

Google has a plan to stare down fake news on Ukrainian refugees in Europe

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Alphabet Inc.'s Google is hoping an ad campaign can help prevent misinformation percolating about Ukrainian refugees who fled Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion from shaping public opinion.

Google is premiering a series of 90-second videos in Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic that will seek to educate viewers about how to

avoid being manipulated, according to Beth Goldberg, the head of research at its anti-propaganda unit Jigsaw.

The spread of misinformation has become a major political issue in the European Union, with watchdogs warning that Russian-affiliated sites and [social media accounts](#) are promoting false pro-Kremlin narratives six months into the war. An effective response remains elusive, despite an EU ban of Russian state media like RT and new rules ordering [internet giants](#) like Google and Facebook parent Meta Platforms Inc. to police their platforms more strictly for hate speech and fake news.

More than 5.6 million refugees from Ukraine have flooded Europe since the war began, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Many have been welcomed in their host nations, but resentment against them is growing, fueled by surging inflation and [economic concerns](#) as Russia cuts energy supplies.

"We've seen from past waves of migration there are certain tactics which get used, like scapegoating and fear-mongering," Goldberg said in an interview. Google's program will help researchers understand how effective the shorts are at "inoculating" viewers against propaganda, she said.

Russia relies on state-run media, anonymous websites and accounts on [digital platforms](#) like YouTube and TikTok to put out a constant drumbeat of conspiracy theories, ranging from a NATO plot to establish a base in Ukraine to the sale of vast tracts of Ukrainian farmland to US agricultural companies, according to NewsGuard, a startup that tracks news credibility.

Critics say the Kremlin wants to chip away at European unity against the invasion, which has led to unprecedented EU sanctions that have helped hobble Russia's economy and made it more difficult for Russians to

travel to the bloc.

Russia's efforts are designed to "undermine the EU's global standing, reduce the European public's support for Ukraine, and cause political disruption within the EU," said Joseph Bodnar, an analyst focusing on Russian disinformation at the Alliance for Securing Democracy.

Jigsaw will use what it calls "pre-bunking," or an attempt to build resistance to propaganda by explaining how it works, in countries where narratives demonizing Ukrainian refugees are already spreading, according to Goldberg.

The strategy was developed by Jigsaw in partnership with researchers at Cambridge University and Bristol University who published a report last month showing it is more difficult to debunk misinformation after it has gained a foothold.

The study, which involved 30,000 participants, concluded that people from a range of ideological backgrounds were better able to identify falsehoods after watching short, sometimes humorous videos that explain common propaganda tools such as drawing false dichotomies.

Attempts to identify and counter fake news have burgeoned since the invasion. In May, Slovak Facebook feeds were flooded with posts that claimed Ukrainians support fascism and the government in Kyiv was secretly developing biological weapons. Meta at the time said it removed some of the content and was working with third-party fact checkers to expose misinformation.

The Czech Elves, a network of volunteers monitoring online disinformation, said in a May report that Ukrainian refugees were being falsely portrayed as causing prices to rise in the country.

Google's experience could have implications beyond Europe. Social media companies are bracing for a fresh onslaught of misinformation ahead of the 2022 midterm elections in the US. Facebook and TikTok have announced strategies to fact-check posts and highlight misinformation.

However, watchdogs have warned that the volume of content posted on these platforms is difficult to sift through.

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