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## MODERATION OF THE UKRAINIAN CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS: METAMORPHOSIS AFTER THE 2022 RUSSIAN AGGRESSION\*

Amidst the backdrop of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the surge of warrelated content on social media platforms, this article delves into the evolving landscape of content moderation on Meta platforms - Facebook and Instagram. The purpose of the article is to explore the peculiarities, identify the challenges, and suggest policy recommendations for improving the moderation of Ukrainian war-related content on Facebook and Instagram following the full-scale Russian invasion.

The research demonstrates that Meta platforms apply the following restrictions for moderating content (including war-related content): limiting certain functions on social media, reducing content distribution, removing content, disabling accounts, removing Pages and groups, and providing warning screens on sensitive or misleading content. The restrictions affected Ukrainian media, journalists, bloggers, activists, and ordinary users documenting Russia's aggression. The most censored content included epithets to describe Russians, war-related satire, posts about the Azov Regiment, calls for violence against Russians, and violent and graphic content related to the war in Ukraine.

To address existing content moderation challenges, it is recommended that Facebook and Instagram increase the transparency of their community standards and guidelines, stop blocking satirical content, and adapt/update their policies to fit the geopolitical realities of international armed conflicts.

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**Keywords:** Meta, Facebook, Instagram, social media platforms, content moderation, content restrictions, Ukraine, Russia-Ukraine war.

## Модерація українського контенту у соцмережах: МЕТАморфози після російської агресії 2022

У статті досліджується модерація контенту про війну в українському сегменті Facebook і Instagram. Мета статті - визначити особливості й виклики, а також виробити рекомендації щодо поліпшення процесу модерації контенту про війну, поширюваного українськими медійниками у Facebook та Instagram після початку повномасштабного російського вторгнення. Для досягнення вказаної мети вирішено три завдання: визначено типи обмежувальних заходів, що Facebook й Instagram застосовують при модерації контенту про війну; виокремлено категорії українських медійників, які найбільше потерпають від обмежень на платформах Мета; проаналізовано застосування стандартів Facebook і правил Instagram у контексті обмеження українського контенту про війну.

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З'ясовано, що Meta застосовує такі обмежувальні заходи при модерації контенту, зокрема про війну в Україні: обмеження окремих функцій у соцмережах, обмеження поширення контенту, видалення контенту, блокування акаунту, видалення сторінок і груп, попередження про неприйнятний і оманливий контент. Встановлено, що ці обмеження зачепили українські медіа, журналістів, блогерів, активістів та звичайних користувачів, які поширювали інформацію про агресію Росії. Визначено, що найбільше обмежень перепадало за такі типи контенту: слова-епітети на позначення росіян, сатира про війну, публікації про полк "Азов", заклики до насильства проти росіян, зображення пов'язаних з війною сцен насильства. Запропоновано рекомендації для вдосконалення модерації контенту про війну, а саме: Facebook та Instagram слід підвищити прозорість своїх стандартів і правил, припинити блокувати сатиру про війну та вдосконалити свої політики з урахуванням контексту міжнародних збройних конфліктів.

**Ключові слова:** Meta, Facebook, Instagram, соціальні мережі, модерація контенту, обмеження контенту, Україна, російсько-українська війна.

Formulation of the scientific problem and its significance. Over the past ten years, social media platforms have increased their role as instruments for disseminating information and coordinating citizens' actions in crises, conflicts, or wars. This was particularly evident in, inter alia, Ethiopia, Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Libya, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Syria, where people utilised online platforms to document human rights violations, denounce brutalities, and spread calls for international assistance during conflicts. The war in Ukraine follows a similar pattern (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Ukrainian users have been actively employing social media platforms during the full-scale Russian invasion. The informational efforts of government bodies, traditional media outlets, and journalists were accompanied by the activities of bloggers, activists, and millions of ordinary Ukrainians who found themselves in the midst of events and were sharing their experiences through social media platforms. Stories of eyewitnesses, posts about the consequences of Russian shellings, and images of atrocities committed by Russian forces have become a common occurrence in the news 249 feed of an average Ukrainian user.

