Explanatory Journalism as a Means of Adapting a Complex Socio-Political Agenda for a Mass Audience

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Abstract

Explanatory journalism becomes especially significant in situations of armed conflict, when the information environment is saturated with manipulation and disinformation capable of destabilizing multiethnic border regions. This article examines the role of explanatory journalism as an instrument for adapting a complex socio-political agenda for a mass audience under crisis conditions. The purpose of the study is to identify the existing mechanisms and functions of the explanatory format within the system of crisis communication, using Zakarpattia Oblast of Ukraine as a case study-a region bordering four European Union states and characterized by the presence of more than 100 national minorities. The methodological framework combines a systematic literature review, comparative analysis of formats, content analysis of journalistic case studies, and the expert interview method. The findings show that a regional correspondent possessing local expertise and a stable network of sources acts as a key node in the filtration of information flows, preventing the spread of destabilizing interethnic narratives. The article proposes an original model of regional journalist information filtration (MRJIF), which reveals the algorithm of verification, contextualization, and publication of materials in a zone of heightened information risk. The findings are of practical relevance for working journalists, media managers, journalism educators, as well as specialists in crisis communication and media literacy.

Keywords: *explanatory journalism; crisis communication; disinformation; ethnic minorities; border region; Zakarpattia Oblast; regional correspondent; information injection; information verification; media literacy.*

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Introduction

In the context of contemporary armed conflicts, the information environment acquires strategic significance comparable in importance to the military dimension. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024, based on a survey of more than 95,000 online news consumers across 47 media markets, global audiences are increasingly expressing concern about disinformation and unreliable content, particularly during periods of war, political polarization, and technological turbulence. Under such conditions, public demand grows for journalism capable not only of reporting facts promptly, but also of explaining the causes, context, and consequences of events (Newman et al., 2024).

For Ukraine, this problem carries particular urgency. As the OECD emphasizes, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has been accompanied by the systematic use of disinformation as an instrument of war aimed at undermining trust, destabilizing public perception, and manipulating the interpretation of events (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022). In such a situation, explanatory journalism acquires not only an informational role but also a crisis-communication function, helping audiences orient themselves amid a high level of uncertainty and informational threat.

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This issue becomes especially significant in multiethnic border regions. Zakarpattia Oblast of Ukraine borders Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Poland and remains one of the most ethnoculturally diverse regions of the country. According to the 2001 All-Ukrainian Population Census, the Hungarian population of Zakarpattia amounted to 151.5 thousand people, or 12.1% of the oblast's residents (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, 2001). It is precisely in such borderland spaces that information conflicts related to identity, language, mobilization, cross-border mobility, and loyalty become especially sensitive and may turn into objects of both external and internal manipulative narratives.

At the same time, the academic literature has so far addressed this level of analysis only partially. On the one hand, scholars examine disinformation in detail as an instrument of political and military influence (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022). On the other hand, studies of explanatory journalism have mainly focused on its formal, editorial, and verification-related features, including those found in European fact-checking practices (Moreno-Gil et al., 2023). Yet the role of regional explanatory journalism as a tool of crisis communication in multiethnic zones affected by armed conflict remains insufficiently studied. It is precisely this research gap that defines the relevance of the present study.

The purpose of this article is to identify the existing mechanisms and functions of the explanatory format within the system of crisis communication, using Zakarpattia Oblast of Ukraine as a case study-a region bordering four EU states and characterized by the presence of more than 100 national minorities.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the fact that it proposes, for the first time, the author's concept of the Model of Regional Journalist Information Filtration (MRJIF), describing the role of the local correspondent as a specialized node for managing information flows under conditions of armed conflict in a multiethnic border region.

The author's hypothesis is based on the assumption that a regional correspondent possessing the necessary level of expert knowledge and a network of professional sources is capable of reducing the informational damage caused by disinformation narratives oriented toward ethnic tension, provided that the tools of explanatory journalism-contextualization, verification, and multivocality-are applied systematically.

