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UKRAINE CONFIDENCE BUILDING INITIATIVE II

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ACRONYMS

ASC	Administrative Service Center
ATC	Amalgamated Territorial Community
BUR	Building Ukraine Together
CATI	Computer-assisted telephone interviewing
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DDGS	Direct Distribution of Goods and Services
EU	European Union
EECP	Entry-Exit Checkpoint
FAA	Fixed Amount Award
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
GCA	Government Controlled Area
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MCIP	Ukraine Minister of Culture and Information Policy
MP	Member of Parliament
MRTOT	Ukraine Ministry of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories
NABU	National Anti-Corruption Bureau
NBU	National Bank of Ukraine
NSDC	National Security and Defense Center
NGCA	Non-Government Controlled Area
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
OTI	Office of Transition Initiatives
SBU	Security Service of Ukraine
SCORE	Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index
SO	Sub-Objective
STTA	Short-Term Technical Assistance

TCG	Trilateral Contact Group
TOT	Temporarily occupied territories
UA	Ukraine
UAH	Ukrainian Hryvnia
UCBI II	Ukraine Confidence Building Initiative II
UNITY	USAID/Ukraine National Identity Through Youth Project
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollar

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Office of Transition Initiative (OTI)'s program in Ukraine, the Ukraine Confidence Building Initiative II (UCBI II) helps to ensure political stability and national unity in Ukraine and mitigate the effects of Russia's aggression by advancing efforts towards the reintegration of Donbas and Crimea, strengthening abilities to counter disinformation and malign narratives, especially in Russian language media, and serving as a ready instrument to address emerging threats to national cohesion and stability.

In January 2021, UCBI II was extended by one year to April 2022. This extension allows OTI to maintain a flexible mechanism that can ensure USAID's ability to respond to issues in the post-election period and the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to respond to high priority emerging issues. In anticipation of the extension, in December 2020, UCBI II convened a Strategy Review Session (SRS) to re-orient its strategic framework and narrow its focus. UCBI II's revised strategic framework was designed to build off of previous successes and leverage cumulative learning.

During this reporting period, UCBI II implemented and completed activities under its previous (June 2019; updated in March 2020) strategic framework while simultaneously pivoting towards programming in support of the revised December 2020 strategic objectives. UCBI II's narrowed strategic focus on reintegration and disinformation was immediately put to work in support of a series of high-level and rapidly evolving relationships and endeavors with the Government of Ukraine (GoU). Given the depth of experience, networks, and relationships OTI and UCBI II accumulated during the life of project – and the flexible nature of OTI assistance – the team has been called upon to provide strategic support to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on the Crimea Summit and Platform – an organization of heads of state and government, aiming to mobilize a more effective international response to Russia's seizure of Crimea from Ukraine; the Presidential Administration for government-led disinformation centers being established under the National Security and Defense Center (NSDC) and Ministry of Culture and Information Policy (MCIP); and the Ministry of Reintegration for the Temporary Occupied Territories (MRTOT) on cross-line dialogue and transitional justice reform.

Under the revised framework, UCBI II is largely maintaining its existing geographic areas of focus albeit with a smaller footprint in Southeastern and Western Ukraine. UCBI II continues to work in Southeastern Ukraine with a focus on Kherson (and a smaller footprint in Zaporizhzhia); Kharkiv; Western Ukraine with a focus on Zakarpattia (and a drawdown in Ivano-Frankivsk); the non-government-controlled areas (Donbas and Crimea); and in Kyiv on initiatives with national significance.

In anticipation of UCBI II's April 2022 closeout, the team continues to work closely with the USAID Mission to hand over areas of programmatic focus. During the reporting period UCBI II started the process of handing over its reform-focused and civil society network building work in the Azov Region to the Democracy and Governance East project. Similarly, most of UCBI II's strategic communications and media efforts have been handed over to the Transformation Communications Activity (TCA). UCBI II has held several meetings with the recently launched Ukraine National Identity Through Youth (UNITY) Program regarding youth focused activities and IREX's Veteran Reintegration Program regarding veterans and IDP programs. UCBI II's commitment to strategically identifying key partners, approaches, and activities to hand over to other USAID and USG programs coupled with the revised strategic and geographic focus will enable the program to work effectively while preparing to exit Ukraine in 2022.

