

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

"#NAFO and Winning the Information War: Lessons Learned from Ukraine"

DATE

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FEATURING

Matt Moores

Co-founder, NAFO

Iuliia Mendel

Ukrainian Journalist; Former Spokesperson for President Zelenskyy

CSIS EXPERTS

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Kathleen
McInnis:

Good afternoon. I'm Dr. Kathleen McInnis, a senior fellow in the International Security Program and director of the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. I'm absolutely thrilled to welcome you all, both here in person and online from around the globe, to this timely and important conversation.

As we continue to observe Russia's war in Ukraine, not only have we witnessed stunning successes from Ukrainians on the battlefield, but the Ukrainian government has dominated the information space in the West, through both President Zelensky and many others, many of whom are volunteers, and their masterful ability to shape international narratives surrounding the war.

This, to me, has been almost surprising. Russian propaganda and its successes at disinformation campaigns have been a longstanding challenge for Western democracies, particularly since the advent of social media. That said, while Ukraine has been capturing the hearts and minds of Western publics, Russia's been arguably working to shape the information environment in other places, like Russia, China, and India. So what can we learn from all this? What insights should we glean for the information war surrounding Ukraine, as we look to other counter-disinformation campaigns in the future?

To walk us through some of the lessons learned through the ongoing war in Ukraine, today in our study we have my colleague here at CSIS, senior vice president and director of the International Security Program Dr. Seth Jones, who's been following and analyzing the conflict extremely closely, and is going to give us a sense of where we are today, and the campaign's actual progress.

We are also thrilled to have Iuliia Mendel, a Ukrainian journalist and President Zelensky's former spokesperson. In addition to Iuliia's distinguished career in journalism, before having a front row seat watching President Zelensky's thinking on the information aspects of the war, she's also just published "The Fight of Our Lives," a fascinating piece that is available for purchase at the event link. And having written a book, that is no small accomplishment. So congratulations on getting that done, in addition to all the things you've got going on.

Iuliia Mendel:

Thank you. And thank you for having me.

Dr. McInnis:

Absolutely. We also have Matt Moores, who's a co-founder of the North Atlantic Fella Organization, also known as #NAFO on Twitter, which is an organic online group of pro-Ukraine supporters that have gained the attention of policymakers and global leaders for their creative use of digital media to take on key sources of Russian disinformation and raise support for

the war effort in Ukraine. He'll be able to speak a bit more to us on why we have lots of images of cartoon Shiba Inus, like, popping up on our timelines these days.

And finally, we have Emily Harding, a senior fellow and deputy director of the International Security Program, our expert on information operations and disinformation, who's been tracking the evolution of U.S. responses to Russian propaganda for years.

So thank you, all. Before I turn to Seth, one reminder to our audience. Please submit any questions that you may have on the – for our panelists – on the link on our event webpage. But with that, over to you.

I'd like to turn to you first, Seth. You've been tracking the progress of the war closely. Could you give us your assessment of where the campaign is now?

Seth G. Jones: Yeah. Thanks, Kathleen. This is a great opportunity to talk about an important issue.

I'll caveat my comments, having been involved in war in U.S. special operations, with the fog of war comment. So things are moving quickly. But to the degree that we can know with some fidelity the battlefield picture, particularly at the tactical level, it's been pretty impressive so far. So if we can go to the big map of Ukraine, I should note that this map is a little bit outdated. We put the tactical map together, it's about a week and a half old. But I'll update everyone on really what is the most impressive series of events very recently, which is we can go to the map of Kherson, what we're seeing down in the south of Ukraine.

Actually, I should note, as a New Englander, I have been using U.S. states as a way to gauge how much the Ukrainians have advanced. We started off with the small state of Rhode Island. Ukraine had retaken territory. Now they've moved up to getting closer to the state of Connecticut, and soon we may be reaching the state of Massachusetts to give people perspective on the size of the territory we're talking about.

But if we look at the area around the Ukrainian city of Kherson, we've seen pretty effective tactical-level pushes of a range of Ukrainian special operations forces, forces like the 46th Air Assault Brigade, 36th Marine Corps Brigade, and 35th Marine Corps Brigade, pushing into Russian-controlled territory of Ukraine. You know, I've been impressed and have

talked to a number of Ukrainian soldiers recently about their effectiveness in combined-arms operation, their effective use of deception in not just using HIMARS to conduct attacks against Russian logistics lines but also to put

together decoys that the Russians have been hitting, cheering, including online, and it turns out they've been decoys, so haven't actually hit HIMARS; they've been hitting reproductions of them. What we're seeing, though, is very serious situation for Russian units on the ground around Kherson. They are backing up against the Dnieper River and are in danger of being encircled. That may lead to an exchange of forces on the ground, we'll see, or it may lead to an extermination of some on the ground as they come under withering fire from advancing Ukrainian forces. But it's a serious military

and, even broader, political situation that Vladimir Putin finds himself. His military forces are losing in the south.

If we go to the areas around Kharkiv – so go to the map of Kharkiv – this is the area where we've seen the most significant advances of the last few weeks of Ukrainians pushing in, retaking most of Kharkiv oblast and then into areas of both Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. And there we've seen, over the last couple of days, the retaking of cities like Lyman. These are pushes from, again, Ukrainian special operations forces, 10th Mountain assault units, and now threats to areas that the Russians have controlled, like Lysychansk, so more progress on the ground.

And I would just say one thing, more broadly – and this gets to the mobilization issue of Russian forces – is the Russians are having a hard time just running a ground war, so, you know, we'll get to the information side, but on the practical level, morale is low. I've talked to several journalists on the ground in the areas of Lyman, for example, recently who have watched with their own eyes Ukrainian forces capture drunken Russian soldiers on the ground or ones that have been hung over from drinking the night before. They're leaving equipment on the battlefield, there's massive corruption, and, you know, sending in untrained forces into the front lines is not going to help the Russian problem. So they do face a serious tactical battlefield problem, which has affected their ability to keep control of areas that they have seized.