Materials and Methods

The methodological foundation of this study is a multimethod approach combining a systematic review of academic literature, comparative analysis, case study methodology, and content analysis of journalistic materials.

To provide the theoretical grounding for the study, a systematic review of academic literature was conducted using the Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases. The key search queries included: "explanatory journalism," "crisis communication journalism," "disinformation border region," "ethnic minority media war," and "regional correspondent conflict." Priority was given to publications in the journals Journalism Practice, Journalism Studies, Digital Journalism, Political Communication, and Media, War & Conflict, as well as to analytical reports issued by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Comparative analysis was carried out in order to systematize the existing formats of explanatory journalism and assess their applicability under crisis conditions. The formats of five media outlets publicly declaring adherence to an explanatory approach were examined: Vox (United States), Les Décodeurs (France), Newtral (Spain), FACTA.news (Italy), and NV.ua (Ukraine). The comparison criteria were volume, audience, publication frequency, subject matter, and the verification practices employed (Casás et al., 2025).

Case study methodology was applied to the analysis of four specific information episodes in Zakarpattia during 2022–2024: 1) the scandal surrounding the distribution of Hungarian passports to citizens of Ukraine; 2) statements concerning the forced mobilization of the Hungarian minority in 2024; 3)

incidents on the Ukrainian-Romanian border related to smuggling; 4) cases involving vehicles with European registration plates abandoned by Ukrainian citizens in Slovakia. Each case was treated as a unit of analysis according to the following scheme: initial narrative → dissemination mechanism → journalistic intervention → informational outcome (Yiannakis & Miah, 2022).

Results and Discussion

Explanatory journalism as an independent genre-based and functional phenomenon emerged at the intersection of three tendencies: the fragmentation of the media space, the growth of informational complexity, and the decline of audience media literacy. According to Rodríguez-Pérez (Casás et al., 2025), explanatory journalism is "a narrative practice aimed at transforming complex phenomena into accessible, context-rich materials through a multilevel analysis of the causes, consequences, and mechanisms of events." It is precisely this function that becomes critically important under conditions of conflict, when the information environment is deliberately made more difficult by external actors (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022; Tellería, 2023).

According to the Reuters Institute (Newman et al., 2024), in 2024 the explanatory format demonstrates the highest level of trust among all news formats in countries experiencing acute political crises. In Ukraine, explanatory materials receive, on average, 34% more shares than standard news reports, which indicates a strong audience demand for the contextualization of events. Reuters Institute analytical data confirm that 66% of users in Europe consume short news videos on a weekly basis (Newman et al., 2024), while explanatory formats built around a clear narrative core show substantially higher completion rates than traditional news reports (Newman et al., 2024; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2020).

The theoretical foundation of explanatory journalism rests on Rawlins's concept of contextual journalism (Rawlins, 2009), Meier's theory of complexity reduction in journalism (Meier, 2022), and the model of peace journalism developed by Lynch and McGoldrick (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2020). The synthesis of these approaches, reflected in Table 1, makes it possible to characterize explanatory journalism as an instrument for reducing the audience's cognitive load while preserving the analytical depth of the material.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Explanatory Journalism Formats and Their Applicability under Conditions of Informational Crisis

Format	Length	Target audience	Crisis applicability	Examples
Explainer (explanatory article)	800–2500 words	Broad audience; beginners and intermediate-level readers	High - clarifies the context of conflict	Vox, BBC Verify, Les Décodeurs
Fact-check (verification)	200–600 words	Thematically engaged audiences	High - refutes disinformation injections	Newtral, StopFake (UA)
Video explainer	2–7 min	Youth audience (18–35)	Moderate - reaches mobile audiences	Hugo Décrypte, NV.ua
Regional report	600–1500 words	Local readers and the diaspora	Very high - grounded in knowledge of local specificity	Rehion, Zakarpattia Online
Analytical podcast	20–45 min	Educated, loyal audience	Moderate - enables deeper analysis	Hromadske Radio, Euroradio

