be remembered that if this narrative had not fallen on fertile ground, it would have no meaning, like several other narratives that Russia has already tried to introduce into the information circulation during this war and has not been successful.

### **3 MANIPULATION OF AIR INCIDENTS (2022-2025)**

Another manifestation of disinformation was the false message regarding drone attacks in Poland on September 10, 2025. Despite the fact that the consequences of a drone attack have not been revealed in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship so far, the Podkarpackie Voivodeship has also been subjected to fake news. Through disinformation in the Podkarpackie region, fake news was aimed at causing fear and a sense of danger among the inhabitants of the region. One of the elements of the narrative was to suggest that the targets of the strikes could have been the airport in Rzeszów and other infrastructure facilities in the Podkarpackie region (Lubera, 2025).

Another message spread was the claim that Ukraine was behind the attacks to "drag Poland into the war", which further fueled social fear (Radio Eska, 2025). At the same time, narratives relativizing the threat were used – e.g. claims that "nothing happened" or that the incidents were only "media theater", which was supposed to undermine trust in the authorities, the police and special services (Ministerstwo Cyfryzacji, 2025).

False visual materials were also used to build an atmosphere of danger – manipulated maps and graphics that indicated the alleged places where the drones fell in Podkarpackie. The analyses also showed that a significant proportion of comments on the Internet (about 60%) duplicated Russian narratives, which artificially increased the

impression of widespread fear (BiznesAlert, 2025). The effect of such actions was an escalation of the sense of threat, weakening trust in public institutions and making it more difficult to verify true information in social media (Lubera, 2025).

Among the many examples of disinformation in Podkarpacie, the leading claims were:

1. The claim that "the airport in Rzeszów is the target" — messages suggesting an imminent local threat. Pro-Kremlin news channels, social media and some Russian media published insinuations and maps suggesting that the target of the attacks was to be, for example, the airport in Rzeszów or the infrastructure in Podkarpacie — this is a simple way to cause local panic.
2. The narrative "it is a provocation of Ukraine" — attributing responsibility to the party that would "drag us into the war." The theses repeated on Telegram and pro-Russian accounts that it was allegedly the Ukrainians who deliberately directed drones at Poland to provoke a conflict reduced the sense of security and strengthened social fear.
3. Relativizing and denying ("nothing happened", "it's a theatre") — fueling uncertainty and anger. Messages saying that the incident is a media provocation, or that the government is hiding the truth undermine trust in institutions and create a sense of danger, because people do not know who to believe. Official government warnings and analyses indicate that such narratives were deliberately disseminated.
4. Fake or manipulated photos/videos and maps - "visual evidence" that causes panic. Publishing manipulated maps or fabricated videos/photos suggesting destruction or flights over specific towns (e.g. location of airdrops over Podkarpacie), even if not real, causes emotions and the news spreads quickly on networks.
5. Mass comments and bots - increasing the impression that the threat is prevalent. Analyses show that a significant proportion (e.g. about 60%) of comments online about drone incidents reflected the Russian narrative, which intensifies the sense of widespread threat.

All examples of disinformation were clearly targeted, in particular:

1. causing anxiety among the inhabitants of the region (fear of further "attacks", concerns about the safety of flights and infrastructure),
2. erosion of trust in local authorities and services — when people see conflicting information, frustration and fear grow,
3. information chaos in social media, making it difficult to reach reliable messages,
4. causing reluctance to continue military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine.
5. Pro-Kremlin narratives have been amplified by bots and anonymous accounts, as well as by radical local groups. Fact-checker monitoring shows that the reach of this type of content has grown rapidly thanks to local discussion groups on Facebook and instant messaging.

## **4 HISTORICAL AND ANTI-UKRAINIAN DISINFORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF PODKARPACIE (2022-2025)**

Historical disinformation, especially referring to traumatic events, is one of the tools used by Russia to fuel social and international conflicts. In Polish-Ukrainian relations, the key thread is the memory of the Volhynian Massacre, the activities of the UPA and the ideology of Stepan Bandera.

Since 2022, Russian information campaigns in Poland, including Podkarpacie – a region bordering Ukraine – have increasingly begun to use the topic of the "Volhynian Massacre" to provoke Poles resentment towards Ukrainians. However, this disinformation is not limited to historical issues – it is also aimed at weakening support for humanitarian and military aid provided to Ukraine in the face of Russia's aggression.

