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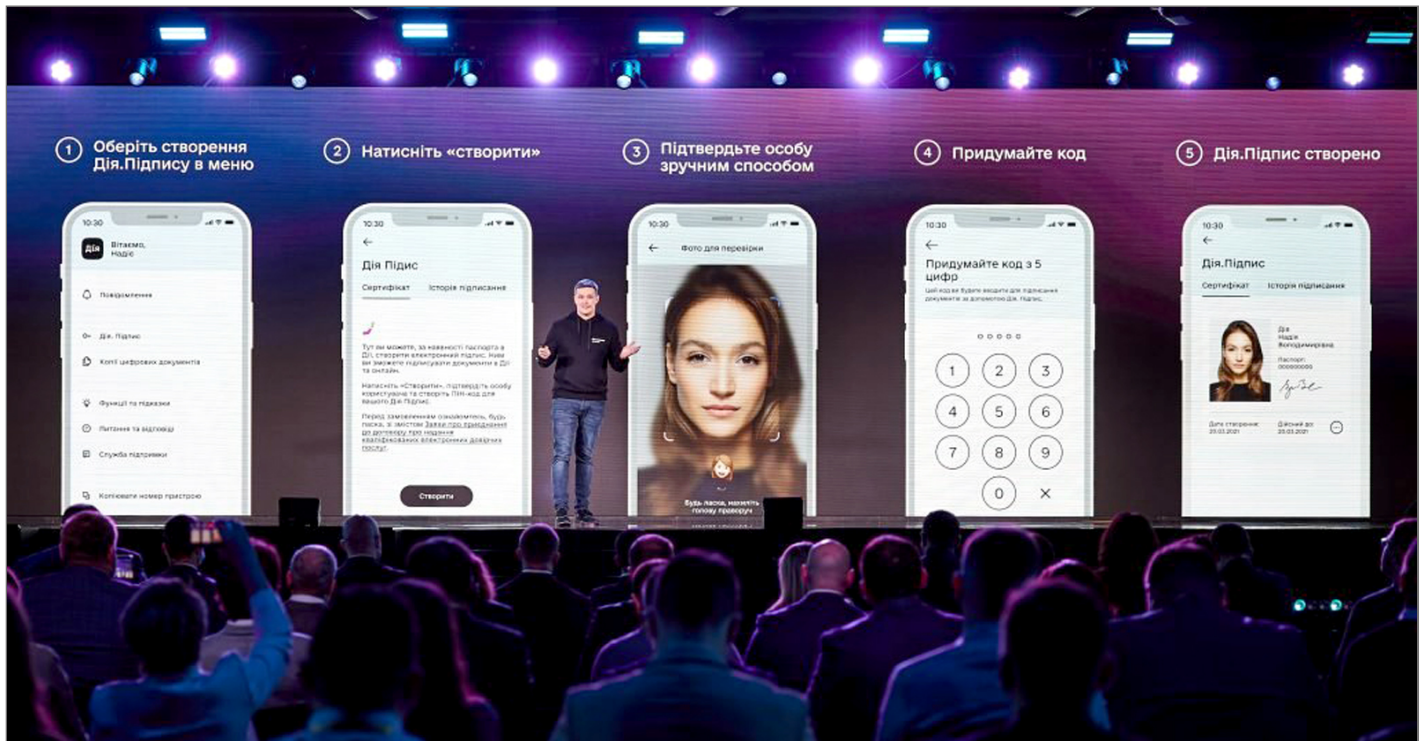
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expanded for use as a digital wartime tool.

By Michael Nevradakis, Ph.D.



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The Ukrainian government in 2020 launched Diia, a digital app that combines identity card, passport, license, vaccination record, registrations, insurance, health reimbursements and social benefits.

That was before Russia's Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine. Now, it appears the Ukraine government is expanding Diia, illustrating how digital apps can be employed during wartime.

What is the Diia app?

In Ukrainian, the word "Diia" means "action," but it's also an acronym in that language, standing for "The State and Me."

Ukraine's deputy prime minister and minister of digital transformation, Mykhailo Fedorov, first [announced](#) the app on Sept. 27, 2019, under the auspices of the "[State in a Smartphone](#)" project.

Officially launched Feb. 6, 2020, Diia is [intended](#) to combine all public services into one app, which operates as a "digital state."