UCBI II PROGRAM AREAS

UCBI II's overarching goal is to support Ukraine's national unity and stability. UCBI II's programming is guided by contextual analysis of local dynamics and geographic regions with activities designed to address objectives based on assessed needs and identified opportunities. During this reporting period UCBI II initiated and completed activities under two strategic frameworks. October – December 2020 activities

are aligned with UCBI II's June 2019 strategic framework. All subsequent activities are aligned with the December 2020 strategic framework, an approach born out of the December 2020 SRS in anticipation of the project's one year extension and move towards an April 2022 closeout.

The June 2019 strategic framework's overarching goal – to expand acceptance of a pluralistic Ukrainian civic identity based on common values – was a valuable guiding framework for the program, however the onset of COVID-19 required a quick pivot to respond to pandemic needs and strengthen government and civil society's efforts to address the crisis. During this reporting period, and in response to this framework, UCBI II supported activities in Ivano-Frankivsk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Zakarpattia, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts as well as at the national level through support to multi-location or government level interventions and media activities. Under the June 2019 strategic framework UCBI II prioritized the following program areas (Note: SO2.4 and 3.5 were added to the framework in March 2020)



The December 2020 strategic framework positions the program to take advantage of new political opportunities presented by the GoU to accelerate the reintegration of Donbas and Crimea and to be ready, as a flexible, rapid response mechanism, to help Ukrainian civil society and authorities to address emerging impediments to stability and national cohesion. While the goal statement, objectives and sub-objectives shifted in December 2020 the *overall intent* of the program remains the same – to promote national unity and stability in Ukraine by empowering and enabling GOU and local organizations to address ongoing and emerging challenges. The new strategic framework reflects work that was started under the previous iteration and builds on UCBI II's cumulative successes and learning yet provides renewed and narrowed focus to ensure the strategic use of both remaining time and funding. During this reporting period and in response to this new framework, UCBI II supported activities in Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zakarpattia, oblasts as well as at the national level through support to multi-location or government level interventions and media activities.

It prioritizes the following program areas:



UKRAINE NATIONAL AND REGIONAL COUNTRY CONTEXT

During this reporting period the Zelenskyy administration prioritized improving national unity, implementing a more inclusive policy toward Donbas, and addressed several key reform areas.

Key issues and events directly impacting the UCBI II strategic framework include:

January 2021: Presidential Administration Announces Crimean Platform Summit

Following President Zelenskyy's September 2020 announcement of the Crimean Platform during the 75th session of the UN General Assembly, in January 2021, the Deputy Head of the Office of the President announced the Crimean Platform Summit to be held in August 2021. The Summit, intended as the inaugural event for the Platform, is a meeting of heads of state and government leaders and aims to discuss effective international responses to Russia's seizure of Crimea from Ukraine.

January 2021: GoU Releases Draft Law on the Transition Period

On 11 January 2021, the Ministry of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories (MRTOT) published a draft law entitled "On the State Policy of the Transition Period". The law represents Ukraine's first attempt at establishing a comprehensive framework for proper legislative regulation of the de-occupation and reintegration of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol, and the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The draft law includes establishing administrative processes to document births and deaths for residents of the NGCAs, guarantees pensions provision for NGCA residents, and calls for the abolition of the permit system at entry-exit checkpoints.

February 2021: Ukraine Bans Kremlin-linked Ukrainian TV Channels

On 2 February 2021, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy shut down three Kremlin-linked Ukrainian TV channels. All three channels belong to Russian President Vladimir Putin's closest allies in Ukraine, Viktor Medvedchuk and Taras Kozak, and are seen as aggressive platforms for Kremlin messaging in

Ukraine's information space. Numerous journalists, civil society leaders, and foreign governments – including the United States – voiced their support for Zelenskyy's actions citing the targeted channel's links to Russian disinformation.

February 2021: Minister of Culture and Information Policy (MCIP) Announces the Establishment of Disinformation Center

On 16 February 2021, while attending a Council of Europe online conference, Oleksandr Tkachenko, Minister of Culture and Information Policy (MCIP) announced plans to launch a Center for Countering Disinformation. The MCIP center is anticipated to work in cooperation with civil society on strategic communications efforts to oppose Russian propaganda and disinformation.

March 2021: Zelenskyy Signs A Decree to Establish the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) Disinformation Center

On 11 March 2021, the President of Ukraine signed a decree to enact the Center for Countering Disinformation under the NSDC. The NSDC center, with direct reporting lines to the Office of the President, is anticipated to serve a critical inter-governmental coordination function and focus on monitoring, analysis, and prioritized responses to the threat environment.

