

Perception of Russia-Ukraine conflict linked to endorsement of false news about adversary

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Piano in Kyiv, 2017. In Ukrainian above: ‘Glory to the nation. Death to the enemies.’ Below: ‘Peaceful meeting for winning the information war.’. Credit:

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In a 2020 survey, Ukrainians who perceived a higher level of conflict between Ukraine and Russia were less inclined to endorse false, negative news about the European Union, but were more likely to endorse false, negative news about Russia. Honorata Mazepus of Leiden University in the Netherlands and colleagues present these findings in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE*.

International geopolitical conflict frequently involves the spread of false information about adversaries through digital disinformation campaigns. However, much remains to be learned about how such conflict impacts people's tendency to believe in and share false news about competing sides.

To better understand endorsement of misinformation, Mazepus and colleagues conducted a survey of 1,615 adults living in [urban areas](#) in Ukraine. The survey was conducted in 2020, prior to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, but after relations between Russia and Ukraine had already strongly deteriorated, and Russia had been blamed for spreading false news to reduce support for the European Union.

Participants were asked to read fake, [negative news](#) stories about Russia, the European Union, or, for a neutral comparison, Tanzania, which is not involved in the conflict.

Analysis of the [survey](#) responses showed that participants who perceived a higher level of conflict between Ukraine and Russia were less likely to believe in and want to share the false stories about the European Union, but were more likely to endorse the false stories about Russia. Stories about Tanzania were least likely to be endorsed.

These findings suggest that people's tendency to endorse false news does not depend simply on their [group identity](#); it also depends on perceptions of the level of conflict between their group and another group. This implies that conflict de-escalation could help prevent the [spread of misinformation](#).

The authors say that this study is the latest in a growing number of studies that provide support for the concept of motivated reasoning—the idea that people are more likely to endorse information that is in line with their preexisting beliefs, while rejecting information that challenges their beliefs.

The authors add, "The main finding of our study is that people's tendency to endorse [false news](#) does not simply depend on their group identity. Different group identities do not need to lead to hostility. What matters for spreading and believing misinformation about another group is whether we perceive them as enemies."

More information: Information battleground: Conflict perceptions motivate the belief in and sharing of misinformation about the adversary, *PLoS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0282308](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0282308)

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