However, the constant flow of content about war gave rise to new challenges for social media platforms. The platforms were faced with new geopolitical realities, which they were generally able to avoid in the past. The fact is that the community standards of social media platforms usually do not contain special exceptions that would ensure sufficient guarantees for freedom of expression in times of war. They were designed for an ideal environment where there is no room for hate speech, and everyone lives in harmony regardless of nationality, gender, age, etc (Гончарова, 2022). In order to maintain such an environment, standards were created to ensure the absence of hate speech or other types of "problematic content" on the platform.

The question remains: what shall be done with the "problematic content" about the war that regularly appears in our news feeds amidst entertainment videos and cute pictures of kittens and puppies? How to moderate posts calling for violence against the occupying forces? Which photos depicting "violent and graphic content" in times of war are acceptable on the platform, and which ones are not? Although these issues have been relevant for the Ukrainian segment of social media platforms since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, they have gained new dimensions after the Russian invasion of Ukraine last year.

With the escalation of the full-scale Russian invasion, the issue of moderating content about Russian aggression became more acute. A lot of Ukrainian content about the war was restricted on social media platforms (CEDEM and The Fix, 2023). Most cases of such controversial restrictions took place on the Meta platforms, namely Facebook and Instagram (Шевченко, 2022). Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine in detail how Ukrainian content was moderated on these two platforms after the 2022 Russian invasion.

Analysis of recent research on this problem. Some recent studies discussed certain aspects of social media content moderation in the context of the war in Ukraine. The Media Development Foundation examined the restrictive measures faced by 57 Ukrainian national and local independent media on Facebook (Media Development Foundation 2022). The Center for Democracy and Rule of Law's research conducted by The Fix shed light on the impact of social media platforms' content moderation policies on Ukrainian media and content creators following the fullscale Russian invasion (CEDEM and The Fix, 2023). Digital Security Lab Ukraine prepared a report on digital security in the Ukrainian civil sector during wartime, addressing, inter alia, the challenges associated with social media platforms (Лабораторія цифрової безпеки, 2022). Human Rights Watch analysed the initiatives and steps taken by popular social media platforms and messaging services in response to the war in Ukraine through the lens of international human rights standards (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Formulation of the purpose, objectives, and methods of the article. The purpose of the present article is to investigate the intricacies, discern the challenges, and proffer recommendations for improving the moderation of Ukrainian war-related content on Facebook and Instagram in the wake of the full-scale Russian invasion. With this purpose in view, the article sets out to attain three objectives in order to comprehend the nature of moderating Ukrainian war-related content on Meta platforms. Firstly, to identify the restrictive measures that Facebook and Instagram apply throughout the content moderation process (particularly concerning Ukrainian content). Secondly, to determine the categories of actors who were subjected to the restrictive measures in the Ukrainian segment of Facebook and Instagram for sharing content about the war. Thirdly, to examine the platforms' standards and policies for moderating and restricting Ukrainian war-related content and develop policy recommendations on the matter.

**Presentation of the main material.** In the pages to follow, the article elaborates on how Ukrainian war-related content is moderated and restricted on Meta platforms. It begins with determining the types of restrictions applied by Facebook and Instagram throughout the process of content moderation, continues with delineating and categorising the actors subject to war-related content restrictions in the Ukrainian segment of social media platforms, and ends with identifying the grounds used by platforms to restrict Ukrainian content about the war.

Regarding content moderation on Meta platforms, Facebook Community Standards (Meta, n.d. b) and Instagram Community Guidelines (Instagram, n.d.) define the types of content allowed to be shared on these platforms and those prohibited. If some content does not comply with the established standards and guidelines, platforms impose restrictions on it. Ukrainian content is no exception.

To deal with "problematic content" on Facebook and Instagram, Meta 251 applies the following restrictive measures:

Taking down violating content. If the content violates the established Facebook Community Standards or Instagram Community Guidelines, it is removed, and the user who shared it receives a strike. Depending on the severity and number of previous violations and strikes, Meta may apply additional restrictions against users, such as reducing the distribution of content, restricting or disabling the account, etc. (Meta, 2023g).