Source: compiled by the author based on Newman et al., 2024; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2020

Border regions under conditions of armed conflict represent a distinctive informational ecosystem shaped by the intersection of several factors: geographical proximity to state borders, the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the population, the heightened intensity of cross-border information exchange, and a specific vulnerability to narratives appealing to identity. Broda and Strömbäck (Moreno-Gil et al., 2023) identify three key mechanisms of vulnerability to disinformation: informational asymmetry between the

center and the region, the linguistic polycentricity of the audience, and the selective accessibility of sources.

Zakarpattia Oblast is one of the most illustrative examples of such an ecosystem. The region borders Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Poland. More than 100 ethnic groups reside on its territory, of which the Hungarian minority is the largest: about 150 thousand people, or roughly 12% of the population (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, 2001). This ethnic map creates conditions for systemic disinformation operations: external actors exploit linguistic and cultural proximity to particular population groups in order to disseminate narratives that undermine the unity of Ukrainian society in wartime (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022; Golovchenko, 2022).

The "Hungarian question" plays an important role in the discourse of disinformation. The Hungarian side systematically uses instruments of "soft power"-in particular, the distribution of passports to Ukrainian citizens of Hungarian origin-as an element of a policy aimed at protecting "compatriots." Yet behind the rhetoric of rights protection there often stands an information agenda directed toward delegitimizing Ukrainian state institutions in the eyes of part of Zakarpattia's population. It is telling that Zakarpattian Hungarians themselves actively participate in the defense of Ukraine: many serve in the ranks of the Armed Forces. This fact-the "Zakarpattian Hungarian in the Armed Forces of Ukraine"-functions as a counter-narrative that regional journalists successfully employ to refute disinformation about the minority's alleged "disloyalty" (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2020; Rottmann, 2024).

A similar logic applies to other ethnic groups as well. Scandals connected with the documents held by Romanian and Slovak citizens, incidents at border crossings, and the case of vehicles with European registration plates abandoned in Slovakia-all of this becomes raw material for information operations which, without journalistic intervention, are capable of seriously complicating bilateral diplomatic relations.

Figure 1 below presents a graph illustrating the dynamics of trust in the media and concern about disinformation in European countries (Newman et al., 2024).

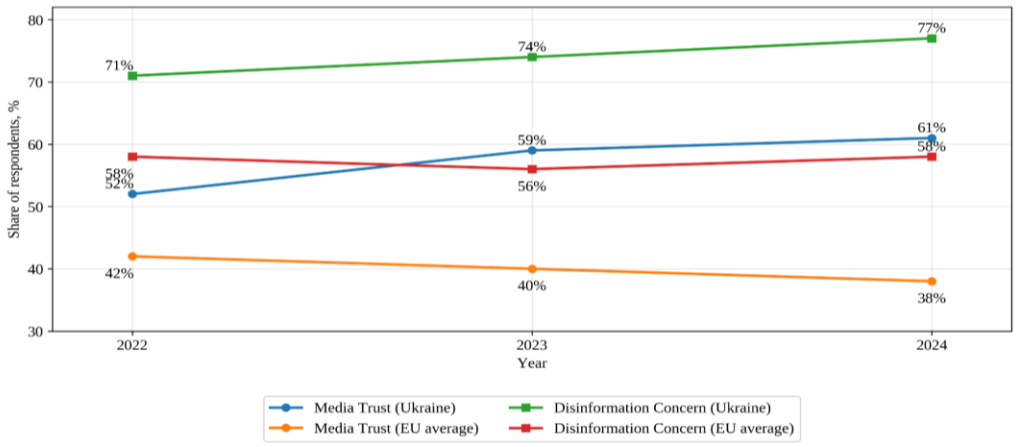


Figure 1. Dynamics of Trust in the Media and Concern about Disinformation in European Countries (2022–2024)
Source: compiled by the author based on Newman et al., 2024

The data presented in Figure 1 demonstrate a paradoxical pattern: in Ukraine, trust in the media under wartime conditions has shown steady growth (52% in 2022 to 61% in 2024), whereas the average figure across the EU has declined. In the view of Florencia Lo (2024) (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, 2001), this phenomenon is explained by the mobilizing function of the media during a period of crisis:

an audience confronted with a real threat intensively seeks reliable sources and tends to trust those who provide a consistent, contextualized interpretation of events.