Dr. McInnis: Just to follow up on that, have you detected or your sources detecting any impact of the information campaign on Russian lack of morale and Russian disorganization?

Dr. Jones: Yeah, I think there's no question that Russian forces lack morale both because of the performance on the battlefield as well as recognizing that this is a war that has significant opposition across the globe, in many areas of the globe. Within Russia itself we've seen the long lines of – I was looking at the satellite imagery the other day – the long lines of generally Russian military-aged men trying to get out through the borders of Georgia, the Russian-

Georgian border. So the information campaign has been a key element, I think, of what is impacting morale on the ground.

Dr. McInnis: So if I could turn to Iuliia. You have been at the center of Ukraine's public messaging when you were the spokesperson for President Zelensky and have recently issued a book, as we mentioned, "The Fight For Our Lives," which is available for purchase at the Zoom chat. Excuse me, on the event page. What have been the key elements of Ukraine's public messaging campaigns, and why do you think they've been so successful?

Ms. Mendel: Oh, wow, Kathleen. Thank you for this question. In fact, I'm really very grateful to sit here and I feel like I at last don't need to fight because for the last seven months what I was doing, I was literally fighting Russian disinformation everywhere where I could, and here I feel like we already have the time and we are at the stage when we can analyze.

I must say that, you know, here the whole development, historical development of Russia and Ukraine and our 31 years of independence played a crucial role because a lot of it was about operational system, and communications really worked well to have this operational system get successes.

But let me remind you that, first, Vladimir Putin destroyed – faked, actually, media and journalism. Then he faked diplomacy. And now he tries to fake democracy by invading and annexing Ukraine. And so this shows that the media, they are the first line of defense against autocracy. And this is where we need to learn our lessons.

So I think this war showed that the boundaries of freedom of speech have got a new framework. And in this new era of emerging informational technologies, we need to answer if we are ready to face the challenges, if we can make tough political decisions and doubt our own rules about freedom of speech to fight – to fight the disinformation, the weaponized words that comes from Russia. And I think that this Russian war against democracy in Ukraine showed that we can actually take really difficult decisions.

So, for me, I think there were several very important points that helped Ukrainians win. The first one is truth against lies. You probably know that according to a MIT report fake news on Twitter usually spread(s) six times faster and more than truthful fact. And usually it happens because fakes are emotional. They are simple. They contain so-called wow effect. They target some emotion. And they are very clear to audience.

The New York Times made a documentary saying that the only way to fight fake news is to be ready to tell the truth as many times as, actually, the fake

news is repeated. But truth is always boring and complex, and this is the problem with the truth. And that's why it is usually less attractive, you know, than fake news. It makes it difficult to actually ask ordinary audience to repeat this boring truth.

With Russian war in Ukraine, with Russian – this war against democracy, we observe how large markets of people around the world from different societal groups repeat truth consciously, fighting Russian propaganda. Because in this war, truth immediately became the most attractive thing. It's like it gave a chance to every person to become a warrior, a soldier, to fight against evil. And this is like when we see that the truth is like – we see something really uncommon for this situation, and this is like when the truth can win.

The second point is that I see that information war plays the rules of real democracy. When we think about hard decisions, difficult decisions, we usually rely on politicians who tackle the major geopolitical issues and questions, of course, of war and peace. But in case of Russian war in Ukraine, the global security system, unfortunately, appeared to be not ready. And you know, though this war, it looks for me as the challenge of 20th century because everything is repeated, you know, as well as we have seen in history books and documentary movies. But – (inaudible) – to the forces, Volodymyr Zelensky, the president of Ukraine, in his addresses, he often appealed not only to politicians, but to ordinary people, to voters directly. And this is how it helped, actually, to make those leaders who probably, you know, wanted to avoid involvement or to close their eyes actually to share responsibility for what's happening in Ukraine.

And here I must say that he appealed not only to the Western audiences, but he also appealed to Russian audiences. And with the help of hackers, different hacker groups, he managed to talk to Russian audiences from Russian TV, from Crimean TV, breaking through the news, which was shocking because it felt like a thread for propaganda.

Of course, there is this story about cats and dogs, and this is my third point. We will listen to this NAFO development later from the next speaker, but let me say that what I note is that Russian propaganda also uses cats as their pictures. I don't know if it's connected to the NAFO movement, but in fact cats are usually very cute and they are very attractive. And that's why, when somebody – some troll or some organization, Russian organization, spreads

fake news, they would like to use cats to make people trust them. That's why I appreciate this very instinctively correct decision to find a dog to spread the news – truthful news and to stand against Russian disinformation online.

My fourth position would be using Hollywood, Hollywood springs to action. Because in today's world, we see more and more how entertainment and politics mutually penetrate each other. We all remember that President Zelensky also comes from the entertainment world. And this war feels real for so many people outside Ukraine and reminds us about the values that we used to perceive as just given by default. It reminds us that we need to stand for the right to live in freedom and democracy, and that these values need to be cherished and appreciated every day.

That's why this story attracts so many directors, writers, and Hollywood stars, like Sean Penn, Angelina Jolie, Mila Kunis. They attracted to get in touch on the history in making through introduction to the political leader, political star, who came from the entertainment world. While President Zelensky is the most popular Ukrainian now in the face of Ukrainian resistance, using these opportunities to promote Ukraine in the world political agenda.

And of course, we don't need to forget that all of this is happening online, as much as never. I mean, literally we are watching a live online show where we can condemn the enemy and cheer for brave heroes. My New York Times friend Andrew Kramer said that nowadays everyone wants to be a Ukrainian a little bit. Every Ukrainian soldier and volunteer contributed to this. And most of all, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who naturally changed his image – forgetting about proper suits and tidy shaving for the other more appropriate version of him.