If prohibited content is posted not on a personal account but on a Page or group managed by the user, strikes and additional restrictive measures may also be imposed on such Page or group (Meta, 2022a). If the profile of an admin or moderator is disabled, the Pages or groups they created might also disappear.

Reducing the distribution of problematic content (also known as a "shadow ban"). Under certain conditions, Meta may reduce the distribution of certain content even if it does not violate Facebook Community Standards or Instagram Community Guidelines, but is considered problematic for one reason or another (Meta, 2023e). This restrictive measure is also referred to as a "shadow ban" in common parlance (Nadiyno, 2023). When a "shadow ban" is applied, the "problematic content" is not removed, but its visibility is reduced in the user's news feed. The content remains accessible on the account or page but becomes somewhat "invisible" as Meta

restricts its display in the news feed and stops recommending it to other users.

The grounds for introducing the "shadow ban" encompass the situations when users share low-quality content, such as clickbaits, links to websites with excessive advertising, misinformation, etc. In addition, Meta reduces the distribution of content posted by users who repeatedly violate Facebook Community Standards or Instagram Community Guidelines (Meta, 2023e).

Restricting accounts. Users who share prohibited content for the first time usually receive just a respective warning from Meta along with the removal of the prohibited content, without any additional restrictions. However, if the publication of prohibited content continues, platforms may limit users' access to certain features on Facebook. This may include taking away their ability to comment on posts, publish content, create pages, etc., for a period of 1 to 30 days (Meta, 2023a).

If the published content violates more stringent Community Standards 252 (such as policies regarding dangerous organisations and individuals), Facebook imposes additional and longer-lasting restrictions. Even stricter measures are applied to public figures if they incite or celebrate acts of violence (Meta, 2023f). Continued posting of prohibited content may lead to the platform disabling the user's account.

- Restricting Pages and groups. If Pages and groups on Facebook frequently violate Community Standards, they are also subject to certain restrictions imposed by Meta. The social media platforms may no longer show such Pages and groups in the personalised recommendations sections to platform users. On Facebook, these sections include "Pages you may like", "Groups you should join" and posts from pages/groups in the news feed labelled "Suggested for you" (Facebook, n.d. c). On Instagram, examples of personalised recommendations sections include the content on Reels and Explore. Furthermore, Meta may reduce the distribution of problematic content, a so-called "shadow ban" (Meta, 2023e), and impose advertising restrictions (Meta n.d. a).
- Disabling accounts. If users repeatedly violate Facebook Community Standards or Instagram Community Guidelines, or if a violation is very severe, Meta will disable their respective accounts. Social media platforms also block the accounts of dangerous individuals and users who misrepresent their identity (Meta, 2022b).

Removing Pages and groups. Meta removes Pages and groups that frequently breach Community Standards. The following situations are considered violations: if the name, description or cover of a Page/group violates Community Standards, as well as if an administrator or moderator of a Page/group creates or approves the publication of content by other users that goes against Community Standards (Meta, 2022e).

It should be noted that Meta sometimes mistakenly applies restrictive measures to certain content or its author. In such cases, users can appeal the blocking of content (Facebook, n.d. a) or disablement of their account (Facebook, n.d. b). No one can guarantee that the restrictions will be lifted, but social media platforms may reconsider their decision under certain circumstances.

7. Providing context on sensitive or misleading content. In addition to the aforementioned restrictive measures, Meta can blur content and add a warning screen explaining why this content may be sensitive or misleading, even though it does not violate Facebook Community Standards or Instagram Community Guidelines (Meta, 2022d). Such a warning 253 screen may be introduced when the content contains potentially sensitive material (such as violent or graphic content) or false information (according to the conclusions of Meta's fact-checkers). Accordingly, each user can decide whether s/he wants to view and trust this content.

