WAR FACT-CHECKING: STRATEGIES AND METHODOLOGY FOR DEBUNKING DISINFORMATION ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE AT THE DEMAGOG.ORG.PL WEBSITE

Monika Szafrańska

iD 0000-0002-7171-2115

Institute of Journalism, Media and Social Communication

Doctoral School in the Social Sciences, Jagiellonian University in Kraków

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ABSTRACT

The first victim of the war is truth. During armed conflicts, disinformation is particularly dangerous, and attempts to manipulate public opinion – whether in the form of a limited set of information or even fake news – should be expected on each side of the ongoing conflict. In this situation, the ability to verify information distributed in the media space is of great importance, especially in the context of the contemporary omnipresence of social media. The purpose of the article is to present, in a form of case study, the strategies for debunking false information on the conflict in Ukraine on the example of the fact-checking portal Demagog.org.pl. This analysis allowed drawing conclusions on the functions of fact-checking in the media system, among which the most important are control, educational and alarm functions. The research contributes to the media studies literature by shedding some light on fact-checking initiatives' role in the media system.

Keywords: fact-checking, disinformation, fake news, war in Ukraine, Demagog.org.pl

Introduction

2022 and 2023 were marked by the Russian invasion in Ukraine. This period is a special challenge for journalists and fact-checkers due to a rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation which has shown that communication might be used as a powerful warfare tool (Bolin, Kunelius 2023, p. 10). The discourse on Russian negative propaganda regarding Ukraine, however, dates back to 2014 when Crimea

was annexed (Baumann 2020, p. 288). Pro-Kremlin media and institutions had spread false and manipulated information about Ukraine to picture it as a threat to Russians. Since 2014, in order to justify the annexation, the Kremlin spoke of ethnic cleansing and other crimes allegedly committed against the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine (Bryjka 2022). The Russian leadership also accused Ukraine individuals or governments of having fascist or Nazi connections, which plays on the sentiment that Russia was the one that liberated nations from Nazis during the Second World War, and this is often repeated in current Russian historical propaganda (Erlich, Garner 2023, p. 10). The Russian tactics in Ukraine are often described as hybrid warfare which can be understood as the use of hard and soft tools relying on proxies and surrogates to prevent attribution, to conceal intent, and to maximise confusion and uncertainty (Monaghan 2015; Iasiello 2017, p. 60).

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine was one of those moments that shed more attention to information warfare. Institutions like the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) started to include manipulative use of information and propaganda in their strategic documents, like the report *Russia's disinformation on Ukraine and the EU's response* by the European Parliament think tank (Bentzen, Russell 2015) or NATO's Brussels Summit Declaration from 2018 (NATO 2018).

The growing awareness of mis- and disinformation contributed to the rise and spread of fact-checking websites run by journalists or/and activists debunking fake news and political manipulation and providing the citizens with non-partisan, objective and verified facts (Kumar 2022, p. 6). The content presented by the fact-checkers should come from open, generally available sources, allowing the readers to reach the same data and conclude on their own. Fact-checking first gained popularity in the United States, later in other regions, including Europe. At the beginning of the 21st century and in the first half of the 2010s, the main goal of such initiatives was evaluating the political claims (Graves, Cherubini 2016, p. 15), however moments like interference in American campaigns before elections and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom by manipulating social media algorithms (both in 2016), COVID-19 pandemic (since 2020) and the mentioned above spread of Russian mis- and disinformation about Ukraine dating back to 2014 widened a range of tasks for international fact-checking community. Today, fact-checking is considered a tool to verify claims from all types of social actors: politicians, journalists, activists as well as social media users (Humprecht 2019, p.312–313).

This article analyses the methods of debunking information implemented by the Polish website Demagog.org.pl, which was the first Polish fact-checking portal and is a member of many fact-checking networks, including International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO). The research is based on a case study which includes fact-checks on disinformation regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war that started on 24th February 2022. The author of this article is the former worker of Demagog.org.pl which on one hand might affect her objectivity or impartiality, yet, on the other – allows her for an unlimited access to information about the verification procedures used by the portal's employees.

The analysis of fact-checking activities in relation to the Polish media sphere in the context of the war in Ukraine is extremely important due to the geographical proximity of both countries and the importance of Poland as an ally of Ukraine. The need for this type of analysis is also justified by the fact that immediately after the Russian aggression on the territory of Ukraine, an enormous number of disinformation incidents were recorded on the Polish Internet (European Digital Media Observatory 2022).

