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Infrastructural frontlines of (dis)information: data territoriality in the Russian war against Ukraine

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The Russia-Ukraine war has critically underscored the importance of cyberspace in modern conflicts, with cyberattacks, information operations, and infrastructure attacks playing a key role since 2014. Beyond the battlefield, both Ukraine and Russia have pursued ambitious digital sovereignty policies that seek to protect their respective “information spaces.” Rooted in the strategic imperative of controlling information flows to secure their territory, these policies are designed to shape and transform the underlying network architectures of the Internet following strongly territorialized conceptions of data and information sovereignty. Since 2022, these policies have intensified, actively reshaping the geographies of data and information, particularly in and around the occupied territories of Ukraine.

This paper investigates how multiple actors are increasingly using digital infrastructures to create and maintain new forms of information control, leading to the emergence of complex data geographies. By employing a mixed-methods approach—including OSINT techniques to track internet data, infrastructure mapping, and fieldwork interviews with key stakeholders—this research highlights how an entanglement of opposite policies contributes to the borderization of data, thus shaping the conditions under which parts of the Internet can or cannot be accessed in occupied territories. By mapping the fragmentation of the digital space alongside contemporary and moving frontlines, this paper underscores how Ukraine’s efforts to maintain connectivity in occupied territories and Russia’s attempts to integrate these areas into its digital governance frameworks impacts the cognitive environment of the population, illustrating the strategic importance of data territorialization in contemporary warfare.

Bridging perspectives from political geography, geopolitics, and Science and Technology Studies (STS), this paper argues that the war in Ukraine illustrates a broader trend in which political actors increasingly reshape the fundamental architecture of cyberspace, including its logical infrastructure. It contributes to discussions on geographies of the digital, digital sovereignty, and the role of infrastructures in modern strategic competition.

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