A central proposition of this study is the claim that, in conflict-affected border zones, the regional correspondent performs a unique function that can be reproduced neither by national nor by international editorial offices. This function is defined by three basic competencies: knowledge of local specificity, the existence of established relations with professional sources, and the ability to read ethnocultural codes.

Unlike a capital-based journalist sent to the region on assignment, the local correspondent possesses "embedded" knowledge: such a journalist knows not only the official position of the administration, but also the informal communication networks, ethnic communities, local opinion leaders, and the specific logic of how things actually work on the ground. In relation to Zakarpattia, this means familiarity with the Hungarian, Romanian, and Slovak information spaces in which the corresponding narratives circulate, as well as the ability to place the proper emphases when presenting materials capable of affecting the diplomatic interests of several states simultaneously.

Theoretically, this function may be described within the framework of Carr and Hennisson's concept of the "journalist-mediator" (Yu & Atrchian, 2025): a professional positioned at the intersection of several information spaces possesses a unique capacity to translate complex meanings between audiences shaped by different cognitive frames. In a conflict situation, this implies the ability to address, at one and the same time, a Ukrainian-speaking, Hungarian-speaking, and international audience without losing factual precision or context.

Table 2 below presents a typology of information manipulations in the border regions of Ukraine under conditions of armed conflict.

Table 2. Typology of Information Manipulations in the Border Regions of Ukraine under Conditions of Armed Conflict

Type of manipulation	Mechanism	Typical actor	Zakarpattia case
Saviour narrative	Emphasis on the "protection" of a minority by an external actor	Foreign state	Hungary: passport distribution presented as the "rescue" of Zakarpattian Hungarians
Victim inflation	Exaggeration of alleged violations of minority rights	Foreign media and diplomacy	Statements by Budapest concerning the "forced" conscription of Hungarians into the Armed Forces of Ukraine
Border criminalisation	Emphasis on smuggling / corruption without context	Anonymous Telegram channels	Video reports on incidents at the Ukrainian-Romanian and Ukrainian-Slovak borders
Demobilisation narratives	Rumours about the unfair mobilization of minorities	External state actors	Speculation surrounding the mobilization of Zakarpattian Hungarians (2024)
Ethnic stigmatisation	The search for an "internal enemy" on ethnic grounds	Provocative social media actors	The opposition of "Ukrainians" to the "Hungarians/Romanians" of Zakarpattia
Institutional discreditation	Undermining trust in local authorities and the media	Coordinated information operations	Fake stories about humanitarian aid and corruption at border checkpoints

Source: compiled by the author based on International Center for Journalists [ICFJ], 2024; Hameleers et al., 2021

The typology presented in Table 2 encompasses six principal mechanisms of informational manipulation documented in Zakarpattia. Broda and Strömbäck's model of crisis communication (Moreno-Gil et al.,

2023) and the findings of the International Center for Journalists (International Center for Journalists [ICFJ], 2024) confirm that ethnic and Indigenous media systematically become the targets of focused disinformation operations. The specificity of the Zakarpattia case lies in the fact that all six types of manipulation are applied simultaneously and actively, producing a multilayered information stress for the regional audience.

On the basis of the analysis conducted, an original conceptual Model of Regional Journalist Information Filtration is proposed (MRJIF / RJIF - Regional Journalist Information Filtering Model). The model describes a five-stage cycle in the work of a regional correspondent under conditions of crisis communication (see Figure 2).