Fake News and Its Role in Propaganda

The Cambridge Dictionary defines "fake news" as "false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke" (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus 2018). Fake news should be considered an instance of misinformation (defined by Claire Wardle as "information that is false, but not intended to cause harm", 2018, p. 5) or disinformation ("false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm", 2018, p. 4). Those two terms, however, are heterogeneous. Wardle describes seven types of mis- and disinformation: (1) satire or parody, (2) misleading content, (3) imposter content, (4) fabricated content, (5) false connection, (6) false context and (7) manipulated content (2017). Wardle's typography is considered the fullest so far because it manages to capture the different goals behind the false information: from the innocent and harmless (in principle) satire, through manipulative but still possible to recognise misleading content, to harmful and dangerous false connection or context.

When it comes to "fake news" alone, Edson C. Tandoc Jr., Zheng Wei Lim and Richard Ling examined 34 academic articles that used the term "fake news" between 2003 and 2017 and their review reveals six types of definition: (1) news satire, (2) news parody, (3) fabrication, (4) manipulation, (5) advertising, and (6) propaganda. Based on this analysis, the authors conclude:

> What is common across these definitions is how fake news appropriates the look and feel of real news; from how websites look; to how articles are written; to how photos include attributions. Fake news hides under a veneer of legitimacy as it takes on some form of credibility by trying to appear like real news. Furthermore, going beyond the simple appearance of a news item, through the use of news bots, fake news imitates news' omnipresence by building a network of fake sites (2017, p. 147).

Fake news has become one of the most useful tools for so-called "black propaganda" which, as defined by Jacques Ellul, "tends to hide its aims, identity, significance, and source. The people are not aware that someone is trying to influence them, and do not feel that they are being pushed in a certain direction" (1973, p. 15). Propaganda is usually associated with the process run by the state and its

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institutions. It is no different in the case of fake news, for how studies by Strategic Communications, Task Forces and Information Analysis show, false and manipulated information is a common method used by state actors to interfere in procedures and political processes in other countries. The method is called Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) and consists mostly of using computational propaganda, including trolls, bots, artificial intelligence and/or algorithms of social media (2023, p. 4). However, fake news has a much wider scope and is not limited to state organisations, nor is it spread only by governments and corporate institutions and news media alone as it is a part of classic propaganda. What makes fakes news particularly dangerous is that it is often spread by unaware Internet users (Reilly 2017, p. 142) as well as professional media and politicians who lack the competence to verify facts.

The Overview of Fake News Regarding the War in Ukraine Spread in Poland

Poland has played the key role in helping Ukraine after the Russian invasion in February 2022. Not only did Poland take most of the Ukrainian refugees (according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, until April 3 rd 2023, Poland has registered nearly 1.6 million Ukrainian refugees), but also is the closest to Ukraine among NATO members, becoming the first gateway for Western humanitarian aid and military support into Ukraine (Atlantic Council 2023, p. 20). This made Poland one of the main targets of the Russian disinformation, which aimed mostly at undermining Poles' willingness to help Ukrainians and antagonising these two nationalities.

When the refugee crisis began in March 2022, information that the majority of people fleeing across the Ukrainian border were not actually Ukrainians gained popularity. People crossing the Polish-Ukrainian border were also reported to behave aggressively (Żytnicki 2022). Later, when Ukrainians started to settle in Poland, one could read on social media about alleged privileges for Ukrainians to the detriment of Polish citizens.

The Kremlin also carried out a disinformation campaign, according to which Poland has planned to occupy territories in western Ukraine (in some of the messages Romania was involved in those plans). The Polish Minister-Special Services Coordinator pointed out that the purpose of spreading the mentioned falsehoods was to threaten Poland with a Russian counter-attack, which would "destroy Poland" (Website of the Republic of Poland 2022).

The war disinformation also included conspiracy theories, which are mostly an extension of other theories known from previous crises. An example is the conspiracy theory about the "imaginary war" being led to scare people and deny them their freedom (Demagog 2022). It is a direct calque of COVID-19 conspirationism according to which the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 does not exist, and the pandemic was planned by global elites to rule the world (Gu et al. 2021).

Fake news also concerned pro-Ukrainian content. That type of disinformation is often exaggerated and based on the unconscious and hasty dissemination of unverified information, even by professional media. The narrative conducted by the Ukrainian side is mainly positive and aimed at raising morale among Ukrainians and their supporters. Examples of this are news about the so-called Ghost of Kyiv (a mythical pilot who was supposed to have shot down several Russian planes within the first few days of the war) and information that the President of Ukraine is directly involved in the armed struggle. In turn, the Russian narrative is characterised by a negative message, often portraying Ukrainians as Nazis (Demagog 2022).