The above-mentioned restrictive measures are applied by Facebook and Instagram when moderating content, including content about the war in Ukraine. The number of cases regarding the blocking of Ukrainian content and accounts on social media has noticeably increased since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion (Лабораторія цифрової безпеки, 2022). War-related content blocking has affected various representatives of the Ukrainian media community. More specifically, "victims" of such social media content restrictions encompass:

- Media. The Media Development Foundation surveyed 57 national and local media and found that almost half of them (27) faced restrictions imposed on their Facebook pages. Many pages had their monetisation, ad usage, and content distribution restricted. The main reasons for introducing these restrictive measures were news publications about the war containing certain trigger words (for example, the word "moskali") and graphic content from the front lines (Media Development Foundation, 2022).
  - Journalists, bloggers, and activists. Representatives of this catego-2.

3. Ukrainian users. We cannot but mention ordinary Ukrainian users who share their stories, lived experiences, and graphic content about the war on social media platforms. They, too, face restrictions from Meta due to their war-related social media publications.

As regards the grounds for restricting Ukrainian content about the war, representatives of the Ukrainian media community are frequently subject to social media restrictions for sharing war-related content from one of the 5 main categories:

1. Epithets. With the onset of full-scale war, the list of expressions prohibited for dissemination on social media platforms has been significantly expanded. Meta is quick to remove posts featuring trigger epithet words to designate Russians, such as "katsapy", "rusnia", "rusaky", "svynosobaky", and the like – even if creatively obfuscated through character substitutions, transliterations, or sprinkled with emojis (Lviv Media Forum, 2022). These are construed as hate speech ("slurs"), unacceptable and anathematised on social media platforms. Both Facebook's Community Standards and Instagram's Community Guidelines define hate speech as violent or dehumanising speech against people based on their so-called "protected characteristics", such as ethnic or national origin (Meta, 2023d).

However, the predicaments arising from the enforcement of such epithets content restrictions are multifaceted. Firstly, the criteria by which the list of words flagged as "unacceptable" is composed remain somewhat elusive.

Secondly, the automated removal of any and all posts that contain the "unacceptable" trigger words (epithets to describe Russians) often dismisses the context in which Ukrainian users employ them - that is, emotional reactions to the harrowing realities of warfare and a denouncement of Russian aggression. This, at times, appears somewhat at odds with Meta's official stance, which recognises Ukrainians' right to freedom of expression, including the expression of anger, as a manifestation of self-defense in response to Russia's military incursion (Meta, 2022c).

Thirdly, a comprehensive list of prohibited words (epithets) is not publicly available; it is exclusively held by Meta's moderators. The Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine has already reached out to Meta, requesting access to the list of unacceptable words, which would help

prevent the mass blocking of Ukrainian users (Міністерство цифрової трансформації України, 2022). However, as of now, full access to the list of prohibited expressions has not been opened up to the general public.

Azov. The Ukrainian media community repeatedly encountered restrictions because of posts related to the Azov Regiment. Instagram blocked the page "Association of Families of Defenders of "Azovstal" (Барсукова, 2022) and removed news publications about the Azov Regiment from the media "#Bukvy" (Букви, 2022). Facebook deleted posts and reduced content distribution from the "RBC-Ukraine" (Драбкіна, 2022) and "The New Voice of Ukraine" (Одінцова, 2022) for publishing news featuring videos about Azov. The list goes on. The reason the content about Azov was actively getting blocked on Meta platforms was that Meta classified Azov as a "hate entity" within its policy on dangerous organisations and individuals.

Meta's policy prohibits disseminating content endorsing, supporting, or representing dangerous organisations. One of the types of dangerous organisations includes hate entities - organisations or individuals actively 255 promoting hatred towards others based on their protected characteristics (Meta, 2023c). There is no publicly available official list of organisations that Meta considers dangerous and categorises as hate entities. However, the fact that Azov was on the list of hate entities initially became known from a leaked list of Facebook Dangerous Individuals and Organizations (The Intercept, 2021). Subsequently, this information was confirmed during negotiations between the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine and Meta. Recently, according to reports from the Ministry of Digital Transformation, Ukraine has managed to reach an agreement with Meta to cease blocking content related to Azov (+ 2023). However, this exception does not apply to one of the founders of the regiment, Andriy Biletsky, and certain Azov-associated symbols.