March 2021: Zelenskyy Approves Strategy for De-occupation and Reintegration of Crimea

On 11 March 2021, the President of Ukraine and the NSDC launched the strategy for the de-occupation and reintegration of temporarily occupied Crimea. The document defines a set of diplomatic, military, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other measures aimed at restoring the territorial integrity and state sovereignty of Ukraine and names the protection of human rights violations as an essential state function.

March 2021: Zelenskyy Signs the National Human Rights Strategy

On 24 March 2021, the President of Ukraine signed the National Human Rights Strategy. The Strategy represents a national level commitment to acknowledging and addressing human rights violations and takes steps to establish an efficient mechanism of protection. Of central importance, the strategy reaffirms the rights of residents of the NGCA to establish their ability to participate in local elections and affirms their rights to pensions and social payments and access to administrative, medical, and educational services.

March 2021: Buildup of Russian Troops Along the Ukrainian Border

In late March 2021, Russia began amassing troops on Ukrainian borders. Russian troops from across the country were deployed under the guise of combat readiness and exercise preparedness. Despite Russian rhetoric around readiness, the posture quickly approached a scale that has not been seen since Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine. A Kremlin spokesman said that Russian military movements posed no threat, but Russian official Dmitry Kozak warned that Russian forces could act to "defend" Russian territory and its citizens at any time.

Ongoing: COVID-19

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to place significant strains on the already under-resourced Ukrainian healthcare system. As of April 2021, Ukraine's Ministry of Health reported the country surpassed 2,000,000 cases with new cases at an all-time high (+20,000 per day as of April 2). Ukraine officially launched its vaccination program on 24 February 2021, yet it is moving at a dangerously slow pace. In addition to Ukraine lacking sufficient vaccine supplies to cover the country's needs, trust in vaccines remains low. For example, December 2020 research by the Kharkiv Institute for Social Research showed that 47% of Ukrainians are not willing to be vaccinated. More recent polling in February 2021 by

Rating Group showed an improvement in vaccine skepticism but noted that only 27% of Ukrainians are ready to take the available CoviShield vaccine with half of this population reporting that they only trust vaccines from the UK, US, and EU. Russia’s ongoing weaponization of the COVID-19 pandemic is of significant concern, particularly as it imposes severe restrictions on people trying to transit out of Crimea or Donbas to government-controlled areas. Kremlin-aligned media in Ukraine continues to target health crisis communications aiming to weaken Ukraine’s response to the pandemic and create discord and confusion around vaccine safety and effectiveness.

GRANTS SUMMARY

From 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021, UCBI II initiated a total of 32 activities, including sub-grants, short-term technical assistance (STTA), and direct distribution of goods and services (DDGS) for a total of \$2,180,817 committed to new activities.