Demagog.org.pl and Fact-Checking in Poland

Demagog.org.pl was the first Polish fact-checking portal. The portal started working in 2014 and in 2016 the Demagog Association was established. The initiative was inspired by the Slovak fact-checking portal of the same name, established in 2010. The creators of the Slovak Demagog were directly inspired by American fact-checking media like PolitiFact, Fact-Check.org and The Washington Post's Fact--Checker (Giereło-Klimaszewska 2019, p. 122). For the first five years, Demagog.org.pl's activity consisted of verifying political claims and promises. However, in 2019 the website joined the Meta's Third-Party Fact-Checking Program within which International Fact-Checking Network-certified fact-checking organisations identify, review and rate viral misinformation across Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp.

Since 2014, many other Polish fact-checking initiatives have been established both in a model of a newsroom – meaning that the portal is affiliated with an existing media company – and by NGOs (Graves, Cherubini 2016, p. 8). The former include Konkret24.tvn24.pl (a part of the TVN TV broadcaster) and FakeHunter.pl (a part of the Polish Press Agency). Besides Demagog.org.pl, the most prominent fact-checking portals functioning as NGOs are FakeNews.pl (a project by Fundacja "Przeciwdziałamy Dezinformacji" [We Counteract Disinformation Foundation]), Pravda.org.pl (a project by Stowarzyszenie Pravda [The Truth Association]), OKO.press (a project by Fundacja Ośrodek Kontroli Obywatelskiej [Civic Control Center Foundation]).

Polish scholar Renata Piasecka-Strzelec distinguishes two main phases of fact-checking development in Poland (2022, p. 257):

a) phase I, covering the years 2014–2019: a response to the emergence of the discussion on phenomenon of fake news in various areas of socio-political life;

b) phase II, covering the years 2020–2021: closely related to the outbreak of the pandemic and the emergence of the infodemic (spread of disinformation connected to COVID-19 pandemic).

The amount of disinformation observed during the war in Ukraine is the extension of the second phase. Since the invasion, the fact-checkers had faced similar challenges, like the wave of fake news connected to one theme at the same time and the global nature of the phenomena generating disinformation. According to Michelle A Amazeen, the growing importance of fact-checking is directly proportional to rising threats to democracy and decreasing stability of institutions (2020, p. 104).

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The social and political system is especially sensitive during crises like pandemics and war threat, which explains the growing significance of fact-checking since 2020.

This is also demonstrated by the increasing presence of the Polish fact-checking organisations in the international fact-checking community. Three of the Polish fact-checking organisations are International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) Signatories. They are: Demagog Association, Przeciwdziałamy Dezinformacji Foundation and Pravda Association. IFCN is led by Poynter Institute and aims at uniting fact-checking organisations from different countries and promoting the best fact-checking practices. All signatories are obliged to obey the IFCN Code of Principles that includes the following commitments:

- non-partisanship and fairness;
- standards and transparency of sources;
- transparency of funding and organisation;
- standards and transparency of methodology;
- an open and honest corrections policy.

The IFCN signatories get a right to collaborate within Meta's Third-Party Fact-Checking Program. However, in Poland, only two organisations had joined the program so far: beside the Demagog Association it is the Polish hub of the French Press Agency (Meta 2023).

Despite the growing presence of disinformation in the world and methods of fighting it, fact-checking portals in Poland are still relatively unknown. The Digital Poland 2022 survey indicates that only 5 per cent of respondents obtain information from fact-checking portals (2022, p. 35), and only 1 in 5 people had heard of this type of activity (p. 10). The visibility of fact-checking is limited among the representatives of the media, too. A study by Dariusz Tworzydło and Anna Miotk, published in 2022, showed that 35 per cent of Polish journalists never use fact-checking websites and every fourth respondent rarely does it. Around 21 per cent of journalists sometimes read fact-checking portals, only 12 per cent do so often and 6 per cent – very often (2022, p. 1367).

War Fact-Checking on Demagog.org.pl: the Case of the War in Ukraine

As mentioned above, Demagog.org.pl works with three basic types of content: false information from social media (mostly Facebook), claims made by politicians and other public figures, and election promises. The fourth form of publication is general analysis, not dedicated to fact-check a specific content but aiming at explaining phenomena connected to fact-checking, disinformation, media literacy etc. Since 2022, some debunks had also been presented in Russian and (less frequently) Ukrainian.

The current case study does not include the section of political promises and general analysis. The category of false information was divided into two subcategories: textual false information and false visuals. The following parts discuss examples of fact-checked information, with a brief description of their content and

methods of debunking used by Demagog.org.pl's fact-checkers. The research sample was selected in such a way as to reflect the widest possible variety of verification strategies. If the same debunking method was used in more than one fact-check, the selecting criterion was the popularity and so called virality of the disinformation trend given fake news belonged to. The case study also provides some examples of the practice of presenting debunks in other languages.