And, as I described in my book, "The Fight of Our Lives," during those dangerous days and the lengthening weeks of war, Zelensky spoke to almost every world leader and gave addresses to parliaments on nearly every continent on the planet, displaying a moral clarity that has seldom been seen since World War II. We ask for a response, for the response from the world, for the response to terror, he told to the U.S. Congress. He echoed Winston Churchill to the British Parliament: We shall got give and shall not lose. His words and actions inspired admiration and support, not just from his countrymen but from people everywhere.

Those who had discounted Zelensky in the past were amazed this post-Soviet former comedian, the leader of the poorest country in Europe, could suddenly become the face of democracy and a beacon of freedom in the world.

Dr. McInnis:

Can I push you a little bit further on that particular point? Which is, you know, how did a TV comedian, that played a president, end up being – end up being a stalwart and internationally inspiring wartime leader? And did the one actually lead to the other, I mean, in terms of preparation for the role?

Ms. Mendel:

Let me say that Volodymyr Zelensky was very underestimated, for the reason that his image of a comedian was very much known and most popular than anything else that he was doing. And in the book I'm describing how he turned from comedian into statesman, and from a statesman to the leader of the country in war. In fact, he is a lawyer by education, and he managed to build a huge successful business in Ukraine, even if it's an empire of humor. Still let's remember that this is the business in the post-Soviet country where Russia tried to penetrate the information and entertainment spheres hugely, and even was banning him from performing his shows.

At the same time, on the stage he actually was not just a funny guy. On the stage, he was performing his beliefs. He was fighting corrupt, old political elite. He was mocking them. And at the same point, he was standing with the people. I know that in 2019 it was not the first time when President Zelensky wanted to go, to run for the president. But earlier, thought he was not ready. In fact, he used humor to fight in this war, a Russian war against Ukraine too. And he actually helped to make this strategy, when so many people voluntarily went out to show that Russian Army is not – it's cruel, it's awful, but it's not the strongest ever. It

doesn't have any motivation. And I see that many Ukrainian bloggers just have built their careers on mocking them and showing them how ridiculous they are.

I think the focused message, it's not only that we are fighting for the democracy and that we are the biggest democracy in the world – sorry – in the post-Soviet region, but also is that Ukrainians are not victims. We are targets for Russians. But we are fighters, and we are going to fight for democracy and our independence.

Dr. McInnis:

Well, that's a great segue, I think, into, Matt, you co-founded NAFO, this organic, online group that's been remarkably successful at countering disinformation, among other things. How did you get started?

Matt Moores:

Sure. First, thanks so much for having me. It's really a pleasure to be here. I also want to say good morning to all the Fellas. But, you know, this started as a fundraiser, really. I was looking and saw that someone was posting

these little cartoon dogs and using them in – you know, to mock and to belittle these, you know, propaganda statements and the, you know, supposed achievements of the Russian military, and just then to throw these little jabs wherever he could get them in. His name is Kamil. He posts as @kama_kamilia on Twitter. So I saw what he was doing. I was interested in

it. And, you know, more people started to pick up on this as, you know, we're sharing the little dog memes.

And one day, someone asked Kamil, you know, how do I get one of these? And he says, well, you know, if you send \$20, or whatever it is, to the Georgian Legion, you know, we'll make you one of these. So from there, you know, it really has gotten quite out of hand, you know? (Laughter.) You know, there's just absolutely no way that we thought that it would be this big, or that so many people would be interested in it. But I think, you know, a lot of the points that we've been speaking about today are responsible for that.

You know, this frustration with the interference and aggression of the Russian government over the past, I mean, 20 years really. And people have had enough. You know, and they want to stand up and they want to fight for what's right. And this organization, this movement, whatever you want to call it, gives everyone globally with an interest and an internet connection a way to get involved. You know, a way to push back and say, you know, no. Enough is enough.

And I think that, you know, beyond the memes, beyond the jokes, beyond the humor there is a real component of it with, you know, fundraising. These little cartoon dog avatars that people have, you know, each one of them is made by a volunteer, a Fella forger in our community. And these little, you know, small donations have raised close to \$300,000 so far. And this money goes directly to units fighting in Ukraine so they can buy clothing, so they can buy ammunition,

so that they can buy, you know, whatever it is they need to fight for the freedom of Ukraine.

So, you know, for me it's a pleasure to be involved with that. And I'm, you know, very excited to see where things go from here. Hopefully onward towards victory as quickly as possible.

Dr. McInnis: Well, I mean, when we were talking before you were talking about – so why the Shiba Inu avatar? Because that's been perplexing me, right? Like, why not a Pomeranian? Those are funny too. But I think there's an important message there. You're saying that the Shiba Inu comes from somewhere else

and that the meme sort of compounded. Could you speak to that a little bit more?

Mr. Moores: It's internet culture, right? So the Shiba Inu character is a real dog. His name is James, I think. And it's just a popular, funny character. It's a stock character, right? So people who are very online, like myself, you know, use

these characters in different ways to make jokes, to make memes, to make a point. And so the Fella character is the Shibu Inu who's wearing the tracksuit and then onward into all kinds of different outfits and accessories that they carry, is an evolution of that character, James (sp). You know, it's something that's readily identifiable to people who are online. They can feel in on the joke immediately. So, yeah, it's just something that's very accessible.

Dr. McInnis: So what was the moment that you knew that NAFO was taking off?

Mr. Moores: I mean, there's been a few that I can point to. I think that one of the early ones was when Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov was bullied off of Twitter. He is, you know, on – I'm not sure how familiar everyone is with him – but he's an ambassador from the Russian government to, I believe, business interests in Vienna. And he just, you know, sits online all day and makes awful statements in support of the terrible things that Russia does.

