

# BAN OF RUSSIAN SOCIAL MEDIA IN UKRAINE AS A MEAN OF COUNTERING RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION - POLICY SUCCESS?

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## Author's declaration

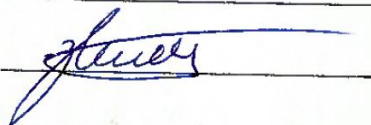
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## **Abstract**

This study evaluated the ban policy of the Ukrainian authorities against the Russian social networks Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki introduced in 2017 and sought to answer the research question regarding the extent to which this policy has proven to be a success. Using the theoretical framework of David Marsh and Allan McConnell, the paper concludes that from a programmatic perspective the policy reached its objectives and outcomes and proved to be a success, while from a political perspective – did not help the government to be re-elected and therefore proved to be only a conflicted success.

## Acknowledgments

*I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Evelyne Hübscher for her guidance and support. I would like to thank to my parents Sergii and Olga, my family and friends for their unconditional love and support. Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to the Ukrainian soldiers for protecting peace and freedom in the whole Europe – without your heroism I would not be able to study and prepare myself for building of a better, new Ukraine.*

# Table of contents

<b><i>Introduction.....</i></b>	<b><i>1</i></b>
Contribution .....	3
Significance .....	4
Next chapters.....	5
<b><i>Literature review .....</i></b>	<b><i>6</i></b>
<b><i>Application of theory .....</i></b>	<b><i>12</i></b>
<b><i>Research design.....</i></b>	<b><i>16</i></b>
Case selection .....	16
Methodology .....	17
Expert interviews .....	20
Research ethics .....	22
Methodological limitations.....	23
<b><i>Context.....</i></b>	<b><i>25</i></b>
<b><i>Empirical analysis and discussion of results .....</i></b>	<b><i>29</i></b>
Programmatic dimension.....	29
Operational indicator .....	29
Outcome indicator .....	34
Resources indicator.....	37
Actor/interest indicator .....	38

<b>Political dimension .....</b>	<b>39</b>
----------------------------------	-----------

Government popularity indicator .....	39
---------------------------------------	----

<b><i>Conclusion .....</i></b>	<b>50</b>
--------------------------------	-----------

<b><i>Bibliography .....</i></b>	<b>52</b>
----------------------------------	-----------

## List of Tables

Table 1: Table from the paper of Marsh and McConnell on the dimensions, indicators, and questions for indicators .....	13
Table 2: Indicators and their measurement in this paper .....	20
Table 3: Information about experts interviewed .....	21

## List of Graphs

Graph 1: Dimensions by Marsh McConnell (2010) .....	18
Graph 2: Visualization of mechanisms and context based on the work of Faletti and Lynch (2009) .....	19
Graph 3: Number of users of social networks (Gemius 2020).....	30
Graph 4: Coverage of social networks (Kantar Ukraine 2020a) .....	31
Graph 5: Number of Ukrainians visiting VK and OK at least once a week (NDI n.d).....	32
Graph 6: : Support of candidates In President by those Ukrainians who have decided and planning to vote (Rating Group 2019) .....	40
Graph 7: Percentage of Ukrainians who “trust” and “rather trust” Poroshenko and Turchynov (Foundation of Democratic Initiatives 2016; 2017a; 2018) .....	41
Graph 8: Percentage of Ukrainians who decided who they will vote for and planning to vote on Parliamentary Elections (Rating Group 2018) .....	42
Graph 9: Percentage of Ukrainians who decided who they will vote for and planning to vote on Parliamentary Elections (Foundation of Democratic Initiatives 2016; 2017a; 2018).....	43
Graph 10: Support of the ban on Russian social networks and Internet-services (Rating Group 2017b).....	44



## **List of abbreviations**

VK – VKontakte

OK – Odnoklassniki

NSDC – National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine

SSU – Security Service of Ukraine

NCTR – National Council of TV and Radio of Ukraine

## Introduction

On April 3, 2022, on the same day when the first bodies of killed civilians were found in Ukraine liberated Bucha, Russian columnist and political technologist Timofey Sergeitsev published in state Russian media “Ria Novosti” an article “What Russia should do with Ukraine” (Sergeitsev 2022) which according to experts is a “genocide handbook for Russia’s war on Ukraine” and “one of the most openly genocidal documents” (Snyder 2022). The article in direct text promoted the so-called “denazification of Ukraine”, which presumed the Ukrainian state to be dissolved, Ukrainians be liquidated as a nation, mass repressions, ethnic cleansing, and sending to the concentration camps to be conducted against those who oppose Russia’s rule over Ukraine. In the second half of the 2000s, seemingly harmless jokes and memes about Ukrainians were widely spread on the Russian Internet and social networks. In the 15-year difference such attempts had highly radicalized and transformed into full-scale disinformation campaigns dehumanizing Ukrainians, denying the right of the Ukrainian state to exist, and whitewashing the most brutal aggression in Europe since World War II.

Disinformation is a serious threat to society and the world at large. Actors, who may be external, internal, or working in conjunction with each other, can spread all sorts of disinformation to deceive and influence decisions in societies, which could potentially affect the lives of millions of people. Disinformation can influence decision-making by aiming at those in power, influence the discourse in society, which accordingly then affects the decisions of politicians, influence voters during elections, or be aimed at certain groups in society to radicalize them.

Examples of threats posed by disinformation include attempts to interfere in elections, internal disinformation that affects the results of elections, the impact of disinformation on decision-

making to combat climate change, the impact on societies and people's decisions to disobey the authorities on the issue of vaccination and public health, disinformation which is deepening societal divides and leads to radicalization, violence, terrorism, disinformation justifying wars or preparing societies for genocides.

The threat of disinformation is also actively manifesting itself in the context of Ukraine. Since the 2000s, disinformation has become an active tool of the policy of the Russian authorities, aimed both at the internal Russian audience and at the audience of other countries to promote Russian foreign policy goals. Ukraine is no exception, and roughly after the pro-Western Orange Revolution of 2004, Russia began to actively spread disinformation in Ukraine using Russian and Ukrainian TV channels, social media, websites, and various types of Russian-made content (WeAreUkraine 2022).

Ultimately, these disinformation efforts have led to a deepening of societal divides in Ukraine in the period of 2012-2014 and made possible the annexation of Crimea without significant resistance in 2014, the conflict in the Donbas, the economic and financial crisis in Ukraine, and forced the Ukrainian leadership to act in response by blocking potential sources of Russian disinformation. Among such sources of disinformation, according to Ukrainian authorities, were the most popular Russian social networks VKontakte (VK), oriented at younger audiences, and Odnoklassniki (OK), oriented at older audiences. As a result of the actions of the Ukrainian authorities, the Russian legal entities that owned these social networks, along with other Russian Internet services, fell under Ukrainian sanctions on May 15, 2017, and thus were blocked in Ukraine.

The blocking of Russian social networks, which were very popular among Ukrainians (for example, the social network VK in 2017 was the third most popular website in Ukraine, after the Google search engine and the YouTube video platform (Kantar 2017)), generated a lot of discussion about the allowability of such a step and the Internet freedoms in Ukraine and in general was a risky step for the Ukrainian government at that point of time.

A logical question arises – given the risk of a backlash that censorship policies may lead to, and especially given Ukrainians' democratic and protest traditions, was the Ukrainian government's decision to block popular Russian social networks justified? Was this policy at long last successful?

The goal of this paper is to assess if this intervention of the Ukrainian government to ban Russian social networks has been successful and the research question is “*To what extent has the ban of Russian social networks by Ukrainian authorities in 2017 proven to be a policy success*”?

## **Contribution**

The decision of the Ukrainian authorities to block Russian social networks also aroused the interest of the scientific community, which also began to evaluate the effectiveness of the ban on Russian social networks using an experimental approach by comparing access to the VK between two groups – experimental and control group. The control group was on occupied territories of Ukraine – close to the frontline where access to the website was not restricted and the experimental group was on government-controlled territories of Ukraine – close to the frontline where access to the website was restricted (Golovchenko 2022; Dek, Kononova,

Marchenko 2019). Such experiment conditions provided us with reliable data on the effectiveness of the ban in terms of access to the website but were still limited by its quantitative approach and did not provide us with an answer to the extent of the success or failure of the policy from different perspectives.

The approach used in this paper is less concentrated on the effectiveness of the ban itself, but rather examines the whole policy in its complexity and includes important contextual details, which the experimental approach is unable to grasp. The success in this work is measured within two dimensions of the Ukrainian ban policy towards Russian social networks – using a theoretical framework provided by David Marsh and Alan McConnell in the work “Towards a framework for the policy success” (Marsh McConnell 2010), namely programmatic dimension (whether the policy has been successful in its programmatic goals and objectives) and political dimension (whether the policy has been popular and beneficial for the ruling party).

## **Significance**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and subsequent events have become one of the key moments in modern world history, the significance of which can hardly be overestimated. President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky called it “the worst war in Europe since WWII” (Ukrinform 2022). Thus, the analysis of the previous events of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation is now of particular value.

It is also important to note that disinformation is one of the main tools of authoritarian regimes in the fight against democracies (Morgan 2018). The outlier case of Ukraine, which, while being a democracy (Åslund 2009) is actively using censorship policies against its autocratic opponent,

may be of particular interest as it raises questions about the methods of combating disinformation in a democratic society and their effectiveness, the limits of freedom of speech in a modern the world and the role of social networks in the spread of disinformation.

## **Next chapters**

In the next chapters of this study, a review of the literature will be shown with an emphasis on disinformation and its threats, the place of the concept of disinformation among related concepts, censorship policies and their side effects, and the response of Ukraine with censorship policies against Russian disinformation. Afterward, the application of theory and research design of the study will be presented with a justification of case selection, information on the methodology of the study, and its methodological limitations. Finally, the context and the empirical part of the work will be presented with an analysis based on data from expert interviews and a thick description and answer to the research question.

## **Literature review**

Disinformation is not a modern concept. As Posetti and Matthews (n.d.) write, “misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda have been features of human communication since at least the Roman times”. Disinformation “appeared not to have been a major research priority in the social sciences prior to 2017” (Freelon Wells 2020), however, for the last five years, a series of political events coinciding with the mass use of social networks has led to an increase in disinformation and, therefore, increase in the popular and academic interest in this topic.

Prior to conducting an overview of the implications and danger of disinformation, it is important to separate the definition of “disinformation” from the similar definitions of “propaganda”, “misinformation” and “fake news”. Scholars admit, that “there is no real consensus across much of the academic literature on how to define many of these phenomena”. As an example, in the same paper disinformation is defined as “knowingly false information” (Tucker et al. 2018).

European Commission has a more comprehensive definition of disinformation, namely calling disinformation “all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally to cause public harm or for profit” (European Commission 2018). Freelon and Wells indicate that this definition covers three important criteria of disinformation, namely its deceptive nature, potential to harm, and intent to harm (Freelon Wells 2020).

Misinformation differs from disinformation with an absence of intention to harm. American Psychological Association provides such an explanation of the difference between disinformation and misinformation – “misinformation is false or inaccurate information — getting the facts wrong. Disinformation is false information which is deliberately intended to

mislead — intentionally making the misstating facts” (American Psychological Association n.d.).

