SAVING LIVES IN EASTERN UKRAINE:

Alternative EORE Approaches

EORE Team Leader Irina Mihei distributes information to an elderly man waiting to cross into the NGCA.
All graphics courtesy of FSD.

Armed conflict has been ongoing in the east of Ukraine since 2014 and continues to have a fundamentally devastating impact on children, women, and men. With continuing hostilities and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating the dire humanitarian situation in the region, 3.4 million people are projected to be in need of humanitarian assistance in 2021. The elderly, persons with disabilities, female-headed households, and children are among the most vulnerable. Additionally, the large-scale population displacement from government and nongovernment controlled areas (GCA and NGCA respectively) of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, separated by the 427-km-long contact line, remains one of the highest concerns.

Unexploded ordnance (UXO) and landmines present a particular threat to the civilian population in this type of "frozen conflict." Many villages and towns on and near the contact line have not been evacuated as the occupants refuse to move or have no other place to relocate; and as a result, civilians carry on living and working near military installations. These civilians live alongside heavily fortified and mined checkpoints with daily artillery bombardments being commonplace. The population are exposed to mines and UXO as a part of daily life, and civilian casualties directly attributable to such hazards are growing. Mines and UXO also are denying citizens access to services such as water or, in the longer term, in the way in which they use the land: Many hectares of good farmland have been seeded with mines, impacting local livelihoods. Therefore, humanitarian mine action (HMA) remains one of the most important parts of the humanitarian response where, in certain areas, explosive ordnance risk education (EORE) is the only applicable HMA pillar for saving lives of civilians.

Over the years, the majority of HMA interventions have been completed in the GCA rather than in the NGCA. Access by international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), particularly HMA, to the NGCA has been problematic since the conflict began. The provision of EORE has been a challenge, and very little of the at-risk population in the NGCA have received information about explosive hazards. The provision of EORE via the more traditional methods of direct presentation sessions to children and adults in their communities or in schools is generally not permitted. This is due to a perception by NGCA de facto authorities that EORE is a potential threat to security and may be used as propaganda by Ukraine. In 2020, FSD, with funding from the U.S. Department of State, began a project with the express objective of developing methods to target residents living in the NGCA. One approach is to access workers and members of the public who are required to cross the contact line to attend to administrative or work-related issues while they are in the GCA, and the second involves the use of social media applications to target the population that cannot travel to the GCA.
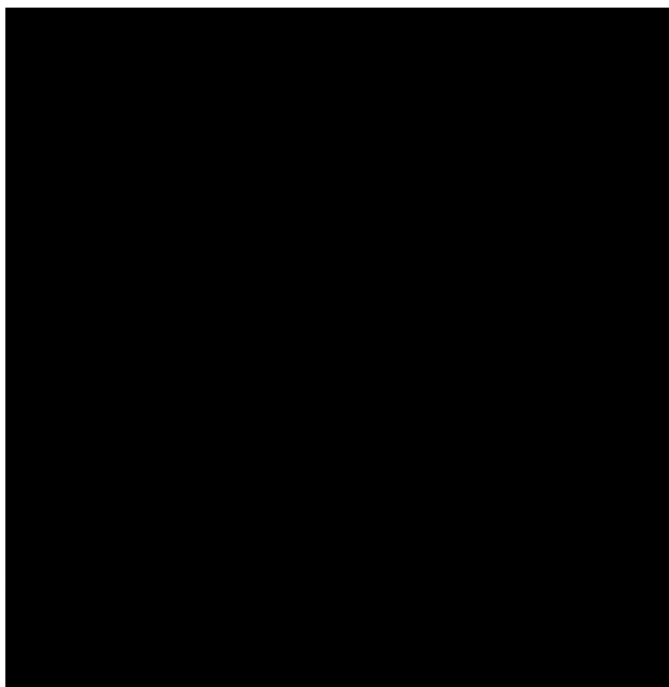
FSD The Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD) is one of a small number of HMA INGOs operating in Ukraine. FSD began in late 2014 with mine risk education teams, then added community liaison and non-technical survey in 2015. Since 2016, FSD has conducted physical clearance projects and continued to expand its knowledge of the impact that explosive ordnance (EO) hazards have on the people living in the region.