And one of the Fellas, LivFaustDieJung, replied to him and, you know, just made fun of him. Just, you know, made the statement that he was making look absurd. You know, it was. It was a stupid statement. He exposed it as being stupid. And Mikhail broke the cardinal rule of being online, which is that you don't respond to someone who's making fun of you. (Laughter.) But he did. And in a very emotional way and was just getting more and more angry about it. But his initial response was you pronounced this nonsense, not me. And that instantly became a meme that you can now buy on T-shirts. (Laughter.) You know, I've seen it on television. You know, on the news, people are actually talking about it. And it just became this flashpoint where so many people were making fun of him that he disappears for a week. And he comes back on and he says: Now is the time to resume tweeting. I have returned from my long-planned vacation addressing – (laughter). So, you know, it's like, yeah, right. But somebody came and said, hey, maybe put your phone down. (Laughter.) You are – I mean, it's

embarrassing. Like, if you look, the tweets are all still up. You can go through them and see, you know, how upset and how emotional he was getting about it.

But that right there is really the – I guess the power of what we're doing, is that instead of trying to come in and point-for-point refute and argue about, you know, what's true and what isn't, it's coming in and saying, like, hey, that's dumb. And then the moment somebody's replying to a cartoon dog online, you've lost. (Laughter.) If you work for the government of Russia and you are online, like, really in your feelings replying to hundreds of cartoon dogs, that's – I mean, I feel sorry for you, bud. I don't know what's going on. (Laughter.)

Dr. McInnis: Well, before this event we were talking about the composition of the Fellas. And there's a remarkable number of women that are engaged. Could you speak to that a little bit more?

Mr. Moores: Definitely. You know, I think that it's something that we from the beginning set the expectation that it's an inclusive movement – that anyone, you know, like I said, with an interest in the survival of Ukraine and in the advancement of democratic ideals can participate. So it's something where – in my experience, meme culture can be, you know, rough and misogynistic and disgusting, but –

Dr. McInnis: Mmm hmm, yeah.

Mr. Moores: Yeah. I mean, we all know. So to see this as being overwhelmingly a positive movement and a movement that welcomes, you know, everyone has been really wonderful. And our fellow forgers, you know, the people who are actually making these little characters and driving the –

Dr. McInnis: Which I love, "fellow forgers." Like, it just – (laughs) – it just comes together so nicely, yeah.

Mr. Moores: It's fun to say, yeah. It's fun to say that – "my fellow forger," hard at work.

Dr. McInnis: Yeah. (Laughs.)

Mr. Moores: So, you know, these people, they're volunteers. They sit and they just crank these out. And the composition of them is about 50/50 between, you know, men and women who are contributing to this. Also, a lot of the people on the backend – it's so funny to say people's names out loud that you're used to tweeting – but goblin_soup, who is one of the admins of our Discord server, a woman; and of course, you know, my wife, who has been instrumental in bouncing ideas back and forth and assisting in all of this.

But yeah, you know, it's – one of the things that I really enjoy about it is that it's positive, you know. This is fun for an important cause.

Dr. McInnis: You mentioned how you raised 300,000 (dollars) to the – to the –

Mr. Moores: The direct donations for the forged Fellas has raised close to \$300,000. But one of the other things that we did – and gosh, I guess it would have been June, maybe – is I reached out to Christian Borys, who runs Saint Javelin. I said, hey, would you be interested in a collaboration? He said, hell yeah; like, this looks really funny. So we did. So he started running, you know, merchandise with the Fella characters on it. You can buy the, you know, "you pronounce this nonsense, not me" shirts from him. (Laughter.) All of

that money goes directly towards causes in Ukraine, so, you know, again, supporting soldiers and supporting civilians and their families.

One of the things that he did that was very beautiful is he founded – not founded, but funded a summer camp for children who had lost family members in the war to give them a break, to get them removed. I don't know, it's really been wonderful to be a part of something that's so genuinely good.

Dr. McInnis: Turning to the sort of broader experience and what we're – what we're learning from all of these things, Emily, I'd love your thoughts on what, in your view, this experience should tell us about information operations and countering disinformation moving forward.

Emily Harding: Right. First of all, I could just geek out all day about the Fellas and the various memes that are out there. (Laughter.) They're so clever. The "what air defense doing" one, oh my God.

Mr. Moores: It's a good one. (Laughter.)

Ms. Harding: It's my favorite. (Laughter.) So –

Dr. McInnis: I like the Stoltenberg one. I think that's –

Ms. Harding: Right, where they're reaching out and shaking hands, yeah.

Dr. McInnis: Yeah. Mmm hmm.

Ms. Harding: NAFO was here. (Laughter.) Yeah.

So it really is a tale of two information environments. There's what Russia wants to put out there into the world, and they are trying very hard to control the media environment inside their own country and then also inside ostensibly allied countries like China and India. They're trying to really work on the India market so that they can keep India on sides or neutral. I think that there were some really interesting things coming out of the Shanghai

summit – or, sorry, the summit – the Shangri-La Summit with Modi and his sort of backing off of any kind of presumed support for Russia.

But on the other hand, the West is experiencing its first real open-source war. Everything is out there. You can see videos from the frontlines of the battlefield. Those have been used for everything from propaganda purposes to targeting purposes. Every soldier with a cellphone in their pocket that can take video and get those videos out is inspiring the world, and the West is just swimming in it. I mean, you can see all kinds of efforts to show these

thoroughly heroic stories, to talk about what the Ukrainians are doing and how well they're doing it. And then, as Iuliia pointed out, Zelensky has been an absolute master at telling his people stories and really making sure the West understands what's going on inside his country. So it's highly bifurcated.

I think that one really interesting thing, all of these purported conscripts – the ones that Putin tried to call up and send to Ukraine in the field who then fled, as Seth mentioned – they are now out in that media environment and they are going to be seeing all of the things the West has been seeing, and I would expect are going to be picking up the phone and calling home and saying it's actually worse than I thought it was; I'm really glad that I fled. And hopefully, that message will permeate throughout Russia as well.

But I think on the sort of larger, serious point, one thing that NAFO has shown and that a lot of these efforts have shown is that it really does come down to citizens doing their best to push back against mis- and disinformation. Our colleague here, Suzanne Spaulding with the Defending Democratic Initiatives (sic; Institutions) Project, is doing a lot of really phenomenal work on trying to do additional civics education, trying to make Americans learn what the difference is between the truth and false information, trying to be a critical reader of things like the news and everything from memes to tweets – like, is this a credible source? Is this something that I should be taking seriously? If it's not, can I alert people this is not credible, this is not serious?