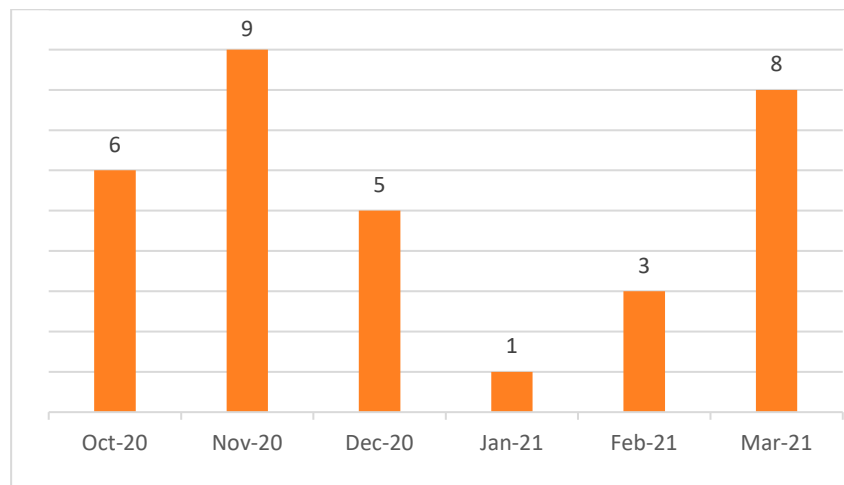


Figure 1: Number of grants cleared: October 2020 – March 2021

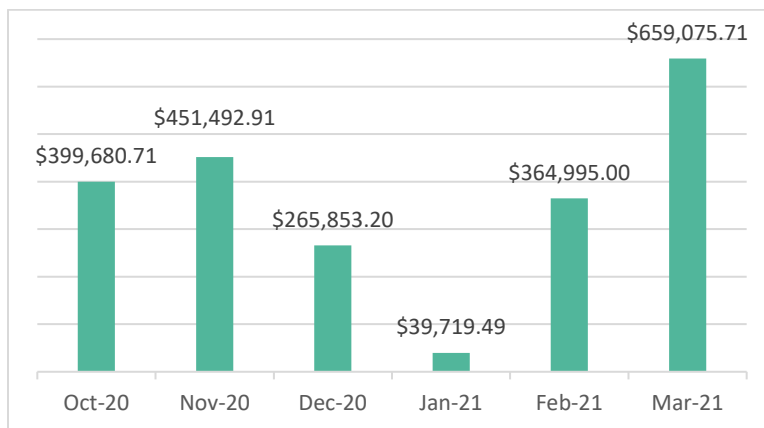


Figure 2: Dollar amount of grants cleared per month, October 2020 – March 2021

ACTIVITY HIGHLIGHTS

Between 1 October 2020 and 31 March 2021, UCBI II issued grants to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civic initiatives, state and local authorities, and other international, national, and local organizations.

Highlights of UCBI II activities from this reporting period are provided below:

OBJECTIVE I: ADVANCE EFFORTS TOWARDS THE REINTEGRATION OF DONBAS AND CRIMEA

Under Objective I, UCBI II aims to expand efforts to rebuild connections to residents of the Non-Government Controlled Area (NGCA) and to support both civil society and Government of Ukraine (GoU) efforts to safely reintegrate Donbas and identify opportunities to increase focus on the reintegration of Crimea. Objective I highlights from this reporting period include:

Between October and December 2020, UCBI II partner **Rights to Protection (R2P)** conducted 10 sensitive, cross-contact line dialogue sessions with environmental experts from the GCA and NGCA of Donbas. Participants drafted resolutions on the severe environmental and ecological impacts of armed conflict. The grantee shared resolutions with the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, the Ministry of Energy, the MRTOT, and Ukraine's delegation in the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG). As a result, the Committee of Verkhovna Rada on Environmental Policy and Natural Management approved the resolutions and shared them with relevant central executive bodies. Currently, the resolutions are being used by the Ukrainian delegation to the TCG which has incorporated concerns around environmental and man-made disasters into the negotiation's agenda.

UCBI II provided support to **Crimea SOS** to monitor the Entry and Exit Check Points (EECPs) at the two of most used crossing points into government-controlled Ukraine for Crimean residents, Kalanchak and Chongar. Crimea SOS undertook 12 monitoring visits between December 2020 and March 2021. Based on the information obtained through their visits, Crimea SOS was able to report on key challenges and hardships facing vulnerable Crimean residents as they attempt to enter and exit government-controlled Ukraine. As a result of this work, Crimea SOS developed a series of recommendations being used by local and national government to improve a range of service delivery issues facing checkpoints. In December 2020, **Vostok SOS** highlighted the critical importance of educational opportunities for young people living in the NGCA of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea. Despite cuts to the national education budget, Vostok SOS, in concert with MRTOT, select MPs, and leading human rights activists lobbied for financial support for students from the NGCA to attend university in Ukraine. As a result of these efforts, for the first time since the occupation, 130 million UAH was allocated from the national budget to support university students from the temporarily occupied territories.

Immediately following the **MRTOT's** January 2021 release of the draft law "On the State Policy of the Transition Period" – a groundbreaking step towards Ukraine's establishment of a proper legislative and regulatory framework to manage de-occupation and reintegration – UCBI II engaged world-renowned transitional justice experts the **Public International Law and Policy Group (PILPG)** to support the ministry. PILPG worked with the MRTOT team on every aspect of the draft law providing legal and technical feedback, comparative analysis to similar international laws and frameworks, a comprehensive review of, and responses to, public and civil society feedback, and operational guidance for next steps and finalization. As a result, MRTOT is incorporating PILPG's feedback and guidance into their revisions and has requested that UCBI II establish a mechanism to allow for ongoing support.

In February 2021, the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)** of Ukraine requested UCBI II's support in preparing for the **Crimean Platform Summit**. The Summit, the inaugural event of the Crimean Platform, aims to unite Ukraine's foreign partners – including heads of state and senior international

officials – around the challenges of the Crimean occupation. UCBI II is working directly with the MFA on logistics, content, and communications in preparation for the Summit, which will be held on 23 August 2021, the eve of Ukraine’s 30th Independence Day.