According to Merriam-Webster's definition, propaganda is “the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person”. It differs from disinformation being a more neutral term – not necessarily having a deceptive nature (might just “spread ideas”) and intent to harm (might both have intents to “help” and “injure”) (Merriam-Webster n.d.).

Concept of “fake news”, which started being widely used in 2016, is rather a sub-concept of disinformation, with the Cambridge Dictionary defining it as “false stories that appear to be spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke” (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.).

Talking about the importance of disinformation, most of the authors in the field agree that disinformation poses a serious threat to democratic systems. Freelon and Wells call disinformation “the defining political communication topic of our time” (Freelon Wells 2020). Disinformation is “undermining the institutions and social conditions necessary for democracies to function” (McKay Tenove 2021) and has “severe repercussions, ranging from legitimate propaganda to election manipulation” (Kapantai et al. 2020). Authors have researched the threats of disinformation regarding the election’s interference, concluding that the threats there are overestimated (McKay Tenove 2021), hate crime – proving that there is a link between the consummation of disinformation and hate crime against refugees (Muller Schwarz 2018), social tensions, political polarization – verifying “that disinformation disseminated through social media increases domestic terrorism” (Piazza 2021), public health



– looking into different aspects of COVID-19 disinformation (Naeem Bhatti Khan 2020), denial of climate change – stating that problem of disinformation is that big that “communication by scientists and their allies by itself will not move climate mitigation forward” (Lewandowsky 2020).

In the Ukrainian context specifically, Russian disinformation campaigns can be considered as one of the key tools using which Russia has facilitated the annexation of Crimea and inflamed conflict in the Donbas region of Ukraine (Jainter Mattson 2015).

All the abovementioned threats have pushed the governments to pursue a variety of regulatory and censorship policies. Literature on censorship in general tends to be concentrated on authoritarian countries, in particular China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and others. However, even in the democratic systems censorship is still a present phenomenon. Such cases are represented by Israel where military censorship “at times sustains the country's freedom of the press, freedom of information, and the public's right to know” (Nossek Limor 2011), or South Korea where “cultural censorship is being practiced” (Yuk 2017).

Currently, there is no unified theory of censorship, but rather a system of separate views that partially intersect with each other. Golovchenko divides views on censorship into two categories: the accessibility view and the political-signaling view (Golovchenko 2021). The accessibility view is represented by the idea that censorship is a cost-imposing tool, a form of a tax (Roberts 2020). Roberts mentions that “censorship technologies impose taxes on information by requiring users to incur costs for accessing or spreading information”. She divides these technologies into three main categories: fear (“threatening users with costly punishment”), friction (Roberts 2018), where censorship “imposes costs simply by making

information more difficult to access” and flooding, where government floods the information space with either propaganda, content to divert attention or lots of false information in order to confuse users where the truth lies. The political-signaling view is represented by such authors as Huang who in his turn views censorship as a tool that is sending a “signal of the government's strength in maintaining social control and political order” (Huang 2015).

Evidence of effects of censorship and ban policies are mixed. There is multiple research both confirming that different types of censorship can both be effective and ineffective and particularly cause backlash. For instance, MacKinnon argues that “so far, the Chinese government has succeeded through censorship and regulation in blocking activists from using the Internet as an effective political tool” (MacKinnon 2008). Another research indicated an interesting spillover phenomenon – China has been using the censorship tool so effectively and smartly that even without the state coercion tools and direct policies absolute majority of the journalists are self-censoring themselves (Stern and Hassid 2012).

However, apart from positive effects for the censor, there are also a variety of backlashes caused by the censorship and supported by literature, namely the “Streisand effect” or “boomerang effect”, radicalization, and increasing reach and receptivity of censored ideas. “Streisand effect” – that “online censorship can mobilize users against the government or inspire more interest in the concealed content because of censorship” (Roberts 2020) is supported by research in other papers (Boxell Steinert-Threlkeld 2019; Miller 2022).

There is also a paper that researched the effect of censorship on radicalized conspiracy theory communities concluding that radicalization is reinforced by social media censorship and the

“centralized ‘banning’ of individuals has the strongest effect on radicalization” (Lane, McCaffree and LeRon Shults 2021).

Jansen and Martin in their work concluded that “attempts to repress ‘dangerous ideas’ sometimes have the opposite effect: that is, they serve as catalysts for expanding the reach, resonance, and receptivity of those ideas” (Jansen Martin 2003).

Ukrainian response to Russian hybrid aggression, in particular in the field of disinformation has accelerated the number of academic research on this topic. Among multiple different responses ban on Russian social media by Ukrainian authorities in 2017 stands solely and also became a prominent topic. A series of studies have been conducted on this topic with different approaches and under a different lens.

Golovchenko conducted a quantitative evaluative study measuring the policy intervention success by the difference in the response to intervention by two samples – Ukrainians living in the south of Kherson oblast near occupied Crimea (where the ban could be technically implemented) and Ukrainians in the north of occupied Crimea (where it could not as the peninsula is occupied by Russia) and achieved a result that ban was effective (Golovchenko 2022). A similar but wider study was conducted by a group of authors, who contributed to the topic by, again, measuring the effectiveness of the ban on the VK by comparing activity in government-controlled areas of Ukraine subject to the ban, and non-government-controlled areas where the ban was not imposed, but in a longer time period – from 1 May 2016 to 14 June 2018. Authors have agreed that banning the VK network “was effective in some ways” (Dek Kononova Marchenko 2019). There is also another paper which is analyzing the ambiguity of the decision to ban major Russian resources in 2017, concentrating on the contradiction of the

ban policy to the freedom of speech and ideals of the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine and mentioning that the policy was not effective as it “did not achieve the expected primary result of reducing the amount of disinformation on the web” (Shumilo Kerikmae Chochia 2019). Holland right after the ban decision analyzes it purely from the standpoint of international law stating that the decision was “not necessary, proportional, or legal concerning the rights of Ukraine's citizens and Ukraine's cybersecurity objective” (Holland 2017).

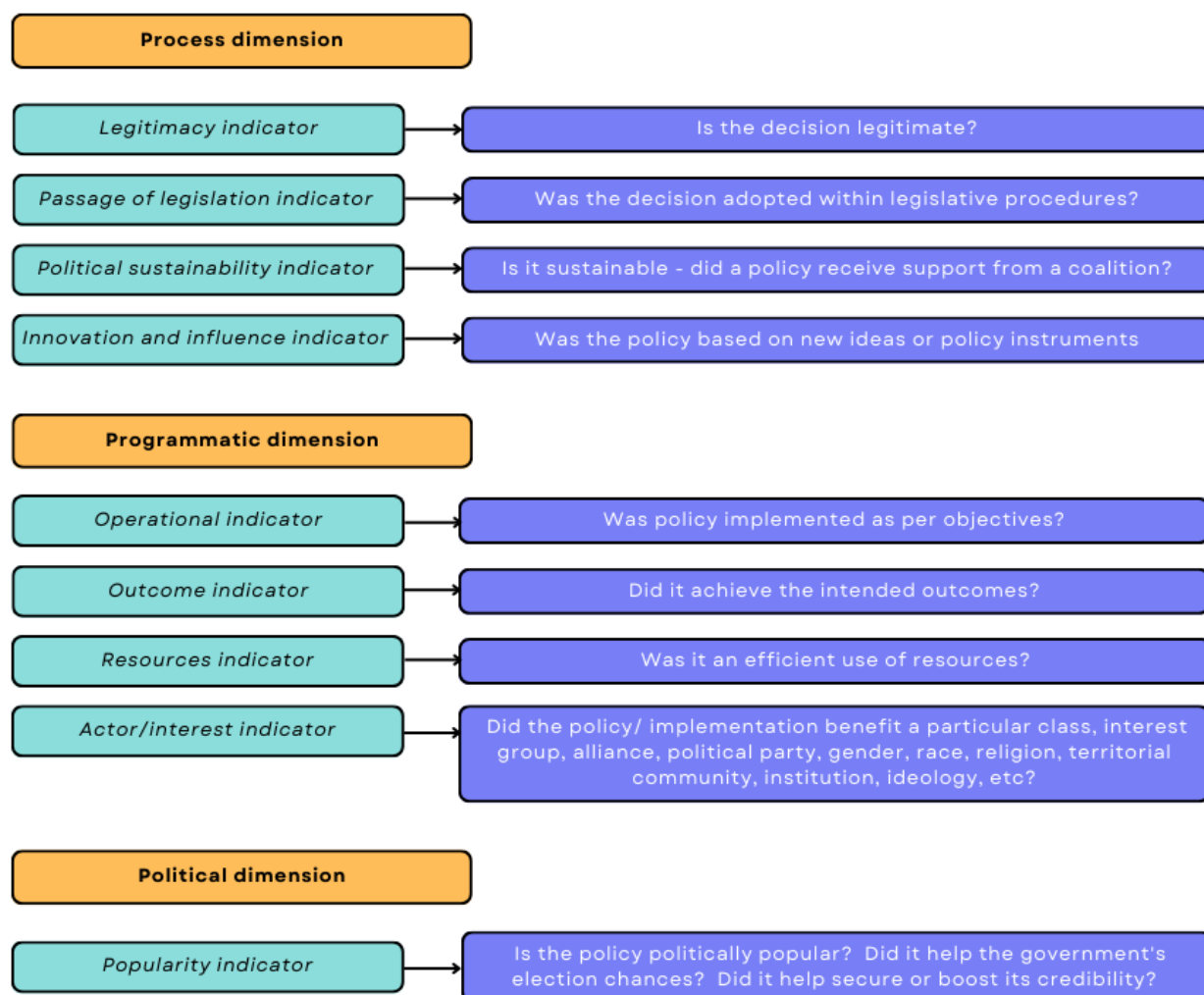
Some of the authors like Way took a more general stance in a debate both indicating that criticism of the ban “fails to account for the legitimate security concerns created by the intrusion of a foreign aggressor’s state media” but also mentioning that the Poroshenko administration by such acts used “war as a pretext to take actions that directly undermined democratic norms” (Way 2019).

## **Application of theory**

To evaluate the extent of the success of the Ukrainian government's censorship policy against Russian social media it is important to have a theory with indicators provided for the assessment.

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the work “Towards a framework for establishing policy success” (Marsh McConnell 2010), which presents three dimensions of policies in which success can be measured – process dimension, programmatic dimension, and political dimension. Another work that is a part of this thesis’ theory is “Policy Success, Policy Failure and Grey Areas In-Between” – a study on the measuring of the “level” of policy success (McConnell 2010).

Authors offer a “heuristic which practitioners and academics can utilize to approach the question of whether a policy is, or was, successful” by viewing policies in three dimensions, each of which has “indicators of success” within those dimensions. To understand whether the indicators of success are present and therefore the policy is successful within a dimension is important to answer the below-mentioned sub-questions under the dimension:



*Table 1: Table from the paper of Marsh and McConnell on the dimensions, indicators, and questions for indicators*

McConnell in his other study “Policy Success, Policy Failure and Grey Areas In-Between” continues the previous work based on the assumption that “success is not all or nothing” and that there are “grey areas in-between”. The main novelty of the work is that it introduces the spectrum which “makes it possible to differentiate intermediate categories between complete success or failure”. This spectrum is introduced for each of the three mentioned dimensions and includes success, resilient success, conflicted success, precarious success, and failure. The article also investigates the examples of contradictions between different forms of success.