One of the things that NAFO has done is report a lot of bots and propaganda to Twitter and to Facebook, and to help identify those accounts so they can be taken down. If you have an entire citizen army of people saying, no, this is clearly a bot, then you have many more eyes on the ground.

But this piece of humor, I mean, this is not new, using humor to fight back against oppressors. As I was preparing for this and looking up some past examples – I may get fired for saying this, but I'm going to say it anyway – (laughter) – there's a great Ethiopian proverb that says: "When the great leader passes, the peasant bows low and farts." (Laughter.) Because this is what you do. It's a great way to tear a bully down if you can laugh at them.

Dr. McInnis: Yes.

Ms. Harding: And that's why, I mean, the stuff that NAFO's doing with the Russians is so amazing because, you know, they're not 10 feet tall. A lot of what they're saying is utterly ridiculous. And while war is not funny in and of itself, there are a lot of ridiculous things that happen, and the Russians are being truly ridiculous in the propaganda that they're repeating. And people making the

effort to point that out, I think, is what tears them down more than almost anything.

Dr. McInnis: So to push or pull that through and ask the – I guess the panel this question, which is: Why do you guys think that, specifically, Russian information operations have been so unsuccessful right now? I'm hearing that there's, obviously, truth versus fiction, but you know, that's – they've actually been pretty successful advancing false narratives before. What's changed? What's made the difference this time?

Ms. Harding: Well, clearly, it's because they picked cats. (Laughter.) That was a strategic blunder to pick cats.

Dr. McInnis: Hey, I'm a cat person, but you know –

Ms. Harding: I'm a total dog person, so, like –

Dr. McInnis: Yeah, OK. Fair enough.

Ms. Harding: You know, they – they're good at doing information operations when they can take something that has an element of truth to it and then they can twist that truth or add to that truth layers of untruth, and then when they can take that and insert it into credible discussions that then move their way into the mainstream. So, like, for – a lot of their election propaganda, for example, you could see them find a kernel of truth and then do the whole, you know, just-asking-questions thing that they can then insert into certain discussion forums or some, like, fringe journalism outlets. But then they create enough buzz around it that it moves very slowly into mainstream, and mainstream feels like they have to report on it because people are talking about it in these other forums.

Dr. McInnis: Right.

Ms. Harding: And that kind of slow progression they're quite good at.

With this, where they're trying to keep up with all of the nonsense – (laughter) – it's just – it's hard. And they – I don't think they can keep up. And I don't think they can fight back against something that's as funny and as sticky and as compelling as some of the things that are coming out.

Dr. McInnis: And there's not the nugget of truth to sort of –

Ms. Harding: Yeah.

Dr. McInnis: – at the – at the center, right?

Dr. Jones: Well, I think that's what – one of the things that has struck me from really the early phases of this war is, you know, one of the main avenues or axes of advance was in – from Belarus and parts of Russian territory to take the capital, to take Kyiv, where one of our participants here, Iuliia, is sitting right now; thankfully it was never taken. And the reality here – I mean, same thing for the city of Kharkiv. The Russians failed in – to take key cities; they then proceeded to take some territory in several of the oblasts in the south and the east, but now they've lost territory. And we see with – you know, The New York Times did a great job recently, in partnership with the Ukrainians, of using signals intelligence – these are Russian soldiers talking to their family members, telling them how bad the situation was on the ground.

So the challenge that the Russians have is we are in a world right now where we can see satellite imagery, we can talk to individuals on the ground, we can use commercially available and other sources of intelligence to actually verify what is going on on the ground to see the utter ridiculousness and the errors of what the Russians are saying and then what actually is happening on the ground. And it struck me, going through some of what the Russian soldiers were saying to family members, what I was reading through and listening to them last week: They are stark comments about the state of Russian forces that runs deeply contrary to what we're seeing from Russian leaders say publicly to what's being reported on Russian television or Sputnik or on other Russian news sources. So, I mean, in a way, there's showing that. There's a second – and this is where I love, Matt, what you and your team are doing too – there's an element – when you start to poke fun at it, too, also adds a level of humor that I think is catching here.

Dr. McInnis: Iuliia, do you have any thoughts on that particular question?

Ms. Mendel: Yeah, actually I could add – I agree with everything that was said, but I could add that Russian propaganda machine, it's so huge because of number of repetitive, like, myths and narratives, but at the same time, if I look at the

information space that they created in 2014, when they were accusing Ukrainians in being Nazi, accusing in having NATO laboratories, NATO bases, et cetera, et cetera, they have not developed much. So as it was mentioned, they really move slowly and in large campaign, but at the same time, they're not flexible and they're not dynamic. So when they see that everything is refuted already and they are being mocked and laughed at, they don't have any other vision but just to continue repeating the same fakes and it doesn't make any sense.

Dr. McInnis: Matt, do you have any further thoughts?

Mr. Moores: I mean, I think she's exactly correct. They don't have the flexibility because it is – you know, what they accuse us of being. So, you know, from the beginning – well, whenever Russian propagandists or people who support it online view anything like what we're doing with trying to push back against disinformation, it's a state plot, you know, it's controlled, it's bots, it's this, it's that. So, you know, we anticipate that. If you check the location for anybody with a fellow

avatar, it's just like Langley, Virginia. (Laughter.) There is no CIA is a big inside joke. So because, though, there is no top-down control, we assess – you know, my team – that's not what it really is. You know, I don't control this; it's something where we've built a community, we've built a culture, you know, that is able to react quickly as things are coming in. You said, you know, with satellite imagery and people sharing cell phones, it's instant, so there is no time for Russia to correct what their message is; they're instantly being made fun of. And as soon as they're trying to, you know, do anything, they're trying to push forward, but Iuliia is saying they can't because there's too much information; they can't react. And it's been very fun to watch them get so angry about it. Like, that is really – I don't know; it gives me a lot of pleasure – (laughter) – to see how inside their feelings – you know, because they have no – there's no concrete thing that they're able to do. Like, all of their tools are not working. You know, they've had success with these, like, brute troll, you know, kind of operations that they've done in the past. It's not working. People aren't buying it. So to see them get so upset and bent out of shape over it, delightful.