Historical disinformation narratives:

"Echoes of Volhynia" - a fake document about the suspension of exhumations. A fabricated document allegedly issued by the Minister of Culture of Ukraine appeared on the Internet, which was supposed to order the suspension of the exhumation in Pużniki – the site of the crime against Poles in February 1945. The fake news was intended to create the belief that Ukraine does not respect the memory of the victims and consciously blocks historical reconciliation (TV Republika, 2025).

A narrative about "nationalism and Nazism". Russian propaganda sources presented Ukrainians as heirs to Nazi ideology, emphasizing the symbolism of the UPA and Stepan Bandera. This message was supposed to generalize historical guilt and build the image of Ukraine as a "fascist state" (Disinfo Digest, 2023).

Local incidents as a pretext for historical associations – after a bank robbery in Przemyśl in 2022, the perpetrator of which turned out to be a person with Russian-Ukrainian citizenship, comments appeared en masse online linking this case with banderism and stereotypes about Ukrainians as "savages" or "heirs of the UPA" (Marszałek, 2023).

## **5 DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES AGAINST AID TO UKRAINE**

"Poles are suffering because of Ukrainians" - messages were spread suggesting that the influx of Ukrainian refugees allegedly deprives Poles of jobs, housing and social benefits. Such narratives were intended to arouse resentment and discourage further solidarity with Ukraine (Fundacja Geremka, 2025).

"Military aid weakens the Polish army" - one of the recurring threads was the narrative that the transfer of military equipment to Ukraine leads to the "disarmament of Polish" and puts Podkarpacie in danger. In this context, information about the presence of NATO troops in Rzeszów and the surrounding area was manipulated (EUvsDisinfo, 2023).

"Ukrainians ungrateful to Polish" - Russian disinformation channels promoted the thesis that despite the huge support from Poland, Ukrainians allegedly show a lack of gratitude and even harbor anti-Polish sentiments. The theme of Volhynian exhumations was also used here – the alleged blocking of the search for victims was supposed to prove Ukraine's "hostility" towards Poles.

"Escalation of the war" - theses were spread that providing military support to Ukraine "draws Poland into the war" and makes Podkarpacie a potential target for Russian drone or missile attacks. It was a narrative intended to instill fear in the border region.

Undoubtedly, disinformation activities have a strictly defined purpose, form and mechanism of action. The most common mechanisms include:

1. combining historical and contemporary threads – e.g. suggesting that the "Banderites from Volhynia" are the same ones who allegedly threaten Poles today,
2. polarization through emotional narratives – e.g. juxtaposing images of Volhynia victims with information about military assistance,
3. manipulation of the local context – taking advantage of the fact that Podkarpacie is the main hub of military and humanitarian aid (m.in. the airport in Jasionka),
4. undermining trust in institutions – suggesting that the government is hiding the costs of support for Ukraine or "exposing Poles to foreigners".

Analyzing the above, it is impossible not to notice that Russian disinformation in Podkarpacie in 2022–2025 is based on the synergy of two threads:

- historical (Volhynia, UPA, Bandera),
- contemporary (humanitarian aid for Ukraine).

Both of these threads are intertwined in order to provoke resentment towards Ukrainians, discourage Poles from providing military and humanitarian support, as well as building a sense of threat in the border region. For this purpose, various disinformation methods are used, which in the long term may cause an increase in social tensions in border cities, especially in Przemyśl.

The effectiveness of the "Kremlin" disinformation depended not so much on the quality of the materials as on the emotional charge of the message and distribution through local communication channels.

## **6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE INFORMATION RESILIENCE OF THE REGION**

### **1. Strengthening the crisis communication infrastructure.**

Podkarpacie requires a developed network of fast communication between state institutions, local governments and regional media. The experience of the drone incident in September 2025 has shown that delays in official messages or the transmission of

unverified, inaccurate messages are conducive to the spread of disinformation. The introduction of permanent crisis response protocols would allow to minimize this problem.

## 2. Media and digital education

A key element of building information resilience is the development of citizens' competences in recognizing manipulation and fake news. Research indicates that local communities with a high level of media education are less susceptible to propaganda. In Podkarpacie, it is worth introducing educational programs in schools and training for seniors, who are often particularly exposed to manipulation in social media.