According to this framework, if the indicators mentioned are present within a given dimension of policy, then in this dimension the policy can be considered successful. In this paper, I am assessing specifically the programmatic and political dimensions of the Ukrainian government's policy on banning Russian social networks, and by answering the questions related to indicators I am examining the presence of indicators within those two dimensions.

In the context of the Ukrainian policy of banning Russian social media, the paper assesses the success of the policy in programmatic dimension by 1) *for operational indicator* – examining whether the policy has been operationally successful, meaning whether the ban has been effectively implemented and whether the number of Ukrainian users of Russian social networks has significantly dropped, 2) *for outcome indicator* – examining the impact of policy on society, meaning whether it has led to the decrease of penetration of Russian disinformation into Ukrainian media space, whether it has made Ukrainians less exposed and less vulnerable to Russian disinformation 3) *for resources indicator* – examining the use of resources, meaning whether the implementation of ban has cost Ukrainian budget significant money 4) *for actor/interest indicator* – examining whether there was a particular group within Ukraine which has benefited from the ban of Russian social networks.

The paper assesses the success of the policy in the political dimension by examining the *government popularity indicator*, in particular by 1) examining how the ban policy has impacted the electoral preferences of Ukrainians in the period from 2017 (the implementation of a ban) to 2019 (Presidential and Parliamentary elections in Ukraine) and whether it has helped or hindered the chances of President Poroshenko and his party “Block of Petro Poroshenko” to be re-elected, 2) examining how the policy influenced the reputation and narrative of Ukrainian

society in general, opposition, civil society and international partners towards the President Poroshenko and his party “Block of Petro Poroshenko”.

It is important to note that in this work the focus is only on a programmatic and political dimension as another dimension mentioned in the theoretical framework, namely the process dimension, has a law-related nature, requires solid legal expertise for the analysis, and has more legal perspective rather than a political one.



## **Research design**

This paper focuses on measuring the success of the Ukrainian authorities' policy to block Russian social media in 2017 and attempts to answer the research question "To what extent has the ban of Russian social media networks by Ukrainian authorities in 2017 proven to be a policy success?".

The research design chapter incorporates case selection justification, methodology of the study (with an explanation of how data to answer the research question will be collected and analyzed), research ethics and methodological limitations of the study.

### **Case selection**

Censorship policies in democratic countries are not a common phenomenon but nonetheless occur in many countries in one form or another (Meserve Pemstein 2018). Among the general phenomenon of censorship policies in democratic countries, the example of Ukraine stands out, which, being a young democracy in the process of reforms, is at the same time in confrontation with autocratic Russia and utilizes censorship policies to block the channels of dissemination of Russian disinformation, which, according to the Ukrainian authorities, is a threat to the national security of Ukraine (Poroshenko 2017a).

I have chosen the case of the policy of blocking Russian social networks on the territory of Ukraine among the other cases due to it being atypical, controversial and raising important questions for the scientific community on the compatibility of democratic regimes and

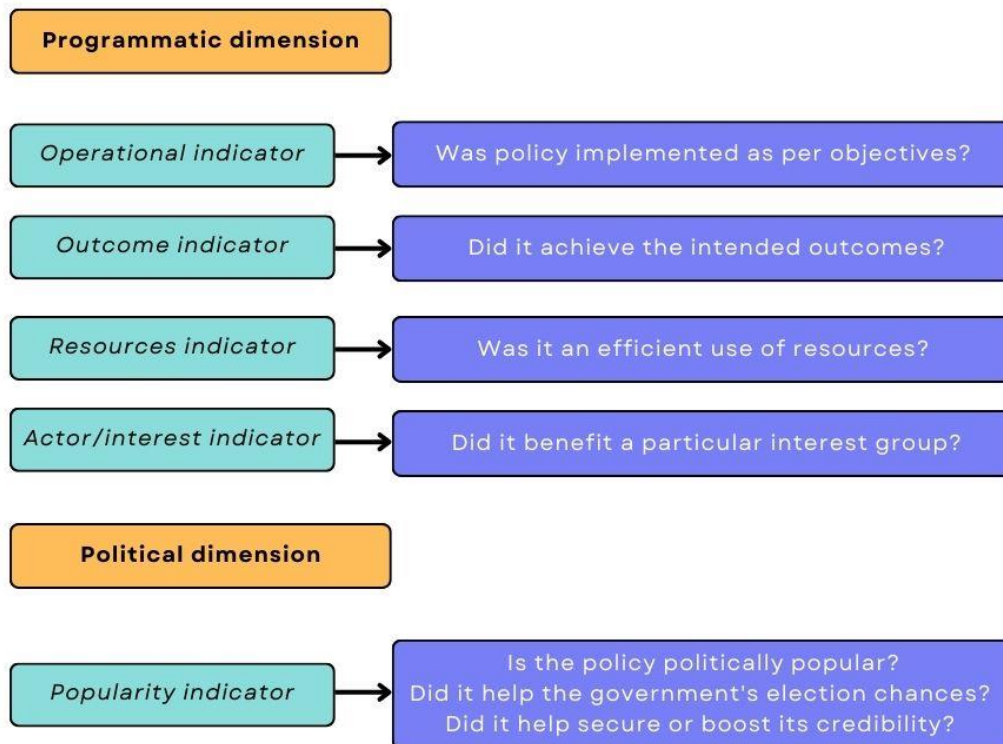
censorship policies, the boundaries of censorship policies, the success of censorship policies in democratic countries in combating disinformation spread by authoritarian countries.

I have selected VK and OK social networks due to them being the most popular Russian social networks, being significantly ahead in popularity of social network Moi Mir by Mail.ru and others.

Finally, among other censorship policies in Ukraine (for example, blocking pro-Russian Ukrainian TV channels in 2021), I have chosen this particular case due to the 6-year period after the ban was introduced, which allows me to evaluate all the effects of the ban from the long-term perspective.

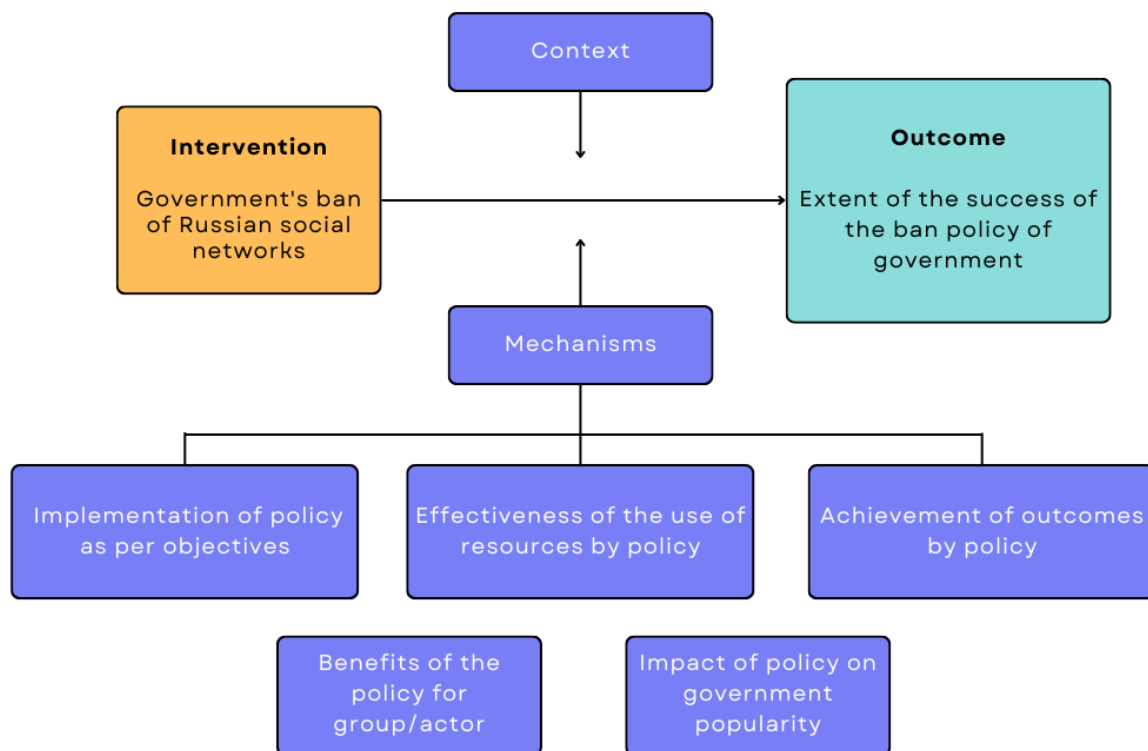
## **Methodology**

To assess the success of the ban policy in programmatic and political dimensions, I am trying to understand whether the indicators of success are present, and to do that I should answer the questions under each of those indicators, namely:



*Graph 1: Dimensions by Marsh McConnell (2010)*

The government of Ukraine has conducted an intervention (government's ban of Russian social networks) which leads to outcomes of the success/failure of the policy and is influenced by the Ukrainian context in 2014-2023 and mechanisms, which are the indicators of the theoretical framework, namely the implementation of policy, achievement of outcomes by policy, the effectiveness of the use of resources by policy, benefits of the policy, the popularity of the policy – illustrated in a Graph 2:



*Graph 2: Visualization of mechanisms and context based on the work of Faletti and Lynch (2009)*

To understand the context and mechanisms and to test the validity of this data through triangulation, I am using such methods as expert interviews, thick description, survey data collection, document analysis, and others.

Table 2 represents indicators, how they are presented in my work, and how they are going to be measured within this paper.

Indicator	How this indicator is represented in my work?	How I measure it
Operational indicator	Effectiveness of the restriction of access to Russian social networks, dynamics of number of users and coverage of banned social networks	Survey data provided by independent marketing agencies and think tanks - Kantar, Gemius, and the National Democratic Institute; opinions of experts interviewed
Outcome indicator	Level of penetration of Russian disinformation into Ukrainian media space pre and post-ban, and its impact on vulnerability of Ukrainians	Opinions of experts interviewed
Resource indicator	The amount of financial resources spent by Ukrainian government to implement the decision	Media commentary of Ukrainian officials, analysis of government documents related to the ban, opinions of experts interviewed
Actor/interest indicator	Presence of a particular group within Ukraine that has benefited from the ban of Russian social networks.	Media commentary of Ukrainian officials, opinions of experts interviewed
Government popularity indicator	Dynamics of electoral preferences, influence of the ban on popularity and chances of re-election of government	Survey data by independent sociological agencies of Ukraine - Rating Group, Foundation of Democratic Initiatives; opinions of experts interviewed

Table 2: Indicators and their measurement in this paper

## Expert interviews

I have conducted semi-structured epistemic (expert) interviews with a framework of questions but freedom of answers of participants. For these expert interviews, purposive sampling was used. To ensure the absence of a bubble of opinions, interviews were conducted with experts from three different spheres, including a non-Ukrainian national.