Dr. Jones: One of my – one of the funnier, earlier examples – this is before the invasion. The Russians had talked about deploying forces for an exercise and identified the areas of Belarus, particularly western Belarus, where they were going to deploy forces. Well, there was a lot of stuff going around TikTok where some of those Russian forces were and the main battle tanks were coming off of rail lines nowhere near where the exercises were and were within miles, or kilometers, of the Ukrainian border. So there was sort of this mocking of oh, so you've moved the exercise – (laughter) – very close to the Ukrainian border, and it was this combination of humor but also facts that you could see and the use of social media platforms that I think was – make this war very different from what we've seen in previous wars.

Dr. McInnis: So, Emily, if I could turn to you and ask, what do you think the U.S. government – basically we've been talking about how the U.S. government hasn't had a role – should it? What should the U.S. government be learning from this or should it be hands-off? I'd love your thoughts on this.

Ms. Harding: Yeah. So first I wanted to point out one time when the CIA and NAFO actually did clash and that was when CIA put out their poll and they said what animal does CIA use as part of its operations –

Mr. Moores: Yeah, almost blew our cover. (Laughter.)

Ms. Harding: (Laughs.) The answer, of course, was dogs but one of the fellows tweeted back at them, if the answer here is not Shiba Inus, then you've really missed an opportunity. (Laughs.) But it gets to the point, right? Like, the government could not do what you do. I've been a long-time government service; I have enjoyed every minute of my government service. There are many wonderful things about my government. Its sense of humor is not the number one thing that

I would point to as its strength. (Laughter.) There are some places around the government where people have done responsive messaging quickly and well. I would point to some of the efforts at DHS and CISA right before some of the elections. The pre-bunking, the trying to shoot down the rumors before they become real things or really lodged in people's lives that CISA did.

Dr. McInnis: And the information campaign prior to the war – you know, the release of intelligence.

Ms. Harding: Right. But that was very official and directed at a particular purpose, so it was, we have this, we have this official information, we're going to take it, we're going to put real information out into the world in a very formal and credible way, and that is where the U.S. government thrives. If you are making an official statement that says this is official U.S. policy, the lawyers of course have thoroughly vetted it, it's been cleared at every level in the land; it takes a long time, but when it comes out, it is an official government statement. When they try to be, you know, quick and cute and funny, you're not going to be fast enough to actually, you know, chase the lie around the world as the truth gets its boots on, and you're also not going to be clever

enough because – you know, we love lawyers but they're going to try and, like, shut a little bit of that down too because you never know who you're going to offend or what you're going to imply, and the U.S. government really needs to hold tight to its own credibility as well. So I would love to have a debate about whether or not we need another USIA and what the U.S. government's messaging strategy should be. I tend to think that the government should stick to where it is strong and to let clever folks like that do this kind of work and to let, you know, wonderful spokespeople like Iuliia – you know, let those thousand flowers bloom from wherever they are inside the U.S. government, and they can put their best foot forward on a daily basis as a coherent messaging strategy.

Ms. Mendel: If I can –

Dr. McInnis: Of course.

Ms. Mendel: – add something because I was listening to what Emily says, to everyone, and the thing is that the propaganda machine reflects, actually, the behavior of autocratic regime. In my book I'm telling how I saw negotiations of Vladimir Putin, and let me say that he has developed through years this image of being a very strong man and that everybody was afraid of him so everybody saw that he's a very good negotiator. But in fact, when I saw him talking to Volodymyr Zelensky, to Emmanuel Macron, to Angela Merkel, he was used, for dozens of years, to order. He was not used to anyone who would contradict, who would argue, you know, or discuss anything, and that's why he was very weak in reacting, in negotiating. And the same, what we see about propaganda: It's very good in action; so it's good in attacks. But when it comes that they see the proper response and they need to be reactive, they cannot do this because they are not used to such type of

reaction. This is the first time when we see the global response to Russian propaganda and it appeared that propaganda is very bad in reactive.

Dr. McInnis: And Seth, you had –

Dr. Jones: Yeah, just one point here, just to support Iuliia. I think one of the advantages of a democracy is that people have the ability to speak their minds and it's not just the government. And I think one of the incredible things about Matt and – what do you call it? A team, a network?

Mr. Moores: The Fellas.

Dr. Jones: Fella. OK, the Fellas. (Laughter.) Is how much this is really a grassroots, bottom-up effort. And I think that's the beauty of democracy when it works.

And it's based not on conspiracy theories, but it's based on humor – but on truthful humor. And I think that's the benefit. And, you know, one of the things that I have found interesting in a democracy in the support of Ukraine is how much support is coming from various levels, not just from the government or from Western governments, but from various initiatives at the bottom up.

Whether it's information, whether it's cyber defense – watching Microsoft getting involved in the cyber defense of Ukraine, whether it's Elon Musk and SpaceX providing Starlink so that Ukrainians can communicate, I mean, those are bottom-up initiatives. And I think that is where democracies are at their

strongest. Again, not with conspiracy theories, because we've seen all that, but where we're dealing in the realm of truth.

Dr. McInnis: Mmm hmm. So I'd like to turn to some questions from the audience, because we've got tons of them. First one, it's often said that pro-Ukraine views have won the information war online. And this rings true in the West. But what about the rest of the world? And are there NAFOs in India, South Africa, Latin America? Is there a lack of them in non-Western countries? And if so, what are the implications?