## 3. Support for independent and local media

Disinformation is particularly rampant where there is a deficit of reliable sources of information. Therefore, it is important to support local newsrooms and investigative journalism through grants, partnership programs with universities, and content proofing training. The presence of strong regional media can serve as a "first line of defense" against fake news.

## 4. Cross-border cooperation

Podkarpacie, bordering Ukraine and Slovakia, should develop mechanisms for information cooperation with foreign partners. Coordinating disinformation monitoring activities and exchanging good practices (e.g. with Ukraine, which has been gathering experience in countering Russian propaganda since 2014) can significantly strengthen the region's resilience.

## 5. Activating civil society

NGOs, parishes, local associations and universities of the third age can act as natural "sensors" of disinformation. Involving them in the process of monitoring the media space and organizing fact-checking workshops increases the chances of quickly identifying and neutralizing false narratives.

## 6. Building social trust

Ultimately, the effectiveness of the fight against disinformation depends on the level of trust citizens have in public institutions. The lack of transparency and inconsistency in the actions of the state are conducive to vulnerability to fake news. Therefore, it is necessary for the authorities to have a transparent information policy and to involve residents in the decision-making process regarding local security.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of Russian disinformation in the Podkarpacie Voivodeship confirmed the correctness of the research hypothesis. The main hypothesis about the high degree of adaptation of Russian disinformation activities to the local conditions of Podkarpacie has

been fully confirmed. The Russian Federation's propaganda campaigns demonstrate a sophisticated use of specific regional elements: the historical memory associated with the Volhynia Massacre, its strategic location as a NATO logistics hub, and local social sensitivities related to the influx of refugees.

Disinformation campaigns effectively exploit local historical and social conditions. The Podkarpackie region, due to its historical memory associated with difficult Polish-Ukrainian relations, is becoming particularly susceptible to narratives that refer to resentment and grievance. Russian propaganda instrumentalizes events from the past in order to cause distrust towards the contemporary actions of the Polish state and international alliances (Kojzar, 2022). Crisis incidents – such as the drone attack of September 9-10, 2025 – act as a catalyst that immediately triggers waves of false narratives (Charlish, Kelly, Erling, 2025). This mechanism is characteristic of modern information warfare: every sudden, not fully explained fact becomes a space for manipulation (The Guardian, 2025). The speed of the spread of fake news often outpaces the reactions of state institutions, which deepens the information chaos.

At the same time, the effect of Russian disinformation is not only the polarisation of public opinion, but also the erosion of trust in state and international institutions (e.g. NATO). In Podkarpacie, it can be observed that residents, bombarded with contradictory messages, are more likely to seek information from local, unverified sources or social media, which is conducive to the further spread of disinformation.

It is also important that every disinformation has real practical consequences. These include: the burden on security and law enforcement services, the need to conduct educational and fact-checking activities, as well as obstacles to humanitarian and local government activities (Kojzar, 2025). In crisis situations, such as a drone attack, administrative resources must be directed not only to security activities, but also to combat rumors.

The analysed narratives - from manipulation of air incidents, through the exploitation of the difficult Polish-Ukrainian past, to anti-immigration fake news - show that Russia is conducting propaganda activities with a high degree of adaptation to local conditions. Podkarpacie, as a border region, NATO's logistical base and the main humanitarian aid corridor, has become the target of particularly intense disinformation operations.

The conclusions of the conducted considerations indicate that disinformation not only polarizes society, but also undermines trust in state and international institutions. The most dangerous are crisis situations, such as the drone incident of September 2025, when the speed of spread of false content exceeds the pace of official communication.

The proposed recommendations allow us to outline a practical path to strengthen the information resilience of the region. It should be emphasized that effective defence cannot be understood only in military or technological terms, but as a socio-institutional process in

which state authorities, local governments, the media, non-governmental organisations and citizens themselves cooperate. Media education, transparent crisis communication, support for independent media and the development of cross-border cooperation are the foundation on which to build sustainable information resilience.

To sum up, Russian disinformation in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship reveals the mechanisms of modern hybrid warfare, in which the line between military and information conflict is blurred. Due to its geographical location, "historical sensitivity" and multiculturalism, the Podkarpackie region is a kind of "laboratory" for researchers and practitioners of information security, showing that effective defense against manipulation requires the cooperation of state institutions, the media and citizens.

The conclusions from this region can be a valuable source of knowledge for the whole country and a reference point for security policies in Central and Eastern Europe.

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