Interview partner	Date of interview	Background of partner	Role of interview
Tamta Otiashvili	May 3, 2023	Ex-Senior Manager of NDI Ukraine's Research and Countering Disinformation Team	Being a key expert in a research of public opinion and disinformation and also non-Ukrainian national Tamta provided unbiased and evidence-based opinion on situation around the ban
Galyna Pastukh	May 5, 2023	Deputy operational director of Data Journalism Agency "Texty", Team Lead on projects related to countering disinformation	Galyna is one of the top experts on disinformation in Ukraine, leading multiple projects on monitoring (through AI) and countering Russian disinformation since 2017
Yevhen Fedchenko	May 9, 2023	Co-founder and Chief Editor of StopFake.org	Being founder and leader of first Ukrainian NGO which started debunking and countering disinformation in 2014, Yevhen is a top expert in his field
Anonymous ex-government representative	May 10, 2023	Deputy Head of one of governmental bodies responsible for countering disinformation	Being one of top officials responsible for countering disinformation, provided valuable insights and opinion on the ban
Anonymous ex-government representative	May 24, 2023	Deputy Head of one of governmental bodies responsible for countering disinformation	Being one of top officials responsible for countering disinformation, provided valuable insights and opinion on the ban

*Table 3: Information about experts interviewed*

In this paper Yevhen Fedchenko referred to as Expert #1, Galyna Pastukh – Expert #2, anonymous ex-high officials of Ukrainian government responsible for disinformation policy – Expert #3 & Expert #4, Tamta Otiashvili – Expert #5.

Limited by Ukrainian laws and regulations, I as a researcher unfortunately could not travel to Ukraine to conduct interviews in person, therefore they were conducted online.

The interviews lasted around one hour and consisted of questions within several main blocks, namely: 1) the context in Ukraine at the moment of the ban in 2017 (influx of Russian disinformation, situation with democracy in Ukraine), 2) the effectiveness of the ban and effects on vulnerability and resilience of Ukrainians and the overall threat of Russian disinformation,

3) the impact of the ban on the popularity of Poroshenko and his allies, 4) the “side effects” of the ban.

For example, to receive the opinion of experts on the effectiveness of the ban and its operational success, I asked the question “Do you think that banning decreased the penetration of Russian disinformation in Ukraine?”. I followed it up with a contradictory question “Maybe they have just simply increased spread through other channels?” and with a question requesting evidential data proving their point – “Is there any evidence you have heard about that proves that this blocked the influx of disinformation?”.

## **Research ethics**

This research involves a potential threat for the interviewed experts on disinformation, as part of them are still located at the territory of Ukraine and potentially might appear under Russian occupation. As they are experts in the fields of Russian disinformation that poses a risk of their persecution by official or unofficial Russian occupation security forces. To mitigate this threat, on the request of interviewees' total confidentiality and anonymity, I will secure and store data on a separate device/USB drive under storage requirements and with a strong key/password needed to access it.

To ensure that consent will be informed, the consent forms will be distributed and signed, prior information on the aims of the research will be shared, and consent forms will include an option to drop out at any time on the wish of the interviewee. The consent forms will also be stored on a separate device with protection to access the data.

It is also important to note that though in this study the positivist approach is applied, I have previously worked in the field of countering disinformation in Ukraine for several years and have a personal interest in the topic. Nevertheless, I am conducting this study as an unbiased researcher.

### **Methodological limitations**

As mentioned above, in this study only programmatic and political dimensions of Marsh and McConnell's theoretical framework of the success of the policy are used as the process dimension requires an extensive analysis and legal expertise. Nevertheless, even within the absence of data on the process dimension the programmatic and political dimensions are still providing enough data to conclude whether the policy was successful or not.

Another issue is the hardly measured outcomes of the policy of blocking Russian social networks. One of the indicators is whether the policy of blocking Russian social networks achieved the intended outcomes. The aim of the policy, according to the Ukrainian officials is to "shut down the mechanism used by Russian ideological machine to shape in the minds of citizens (of Ukraine) what they (Russians) need" (SSU 2017) and therefore the intended outcome would be the decreased ability of Russia to influence the minds of Ukrainian citizens, which includes the decreased level of penetration of Russian disinformation into Ukrainian information space and the decreased level of vulnerability of Ukrainians to Russian disinformation. Such outcomes are nearly impossible to measure using quantitative approaches, therefore the only reliable way is to collect such data from the perception of top experts in this field, which is the reason for utilizing expert interviews in this study.



Finally, while in the expert interviews, I am trying to avoid the opinion bubble, it would have been beneficial for this paper to receive the answers to the same questions by the political opponents of the ban. However now, during the full-scale war in Ukraine, such political opponents are silenced and can be potentially self-censoring themselves and unavailable to reach. To mitigate that I have included in the list of interviewees a non-Ukrainian national who does not have a bias towards my questions.

## Context

Disinformation was an integral part of the Soviet military-political strategy and today continues to be an integral part of the Russian strategy. It is believed that the term “disinformation” itself originates from Soviet Union times with it being present in the 1952 Great Soviet Encyclopedia (Taylor 2021). After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transitional period of the 1990s, disinformation again became an active component of the already Russian military-political efforts.

Modern Russian military doctrine (so-called “Gerasimov Doctrine”) began to actively promote the term "asymmetric war" or “hybrid war” as an important element of Russia's strategy in the fight against the West (Mckew 2020). As Russian military theorists write, “In modern conditions, the means of information influence (indirect actions) have reached such a level of development that they can solve strategic problems. (Chekinov Bogdanov 2010).” The importance of an “asymmetric” response was not once emphasized by high Russian officials, including Vladimir Putin (Putin 2006).

In the middle of the 2000s, democratic processes intensified in the form of “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet space, which included Georgia, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine, which received a pro-Western government after the Orange Revolution in 2004. However, Ukraine became a target for truly intense pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns during the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014, the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the so-called “Russian Spring” in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine and the Russian invasion of Donbas in 2014. Since that period, Russia has actively used disinformation to “promote Russia’s image,

undermine Ukraine, and disparage the West” (Erlich Garner 2021). At that time, according to expert #5, the “threat of disinformation became very, very clear”.

The success of the annexation of Crimea without firing a shot and the destabilization of the situation in the Donbas is explained, in the first place, by the successful disinformation efforts of Russia inside of Ukraine, where it managed to convince a significant part of the Ukrainian population that the Revolution of Dignity was a “Nazi coup” and threatened lives, health and well-being of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine (StopFake 2018).

At that time, the key channel for the dissemination of Russian disinformation in Ukraine was Russian television. For instance, before the annexation, around 10% of the population was watching Russian channels (Nielsen 2014). The post-Maidan authorities of Ukraine also recognized the success of Russia's use of disinformation instruments and therefore, in 2014, began their policy of blocking Russian disinformation resources. The first step in this policy was precisely the blocking of key Russian TV channels (NCTR 2014). In general, in the period from 2014 to 2017, 80 Russian TV channels (NCTR 2018) were blocked in Ukraine. The justification for filing a lawsuit by the Ukrainian regulator and blocking TV channels was "the existing signs of crimes against the state and inciting ethnic hatred" (BBC 2014).

During the hostilities in the Donbas in the period of 2014-2017, the Ukrainian authorities continued the policy of censorship by expanding the list of blocked TV channels, blocking Russian web resources, as well as Russian media content – including books, films, and TV shows, creating lists of banned Russian cultural figures who support the war in Ukraine (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2014).

In 2017, the policy of blocking resources that threaten the national security of Ukraine reached Russian social networks and Internet services operating in Ukraine. Before Revolution of Dignity 2013-2014, OK was already owned by Mail.ru Group, the main shareholder of which was Alisher Usmanov – a Russian oligarch close to Vladimir Putin (Partridge 2022). VK was established and owned by Russian entrepreneur Pavel Durov, who in 2014 under pressure from the Russian government had to sell VK to Mail.ru Group and Alisher Usmanov. After that, according to expert #3, both VK and OK were “totally controlled by FSB (Russian security service)”, expert #1 – “controlled and used by the government”. Expert #1 mentioned that VK and OK became “weaponized by Russia” and became “one of the main platforms” for dissemination of Russian disinformation, and after the ban of Russian TV channels in Ukraine in 2014 “started playing even more important role” in the dissemination of disinformation.

Unlike previous decisions to block Russian resources and content, which were banned either by a court decision or by the adoption of laws by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, Russian social networks were not “banned” in a direct sense of this word (however we will still use the word “ban” in this work regarding that for the simplification) – they were blocked through the mechanism of imposing sanctions against their Russian legal entities or owners.

On April 26, 2017, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, together with the National Bank of Ukraine and the SSU, drew up a proposal for a list of individuals and legal entities against which sanctions should be imposed, on April 28, 2017, the NSDC supported the proposals of the abovementioned bodies. On May 15, 2017, President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko enacted the decision of the NSDC and thus imposed sanctions against the Russian social networks Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki, as well as Internet services Yandex, Mail.ru, Dr.Web, and Kaspersky Lab antiviruses, software 1C and others (President of Ukraine 2017).

The main reasoning of Ukrainian authorities was countering Russian propaganda. President Poroshenko mentioned that VK and OK are “widely used by Russian special services to promote Russian propaganda and conduct special information operations against Ukraine and its citizens” (Poroshenko 2017b), Head of SSU Vasyl Hrytsak noted that VK and OK “are mechanisms used by the Russian ideological machine to shape in the minds of citizens what they need” (Hrytsak 2017). Among other reasons were the protection of the personal data of Ukrainians (Poroshenko 2017b), the fight against pirate content (Turchynov 2017), the fight against hate speech (Hrytsak 2017), and the fight against pornography and “suicidal groups” (Hrytsak 2017).

Subsequently, the Ukrainian authorities, already under the new President Volodymyr Zelensky, will also block several Ukrainian channels and media through the sanctions’ mechanism, which, according to the authorities (Zelenskyy 2021), as well as most experts (Ukraine Crisis Media Center 2021), were associated with Russia and spread Russian disinformation.