Mr. Moores: I mean, we are a global movement. I know that there are Fellas, you know, from all over. I know at least two Fellas that are in Brazil. So, you know, I know that this is global. I know that there are people participating. How far, you know, is our message reaching into these other areas? I'm not sure. You know, I don't really – I haven't thought about it, actually. When I saw the – or, when I heard you ask the question I thought, yeah, that is a good question. I don't know.

Dr. McInnis: (Laughs.) Fair enough. But you were talking about the sort of –

Ms. Harding: Bifurcated?

Dr. McInnis: The bifurcated, yeah. Could you –

Ms. Harding: Yeah. I mean, I think this is worth a lot of studying. The problem is that a lot of places you'd want to study are hard to study. But, yeah, Russia, I think, has figured out that they've lost the West, as far as supporting this war. That's never going to happen. So what they want to do is try to hold onto the support they have where they have it, and to shore up people who are sort of on the fence or maybe uninterested to the extent that they won't buy into the sanctions, that they will continue trading with Russia, that they can be sort of an outlet for what Russia needs.

And in the West, I mean, what Russia does really excel at in its propaganda campaigns is not so much building itself up but ripping others down. And I guarantee there are discussions going on in Moscow about how to, you know, shift the discourse in the U.S., or shift the discourse in Europe, to really play up any kind of energy issues that Europe has, in order to distract them from what's going on in Ukraine or make them waver in their support. I mean, that is now I would anticipate that Russia will "strategize" its way through the West. And then for the rest of the world, you know, just try to keep them either onside or, at least, not opposed. And do that with these strong messaging campaigns.

Dr. McInnis: But if I could follow up on that, because many analysts are predicting that political support for the war in Ukraine might get more challenging because

of the energy crisis – because the costs of war are going to be mounting, particularly over the winter. I'd love your thoughts on, well, what are the kinds of messages that need to be communicated to publics as we move into the winter? And how do we maintain solidarity?

Ms. Harding: Yeah, I mean, it is the question. The Biden administration I think has done this reasonably well in talking about this not just as a war going on in Ukraine, but as pushing back against autocracy, pushing back against a bully in Russia that wants to try to expand its influence throughout the former Soviet empire, and really trying to describe the bigger struggle. This is not – this is about us, you know? This is not just about the Ukrainians. This is about us. This is about the West. This is about democracy.

For the Europeans and what's coming this winter, I do not envy any of their political leaders trying to manage their way through this. I think it's going to be challenging. But we've also seen the Europeans take this personally in a lot of ways. I mean, it is close to them. It's right there. You go to Germany, and they feel like this conflict is happening right there. And I think, in a way, that will help with the solidarity over what's going to prove to be a cold winter.

And, I mean, I would love to hear Iuliia's thoughts on this as well, but anytime Zelensky or the first lady of Ukraine go out and talk about what's going on on the ground and the inspirational fighting and then the struggle of her own people, it

definitely sort of in my mind minimizes the complaints about, you know, oh, our gas prices are a little bit higher.

Dr. McInnis: Mmm hmm. Iuliia, do you want to jump in?

Ms. Mendel: Well, yes. It's really very difficult to go with any logical messages when you see the photos and videos from what Russians are doing, and keep doing, actually. And every time it's more and more awful. And when you think that you already cross all the possible, you know, borders of horror, they keep, you know, surprising more and more. And that's, of course, the most sound way to spell out the issue and, you know, to keep fatigue down.

But also many leaders, they understand that there were a lot of mistakes done in geopolitical way in terms, for instance, of becoming fully dependent or partially dependent from Russian energy. And, you know, there is this just civilized mindset that doesn't allow you to be dependent on a terrorist. Because even if Russia is not recognized as a terror regime, it definitely behaves as it is. So in fact, many leaders, they are trying right now to figure out what to do and how to find – diversify different resources of energy. Like

Germany, for instance, and this is more important question for them, than just to return back in the positions where we were at the beginning of war.

And we see that Nord Stream is not going to work, which was a big – Germany's, you know, decision. Very important for the new chancellor. We also see that many countries which are near Ukraine, like Baltic states, or Moldova, or Poland, they are extremely concerned – extremely concerned. Polish people took over 2 ½ million of Ukrainians. So literally those Ukrainians were and are living in their apartment. But they have raised their army three times. And they are preparing new major training campaigns because they understand that, you know, they don't want to border Russia. (Laughs.)

This is a terrible, terrible future for many. So I guess that many political leaders, they just want to avoid this very future where Russia could be stronger. And within Ukraine, we have experienced this stuff – blackmail, energy, economic blackmail and threats from Russia for the last 31 years. We just think there is no place for economic reason anymore. And we, you know, ask to promote ourselves as those who will try to regain the territory and to finish this war, as fast as possible. But we need to stay united for this.

Dr. McInnis: Mmm hmm. Seth.

Dr. Jones: Yeah. I think – I think both Emily and Iuliia have put their fingers on what's a really important point here, that is bigger than just Ukraine. But this is really about sovereignty. It's about democracy. And if those countries the West start to get cold feet here, push for negotiations that leads to de facto or de jure Russian control, what's the message you're sending? That you're going to let ruthless, brutal, aggressive activity stand? What is the message you send to the Georgians,

or to Moldova, or to the Baltics states, or to Finland, or to Taiwan if you're going to let aggressive actions stand?

I mean, the point here is both militarily, diplomatically, on the information side, we cannot let this kind of ruthless, autocratic seizure – illegal seizure of territory stand. And I think that's – this is the thing that's great about this broader discussion, because it's brought all of society into it. But I think the broader point is: We cannot set a precedent here for the illegal seizure of territory, because I think it opens up a really dangerous future, if that's the case.

Dr. McInnis: Another question from the audience. Is the international community – government, private sector, civil society – doing enough to gather and expose evidences of Russian disinformation? Would a greater level of attribution lead to greater support towards Ukraine?