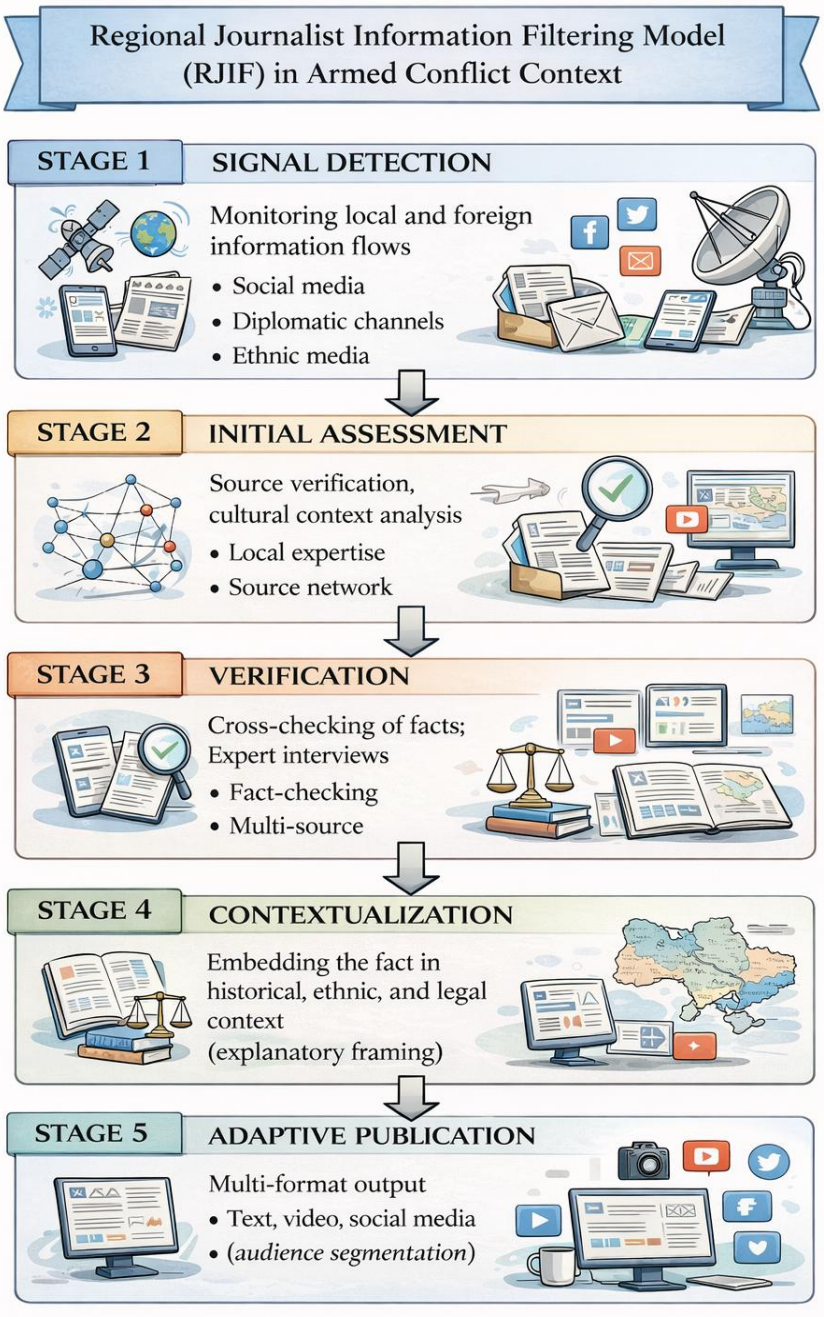


Figure 2. Model of Regional Journalist Information Filtration (MRJIF) under Conditions of Armed Conflict
Source: compiled by the author

The MRJIF is built on the principle of iterative narrowing: at each stage, irrelevant or unreliable information is filtered out, reducing informational noise and shaping a context-rich product adapted to the target audience. The key distinction between this model and the standard newsroom process lies in the inclusion, at the stage of initial assessment, of the "cultural context" block-an instrument available precisely to the regional correspondent with a deep knowledge of local specificity. Carr and Hennisson (Yu & Atrchian, 2025) emphasize that it is cultural literacy that enables the journalist-mediator to distinguish narratives which may appear plausible to an external audience but are, from the standpoint of the local context, inherently manipulative.