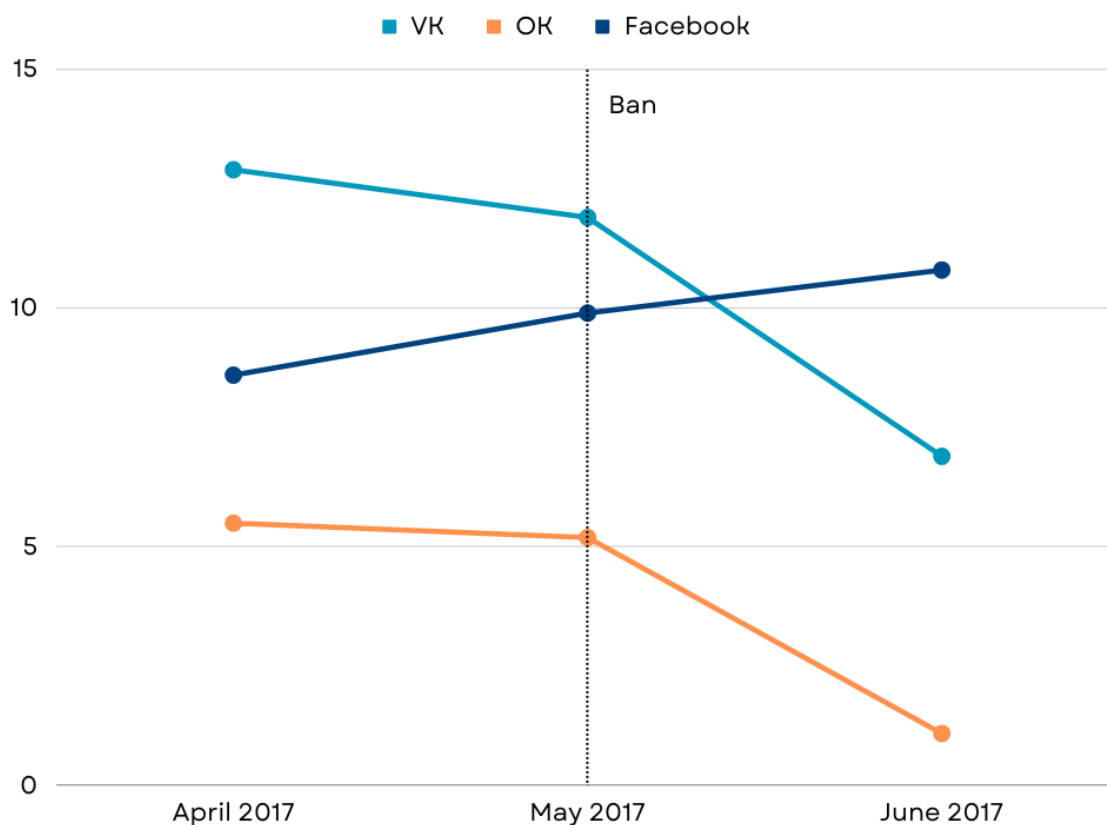
## **Empirical analysis and discussion of results**

### **Programmatic dimension**

#### **Operational indicator**

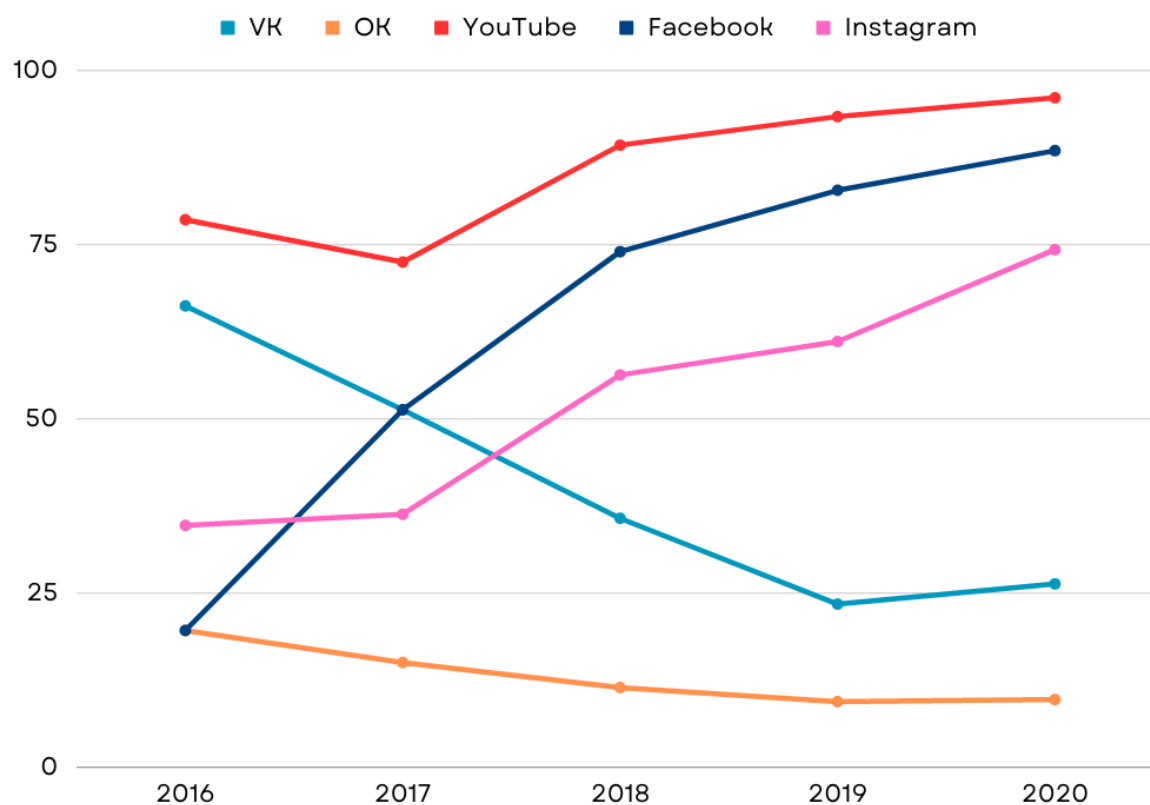
To understand if the policy has been implemented as per objectives, it is necessary to understand what objectives were stated by the Ukrainian authorities during the decision to ban Russian social networks. For this purpose, I have analyzed governmental documents related to the ban. According to the Decree of the President of Ukraine #133/2017 (President of Ukraine 2017) on implementing the decision of NSDC to impose sanctions, it is stated that concerning LLC Mail.ru Group Russia, LLC Mail.ru Group Ukraine, LLC Vkontakte Russia, and LLC Vkontakte Ukraine it is “prohibited for Internet providers to provide access to Internet users to the resources of the "Mail.ru" services (www.mail.ru) and socially oriented resources "Vkontakte" and "Odnoklassniki”. Therefore, the key objective of Ukrainian authorities, in this case, is to prohibit the provision of access to Russian social networks.

The most reasonable indicators of the effective prohibition of the provision of access to social networks are the number of active users or visitors of those social networks and coverage of the Internet audience of Ukraine by those social networks.



*Graph 3: Number of users of social networks (Gemius 2020)*

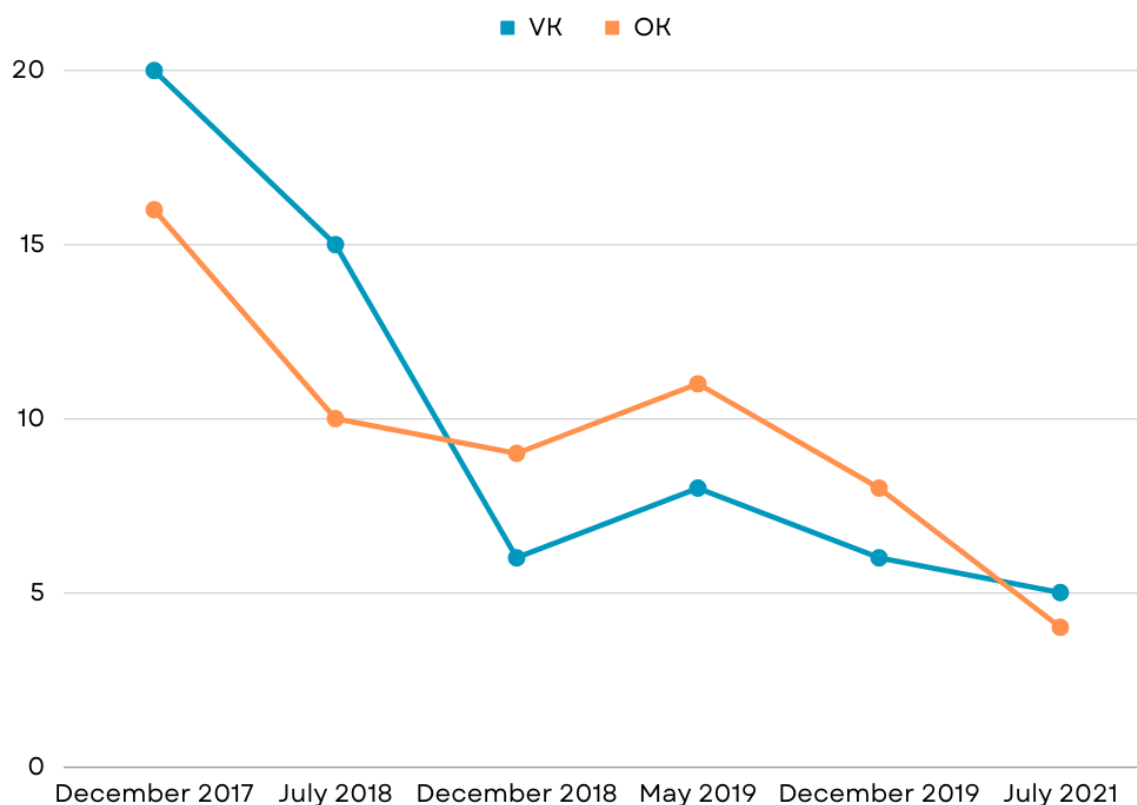
According to the data from Graph 3, the number of users who visited VK fell from 12.9 million in April 2017 to 6.9 million in June 2017 after the ban. An even more dramatic decrease can be observed concerning OK, which fell from 5.5 million users in April to 1.1 million users in June. At the same time, Facebook has gained more users in the same period – from 8.6 million to 10.8 million.



*Graph 4: Coverage of social networks (Kantar Ukraine 2020a)*

According to Graph 4, the coverage of the mobile applications of VK and OK fell from 66.2% and 19.6% in 2016 to 26.3% and 9.7% in 2020. At the same time coverage of YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram (currently the 3 most popular social platforms in Ukraine) have significantly increased.





*Graph 5: Number of Ukrainians visiting VK and OK at least once a week (NDI n.d)*

According to the data from Graph 5, the number of Ukrainians who at least once a week visit VK and OK fell from 20% and 16% in December 2017<sup>1</sup> to 5% and 4% in July 2021. In an interview with expert Tamta Otiashvili she also mentioned that according to NDI’s research, the number of visitors of VK and OK “has hugely dropped” in 2017-2018, and now, in 2023 is “almost unmeasurable”.

However, it became quite clear after the ban that it could be easily circumvented using VPN, proxy, or anonymizer services. The question arises – can we consider the ban policy as success

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<sup>1</sup> December 2017 data includes people who responded that they visit VK or OK daily, several times a week and once or several times a month

if the ban itself can be bypassed? The first part of the answer is that goal of the Ukrainian government was not to completely forbid Ukrainians from joining but to decrease the number of users by incurring additional costs for Ukrainians to access the blocked resources, which goes in line with Robert's "friction" explanation of censorship (Roberts 2020).

The second part of the answer is that even with the relatively easy circumvention options, the number of users over time was gradually going down, which can be seen on Graphs 4 and 5. As an additional example, in September 2020, VK announced that it was able to bypass the blocking of Ukrainian providers and authorities, and called for downloading its application, which can be used without a VPN. However, this event did not significantly affect the popularity of VK in Ukraine – according to Kantar, in 2021-2022, this new VK application did not even enter the Top 25 most popular applications in Ukraine (Kantar 2022a; Kantar 2022b).