EORE at Crossing Points

There are five entry/exit crossing points (EECPs) between the GCA and NGCA along the contact line in eastern Ukraine. Before the COVID-19 pandeminc, between 1 and 1.25 million people used these EECPs each month, with the vast majority (over 90 percent) of the crossings orginating in the NGCA. The majority of people crossing the EECPs are over the age of sixty and are mostly doing so to attend to issues related to pensions/social payments or to withdraw cash. This results in a consistent opportunity to engage a significant proportion of the NGCA population at the EECPs and at the various Ukraine government pension offices that are located close to the EECPs. Thus, FSD provides short, direct, and/or face-to-face EORE presentations and/or safety briefings at these locations, specifically targeting people visiting from the NGCA. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant challenges to the implementation of this activity. On 21 March 2020, the contact line was sealed off to help curb the spread of the virus in the conflict-affected areas. Movement through the EECPs remains restricted and highly unstable due to the COVID-19 pandemic prevention measures adopted by the government of Ukraine and the NGCA de-facto authorities. As of May 2021, these restrictions are still enforced, and of the five EECPs, only two are operational.

Thus, significant challenges revolve around the closure of the EECPs, and subsequent uncertainties surround the full reopening of the EECPs for normal use. Presently, very few people are permitted to cross through the two open EECPs into the GCA from the NGCA, and the crossing conditions for affected populations remains tense. In numerous cases, people were refused exit or were approved to exit but refused entry by the other "side." In addition to COVID-19 restrictions, temporary closures and weather conditions also dramatically affected the number of crossings in 2020. The number of individual crossings from 21 March 2020 until the end of the year represented less than 3 percent of the level of crossings recorded in 2019 during the same period.

However, FSD EORE teams have been at the operational EECPs (Stanytsia, Luhanska, and Novotroitske) from May 2020 until the present and able to conduct safety briefings for NGCA residents. The briefings normally take up to ten minutes and are provided to people as they wait in line. The key modules of a traditional EORE session are discussed with the affected population, including safe and unsafe behavior, reporting mechanisms, mine/UXO recognition, etc. The EORE team uses informational folders and posters containing pictures that help trainers promote safe behavior and provide visual briefings. Various types of education materials are also distributed. As the distribution of EORE materials is heavily regulated, each type of product is designed in two languages (Russian and Ukrainian) to prevent any potential problems with authorities. While UNICEF approved FSD's EORE materials for children, there is no functioning national authority at present to approve EORE materials for adults; however, all FSD EORE materials conform to IMAS standards. FSD teams use a variety of printed materials, including a pocket-sized brochure summarizing key EORE messages, a coloring page designed for children, and an A5-sized leaflet describing safe/unsafe behavior and reporting mechanisms. The leaflet also contains a QR code that allows access to the project-dedicated social media landing page, which provides more EORE-specific information to those who are interested.

Digital EORE

FSD's second approach to reach NGCA residents involves the use of social media to target those who cannot travel to the GCA. Inspired by a trial conducted in 2020 of the use of targeted social media advertisements (i.e., Facebook [FB] ads) for delivery of EORE in Iraq, FSD is conducting a similar trial of the use of FB and Vkontakte (VK, the Russian version of FB) ads in eastern Ukraine, with an emphasis on reaching users living in the NGCA. The FSD conducted the trial over a six-month period in 2020 and decided to continue the trial project into 2021. As there was a significant lack of EORE available via the social media sphere, especially in the NGCA, the media campaign objectives were to increase awareness about the explosive ordnance (EO) threat and introduce the consequences of risk-taking behavior. Moreover, the campaign sought to build a strong communication tool through positive dialogue in a constructive educational atmosphere. Therefore, FSD designed an online platform with fun and non-traditional formats to discuss the EO threat. The trial was divided into two modules: The first module focused on FB over the first three months of the trial (June–August 2020), and the second focused on VK over three subsequent

Screenshot of a sample BezMin post on Vkontakte.

months (October–December 2020). The methodology applied to both modules of the social media campaign and was divided into three key components: (1) the design of materials, (2) the development of the landing page, and (3) an interactive portion of the campaign.

Together with a Ukrainian public relations company skilled in the design and employment of FB ads, FSD developed a project-specific landing page for targeting NGCA residents. FSD recycled some of the material developed for the FB module for the VK module. This allowed FSD to develop the second campaign significantly faster and start the VK trial shortly after the FB social media trial was completed. The ads were tailored to users based on their IP addresses. A new, project-specific landing page, BezMin (Without Mines), was developed for FB and VK. By clicking on the link provided in the ad, users visited the BezMin page displaying appropriate EORE messaging, videos, and information on how to report suspected EO.