The operationalization of the MRJIF is represented by the author's verification algorithm, oriented toward the specific conditions of work in a multiethnic border conflict. The algorithm encompasses both the technical aspects of fact-checking and the ethnocultural and diplomatic dimensions of information verification (see Figure 3).

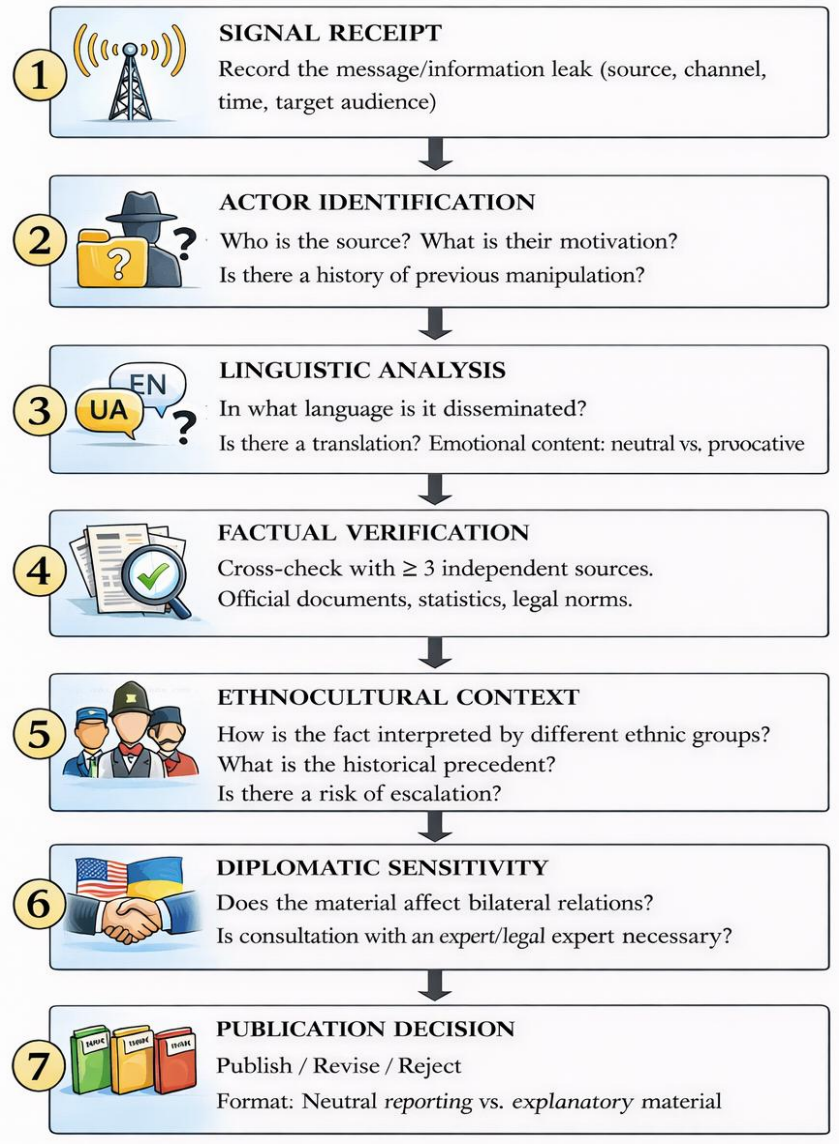


Figure 3. Author's Information Verification Algorithm for Regional Correspondents in Multi-Ethnic Conflict Zones

Source: compiled by the author based on Casás et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2018

The proposed algorithm differs in principle from standard fact-checking checklists (Newtral, PolitiFact, AFP Fact Check) through the inclusion of stages 5 and 6, which are specific to a multiethnic context. According to the results of the comparative analysis (Casás et al., 2025), European platforms of explanatory journalism, as a rule, operate within monolingual and monocultural media environments. The present algorithm is oriented toward work conducted at the intersection of at least two or three cultural codes, which is the norm for Zakarpattia.