Textual Fake News

This part discusses fake news based on text (both written and spoken) which might be accompanied by some images, although the main sources of disinformation are words rather than visuals. In most cases, the fact-checks analysed social media posts.

One of the first types of disinformation detected on social media at the beginning of the war were posts spreading theories claiming the conflict was a conspiracy of the world elites. According to some fake news, the decision to change the rules for the entry of refugees to Slovakia, issued nine days before the Russian invasion, was supposed to prove that the Russian-Ukrainian war had been planned. To debunk this information, Demagog.org.pl's fact-checkers asked the Public Health Office of the Slovak Republic about the reason for this decision. The office responded that the decision was made "on the basis of publicly available information about the danger of a military invasion" (Demagog 2022a). The fact-checkers also analysed Slovakian media reports and official's statements informing about the threat of invasion, concluding the Public Health Office of the Slovak Republic had enough reason to change the rules for refugees before 24 February 2022.

Russian propaganda put significant effort on convincing the public opinion that Russia is a victim of Ukrainian aggression and Ukrainian nazism. To debunk these types of false claims, the fact-checkers, among other things, referred to the media and activists who found the Russians were responsible for destroying some buildings in Kyiv. Other sources were reports from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) about Ukrainian civilians being killed and wounded in Russian attacks. The fact-checkers also quoted some experts (lawyers, political analysts and others) providing some insights why Ukraine should not be called "Nazis" or "Fascist".

The Russian propaganda had tried to undermine Ukrainian credibility by spreading fake news that Ukraine had not registered its borders with the United Nations (UN). In this case, Demagog.org.pl's fact-checkers referred to another fact-checking portal's (StopFake.org) analysis that proved there is no such term as "UN registration of state boundaries". The fact-checkers also cited documents confirming the land border between Ukraine and Russia was ratified by the parliaments of both countries in 2004.

One of the biggest disinformation crises in Poland began in March 2022, when a significant number of Ukrainian refugees started crossing the Polish-Ukrainian border. The most interest was shed on the city of Przemyśl which is situated near

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the border with Ukraine. There were numerous reports on social media about various developments on the border: the group of refugees was allegedly dominated by young men from Africa and the Middle East who committed violence and theft and tried to cross the border without the required documents. The press department of the Ministry of Interior and Border Guard spokeswoman informed Demagog. org.pl that: "The dominant group of refugees in Poland are citizens of Ukraine" (Demagog 2022b). In a response to information about a woman being attacked with a knife, a spokeswoman for the Regional Police Headquarters in Rzeszów notified the fact-checkers that the hospital had not registered such an incident. In the fact-check, police officers were quoted, too, assuring there had not been any more crimes reported in the border areas than before the refugees started arriving.

After the crisis on the border, manipulated information about alleged privileges for the Ukrainian refugees started to spread on social media. In April, the fact-checkers debunked the viral post presenting a list of benefits that Ukrainians coming to Poland can count on and of entertainment outlets that they use "for free", due to which Poles appear as "citizens of the second category" (Demagog 2022c). As the fact-checkers pointed out, most of the introduced solutions either apply to Poles in the same manner, or are temporary. The fact-check was based on a detailed analysis of legal acts and government documents.

A common example of anti-Ukrainian disinformation was fake news about alleged biological and chemical weapons laboratories. In May, former correspondent of the Polish public television Mariusz Max Kolonko shared a video in which he claimed there were 16 laboratories in Ukraine, where pathogens are produced "with American money". Ukraine and the United States worked together to combat the threat of terrorism using biological weapons. In the fact-check, the detailed history of this collaboration was presented based on official documents from both countries, including a generally available agreement from 1993. The conspiracy theory about secret laboratories in Ukraine refers to some theories which were prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic, claiming the coronavirus got out of the laboratory.

It is particularly difficult to detect fake news with missing context. An example of this disinformation strategy was a video in which Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that "the US will have to send their sons and daughters, just like we [Ukrainians] send our sons and daughters to war. And they will have to fight … and they will die" (Demagog 2023). The video became a pretext for saying that the Ukrainian president "called on NATO to join the war" (Demagog 2023). In reality, Zelenskyy was referring to a hypothetical situation in which one of the NATO countries would be attacked. The fact-checkers shared two versions of the original recording: in Ukrainian and English, together with the exact time stamps, and translated into Polish the manipulated part of Zelenskyy's speech.

Visual Fake News

Visual disinformation is especially dangerous, for manipulated videos or pictures grab attention much easier than textual information (Cao et al. 2020, p. 2). There are two fundamental types of visual disinformation: photos/videos that were put in a wrong context, or photos/videos that were edited. Both are used in pro-Russian as well as in pro-Ukrainian propaganda.