Due to the sensitive nature of the content (particularly for NGCA residents), the page has neither donor nor FSD branding to promote the principle of neutrality in the posts and to attract a wider audience from the NGCA.
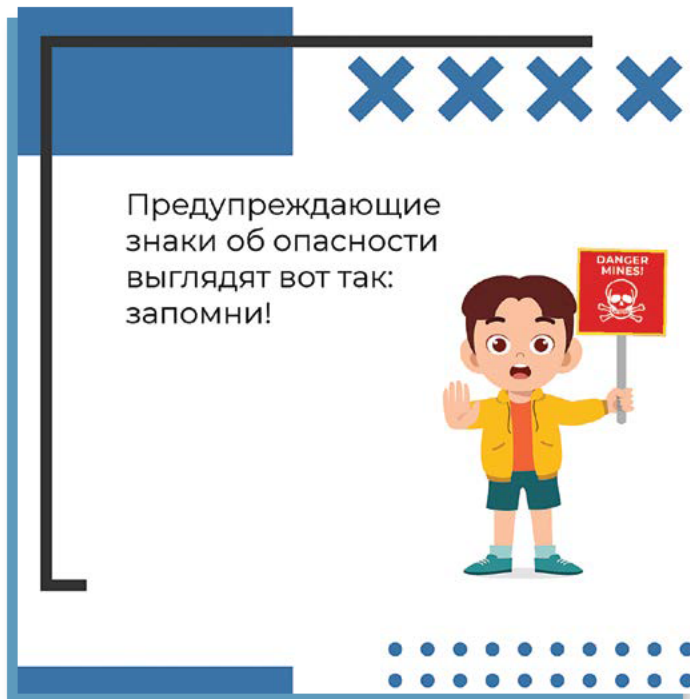
Screenshot of a sample post in Facebook.

A media content plan for the campaign consisted of various types of materials for at-risk communities. Comprising different types of material, each post covered one of several possible topics of the traditional EORE session: EO recognition, identifying potentially hazardous areas, official marking (red warning sign with the message "Danger Mines"), unofficial marking (crossed sticks or home-made signs), unsafe behavior, safe behavior toward EO, what to do in case of an emergency, or reporting. Some posts contained images, which matched the various types of vegetation and weather conditions normally found in the region, and encouraged beneficiaries to identify the explosive hazards they found.

Challenges during the interactive portion of the media campaign involved the use of specific terminology, and adherence to neutrality principles in posts and comments. Moreover, the Ukrainian government currently restricts in-country access to VK. On the national level,

Screenshot of a sample post in Facebook.

Ukrainian-based internet service providers (ISPs) are not permitted to conduct any activities using VK. However, people in the NGCA can access VK through Russian infrastructure. Therefore, neither FSD nor Ukrainian public relations specialists had practical experience or skills in conducting a targeted media campaign in Ukraine utilizing VK as a platform. However, FSD was able to find a method to conduct the VK media campaign using an independent PR company. The posting target was twenty-one posts per month.

The first month of each module was used to develop brand awareness. Over this period (the active phase), the target audience would become acquainted with the BezMin page. During the second and third months, the audience, now aware of the brand, began to show more interest in the posts and were keen to interact with and subscribe to the page. The highest number of followers was reached during the second and the thirds months of each module.

As seen in Figure 1, 901 followers were attracted over the first three months of the FB module's active phase, while only 101 new followers joined the FB page over the following three months where the FB campaign was "dormant." By comparison, the active phase of the VK campaign had less than half the total number of followers when compared to FB during the same phase of the trial. Whereas the active phases reflect when the PR company was actively posting material to both FB and VK, the dormant phases reflect when no new posts were made to FB or VK. Demonstrating trends for both FB and VK, Figure 1 indicates that the most cost-effective use of available funding and beneficiary coverage for any social media campaign involves maintaining a high tempo of activity for at least six months. In order to maintain growth and reach a greater number of beneficiaries, the duration of future media campaigns was increased to six months. When measured by physical interactions with the ads, the FB module seemed significantly more successful across both the GCA and NGCA; however, an analysis of users' locations indicated that for NGCA residents (the target audience for the trial), VK was more popular than FB. Moreover, the number of resident VK users in the NGCA is much higher than FB users, which led FSD to conclude VK was more popular in NGCA than FB.