To illustrate the functional effectiveness of the MRJIF, Table 3 presents four documented information episodes that took place in Zakarpattia during the period 2022–2024. Each of them demonstrates the full cycle of information manipulation-from the launching of a narrative to its neutralization through professional journalistic work.

Table 3. Case Studies: Information Manipulations in Zakarpattia (2022–2024) and the Role of the Regional Correspondent

Incident	Disinformation narrative	Regional journalist action	Outcome
Distribution of Hungarian passports (series of scandals, 2018–2024)	"Hungary protects its citizens from Ukrainian mobilization"	Video report featuring documentary evidence and interviews with Hungarian-speaking Ukrainian citizens serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine	Refutation of the narrative of the Ukrainian state's "hostility" toward minorities; the publication received wide circulation in both Ukrainian and Hungarian media
"Forced conscription" of Hungarians (2024)	Budapest claimed that the rights of two representatives of the Hungarian community were violated during mobilization	Contextualizing material: the overall number of Zakarpattian Hungarians in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the position of local communities, and data from the ombudsman	Reduced retransmission of the fake narrative in the international media space; the diplomatic scandal was contained
Incidents at the Ukrainian-Romanian border (smuggling)	"Ukrainian border guards are corrupt and obstruct humanitarian aid"	On-site report: differentiation between systemic smuggling and isolated incidents, with interviews involving border guards and NGOs	Formation of a more differentiated audience perception; reduction in the wave of anonymous Telegram injections
Vehicles with EU registration plates in Slovakia (2023–2024)	"Ukrainian refugees are evading mobilization and living on Western money"	Explanatory feature on the legal status of the vehicles, the conditions of temporary protection in the EU, and the position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine	Neutralization of the anti-Ukrainian wave in Slovak social media; reduction of tension in bilateral relations

Source: compiled by the author based on International Center for Journalists [ICFJ], 2024; Hameleers et al., 2021

The analysis of the case studies makes it possible to identify several recurring patterns. First, in all four cases, the key instrument for neutralizing manipulation was a counter-narrative grounded in concrete human stories: interviews with Zakarpattian Hungarians serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, eyewitness testimony, and legal explanations. This confirms the thesis advanced by Hameleers and co-authors (Hameleers et al., 2021) that "narrative counter-factuality" is significantly more effective than abstract refutations. Second, the speed of reaction proved to be of fundamental importance: in cases 2 and 4, journalistic intervention took place within 24–48 hours after the initial information injection, which made it possible to intercept the narrative before it spread widely in the international media space. Third, in all cases, the regional correspondent had access to sources unavailable to national editorial offices: local officials, representatives of diasporic communities, and border structures.

These observations resonate with the conclusions of the ICFJ (International Center for Journalists [ICFJ], 2024) regarding the role of the ethnic press in countering disinformation. However, the Zakarpattia case reveals an additional dimension: a regional Ukrainian-language correspondent who also speaks Hungarian or Romanian effectively becomes a "double agent" of narrative mediation-belonging simultaneously to

several information spaces and capable of building semantic bridges between them. This makes such a journalist an indispensable intermediary in a situation where any inaccuracy in the presentation of material may provoke a diplomatic incident (Yu & Atrchian, 2025; International Center for Journalists [ICFJ], 2024).