The first type is easier to make, that is why it is more common. It often manifests by using the old visuals to picture the current situation. The beginning of war brought a few examples of this method used in pro-Ukrainian disinformation. One of them was a photo showing the alleged shooting down of a Russian fighter aircraft. It turned out, however, that the footage pictured something entirely different: the situation from 1993, when Russian MiG-29 fighters were destroyed as part of a show in Great Britain.

Since the beginning of the war, the opposite method of disinformation has been observed: visuals that showed current events were used to convince social media users that those photos or videos were old and manipulated. Three days after the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the fact-checkers debunked the disinformation claiming that the photograph of a wounded woman from Chuhuiv that has been widely spread at the time comes from 2018.[1] The purpose of this method is to undermine the credibility of Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian information sources and the importance of the war itself. It is an entirely new type of disinformation which is very dangerous because it can easily lead to confusion and mistrust towards those who provide the information about the war on a daily basis, but also it can desensitise people to violence, victims and damage caused by invaders.

Another type of visual disinformation – which is not only harder to prepare, but also to detect – is photomontage and other forms of editing pictures and videos. In February 2023, on Polish-language Facebook information was published that tank drivers were recruited in Poland to fight in Ukraine for "true Polish lands". Fake news was pictured with photos of alleged posters from the Warsaw subway. Information about the billboards encouraging Poles to join the army also reached the Russian media. The photograph showing the poster in the Russian subway was, however edited and, as the Byelorussian TV station Belsat found, the original came from 2017. The Polish Ministry of Defence also denied the existence of a mobilisation campaign for the Polish army. Another example of the misleading photomontage was the photograph discrediting President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, picturing him speaking in the US Congress against the background of the Ukrainian flag with SS symbols. In reality, there was a number "46" on the flag. The fake news was spread by a law office Lega Artis, which was known in Poland for disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic (Litwin 2022).

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1   The photograph can be seen at Alex Lourie's Instagram Account at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CbfNKQwOhux/?img_index=1.

The basic way of debunking these types of false information used by the fact-check-ers is the reverse image search (offered, for example, by Google or TinEye). The method allows determining when, where and by whom the image was published for the first time and providing the right context of it.

Political Claims

Fact-checking of politicians and other public figures' claims was the initial kind of activity by Demagog.org.pl dating back to 2014 and still remains the second main pillar of its work together with debunking fake news from social media. Political fact-checking is particularly crucial, since within Meta's Third-Party Fact-Checking Program, it is not allowed for fact-checking websites to verify claims from politicians. The process of debunking looks differently than in a case of social media fake news. As for the fake news, only those claims are fact-checked which the editorial board knows are mis- or disinformation. However, when it comes to political claims, all statements that hold verifiable facts can be checked. The methodology of Demagog.org.pl holds five ratings:

1. true:
   a) there are two credible and independent sources or one if it is the only one adequate from the point of view of the context of the statement, confirming the information contained in the statement;
   b) the statement contains the most up-to-date data existing at the time;
   c) the data is used in accordance with its original context;
2. half true:
   a) the statement contains a combination of true and false information;
   b) the presence of false information, however, does not cause the thesis contained in the debunked statement to be distorted or misrepresented and/or the actual data speaks even more in favour of the author's thesis;
3. false:
   a) the statement is inconsistent with any publicly available information based on a representative and credible source;
   b) its author presents outdated information that is contradicted by more recent data;
   c) the statement contains partially correct data, but omits key information and thus falsely reflects the facts;
4. manipulation: the statement contains information that is misleading or distorts the facts, in particular by:
   a) omitting important context;
   b) using correct data to present false conclusions;
   c) using selective data proving the thesis (cherry-picking);
   d) using incomparable data to obtain the effect of similarity or contrast;
   e) exaggerating one's achievements or belittling the role of the adversary;
   f) non-substantive methods of argumentation;

5. unverifiable:
    a) the statement is impossible to verify in any available source;
    b) it refers to obsolete sources, on the basis of which it is impossible to make judgments about the present;
    c) it concerns estimates with a large degree of uncertainty;
    d) it contains imprecise or too general statements, is impossible to verify for other objective reasons (Demagog 2022d).

In this case study, only claims rated as false were chosen.