Another distinct difference between VK and FB was audience age. VK permits children from the age of twelve to register, and children are its second largest demographic. Alternatively, FB requires users to be thirteen or older and is not as popular with children. Over the three months, the VK campaign reached 26,548 persons under the age of eighteen, compared to only 704 children reached in the FB campaign. The VK network has a larger number of groups from educational institutions compared to FB. One of the major achievements of the VK media campaign trial is the fact that BezMin posts were reposted by various accounts and/or groups managed by educational establishments. For example, FSD's posts about unsafe behavior were reposted by a student group from the Civil Protection Institute in Luhansk People's Republic, which had 179 followers. BezMin was seen as a trustworthy source of information, and the method of delivery appeared to be appropriate and understandable.

More than half of BezMin users on FB (55 percent) are female, while the majority of interactions (reposts, clicks, and comments) were made by males; the major age group was in the 35–44 range. On VK, 52 percent of active users of the BezMin page were males. The major age group is the same as in FB. The second largest age group were users under the age of eighteen. Geographically, 73 percent of VK beneficiaries were from the NGCA; 5 percent were based in the parts of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts in the GCA; and only 4 percent were located in other areas of Ukraine. The location of 18 percent (or 34,979) of beneficiaries was not identified by VK social media; the use of a virtual private network (VPN) to enter the VK social media is likely to be the reason for this.
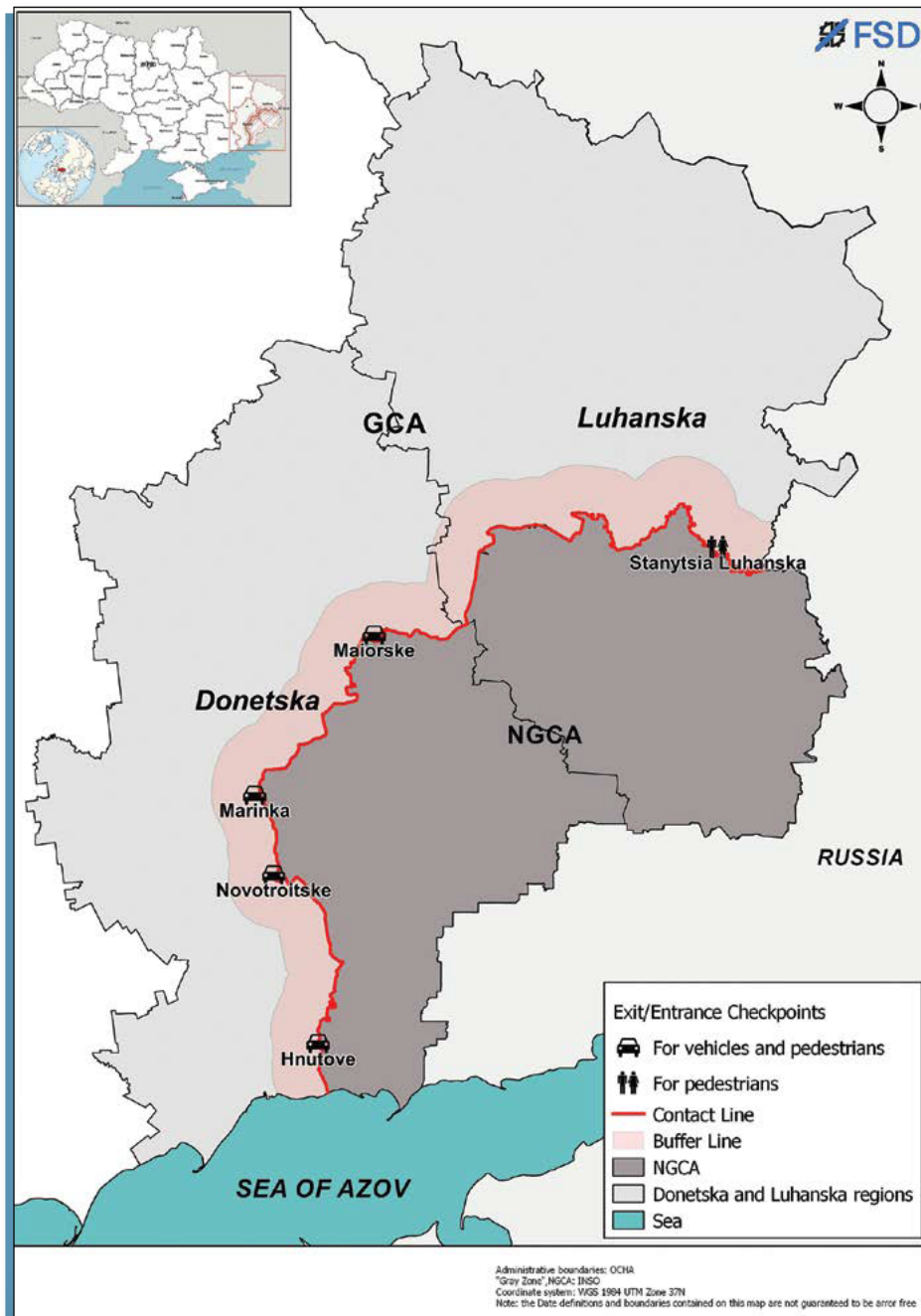
Map of eastern Ukraine 2021: GCA, NGCA, contact line and EECPs.