Experts argue that the decline in the number of users, in addition to technical blocking, also occurred due to several other aspects. Firstly, the very fact that social networks became banned turned users away from using social networks or from using VPNs and bypassing blocking. For example, in 2020, after the introduction of the VK application with a built-in proxy, Secretary of NSDC Oleksii Danilov said that users of this application "will be put on the list" by authorities using a special system, and those who distribute Russian content on these social networks "will deal with the National Police " (Danylov 2020). Such statements, even without leading to any actual legal measures, sent a threatening signal to Ukrainian citizens, which goes in line with Huang's political signaling view on censorship (Huang 2015).

Secondly, social networks are platforms for social interaction, and if most of the user's friends, acquaintances, or relatives stop using the platform due to its blocking, then the user, even having

the tools to bypass this blocking, will probably use the platform less, because he/she loses one of the key advantages of social networks – the possibility of social interaction.

The abovementioned surveys and arguments support the position that the ban policy has both in a short time and long-time visibly decreased the number of people who in Ukraine who are using Russian social networks VK and OK and therefore I can state that under the operational indicator, the policy was a *success*.

### **Outcome indicator**

Among all the indicators explored, it is the most challenging to gather and analyze data for the outcome indicator. There is no open research on the impact of disinformation on Ukrainian society and specifically on the change of this impact after the introduction of the ban. However, it is possible to gather valuable opinions of experts on disinformation on this topic.

The ban could have impacted two variables, namely the influx of Russian disinformation in Ukraine/its penetration into the Ukrainian media space and the ability of Ukrainians to counter disinformation themselves/their resilience or vulnerability to disinformation. To understand the effect of disinformation on society I asked experts questions regarding those two variables.

Regarding the influx of disinformation, experts have generally agreed that it has fallen upon the introduction of the ban. Ex-government official, expert #4 has noted that the ban “lowered the amount of disinformation in Ukrainian media space” and expert #3 mentioned that in a moment amount of disinformation “had fallen” but could have transferred to other channels.

However, it is a valid counterargument whether we can consider the outcomes of the ban as successful if the disinformation after the ban has simply transferred from one communication channel to another. This counterargument was recognized by the experts. For instance, Yevhen Fedchenko, expert #1 mentioned that the ban has given Ukrainians “time to adapt” and that such a ban has caused the need for Russia to “restructure their ecosystem, which takes time and with each iteration of ban it becomes harder and more costly for them”. Expert #5 mentioned that “this measure put some breaks on a problem but did not handle the entire problem”. Apart from that, ex-government representative, expert #4 noted that such a ban also makes them lose financial resources invested into spreading disinformation on a platform, and that after the ban Russia had to “transfer their budgets” from VK to Telegram.

One more important aspect of banning Russian social networks was raised by both international expert #5 and expert #2 from Ukrainian CSOs – that disinformation could have transferred to other platforms like pro-Russian Ukrainian television or junk websites, but expert #5 said that the ban has “handled the completely uncontrolled flow of disinformation that was on a very personal level” as VK and OK were designed as “personal spaces” with people using them for communication with their family, friends, acquaintances and therefore the spread of disinformation there was easier as information from known people was “trustful and relatable”. Another part of VK that made it trusted, according to expert #2, was the entertainment part of the platform –memes, jokes, audio, and videos behind which “political content was hidden”.

Experts recognized that after the ban users have started moving to Western platforms which are having partial independence and having moderation policies in place. Expert #1 also noted that the ban on VK created problems for Russians as the “universal platform” was banned, and they had to substitute it with thousands of different websites.

Regarding the vulnerability of Ukrainians to disinformation, experts have agreed that the policy directly has not contributed to a decrease in the vulnerability of Ukrainians. International expert #5 mentioned that for this purpose “limiting space is not enough – a more complex approach is needed”. However, the ban itself had side effects which had indirectly contributed to the decrease in the vulnerability of Ukrainians.

Ban has increased awareness of people about the existence of Russian disinformation – after the ban societal discussion emerged and during that discussion authorities and the expert community had a chance to convey the message about the threat of Russian disinformation and Russian communication platforms like VK and OK. As expert #1 mentioned, the ban has also “delegitimized” the platforms in the eyes of Ukrainian society and decreased the overall trust of Ukrainians in Russian social networks.

It is also worth noting that apart from positive there were also negative side effects. Thoughts of expert #5, who said that ban has led to the radicalization of pro-Russian groups, go in line with scholar’s arguments that censorship leads to political polarization. However, it is worth noting, that at that point in 2017, the ban has not led to any kind of violence or actions of radicalized groups. Expert #3 mentioned that for part of the government, the ban has created a misconception that the problem of Russian disinformation is completely solved by it. Four years later, Ukrainian authorities under new President Zelensky had to divert to the ban policy again.

Based on what was said above, I can conclude that the ban has achieved the outcome of decreasing the influx of Russian disinformation into Ukraine but only to a limited extent has increased the resilience of Ukrainians against Russian disinformation. As broad outcomes were

achieved with certain nuances, I can state that under this indicator the ban policy is a *resilient success*.

### **Resources indicator**

Effectiveness in the use of financial resources has been an important element for any policy pursued in Ukraine since the period of deep financial crisis in 2014-2015. Thoughtless waste of resources on any government policy, and especially the policy of censorship, which by its nature caused discontent, could further aggravate the situation in society.

The Ukrainian authorities did not follow the more complicated path and did not create an expensive infrastructure for blocking resources but shifted the responsibility for blocking resources to Ukrainian providers. It was the providers who had to use their internal resources to block access to VK and OK and the state part of the work was to provide advice on how to technically implement this block. Government authorities have communicated the provider's role both in public through media commentary (Turchynov 2017) and in the documents, where it was stated that "there is a prohibition for the Internet providers to provide access to" VK and OK (President of Ukraine 2017). All experts interviewed believe that in this way the Ukrainian budget did not spend significant amounts of money on the implementation of this ban.

A potential counterargument may be that since the technical implementation was put on the shoulders of the providers, they themselves could already incur losses and thus pay less to the Ukrainian budget, but the fact is that 6 years after the blocking, the main Ukrainian providers continue to work and pay revenues to the Ukrainian budget.

Experts #2 and #5 also drew attention to the fact that the blocking could potentially hit Ukrainian small businesses that operated on VK. However, they also admit that although the ban on VK could have hit small businesses at first, Ukrainian entrepreneurs were not left without an alternative and most of them moved to Instagram, which, according to expert #2, turned out to be an “even better” platform for trading.

It should also be noted that in the media, which at that time actively covered the blocking processes and provided, among other things, a platform for serious criticism of the decision, there were no negative comments aimed specifically at the resource part of the policy.

Thus, I can state with confidence that, in terms of the use of resources, the blocking of Russian social networks was a *success* – with minimal or no spending by the Ukrainian budget a visible effect was achieved in restricting access to Russian social networks for large amounts of population.

### **Actor/interest indicator**

The next aspect to consider is whether there was a particular group within Ukraine that benefited from the ban on Russian social networks. The very essence of the policy of blocking such large social networks as VK and OK (which at the time of blocking in Ukraine had 12.9 and 5.5 million users, respectively) suggests that the policy was not aimed at the benefit of a certain group of population or interest group in Ukraine.

A similar point of view is shared by experts #1, #2, #3, and #5 who argue that this policy “specifically benefited Ukrainians at large” and “benefited Ukrainians in general”. Based on

the statements, press releases, and comments of the Ukrainian authorities for the media, I can distinguish several potential groups, who have benefited from the policy, namely 1) Ukrainian or Western Internet services (the same Western social networks that have dramatically increased their audience in Ukraine after the ban); 2) Ukrainian anti-piracy organizations and producers of Ukrainian licensed content; 3) Children who could potentially become members of suicide groups and vulnerable groups who could have been affected by pornography.

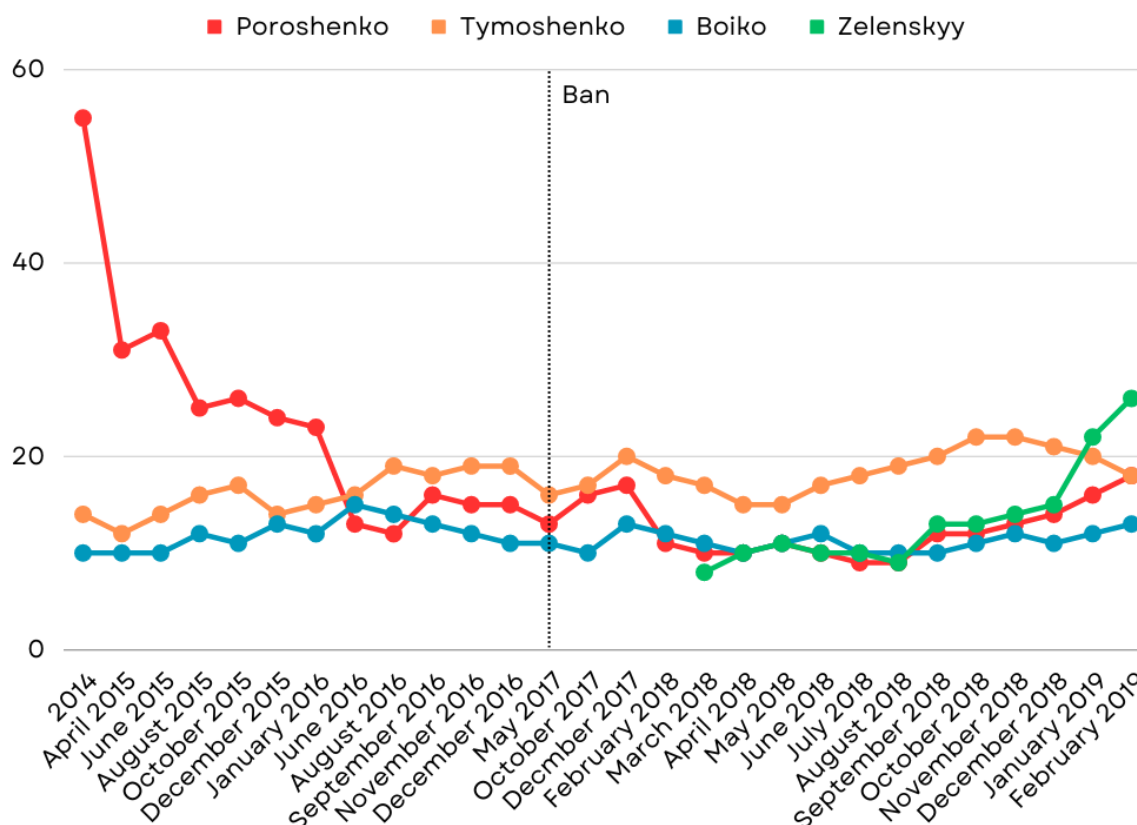
To sum up the actor/interest indicator, I can state that as intended broad target group has benefited from the policy (which is proven by the outcome indicator) therefore it can be considered as an actor/interest *success or a resilient success*.

## **Political dimension**

### **Government popularity indicator**

To assess the impact of the ban on the popularity of the Ukrainian authorities, I will consider several aspects, namely, I will look at the change in electoral preferences of Ukrainians following the ban and will also consider the context of the political situation in Ukraine in that period.