Ms. Harding: I mean, it's a really difficult thing to do. Who in the government would do this, right? Like, who would be going out and saying: See this troll? See this bot? This is definitely a Russian. Like, you can do that, but if you get it wrong once then it's over. I think that the social media platforms, the Twitters and the Facebooks of the world, have gotten a lot better at identifying these kinds of accounts and taking them down, and then talking about it when they do. I mean, it's definitely in their interest to show: We're on top of this. We're taking them down when we see them. Is it Facebook that just took down a whole slew of Russia-associated accounts, I think? And they talked about it. You know, there were press articles about it.

That kind of thing I think is helpful. I'm not sure the government is best placed – unless it's an indictment or, like, taking down the former Internet Research Agency, that kind of activity would make a lot more sense to me.

Ms. Mendel: Well, I think there were important steps taken. For instance, I remember in 2019 I visited London for a big Canadian-U.K. conference on media. And two media were banned from that – from entering this conference. That was Russia Today and Sputnik. And that was pretty exclusive way of maintaining media relations. And London – British people were telling me that British government did not want to close Russia Today for having BBC in Moscow and getting news from BBC from Moscow. At the same time, they were putting huge fines on RT and RT was paying them – the fines, like 250,000 of pounds. And now we see that majority of the governments, they banned the propaganda media. And the only explanation for this? That these are not media; these are propagandists. So I think these were, like, important steps in terms of how we perceive the freedom of speech.

On the other hand, I agree with Emily that the governments probably are not among the leaders to fight propaganda and lies today. And probably, you know,

every government in the world needs to develop some kind of disinformation department and, you know, to work with technologies to provide better response to the technological challenges of propagandists.

Dr. McInnis: Another question from the audience specifically sort of teasing out this thread that has been through the conversation about humor: Why do you guys think that humor is so effective in this information space? Matt, I'm going to turn to you. (Laughs.)

Mr. Moores: Sure. I think it cuts through the nonsense, right? I think that one of the reasons why the United States struggled to deal with Russian propaganda – you know, with disinformation – is that there is this idea that if we can get the facts, right – like, if we get enough good facts, we can present that and

then, you know, I'll win this argument because I can expose the other side for, you know, saying something that's not true. And it just doesn't work, not when the other side is not playing by the rules and they're not going to, you know, agree with you about what is and isn't true, because they have a different objective. They're not trying to present the truth; they're trying to present their narrative, which, you know, supports their, you know, goals of committing horrific crimes in places like Ukraine.

So to go around that and say, no, instead I'm going to demonstrate that what you're doing is ridiculous and I'm going to make fun of you with cartoon dogs or, you know, whatever other tools are at your disposal is something that has been effective, I think a lot of – because they just don't know what to do. You know, there isn't the ability to respond to it. They can't – don't have the, like, freedom of maneuver, right, to, like, come up with a narrative on the spot and start arguing or creating their own things. Because it is – it's a government apparatus against private citizens on their own time who just believe in, you know, democratic values and that good should triumph over evil.

So there's power behind that. And humor is effective, and I think it's also very sticky. You know, there's something about that where instead of coming out and, you know, I'm putting out my policy paper which refutes, you know, all of these points, you come out and you make something funny, people remember it. It's effective and it's also something that's very easily shared. You know, I've seen, you know, memes that Fellas have made printed in newspapers now. You know, I've seen them on TV. So the ease of – the transportability, I guess, of those ideas through humor is just much higher.

Dr. Jones: I mean, I think we can see that with the way, for example, Hollywood has utilized humor for information. We've seen it in movies, including the depiction of recent very popular movies of Hitler essentially demeaning him but through comedy, or dark comedy in some cases. We've seen very powerful uses of humor from television shows like "Saturday Night Live" in the political sphere

and a way of pushing back against messages through some elements of both truth and humor.

So I think it's a way that also gets a lot of younger audiences involved as well. I know my kids gravitate towards the humor side of these. So they're big fans of the dogs, by the way. (Laughter.) It's powerful.

Ms. Harding: It is powerful. It makes something less scary if you can laugh at it. If something is funny, then it's no longer terrifying you. I think J.K. Rowling did this very well with Harry Potter. There's the whole scene where there's the

boggart and the boggart comes out of the closet. And the way that you kill off a boggart is by turning it into something funny, so a giant spider becomes a giant spider wearing roller skates. And it's funny and everybody laughs at it, and it kills off the boggart. I mean, this is, I think, a universal truth of humanity: If you can laugh at something, suddenly it feels more manageable. It feels more cut down to size. It feels like something that you can take down.

Dr. McInnis: Right? Which is why humor is so anathema to so many autocrats and dictators, right?

Ms. Harding: Yeah.

Dr. McInnis: I mean, look what we saw with the Sony Pictures hack a few years back with the movie "The -

Ms. Harding: "The Interview."

Dr. McInnis: "The Interview." That's what I was thinking. "The Interview," right?

Ms. Harding: Yeah.

Dr. McInnis: They went after Sony because they had, you know, a funny movie about the dictator.

Ms. Harding: Yeah. And as a result, made it so much more popular than it otherwise would have been. (Laughter.)

Dr. McInnis: Whoops. (Laughs.)

Ms. Harding: Yeah. Right.

Dr. McInnis: But also, you know, back to your point about making – you know, making fun of Hitler, that was one of Mel Brooks' key points, right, like over the years. Like, you can't take on Herr Goebbels – it's a quote from him: You can't take on Herr Goebbels on his – on his own, right? You can't take him on by messaging. But if you laugh at him, they have no idea what to do. And so it's interesting to see

how all of these lessons in humor and information operations are coming together in this war in Ukraine and teaching us so much about the conduct of information operations and countering disinformation today.

We are at time. There are so many more questions, but I am so grateful to all of you to – for being here to share your insights. Thank you, Seth, Iuliia, Matt, Emily, for being here. Thank you to our online audience and our studio

audience. And while you're here, go ahead and check out some stuff on the CSIS website. There's lots of stuff – fun stuff to poke around on and some interesting reports to check out while you're here. But with that, thank you all so much. This has been a fascinating conversation.

Ms. Harding: Thank you.

Dr. Jones: Thank you.

(END)