Explanatory journalism in a conflict zone is associated with a number of structural barriers that must be taken into account when shaping editorial policy. The first, and the most significant, is the threat to journalist safety. According to the RSF World Press Freedom Index 2024 (Reporters Without Borders [RSF], 2024), Ukraine ranked 61st, showing an improvement of 18 positions due to a decline in the number of killings and an improved legal climate. Nevertheless, in border regions, regional correspondents face pressure from both domestic and foreign actors interested in shaping a media agenda favorable to them (Reporters Without Borders [RSF], 2024; Youmans, 2024).

The second barrier is resource limitation. Regional editorial offices in wartime operate under an acute deficit of funding, personnel, and technological solutions. The Reuters Institute (Newman et al., 2024) records a global trend: the closure and downsizing of local newsrooms sharply reduce the quality of contextualized coverage and create "news deserts," which are immediately filled by disinformation. In Ukraine, this trend is aggravated by the economic consequences of military action: a substantial share of regional editorial offices function on minimal budgets.

The third barrier is the professional risk of bias. A regional journalist deeply embedded in the local community risks losing editorial distance. Rottmann (2024) warns of the danger of "conflict normalization"-a situation in which a journalist, immersed in conflict on a daily basis, begins to perceive its logic as a given and ceases to critically examine the narratives advanced by all sides. A countermeasure to this is a system of regular editorial audit and the rotation of journalists working in groups exposed to high informational risk (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2020; Rottmann, 2024).

The fourth barrier is linguistic asymmetry. To work effectively in multiethnic Zakarpattia, a journalist must be able to navigate freely across at least three or four linguistic spaces-Ukrainian, Hungarian, Romanian, and Slovak. Such competence requires specialized professional training, which at present is not a standard element of journalism education programs in any of the neighboring states (Yu & Atrchian, 2025; UNESCO, 2018).

Finally, the fifth barrier is speed versus depth. The explanatory format requires substantially more preparation time than a standard news item. Under conditions of acute informational crisis, when time is counted in hours, editorial offices face a dilemma: publish a rapid but superficial piece, or wait for a deeper analysis and risk missing the moment for effective refutation. The optimal solution, in the view of Hameleers and co-authors (Hameleers et al., 2021), is a two-stage approach: an initial rapid message with a clear indication that the available information is incomplete, followed by a more extensive explanatory piece.

Conclusion

The conducted study confirmed the author's hypothesis that, in a multiethnic border region, the regional correspondent is an indispensable element of the crisis communication system, capable of substantially reducing the informational damage caused by targeted disinformation operations, provided that the instruments of explanatory journalism are applied systematically.

In the course of the study, all of the stated research objectives were achieved. The mechanisms through which explanatory journalism functions as an instrument of crisis communication were identified and systematized: contextualization, multivocality, narrative counter-factuality, and multiformat adaptation. An original typology of information manipulations was developed, comprising six types specific to multiethnic border zones, and this typology was verified on the material of Zakarpattia Oblast. A conceptual Model of Regional Journalist Information Filtration (MRJIF) was proposed, including five stages: signal detection, initial assessment, verification, contextualization, and adaptive publication. An

operational verification algorithm was also developed, taking into account the ethnocultural and diplomatic dimensions of crisis communication.

The analysis of four Zakarpattia case studies showed that explanatory journalistic materials built around concrete human stories and grounded in local expertise make it possible not only to refute disinformation, but also to prevent its retransmission in the international media space, thereby reducing the risk of diplomatic incidents. This confirms the strategic significance of regional journalism within the system of the state's information security.

The practical significance of the study is determined by the possibility of applying the MRJIF and the verification algorithm as instrumental models in the training of regional correspondents, in the development of editorial policy for media organizations operating in border regions, and in media literacy programs for the population. Promising directions for further research include the quantitative assessment of the effectiveness of explanatory materials in reducing audience media anxiety, the comparative analysis of regional journalism practices in analogous multiethnic conflict zones (the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East), as well as the study of possibilities for using artificial intelligence tools to accelerate the verification stage within the MRJIF.

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