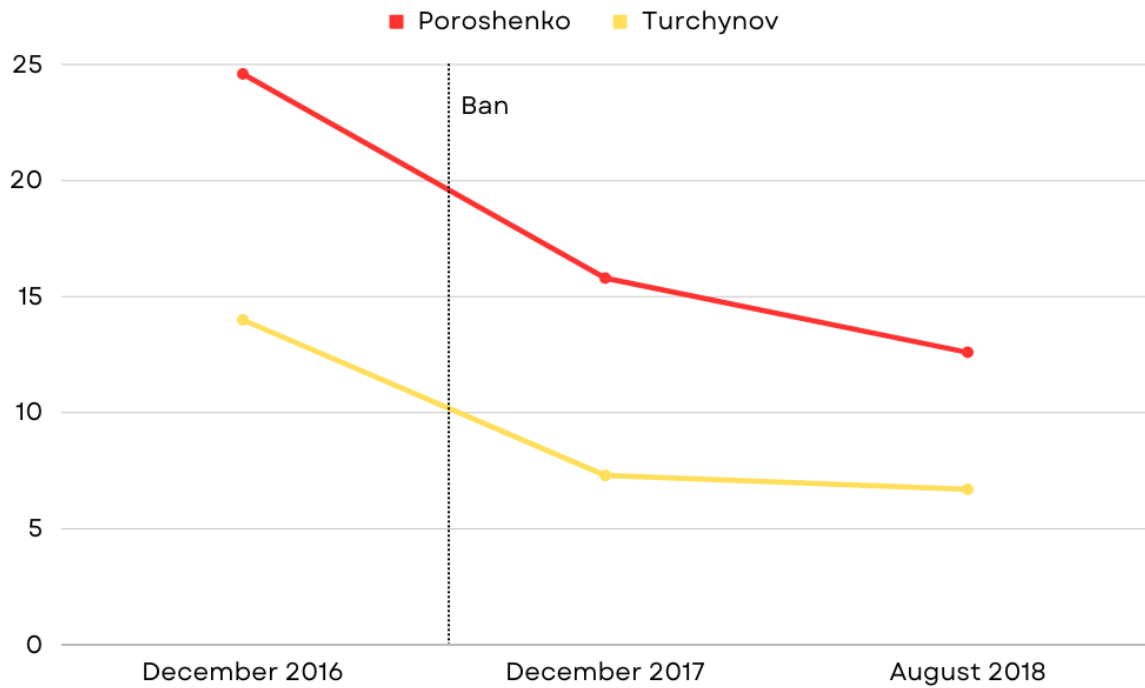




Graph 6: : Support of candidates In President by those Ukrainians who have decided and planning to vote (Rating Group 2019)

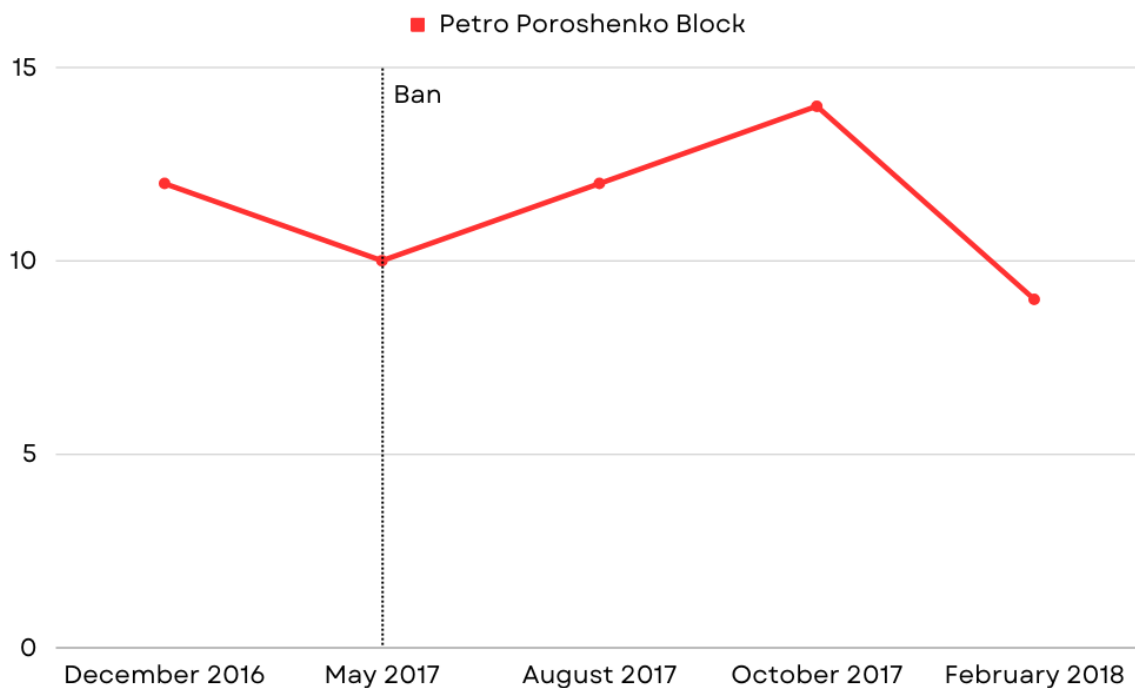
Graph 6 allows analyzing ratings of the main presidential candidates over a long time period and in dynamics. The first conclusion that can be drawn is that President Poroshenko lost his electoral popularity at least a year before the imposition of sanctions against Russian social networks, in 2014-2016. The second conclusion is that immediately after the imposition of sanctions, according to October and December 2017 data, Poroshenko's ratings not only did not decrease but also slightly increased, although, in the long term, they still fell to their

minimum values in 2018.



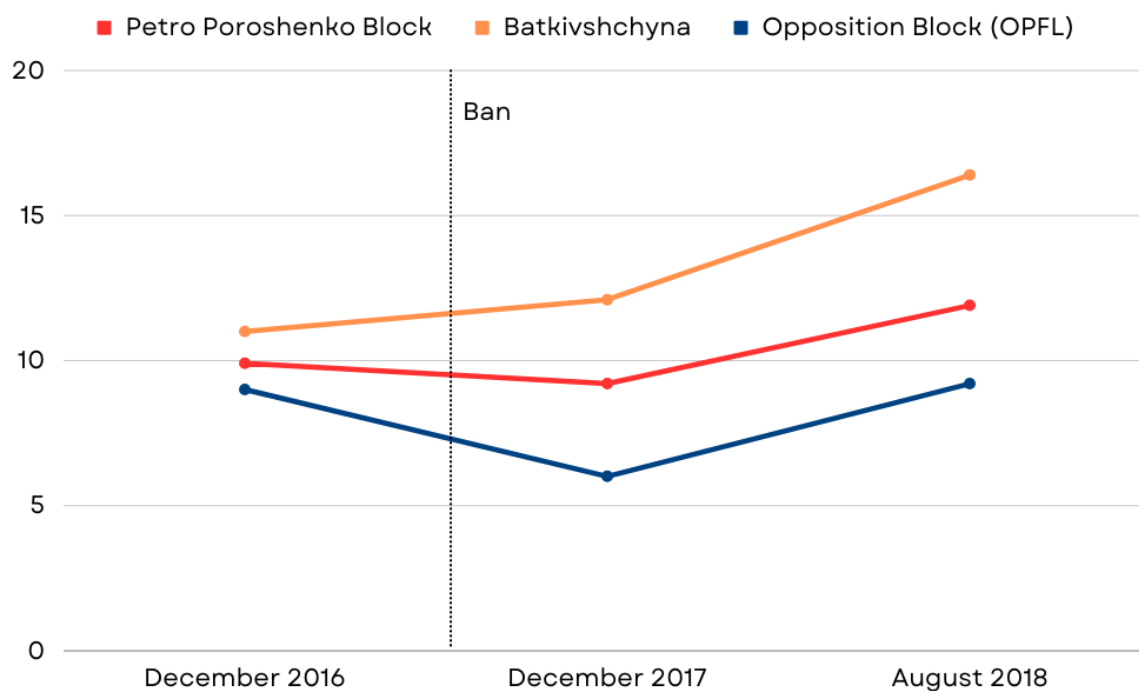
*Graph 7: Percentage of Ukrainians who “trust” and “rather trust” Poroshenko and Turchynov (Foundation of Democratic Initiatives 2016; 2017a; 2018)*

Graph 7 is not including numbers from October-December 2017, unlike the previous one, and here it can be seen that in a perspective of yearly measurements, both Petro Poroshenko and Oleksandr Turchynov have been steadily losing the trust of Ukrainians over 2016-2018.



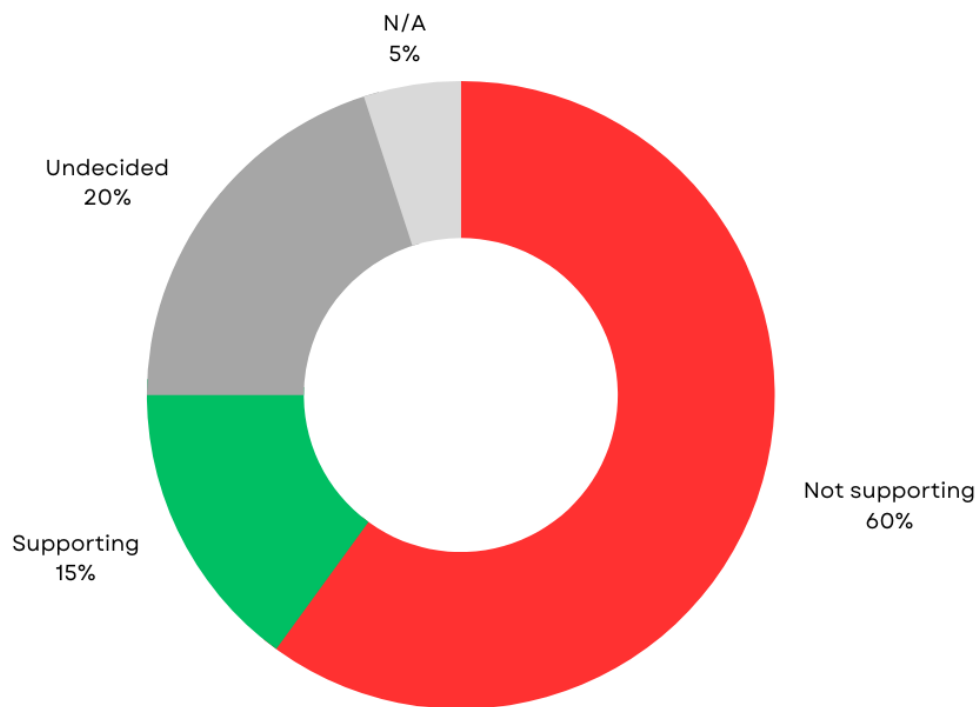
*Graph 8: Percentage of Ukrainians who decided who they will vote for and planning to vote on Parliamentary Elections (Rating Group 2018)*

Party ratings on Graph 8, on the other hand, are showing the same temporary spike in the popularity of the government party at the same time as it happens with the ratings of President Poroshenko in Graph 6. However, this Graph also shows that, again, at the same time as Poroshenko, his party ratings are significantly falling in 2018.