Studies from Demagog.org.pl and Institute of Media Monitoring showed that the most involved in spreading anti-Ukrainian information in social media is the right-wing party Konfederacja [Confederation] and its representatives like Grzegorz Braun, Krystian Kamiński and Janusz Korwin-Mikke – each of them a member of the Polish Parliament (Grzesiczak 2023, 2023a, 2023b). Korwin-Mikke's statements often referred to the massacre in Bucha (where 458 bodies of civilians murdered by the end of March 2022 were found) as allegedly caused by Ukrainians – until 11 April 2023, six such claims from this politician were fact-checked by Demagog.org.pl (one in May, July and November and two in August 2022 and one in April 2023). All the fact-checks cited the results of two separate investigations: by *The New York Times* and Bellingcat providing, for instance, videos of the Russian forces firing on a cyclist in Bucha. Over time, similar evidence was provided by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Russian war crimes were also covered in United Nations' (UN) report.

Another noteworthy example of political fact-checking was the debunking of four statements by the Russian ambassador in Poland, Sergei Andrejev. By the end of March 2022, he conducted a press briefing, during which he repeated some fundamental fake news spread by Russian propaganda. One of them stated that in a bombarded maternity hospital in Mariupol there were no Ukrainian civilians but Ukrainian troops. This was proven wrong with videos and photos made by journalists present in Mariupol during the occupation. Similar claims came from the Russian embassy in the United Kingdom, which implied that the shelling was staged using Ukrainian actresses. The disinformation was rationalised with photos of an Instagram influencer, Marianna Podgurskaya who was allegedly hired to fake a victim.[2] The evidence collected by the fact-checkers – including photos from the woman's social media – proved that she was visibly pregnant and she lived in Mariupol which legitimated her presence in a clinic on the day of the shooting.

Another statement from Andrejev fact-checked by Demagog.org.pl accused Ukrainians of shooting Donbas "every day" and "pursuing a hostile policy, questioning Russia's security" (Demagog 2022e). The fact-checkers quoted, among others, the Ukrainian Border Guard's communiqué from before the war pointing that the attacks were deliberate provocations by Russia. Another source was, yet again, the

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2　The original tweet is not available anymore; printscreen can be seen at: Milmo, D., Farah, H. (2022). Twitter removes Russian embassy tweet on Mariupol bombing. The Guardian, March 10. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/10/twitter-removes-russian-embassy-tweet-on-mariupol-bombing.

Bellingcat investigation leading to the conclusion the Ukrainian army bombed the territory of Donbass was fabricated, which was proved by pointing to inaccuracies in the published photos and recordings. There was also cited an analysis of the Ukrainian fact-checking portal StopFake, according to which a document purporting to be evidence of a planned attack on Donbas by the Ukrainian armed forces and justifying Russian pre-strike was a fake.

Content in Russian and Ukrainian

At the onset of the war, Demagog.org.pl decided to implement a new strategy of reaching the audience consisting of translating some of the most dangerous fake news to other languages, mostly Russian. The practice, however, was not used frequently. As of the beginning of April 2023, there were 19 fact-checks available in Russian (however, 3 of them are not linked to the war in Ukraine) and 2 in Ukrainian.

The debunks translated into Russian or Ukrainian were usually the ones with the most harmful potential of disgracing and creating a negative atmosphere around Ukrainians, like the photograph allegedly showing Ukrainian refugees misbehaving in a store in Germany (the photograph, as the reverse image search proved, was made long before the war in Ukraine). The purpose of publishing in Russian was also to minimise the influence of anti-Polish propaganda on the Russian social media. An example of this practice were edited photographs showing billboards in Warsaw picturing Polish Land Forces officer, General Jarosław Mika encouraging people to "remember history". However, the photographs had been photoshopped and one of Demagog.org.pl's fact-checkers, after defining a location of where the billboards with General Mika were allegedly hanging, personally visited those places and took pictures presenting regular billboards hanging there.

The pro-Ukrainian fake news were also translated into Russian. One of them, applies to a post that appeared on Facebook with a photo that allegedly shows the entrance to a subway station in the United States with the inscription above the entrance being a tribute to the bravery of Ukrainians with the words: "I thought I knew what bravery is. And then I saw Ukraine" The original photograph was from the stock site, and the quote came from the letter a reader wrote to *The New York Times* a few days after the beginning of the war. The fact-check was also translated into Ukrainian.

Strategies and Methodology of War Fact-Checking on Demagog.org.pl

The basic purpose of fact-checking is to deliver verified and reliable information to those who come across fake news and other forms of manipulation. Fact-checking, however, is not only about saying "This is true and this is fake". Each fact-check – especially one that rates a claim as false – has to be grounded in reliable sources and deliver the whole context in a neutral way. Socially sensitive themes require

particular care as well as using adequate and transparent methods during the debunking process.