OBJECTIVE 2. INCREASE AVAILABILITY OF RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE CONTENT TO COUNTER DISINFORMATION AND MALIGN NARRATIVES

In recognition that the best defense against disinformation is well targeted information that supports engaging, factual narratives, UCBI II’s Objective 2 portfolio works in support of Ukraine’s media sphere, which is of paramount importance to continued progress toward national unity and stability.

National Level Engagements:

In November 2020, UCBI II partnered with one of Western Ukraine’s most progressive organizations — **The Institute for Central European Strategy** — for the **Re:Open Zakarpattia Development Forum**. The forum, the first of its kind in the region, brought together national and regional government representatives, as well as European Parliament and USAID Mission representatives as opinion leaders, civic activists, and business representatives shared best practices from other regions of Ukraine and presented proposals on legislation and actions on topics such as investment and multiculturalism. The forum had 78,000 livestream viewers and received national media attention. A sociological study prepared as a part of the Re:Open Zakarpattia has become a source of objective information about the region and a tool to counter disinformation. Two key figures from the study showed that less than 1% of the regional population supports separatist movements and 51% support Zakarpattia being part of a united Ukraine.

The **Spalakh** documentary series aims to increase appreciation of modern Ukrainian culture. UCBI II supported the production and promotion of the 10-episode series featuring topics such as folk music, fashion, cinema, gastronomy, and dance. The series features some of the most vibrant individuals of the past decade including the first Ukrainian music video producer Viktor Pryduvalo; musicians Vlad Troitsky and Dakha Brakha who globalized Ukrainian ethnic music; and Irina Danilevskaya the mother of Ukrainian Fashion Week. Since its debut in December 2020 Spalakh has already accumulated over 1 million views on YouTube and continues to receive an unprecedented 98% rating for positive feedback from viewers and is highly acclaimed by industry professionals and GoU officials.

In December 2020, UCBI II received a request from the Office of the President (OoP) to support research examining international best practices on countering disinformation. The research request, intended to support an anticipated OoP disinformation center, included an examination of the Ukrainian disinformation space, comparative analysis of international disinformation models, and technology mapping of Ukrainian disinformation tools and recommendations for internationally available products and solutions. UCBI II immediately mobilized internationally recognized expertise from Tom Kent, the former President of Radio Liberty/Free Europe and author of *Striking Back: Overt and Covert Options to Combat Russian Disinformation* (for the analysis of the Ukrainian disinformation space); the Open Information Partnership (OIP) managed by Zinc Network (for the comparative analysis and in partnership with the UK FCDO); and the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Lab (for the technology mapping). Shortly after mobilizing this expertise the GoU formally announced the creation of two government-led disinformation centers – one to be housed under the NSDC and the other under the MCIP. These decisions highlight the importance of countering disinformation at the highest levels of Ukrainian leadership. Given UCBI II’s proactive engagement, leadership from both centers are relying on UCBI II’s expert support as they craft their goals and objectives and work to navigate the different mandates of each center.

To promote evidence-based programming for **DIM/DOM TV**, **Peter Pomerantsev**, and the **Arena** research team¹, joined by the **Kharkiv Institute for Social Research** undertook a series of focus groups with NGCA and GCA participants between January and March 2021. The focus groups tested the effectiveness of messages and themes for a historical documentary series set to be aired in August 2021 to commemorate Ukraine's 30th anniversary of independence. Per the focus groups, NGCA residents reflected positively on unifying Ukrainian events prior to the Russian occupation such as the 2012 UEFA European Football Championship and Ukraine's 2004 Eurovision victory. Insights from the focus groups are being used to inform the messages and tone of the series to ensure strong reception among the intended audiences.

In February 2021, UCBI II was approached by the **Ukraine Crisis Media Center (UCMC)** to support the development and implementation of a massive online open course for countering disinformation. The course, which will be hosted by Prometheus (Ukraine's leading online professional education site), aims to enhance the resilience of Ukrainian society to malign informational influence, strengthen democratic practices and institutions, and promote responsible electoral behavior, all of which stems from raising the media literacy level. UCMC will develop, launch, and promote comprehensive content that will present key structural knowledge on disinformation and propaganda from leading Ukrainian and American experts in the field. In addition to producing new content, UCMC is aggregating knowledge from civil society leaders such as StopFake and EuroMaidan Press to ensure the course is reflective of cumulative Ukrainian best practices.