Overall, Meta's policy regarding dangerous organisations in general, and content about Azov in particular, is somewhat ambiguous. Firstly, neither the process of forming the list of dangerous organisations nor the official list itself is accessible to the public. The Oversight Board of Meta has also drawn attention to this issue in one of its decisions, recommending that this list be made public (Oversight Board, 2020).

Secondly, as noted by the organisation Article19, the definition of "hate entities" in Community Standards is so broad that it can even encompass certain political parties (Article19, 2018).

Thirdly, Community Standards and guidelines allow the dissemination of content about dangerous organisations to report on, condemn or neutrally discuss them or their activities (Meta 2023c). Based on the above, Meta should not block content about Azov if it is shared in the form of news with a neutral tone. The situation may differ if the content portrays the regiment positively, as this could be grounds for content blocking from Meta's perspective.

Nonetheless, given recent agreements between the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine and Meta, the issue of blocking content about Azov has been resolved de jure. However, de facto cases of blocking certain types of content about Azov still occur. Therefore, Meta needs to improve the moderation of this content in practice.

- 3. Calls for violence. Calls for violence can be categorised into two groups:
- the first group includes death wishes and calls for violence against Russians, such as "kill all Russians";
- the second group comprises calls for violence against Russian soldiers, such as "kill all occupiers".

At the outset of the full-scale Russian invasion, Meta temporarily allowed Ukrainian users of Facebook and Instagram to publish calls for violence against Russians, Russian soldiers, Putin, and Lukashenko in the context of the invasion, provided that such calls did not specify a particular location or method of violence (Vengattil and Culliford, 2022). These changes to the content moderation process were not reflected in the public community standards and rules, but social media moderators implemented them in practice.

However, Meta soon revised this decision, allowing calls for violence only in relation to Russian military personnel and prohibiting such calls concerning Russians or heads of state. The company stated that it would not tolerate any manifestations of Russophobia, calls for violence or discrimination against Russians on Facebook and Instagram (Vengattil, 2022).

Currently, many posts of Ukrainian users containing calls for violence against Russians are blocked on Facebook and Instagram as:

- "hate speech" based on "protected characteristics", such as ethnicity or nationality (Meta, 2023d);
- "violence and incitement", which refers to calls that could potentially incite or promote violence (Meta, 2023h).

It is worth noting that blocking direct calls for violence against all Rus-

sians as a national group is completely rational from the perspective of international law. Indeed, any expressions of hatred towards a particular group of people based on nationality, which constitute incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence, are prohibited<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, posts with calls for violence against Russian military personnel do not fall under this prohibition. As highlighted by the Oversight Board, such posts refer to Russian military personnel not because of their nationality, but rather due to their involvement in hostilities and violent crimes in the context of Russia's unlawful military aggression against Ukraine (Oversight Board, 2022a).

4. Satire. Meta imposed various restrictions on Ukrainian users for disseminating satirical content about the war, Russians and Putin. Some vivid examples include Facebook's blocking of the satirical project "Toronto Television" (Детектор медіа, 2022), removal of caricatures from the "Durdom" page (Дурдом, n.d.), removal of caricatures (Журавель, 20236) and restrictions of the account (Журавель, 2023a) of the activist Yuriy Zhuravel, and even debunking of caricatures from the satirical page "Kit i 257 Вава" (Кіт і Баба, 2023).

Satirical content is often restricted based on Community Standards regarding "hate speech" and "dangerous organisations and individuals". However, it should be emphasised that blocking satirical content is controversial from the perspective of both Meta's rules and international freedom of expression standards.

Meta's standards on "hate speech" (Meta 2023d) and "dangerous organisations and individuals" (Meta, 2023c) stipulate that content that would otherwise violate Community Standards is allowed to be shared on Facebook and Instagram if it is satirical. Moreover, international standards (Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights n.d.), which Meta is committed to following according to its own Corporate Human Rights Policy (Meta, 2021), provide for enhanced protection of the right to freedom of artistic expression, including satirical caricatures. Therefore, this raises the need for Meta to reconsider its approach to blocking satire on social media platforms.