Figure 1. Scheme of Work of a Fact-Checker on Demagog.org.pl Website
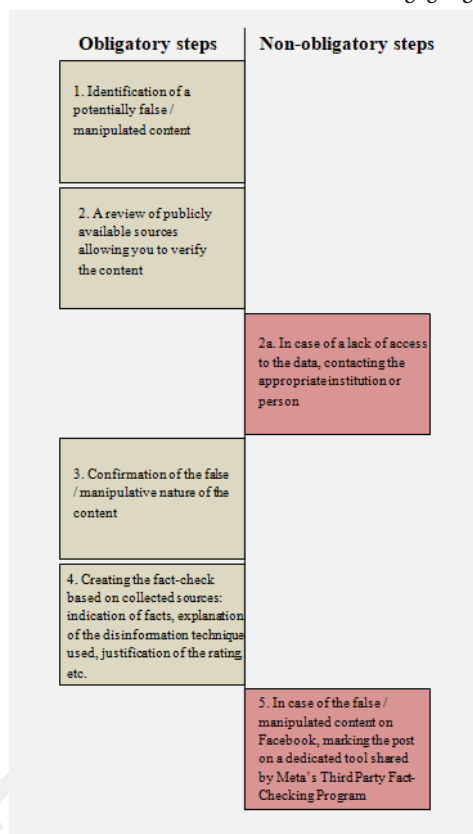
Source: own work

This research indicates that Demagog.org.pl's fact-checkers use a wide range of methods to debunk false information.[3] All incorporated strategies do, however, have one thing in common: they are based on as original sources as possible and

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3   This study has several limitations, too. The first stems from the fact that only one fact-checking organisation was used as an example. Although Demagog.org.pl is the first and one of the most prominent representatives of fact-checking in Poland, its methods of material selection and verifying information might not reflect strategies incorporated by all Polish fact-checking portals. Another limitation might be that the research method used in this paper, a case study, is not as structured as, for instance, content analysis, which would contain research conducted in a uniform manner, delivering more universal and representative conclusions. Finally, the presented characteristics of fact-checking methods cannot be transferred to any kind of fake news. Of course, every fact-check has to obey the rule of referring to original and traceable sources, yet these sources might differ depending on the topic

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on research methods widely acknowledged in science. As presented in Figure 1, rating the content as a fake news shall be preceded by an in-depth evaluation of sources and available tools. One of the most important grounds for fact-checking is reference to official documents, acts and data. Not only does this require accessing the original sources (including those coming from abroad), but also hyperlinking so that the readers can find the quoted data on their own and check whether it has been used correctly. Sometimes it only takes showing, for example, the original statement when the disinformation consists of manipulating the context of a public figure's claim. In other cases, the fact-checkers need to deeply analyse the official documents and law acts. This is helpful, especially when it comes to some fake news regarding military and international affairs (like the alleged lack of registration of the Ukrainian borders), but also the benefits for refugees which the disinformers often used to turn Poles against the newcomers. Another method of reaching only to original sources is recalling some information by contacting institutions and/ or officials. This was particularly useful in a case of the disinformation regarding the criminality of some Ukrainian refugees.

A useful source for the fact-checkers are also reports from recognised institutions (for instance UN) and media, especially when the disinformation uses current events like the Bucha massacre, which the Ukrainians allegedly caused. The journalists' investigations or open-source intelligence-based reports provide in particular photographs, videos and maps which document damages, victims, the presence of the Russian troops in a given place etc. The debunking of fake news can also consist of conducting the fact-checkers' own investigation, like in a case of false billboards in Warsaw suggesting the planning of military mobilisation.

The primary way of debunking visual fake news is the use of reverse image search, which helps find the place an image appeared for the first time and show the history of how it was used for mis- and disinformation purposes. The fact-checkers, however, rarely limit themselves to using this technical method only. The majority of fact-checks in which reverse image search was used also contain other sources of information providing the context and facts on what the manipulated photograph really refers to. Sometimes, when the photograph was edited or remade, it is crucial to provide an exact comparison between the original and fake picture. In a case like this, a useful tool is a slider, thanks to which the reader may immediately see what changes were incorporated and where they can be seen.

It is also common for the fact-checkers to refer to data provided by other fact-checking websites instead of conducting their own research. Some of the most representative debunking methods, used by Demagog.org.pl's fact-checkers, were presented in Table 1.