#Newkraine 2.0, a series of blogger diary videos in Russian by influencer **Denis Kazansky**, an internally displaced Donetsk native also served as an official representative on the TCG. – **#Newkraine 2.0**, his second such project with UCBI, showed citizens that reforms are improving cities and expanding opportunities. At the beginning of the activity Kazansky had about 140,000 subscribers on Facebook and YouTube which has since grown to over 312,000. The video diaries received over 890,000 views on Facebook and YouTube collectively – outperforming Kazansky's projected number of 250,000 by 72%. Kazansky expertly highlights successful regional development initiatives showcasing industrial parks, modern power plants, renewable energy sources, hydroelectric power stations, and waste sorting lines. Kazansky's work has established a tangible connection between local development and the wider reform agenda, helping to bridge the gap between government progress and citizen expectations.

Given the success of the first season, UCBI II supported Season 2 of the humorous travel show **Le Marshrutka** beginning in October 2020. Season 2 of *Le Marshrutka* visits Eastern and Southern Ukraine and the Zakarpattia region and has reached over 11 million viewers on TV and nearly 2.5 million on YouTube. The recipe for the show's success includes the host's ability to present information in an openhearted and entertaining manner and the teams' ability to consistently feature previously undiscovered destinations, local attractions, and regional cuisine. Following each show, the



Le Marshrutka – travel show about the uniqueness and beauty of Ukraine

¹ Arena is an innovative program dedicated to overcoming the challenges of disinformation and polarization. Based at the Institute of Global Affairs (IGA) within the London School of Economics and Johns Hopkins University SNF Agora Institute, the Arena program aims to use high-quality research, analysis, and evaluation to create effective best practices that can then be disseminated to journalists, public diplomacy teams and civic groups. Arena seeks creative ways to counter the menace of unreality, stop the spread of hatred and division, and foster a fact-based discourse that enhances security, enables democracy, and builds trust. Its experimental research projects involve journalists, academics and data scientists who seek to both understand disinformation campaigns and reach audiences impacted by them.

production team reported receiving multiple requests to provide contacts of the local business and tourist spots they profiled. These requests led to show’s producers using their own resources to create the *Le Marshrutka’s Gift Box* featuring the best of the gastronomical treats collected from various regions all over Ukraine. Together the show and the gift box vividly illustrate how active citizens are creating a vibrant and modern Ukraine. In December 2020, the show’s host Lesya Nikityuk was nominated as a Tourism Ambassador by the Ukrainian State Agency for Tourism Development.

The third year of **PitchUA** launched in December 2020. Management of the contest, initially launched by UCBI II in December 2018, was handed over to longer-term USAID-funded project Transformation Communications Activity (TCA) (co-designed with the Mission and OTI). Working hand-in-hand with TCA, PitchUA 3 included an open call for creative outlets to “pitch” Russian-language content promoting Ukrainian values of democracy and unity that could be funded by UCBI II. PitchUA3 collected a total of 340 applications – across all themes – of which 36 met UCBI II’s Russian language criteria. 18 of the 36 applicants passed the first round of the competition and proceeded to the “doctoring” phase of the contest. These 18 semi-finalists are working closely with industry experts from Hollywood, London, and Kyiv to prepare for the final round of pitching in April 2021.



Promo of the “MAMA” TV series

PitchUA2 finalist – a four-episode TV drama entitled “**MAMA**” – came to an end in March 2021. Based on a true story, “MAMA” aimed to humanize the conflict and increase acceptance of citizens of the occupied territories. The project was co-produced and broadcast beginning in February 2021 on one of the most popular national TV channels – STB – and demonstrated exceptional results as reflected in TV ratings, digital reach, and feedback from viewers and critics. “MAMA” reached an audience of over 6,500,000 people through STB and accumulated an additional 1,000,000 views on YouTube so far. Given these results, STB has agreed to co-fund Season 2 and invest additional funds for advertising. The production team is in negotiations with DIM/DOM TV to broadcast both Seasons 1 and 2 for the NGCAs.

Local Level Engagements:

Building on UCBI II’s previous success building sustainable local media outlets, in January 2021, the project supported the launch of **Vision Radio** in Zaporizhzhia. Vision Radio, a newly created independent media platform quickly became an active stage for discussion, debate, and cooperation between Zaporizhzhia residents and local authorities. To date, 10 government officials have taken part in live “question-answer” broadcasts where they engage directly with citizens on topics including education, medicine, inclusive reforms, internet safety for children and adolescents, and the potential for united territorial communities. The Vision Radio team has also hosted a series of online cultural and educational events and a media school for prospective civic journalists. The media school brought together 30 aspiring journalists to study critical media literacy topics central to countering disinformation including fact-checking, accuracy verification for photo and video content, and recognition of text message manipulation. To close the activity, the Vision Radio team held an online media forum to discuss myriad topics including the need for more independent media in Ukraine that is not financially dependent on business or government.