Beneficiaries. Over the three active months of the FB module, the advertisements were shown 311,133 times; each unique individual saw the ad an average of 4.62 times during this period. The total number of unique beneficiaries was 67,301. Over the three active months of the VK module, the advertisements were shown 1,007,343 times to 192,399 unique beneficiaries; each unique individual saw the VK ad an average of 5.24 times (VK ads are considerably cheaper than FB). When comparing the number of unique beneficiaries, the VK campaign might seem more successful than the FB campaign; however, FB requires users to "click through" (i.e., interact) to see the ad, whereas VK displays the ad and does not require interaction. Table 1 provides a breakdown of actual interactions with the published materials, which is usually measured by number of clicks, reposts, comments, and likes.

During the social media campaign, there a number of NGCA cities that had beneficiaries covered by FB and VK. However, residents of Amvrosievka, Kadiyivka, Khartsyzsk, Kirovskoye, Lozove, Lutugino, Makeevka, Perevalsk, Pervomaysk, Rovenky, Sneznoe, Torez, and Vesëlaya Gora were covered by only one social media provider. Moreover, the FB campaign was able to reach internally displaced persons (IDPs) all over Ukraine. When these IDPs do return home to the NGCA, they will have an increased knowledge about safe behavior and how to protect themselves from explosive threats.

During the planning phase for the trial it was assumed that the target audience would use mobile devices rather then desktops or laptops. The campaign determined that the hardware (smartphone, tablet, etc.) used to access FB or VK has a significant influence on the overall success of the media campaign. To view published posts, 92 percent of VK followers and 88 percent of FB followers used mobile devices. Therefore, all informational material was designed for mobile devices and included high-resolution pictures, appropriate formating, and selective keywords. For wider coverage of the target audience, the Russian language was used in both the campaigns and associated material for the NGCA audience. Some GCA followers criticize this

approach; however, it was stressed that BezMin is a non-political educational platform, which aims to increase the awareness about explosive hazards. When there was a need to provide a link to a source of information, an international (not Russian/Ukrainian) source was used for this purpose. Quoting international sources prevents accusations of information being false or propaganda.

The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. The posts were designed to encourage beneficiaries to engage in online discussions regarding explosive threats, to ask questions, and to share opinions. For this reason, FSD used its staff to monitor the interactions. Monitoring included follow-up responses to questions, giving professional feedback, sharing best practices of safe behavior, and amending the page content based on audience requests. FSD was able to ensure the posts were targeted to the specific needs and concerns of the affected population. For example, posts might ask, "Have you ever seen a minefield?" Beneficiaries could respond by sharing pictures or locations of the contaminated areas in their respective communities. The page became a platform for the discussion of EO-related information, potential hazardous areas, and unsafe behavior trends.

Conclusion

However, current EORE-sector thinking is that digital EORE campaigns seem to be most effective when complementing, not replacing, other EORE activities at an interpersonal or face-to-face level. In this way, digital EORE becomes a highly cost-effective force multiplier, increasing reach and coverage while reinforcing messages provided through non-digital means of delivery.

The BezMin landing page was a platform that was well accepted in both VK and FB modules, and the information presented is important and relevant to the residents of the conflict-affected areas (both the GCA and NGCA) of eastern Ukraine. The campaign also had the welcome benefit of reaching IDPs who relocated to other parts of Ukraine away from the conflict area.

In the case when a newly-created platform (such as BezMin) is developed, a period of at least three months should be allowed to develop a regular audience, conduct the needs assessment, and design the most suitable ways of interacting with the audience. However, due to a variety of subject areas related to EORE, it is suggested that the length of this type of initiative should be at least six months.