*Graph 9: Percentage of Ukrainians who decided who they will vote for and planning to vote on Parliamentary Elections (Foundation of Democratic Initiatives 2016; 2017a; 2018)*

The same data on parties from another sociological agency on Graph 9 shows that party ratings of governmental Petro Poroshenko Block have not changed much at the end of 2017 in comparison with the end of 2016 and started even gaining more electorate in the middle 2018, closer to 2019 elections.



*Graph 10: Support of the ban on Russian social networks and Internet-services (Rating Group 2017b)*

Finally, at the request of one of the Ukrainian media, the sociological agency Rating has conducted a study on support of the ban on Russian social networks and Internet services. The data on Graph 10 shows that 60% of respondents were not supporting the ban, 15% – supported it, and 20% – did not decide. According to the Rating, the biggest supporters of a ban were from Western Ukraine, having higher education, and were voters of Block of Petro Poroshenko, Svoboda, and Civic Position parties.

### ***Confounding factors and the spike in government popularity after the ban***

Prior to making any conclusions on the influence of the ban on the government's popularity, it is important to “isolate and ascertain the effect of the policy on the outcome, controlling for

other potential causal factors” (Marsh McConnell 2010). In this case, it means that to make any strong conclusions it is required to isolate the effect of the ban on electoral preferences from the effects of other events in the same period, which is hard as there is no such detailed research available in Ukraine. However, I can still provide a certain contextual detail that would give a chance to understand the influence of the ban on the popularity of authorities and their chances to be re-elected.

Ukrainian voters tend to quickly become disillusioned with their government after it is elected, and this decline is usually seen after a short period of high hopes, for example, after the 2004 and 2014 revolutions (Rating Group 2019). For Petro Poroshenko and his political party, the struggle for most voters ended in 2016, when both his ratings and those of his party dropped to values below 10-20%. Within all the Graphs provided in this section, after 2016 I can only see minor fluctuations and it is hard to make conclusions on the influence of the ban on electoral preferences based on that data.

The only visible trend is the temporary spike in popularity of both Poroshenko and his party in a period right after the ban, which is contradictory to the logic of the censorship policies, which tend to be unpopular and specifically the data from Graph 8, where it can be seen that ban was unpopular in Ukraine. A possible explanation for this may be another, much more important event in the eyes of the Ukrainian community, which also fell on May-June 2017, namely the introduction of a visa-free regime for Ukraine with the European Union. According to a survey by the Foundation for Democratic Initiatives, it was the introduction of a visa-free regime that became the key event of 2017 for Ukrainians, while the ban on Russian social networks was not even included in the list (Foundation for Democratic Initiatives 2017). Potentially another

event that slightly increased the rating of the government could have been the successful hosting of the Eurovision song contest in May 2017.

***Electoral strategy of Poroshenko and the influence of the ban on his chances of being re-elected***

Nevertheless, after the temporary spike in 2017, Poroshenko's and his party's ratings have fallen again in 2018 and the history shows that both he and his party did not manage to get re-elected. Apparently, it should be strictly stated that the ban did not help them in getting re-elected and therefore was a political failure, however, there is an important electoral contextual detail that should be mentioned. Poroshenko's strategy, according to journalists (Rudenko 2019, Leshchenko 2019), was to reach the second round of the Presidential elections in 2019, where he had to face one of the other Ukrainian politicians-old-timers (for example, Tymoshenko, or, ideally, pro-Russian candidate – Boiko, Medvedchuk, or Rabinovich). Poroshenko, consistently building his image as a patriot, defender of Ukraine, and Euro-Atlanticist wanted to outrun Tymoshenko (known for signing an “enslaving contract” with Gazprom) or the pro-Russian Boiko, Medvedchuk, and Rabinovich, promoting the argument that he is not perfect, but they are even worse, as they are ready to cooperate with Russia.

The ban on Russian social networks fit into the strategy of building the image of the defender of Ukraine from the threat of Russia, and it can be assumed that this was the reason that prompted Poroshenko to adopt this decision. According to expert #3 who worked in the structures of the Ukrainian government responsible for combating disinformation, this decision had a different effect on the trust of Ukrainians towards the government – “it increased trust for some and decreased it for others.” Probably, Poroshenko believed that such a decision would

cement the support of his 10-20% of the key electorate, which would bring him to the second round of elections, where he would face a pro-Russian opponent against which he had solid chances. If he succeeded, the ban policy could have been called successful in terms of impact on the popularity of the government. The fact is that Poroshenko failed to carry out his plan. After the post-Maidan leaders of Ukraine failed to bring Ukrainians promised changes, specifically in terms of the fight against corruption and economic development, Ukrainians became disappointed not only in the ruling authorities but in the entire political class. This is what led to the fact that the non-systemic candidate Volodymyr Zelensky and his new Servant of the People party were able to win a landslide in the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019. If not for the factor of Zelensky, Poroshenko's plan, within which the ban policy fits, could have a higher chance of success.

### ***Opposition to the ban and influence on Poroshenko's image***

Counterargument can be provided that the ban policy has undermined the image of Poroshenko in the eyes of society due to the consolidated opposition effort towards the ban. However, it must be acknowledged, that besides Ukrainians in general not supporting the ban, the opposition to this decision was not broad enough to force the government to reconsider its decision and that could not in the long term undermined the remaining confidence of Ukrainians in Poroshenko and his party. The pro-Russian "Opposition Bloc", which has 43 MPs out of 450 in the Ukrainian parliament, was the only parliamentary party that came out with an articulated criticism of the decision, calling it "illegal" and "a crime against society" (Ukrainska Pravda 2017), while other opposition parties did not comment on the decision and remained neutral. Closer to the 2019 elections, Volodymyr Zelensky, in an interview, softly criticized the decision, saying: "And what have we achieved? Our people began to circumvent the ban"



(RBK-Ukraine 2019). However, having already become president, in 2020 Zelensky prolonged the duration of the ban and even expanded the policy of censoring Russian and pro-Russian content and media (President of Ukraine 2021).

Another fact is that the decision to ban, although it was not supported by 60% of Ukrainians, did not turn into mass protests. After the ban, 50 people gathered for a demonstration in Kyiv (Radio Free Liberty 2017) and only two people – in Odesa (Apostrophe 2017). The only visible form of opposition to the decision was the online petition on the website of the President of Ukraine, which managed to get the necessary 25,000 votes and which Poroshenko rejected mentioning it is “impossible” to lift the ban (Poroshenko 2017b).

The expert community also did not have a consolidated opposing stance. At the end of May 2017, the Foundation for Democratic Initiatives conducted an expert survey of 40 experts, including key Ukrainian analysts, political scientists, journalists, and public figures. According to the survey, 31 out of 40 experts supported the government's decision and stated that the decision would lead to strengthening the information security of Ukrainians, while 9 opposed it (Foundation of Democratic Initiatives 2017b).

During an expert survey conducted within the framework of this thesis, all experts supported this decision of the government, however to a different degree. Civil society experts #1 and #2 said the decision was “correct” and “priceless”. Former representative of the Ukrainian state structure, expert #3 was “very supportive” of this decision. A non-Ukrainian representative of an international organization, expert #5, said that this decision influenced the influx of Russian disinformation, but at the same time it was a “slightly bad managed step”.

The key opposition force to this decision were Ukrainian organizations advocating freedom of the Internet (for example, the Internet Association of Ukraine (Detector Media 2017)) and some international organizations (for example, the Council of Europe, Freedom House, Human Rights Watch (Radio Free Liberty 2017)). They have most often acted as an alternative to state messages, however, their influence could not undermine the implementation or completely cancel the policy.

Therefore, based on the data above can state that in the context of Ukraine in 2017, the policy of banning Russian social networks was not popular and did not help the government to be re-elected in 2019. However, it would be not right to call this dimension of policy a failure, due to several reasons: 1) Survey data is supporting an argument that this policy rather had not much effect, nor negative, nor positive in terms of overall ratings of the President and his party; 2) Without the factor of start of the political career by Zelensky this policy could have potentially helped the government to fight for re-election as the policy had a positive effect on the key electorate of the President and his party; 3) The policy was controversial, had both equal support (from expert groups) and criticism (from Internet and human rights organizations) but did not have strong political opposition which did not pressure the government to reverse actions, and which most likely did not affect the image of the President and his party to a large extent.

Therefore, I can conclude that in a political dimension, this policy was rather a *conflicted success*.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have evaluated the ban policy of the Ukrainian authorities against the Russian social networks VK and OK. *Programmatically, the policy has proven to be a success*, as it has reached its objective of visibly decreasing an amount of people accessing mentioned networks, partially managed to reach the outcomes – managed to decrease the influx of Russian disinformation and the won time for Ukrainian society to adapt to the Russian disinformation attacks, but has only partly, as a side effect, managed to decrease the vulnerability of the Ukrainians. The policy was effective in terms of use of resources as Ukrainian government did not spend any resources on the implementation of the ban and the policy was effective in benefiting a target group – the general population of Ukraine

From the political standpoint, *the policy has proven to be only a conflicted success* – it cannot be called a success but cannot be called a complete failure either. The results show that policy neither increased nor decreased government popularity, was positively perceived by the key electorate of Petro Poroshenko and his party but negatively perceived by the majority of Ukrainians, did not help the government to get re-elected in 2019, partly because of the factor of Zelensky and contextual changes in the Ukrainian politics in 2018-2019.

Synthesizing together the results of the analysis of two dimensions – programmatic and political, it can be concluded that *the ban of Russian social networks by Ukrainian authorities in 2017 proven to be a policy success to a certain extent*.

Unfortunately, the theoretical framework on which this paper is based on, openly recognizes its limitations in defining the exact extent of the success if there is a difference in the level of

successes in different dimensions. Another issue is whether a policy at all can be considered as a full success or failure, as the full success can be doubtful due to the concept of “success” always being “contested to some degree” (Marsh McConnell 2010). In the context of Ukraine, can we call the ban policy as a “programmatic success” if it, from one standpoint reaches the objectives and part of the outcomes, but from the other point, still limits Internet freedoms and has human rights issues? Can any policy be a total “failure” if even a failure gives an incredibly important experience and lessons which can be later used for the formation of successful policy? However even with a presence of such issues, the use of this theoretical framework provides more than just understanding of the effectiveness of a policy, but a more complex evaluation of the policy in a deeper Ukrainian context, allows us, as researchers, to make conclusions on whether such a policy can be potentially used by other countries and actors.

Continuing my thought, this paper also shows the perspectives of using the ban policy towards a hostile media channel by a democratic state. It is very likely that ban policy, especially towards popular resources, would not be supported by a democratic society. However, the contextual details, for instance the understanding by the society of the extent of threat posed by a resource to national security, the extent of other democratic freedoms, will soften or toughen the reaction of society and change in electoral preferences. From a programmatic perspective, a ban policy can be effective in a short-term period and as an emergency reaction towards the threat of disinformation (for instance, in the situation of the escalation of societal divides, changes of the beginning of a civil conflict or the intervention from another state etc.) In the long-run period, disinformation tends to shift to other resources and therefore bypass the ban.

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