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Table 1. Examples of Fact-Checking Strategies Used to Debunk Chosen
False/Manipulated Claims on Demagog.org.pl Website

Examples of false/manipulated claims	Fact-checking strategy
Ukrainians are the aggressive side in a war	Citing reports from recognised institutions (like the UN) providing data about the Russian crimes among Ukrainian civilians, devastation of Ukrainian cities etc. Referring to media and activists' reports
Ukrainian refugees commit crimes in Poland (and other European countries)	Contacting state institutions and officials, including the Police, Border Guard etc. Referring to the official communication already published by the authorities and competent institutions
Ukrainian refugees receive privileges at the cost of the Polish society	Analysis of the legal acts and official documents
There are American laboratories in the Ukrainian territory	Analysis of the official documents, including the agreements between the two countries in order to provide the historical context
Some of the crimes in Ukraine (like the Bucha massacre and bombarding of the hospital in Mariupol) were staged or arranged by the Ukrainians	Analysis of photographs, videos and maps delivered by journalists based on investigations or open-source intelligence Analysis of activity of individuals allegedly playing the part of victims
Photographs (often edited) picturing situations that never took place	Using reverse image search Analysis of the history and original context of the visual

Source: own work

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The challenge that stands before the fact-checkers is the fact that the creators of mis- and disinformation still seek new forms of fake news. The main example of it is misleading people that the photographs picturing the current events come from the previous period and are "disinformation". This method has not been seen before the war in Ukraine. The mis- and disinformation wave surrounding the conflict also revealed that the propaganda easily adjusts to the current situation, using it to manipulate the public. The fact-checkers need to pay special attention to events that have the potential to polarise and arouse extreme emotions or even cause aggression. In Polish conditions, this is particularly reflected in the refugee crisis, during which even single examples of favouritism towards Ukrainians or violence perpetrated by Ukrainians grew to a point where hatred was directed towards the whole Ukrainian nation. The principle of impartiality is obeyed even when it comes to pro-Ukrainian fake news, which might be seen as less harmful.

Conclusions

By analysing some of the most representative methods used by fact-checkers from the website Demagog.org.pl, this research shows that an undoubted advantage of fact-checking is basing all analyses and conclusions on available sources. Regardless of the content and form of information that needs to be checked as well as its source, the entire fact-checking process is unified. As regards disinformation about the war in Ukraine, the methods used by fact-checkers are the same as in other thematic areas. This proves the universal nature of this method.

Considering the ongoing war in Ukraine, the situation within the infosphere looks, however, different from the period of peace. Not only is there an increased supply of disinformation, but also it takes a much more advanced and complex form, in particular, as fake news comes from both sides of the conflict and is used as a warfare tool with a similar scope to other methods of combat.

At the same time, the specificity of fact-checking consists in diffuse and dispersed actions. Fact-checkers can only react to single false and manipulated information or, at most, groups of narratives, but they cannot clean the debate from all fake news which is being continuously produced. Therefore – besides fact-checking's responsibility to control the quality of public debate – in the face of the war, its another function is emerging: warning the society about danger linked to disinformation and educating particular actors (not only the news consumers, but also politicians, journalists, influencers etc.) about methods of recognising false information and debunking it with the use of reliable sources. In this regard, fact-checking can reinforce trust not only in journalism, but also in science, politics (see Graves 2016) and institutions, including social platforms.

The importance of this alarm and educational function is growing in a situation when the professional media are gradually becoming less interested in informing about the war due to the increasing fatigue of that topic showed by the audience and the necessity of diversifying the content. One must not, however, forget that the war is still being waged and the amount of disinformation in the infosphere remains enormous. Due to this problem and the lack of proper media literacy education, which results in the incompetent approach taken by many social actors towards the content that surrounds us, one can expect the growing importance of fact-checking initiatives in the media system.

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STRESZCZENIE

Pierwszą ofiarą wojny jest prawda. Podczas konfliktów zbrojnych dezinformacja jest szczególnie niebezpieczna, a prób manipulacji opinią publiczną – czy to w formie odpowiednio ograniczonego zestawu informacji, czy nawet fałszywych wiadomości – należy spodziewać się po każdej stronie toczącego się konfliktu. W tej sytuacji umiejętność weryfikacji informacji rozpowszechnianych w przestrzeni medialnej nabiera ogromnego znaczenia, szczególnie w kontekście współczesnej wszechobecności mediów społecznościowych. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie, w formie studium przypadku, strategii demaskowania fałszywych informacji na temat konfliktu w Ukrainie na przykładzie portalu factcheckingowego Demagog.org.pl. Analiza ta pozwoliła wyciągnąć wnioski na temat funkcji fact-checkingu w systemie medialnym, wśród których najważniejsze są funkcje kontrolna, edukacyjna i alarmująca. Badanie wnosi wkład w literaturę z zakresu nauk o mediach, rzucając nieco światła na rolę inicjatyw fatctcheckingowych w systemie medialnym.

Słowa kluczowe: fact-checking, dezinformacja, fake news, wojna w Ukrainie, Demagog.org.pl