Social media has more flexibility when compared to the standard face-to face EORE session, as it is not impacted by weather, the time of day, or other force majeure factors (such as the closure of the EECPs). During the COVID-19 pandemic, when quarantine restrictions and lockdowns were in force, the online format was the only applicable method for delivering EORE messages to residents of the NGCA.

MODULE/EVENT	CLICKS	REPOSTS	LIKES	OTHER INTERACTIONS AND COMMENTS
Facebook (Jun–Aug 2020)	6,331	418	2,316	3,883
Vkontakte (Sept–Nov 2020)	3,918	32	715	99

Table 1. Social media interactions.

Moreover, the BezMin posts are accessible at any time convenient to the beneficiary. Large numbers of people can be reached in a specific area, overcoming obstacles posed by security, geography, and complex operating environments that limit the delivery of face-to-face EORE. The flexibility of a social media campaign allows the EORE provider to target specific age, gender, or demographic groups depending on the project's priorities. However, it is less effective when the target audience is the elderly or young children under the age of twelve. Moreover, immediately after an incident or accident involving EO and civilians occurs, posts can be made as a form of "emergency" EORE.

This pilot project shows the potential of using social media for EORE in areas with a reasonable communications network. Digital tools are less effective in areas with poor internet connectivity or reduced mobile data coverage. Nevertheless, the ongoing success of a social media campaign relies on regular, new, and interesting content. A lack of new posts equates to a decrease of a beneficiary's interest and leads to the decrease of EO-threat awareness. The social media campaign can have long-term benefits as long as it is maintained and operational.

In the NGCA at present, where physical access is very difficult or not possible at all, the FSD social media campaign (a trial) is one of very few alternatives for residents to access information about EO and to interact with an EORE professional. While the conflict is ongoing, continuation of the social media campaigns is crucial for raising awareness and promoting safe behavior in the conflict-affected communities in eastern Ukraine. As a result of additional funding from the U.S. Department of State, the social media campaign is continuing through 2021. ©
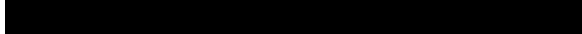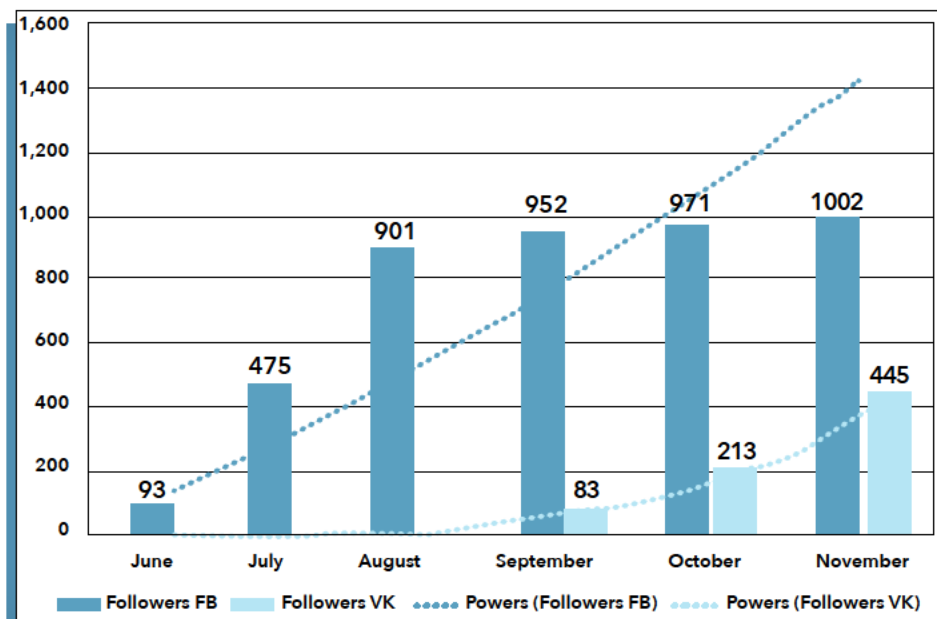

Figure 1. FB and VK followers June–November 2020.

ENDNOTES

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1. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE PLAN UKRAINE, AT A GLANCE," 25 November 2020, https://bit.ly/2OKDbDF.
2. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Ukraine Situation Report," last updated 25 January 2021, https://bit.ly/2NxQkzm.
3. The Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, *Review of New Technologies and Methodologies for Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) in Challenging Contexts*, August 2020, https://bit.ly/3qqH12x.
4. БезМин," Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/BezMin.info.
5. БезМин," VKontakte, https://vk.com/bezmininfo.