Violent and graphic content. Telling the world about Russia's aggression, Ukrainian users often post photos and videos that depict atroci-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 20, Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171

However, there is an exception - content featuring scenes of violence can be published in the context of discussing human rights abuses, armed conflicts, and other serious issues. The importance of allowing content with scenes of violence on the platforms in order to inform the public or document human rights violations was affirmed by the Oversight Board (Oversight Board, 2022b). At the same time, for some content with scenes of violence, Meta adds a warning screen indicating that such content may be potentially sensitive or disturbing to certain users (Meta, 2023b). To Meta's credit, the company tends to allow sharing of graphic content depicting the consequences of Russia's invasion on Facebook and Instagram. Some photos and videos get blurred (Kyiv Not Kiev, 2023).

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It goes without saying that the cases of mistaken removal of content by the platforms' algorithms (false positives) do occur. However, these mistakes are often quickly corrected. A prominent example is the brief mass blocking of posts with hashtags like #bucha, #buchamassacre, and others, which contained photographs of people killed by Russians in Bucha. However, Meta promptly responded to appeals from the Ukrainian media community and unblocked these hashtags (Paul, 2022).

There are two aspects of Meta's policy on "violent and graphic content" that the company should improve:

- Criteria for Applying Warning Screens. Meta should clarify the criteria it relies on when applying warning screens to certain types of content with scenes of violence. These criteria should be specified in publicly available Community Standards. The Oversight Board also emphasised this point (Oversight Board, 2022a).
- Moderation of Content Featuring Individuals with Physical Injuries. Meta should pay special attention to the moderation of content featuring individuals with various physical injuries received during armed conflicts, such as lost limbs or scars on the body. A recent example is the blurred photo of Masi Nayyem on Facebook, who lost an eye during the war (ZMI-NA, 2023). In this case, the blurring was questionable because the photo depicted Masi Nayyem in the way he looks in everyday life. The blurring was later removed after CEDEM appealed to Meta. However, this prece-

dent should be taken into account in future moderation of similar content. After all, many Ukrainian defenders and veterans could find themselves in such situations.

Conclusions. We are now on the brink of change. The war in Ukraine forces social media platforms to respond to new geopolitical realities. Following the full-scale Russian aggression, the volume of war-related content posted on social media platforms has significantly increased. However, social media platforms were ill-prepared for this shift. Their content moderation standards were initially designed for peacetime and did not comprehensively regulate content moderation in the context of armed conflicts.

The Ukrainian media community, which actively covers the course of the war on social media platforms (especially on Meta's Facebook and Instagram), has experienced numerous restrictions imposed on Ukrainian accounts and the content they share. These restrictive measures affected Ukrainian media, journalists, bloggers, activists, and ordinary users who reported on Russia's aggression and documented the atrocities of Russian forces. Ukrainian media community received the highest number of restrictions for posting the following types of content: epithets to describe Russians (e.g. "katsapy", "rusnia", etc.), satirical content related to the war, posts about the Azov Regiment, calls for violence against Russians, and images depicting scenes of violence concerning the war in Ukraine.

It became evident that the platforms need to establish clear rules for moderating content about war in the context of international armed conflicts. Meta already took some initial steps in this direction. In particular, Ukrainian users were allowed to publish on Facebook and Instagram the calls for violence against Russian soldiers and photos/videos depicting their atrocities. Meta also lifted the formal restriction on publishing content about the Azov Regiment, but this policy requires further refinement, as such blockages continue to occur in practice.

In addition, there are several other aspects of war-related content moderation that social media platforms need to improve. Meta should make publicly available the information about the lists (and process for establishing the lists) of epithets and dangerous organisations that are considered unacceptable on Facebook and Instagram. They should also cease blocking satirical content, which enjoys greater protection under international law. Furthermore, public Community Standards should include the criteria used to determine the necessity of blurring the content with scenes of violence.

It is essential to ensure that these new changes to the Community Standards are developed not only for internal use by social media moderators (as is often the case now) but are also included in publicly accessible Community Standards.

In conclusion, social media platforms now have a window of opportunity to make significant amendments to content moderation rules in the context of international armed conflicts. Representatives of civil society and governments should assist the platforms in this endeavour.

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