



# Information Warfare Watch No. 28

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## UKRAINIANS SEEK NEW NEWS

Since the start of Russia's war of aggression nearly two years ago, Ukraine has found itself the target of a massive disinformation campaign from Moscow. In response, Kyiv has marshalled its own effort to change local (and global) perceptions of the war through an ongoing informational offensive known as Telemarathon United News. But has Ukraine's outreach tilted too far the other way? The 24/7, multi-network television program, which Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has termed a "weapon" in the informational battle against Moscow, was established by presidential decree in March 2022 as a way of breaking Russia's stranglehold on the media and improving morale among Ukrainians. However, Telemarathon is reportedly declining in popularity among Ukrainian viewers, with many coming to see it as essentially a propaganda outlet for government messaging. As the *New York Times* reports, viewers of Telemarathon "have complained that the program often paints too rosy a picture of the war, hiding worrying developments on the frontline and the West's eroding support for Ukraine – and ultimately failing to prepare citizens for a long war."

That has led to widespread criticism of Telemarathon, including from within the Ukrainian government itself. "It has a dangerous side, it creates an optimistic view of the situation and then leads to disappointment," notes parliamentarian Yaroslav Yurchyshyn, who heads the Ukrainian Rada's committee on the freedom of speech. "We need solid, balanced information that our society can analyze and from which people can make decisions." (*New York Times*, January 3, 2024)

## HOW RUSSIANS CONSUME INFORMATION NOW

Traditionally, Russian society has relied heavily on print and broadcast media – and the Kremlin has consequently prioritized those mediums in its propaganda and messaging efforts. But Russian media consumption is changing. A new poll carried out by the VTsIOM center in December highlighted significant shifts in how Russians consume the news. Today, the survey of some 1,600 respondents found, four out of ten Russians identified television as their main source of news and current events, down significantly from half-a-decade ago, when 53% of respondents did. As television has declined in popularity, meanwhile, the internet has risen in prominence. Russia's "youth audience prefers a global network to receive news," VTsIOM notes. Accordingly, more Russians now rely on the Internet than on television as their main source for news.

What does all this signify? "These shifts do not mean that television is irrelevant," notes Russia expert Paul Goble, "but they do mean that the internet has become far more important and influential and far more quickly than most suspected. And that casts doubt on the ability of Putin to rely on that medium to structure public opinion in support of his policies as well in the future as television has in the past." (VTsIOM, December 2023; *Window on Eurasia*, December 28, 2023)

## CHINA STOKES ONLINE ANTISEMITISM

In the aftermath of the October 7th massacre carried out by Hamas in southern Israel, the world has witnessed an alarming surge in online anti-Semitism. While the phenomenon has many causes and drivers, at least some of it is being driven by state actors for their own geopolitical purposes. "Since the Oct. 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, the quantity and virulence of antisemitic content on China's tightly controlled internet — especially on its social media — have skyrocketed," writes Josh Rogin in the *Washington Post*. "This unprecedented surge in antisemitism online in China could be possible only with the blessing of the Chinese government, which appears to be using anti-Jewish hate as a tool of its anti-U.S. and anti-Western diplomacy."

"What we saw after October 7 was a drastic change in the social media within China. The antisemitism became more unplugged, more free-flowing," Rogin cites Aaron Keyak, the State Department's deputy antisemitism envoy, as saying. "And because we know that the Chinese internet is not free, that's a conscious decision by the Chinese government to allow that kind of rhetoric to be greatly increased."

The reasons has everything to do with China's Mideast policy – and its own ideology. "Beijing has long relationships with Palestinian groups and sees the Palestinian issue in the context of its overall anti-Western, anti-imperialist worldview," Rogin notes. As well, "[b]y putting forth the old conspiracy theory that Western democracies are secretly run by a small cabal of Jews, rather than subject to legitimate elections, Beijing seeks to convince its domestic audience that China's system is superior." (*Washington Post*, January 8, 2024)