UCBI II supported the development and strengthening of a media outlet **Vgoru** – currently the only source of independent, unbiased local information for the Kherson region. With UCBI II support, Vgoru transformed from an online newspaper into a full-service, multi-faceted media platform. The Vgoru team revamped their website, overhauled their branding, developed a production roadmap, and launched their own production studio. After the launch of the platform, including new formats for infographics and videos, their average monthly readership has gone from 30,000 to 350,000. With increasing demand for

unbiased information, the Vgoru platform has the potential to become one of the most powerful media resources in the Kherson region.

With UCBI II support, Ivano-Frankivsk-based **Urban Space Radio** developed 5 thematic podcasts (with over 40 episodes). Urban Space Radio's podcasts entitled "Hryts' Arch" and "Stereoranch" tackled sensitive topics such as regional and gender stereotypes. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Urban Space Radio created an additional podcast series entitled "Who Knows How." Launched in October 2020 and featuring psychologist Anna Shyichuk, "Who Knows How" addressed common psychological challenges people are facing during the pandemic and offered recommendations on how to overcome them. Both podcasts under this activity have appeared in the Ukrainian Apple Podcasts top ratings numerous times, with "Who Knows How" steadily remaining in the top-5 for science shows. Urban Space Radio has reached over 190,000 listeners with those products.

OBJECTIVE 3. ADDRESS EMERGING CHALLENGES TO STABILITY AND NATIONAL COHESION

UCBI II keenly monitors the political situation in Ukraine remaining abreast of trends and events that pose challenges to stability and national cohesion. Key highlights for this reporting period center around UCBI II's COVID-19 support and response initiatives which continued as the ongoing and escalating pandemic continued to put stress on Ukraine's under-resourced health system.

Front-line health care workers in some of Ukraine's hardest hit locations – Chernivtsi, Ivano-Frankivsk and Zakarpattia – have found themselves in need of basic PPE as they serve their communities. In support of regional authorities who are struggling to find the resources to support the pandemic and front-line health care workers caring for their communities, UCBI II – in partnership with **Chernivtsi, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Zakarpattia Regional State Administrations** – provided support to over 30 regional medical facilities. Between October 2020 and February 2021, UCBI II supplied 18,300 protective suits, 28,900 FFP3 respirators, 186,000 disposable medical face masks, 287,000 disposable hats, 457,000 disposable shoe covers, and 5,100 face shields. The distribution and delivery of the PPE was organized by each of the regional state administrations COVID Response Task Force and supported by volunteer organization **Revival of Zakarpattia**.

In Kherson, local organization **Zahyst** used UCBI II support to deliver more than 25,000 masks to the Kalanchak and Chongar EECs and Administrative Support Centers (ASCs) in December 2020. The provision of protective masks to the EECs and ASCs was amplified on online media in Crimea through the Crimean news service website Krim. In February 2021 UCBI II worked with Zahyst to supply 15 local hospitals with 17,000 protective suits, an activity that inspired a local big business – TM ANSERGLOB – to join the project and provide safe storage of the suits in their warehouses, as well as assistance with the distribution free of charge.



Presentation of the telemedicine equipment in Bardiensk

Many Ukrainian hospitals are at capacity or are closed to non-emergent patients making it difficult for patients to obtain appointments or medical tests during the pandemic. Between January and March 2021, UCBI II supported **Berdiansk Territorial Medical Unit (BTMU)** to purchase and install telecommunication equipment that allows for remote consultation and diagnosis. In addition to the provision of equipment, 33 BTMU doctors and 5 administrators underwent training on the equipment and systems in February and March 2021.

Following a direct request from the **OoP**, UCBI II supported the logistics and operations for the

inaugural conference – *Coronavirus: Challenges and Responses* – under the President’s **All-Ukrainian Forum** initiative. The All-Ukrainian Forum is a series of weekly thematic meetings covering the country’s most pressing topics. The first Forum – opened by President Zelenskyy – was held between 8 and 10 February 2021 and covered a wide range of COVID-19 related topics. The forum was held offline with a limited number of in-person participants and was streamed live on key Ukrainian TV channels and social networks. High-level international speakers such as Ursula von der Leyen, President of European Commission (EC) and Tedros Adhanom, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) were featured at the event. The most significant outcomes of the event were its ability to address issues of vaccine safety and virus mitigation requirements to a national audience.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) is an integral part of project performance management systems and is critical for learning, accountability, and outreach. UCBI II’s project evaluation is a systematic process of analysis, with a clear feedback loops generated during monthly activity site visits performed by staff, regular M&E meetings, findings from an independent monitoring firm contracted by UCBI II, and media monitoring. Information gathered by UCBI II staff, and by external evaluators, is examined by the project development team and the senior management team who use it to make strategic programming decisions. While the ongoing pandemic makes site visits more difficult, the UCBI II was able to average 4 visits per month during this reporting period. In addition to site visits, the UCBI II team regularly prepares weekly outcome bullets and renewed its work on the learning agenda in concert with OTI Washington.

Key M&E highlights from this reporting period include:

With UCBI II support, in November 2020, **Info Sapiens** conducted the final wave of COVID-19 public opinion research. In addition to the research providing important contextual analysis, UCBI II used the results to directly inform activity design. UCBI II used the research findings to inform the panel of experts engaged under the inaugural OoP **All-Ukrainian Forum Coronavirus: Challenges and Responses**. Per the research, more than 40% of Ukrainians have confidence in COVID-19 information that comes from doctors and health professionals as compared to a 31% confidence level in information issued by both President Zelenskyy and the international community. As such, the Forum relied heavily on panelists from the medical community when communicating key messages and practices. Further, UCBI II presented the polling data to UNICEF and the MCIP, both of whom used the findings around vaccinations to develop strategic communications messaging.

UCBI II also partnered with local research organization Info Sapiens to complete cluster evaluations to measure public attitudes towards targeted media products and health reform processes. As a result of the media-focused cluster evaluations, UCBI II partner Vgoru learned that their target audiences’ value personal stories about local heroes that overcome obstacles and want to see more socially responsible content. As a result, Vgoru was able to produce targeted content about a local social services center and the eBaby service, an on-line platform for receiving birth certificates. The health reform cluster evaluations provided information that enabled UCBI II to better design health care-related activities at the regional level. The research showed that residents of Mariupol are significantly more satisfied with the delivery of healthcare services compared to those living in Melitopol and Berdyansk. As a result, UCBI II designed two COVID-19 digital medicine activities directly targeting Melitopol and Berdyansk. These results have also been shared with the Office of Health in the USAID/Ukraine Mission.

In 2018, UCBI worked with Western-Ukraine based Institute for Central European Strategy to support the development of independent media outlet **Varosh.com.ua**. **Varosh** produces content aimed at reducing stereotypes and promoting messages of tolerance, diversity, and pluralism. With UCBI II support

Varosh has become one of the most frequently visited web resources in the region and one of the only outlets that encourages productive discussions amongst readers with varying viewpoints.

Following this activity, key stakeholders including the Zakarpattia State Oblast Administration, members of Rada from Zakarpattia, business representatives, civic organizations, and local opinion leaders expressed the need for in-depth, multi-stakeholder discussions to address regional challenges and opportunities. Building off previous success, in November 2020, UCBI II supported **The Institute for Central European Strategy** and **Varosh** to hold the **Re:Open Zakarpattia Forum**. Spanning two days, Re:Open Zakarpattia hosted 10 panels with ~45 regional and national experts, opinion leaders, civil society, international diplomats, representatives of business and government, investors and donor organizations to discuss culture, investment, representation of the region at the national level, and cross-border cooperation. Varosh launched a major media campaign successfully promoting the event to local and national audiences.

During forum planning, ongoing Ukrainian-Hungarian tensions led to media coverage of the narrative that there was widespread support for Hungarian and Transcarpathian separatism, including that the region was planning for the creation of its own republic. To better understand these narratives and ensure that the forum had a strong evidence for panel discussions, the **Democratic Initiatives Foundation** launched a public opinion survey. The survey revealed that despite aggressive pro-Separatist narratives – promoted by Russia – claiming widespread support for separatist movements, less than 1% of the regional population supports such movements and 51% support Zakarpattia being part of a united Ukraine. These groundbreaking results challenged harmful, long standing regional stereotypes and were picked up by Radio Svoboda, BBC Ukraine, and UA:PBC who used the findings to expose Russian-led disinformation and counter destructive narratives through independent journalism.