Digital passports and other official documents are now considered legally [equivalent](#) to their paper versions, making Ukraine the [first country](#) to accomplish this.

Diia provides more than [50 government services](#), with the eventual goal of making [all interactions](#) with the state available through the app.

Currently used by 14 million Ukrainians, [according](#) to Wired, Diia is considered a "[national brand](#)" in Ukraine.

Some of the [documents](#) available via the app include citizens' national identification card, a [biometric passport](#), drivers' licenses (with Ukraine being the [fourth](#) European country to introduce them in digital form), vehicle registration certificates and insurance policies, tax documents, birth certificates and COVID [vaccine certificates](#).

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The Diia app is even credited with making Ukraine "a world leader in the number of available online services for parents of newborns" — with [nine online services](#) related to the birth of a child available within 20 minutes of the child's birth.

As [reported by The Defender](#) in December 2021, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals — in particular, [Goal 16.9](#) — call for the provision of a digital legal identity for all, including newborns, by 2030.

Other services available via the Diia app include [digital signatures](#), [business registration](#), the "Diia City" [virtual residency program](#) for businesses to be virtually located in Ukraine and special services for [internally displaced persons](#).

The Diia brand and project are largely [credited](#) to Fedorov, who remains Ukraine's digital minister as the conflict with Russia continues.

Fedorov had previously established a digital marketing startup, which led to him being [hired](#) by Volodymyr Zelensky in 2018 as [director of digital](#) for Zelensky's presidential campaign.

In August 2019, shortly after Zelensky was elected, his government [established](#) the Ministry for Digital Transformation — with Fedorov named as minister.

The [World Economic Forum](#) (WEF) [praised](#) Fedorov for his work, including the Diia app.

While “digital wallets” combining essential government documents such as drivers’ licenses and “vaccine passports” have become more widespread over the past year in several countries — [including the U.S.](#) — the Diia app represents one of the most wide-ranging and sophisticated such efforts worldwide.

And in the past year, Diia has seen further deployment: in the “battle” against [COVID](#) and in the country’s military operations against Russia.

Amid controversy, the Diia app operated as a ‘vaccine passport’

Ukraine’s Ministry of Digital Transformation [launched](#) digital COVID vaccine certificates in July 2021, available “100% in the Diia application.”

The government developed three types of [certificates](#): two for domestic purposes (for one- and two-dose vaccines), and an international certificate for travel purposes — now officially [recognized](#) by the European Union and [at least 43 countries](#).

The issue of vaccine passports in Ukraine generated controversy from the get-go.

As [stated](#) by Oleksiy Vyskub, first deputy minister of digital transformation, in May 2021:

“Now we are considering the introduction in Ukraine of two types of COVID-19 certificates — internal and external. External, for the ability to travel; internal, if such cases are chosen politically, for the resumption of concerts and other public events. Now it is politically debated. It is clear, this is a difficult question, depending on the availability of the vaccine.”

Nevertheless, on Sept. 13, 2021, the Ukrainian government [announced](#) vaccine passports. Utilizing the certificates available in the Diia app, the government restricted access by the non-vaccinated to a variety of businesses and venues, and to the workplace.

These restrictions resulted in public mobilizations against the “vaccine passports,” including a [protest](#) in Kyiv in November 2021.

However, at the time, despite two months of vaccine passport enforcement, [only](#) about 17% of Ukraine’s population was “fully vaccinated” — one of the [lowest levels](#) in Europe.

In a time of conflict though, these digital COVID vaccination certificates were surely useful for fleeing refugees — as evidenced, for instance, by a [document](#) originating from Greece’s consulate in Odessa, which requested that members of Ukraine’s Greek diaspora seeking to flee to Greece have their vaccine credentials at the ready.

Aside from “vaccine passports” though, the Diia app also was used to incentivize COVID vaccination via financial means.

Beginning Dec. 19, 2021, the Ukrainian government launched the [ePidtrymka program](#), paying citizens age 14 and older who could demonstrate proof of “full vaccination” against COVID 1,000 hryvnia (approximately \$35 at the time).

[Described](#) by some commentators as a form of a “social credit” system, the program was scheduled to last until Dec. 18, 2022. The monies provided, however, cannot be spent freely, but only on certain categories of purchases, such as medicines and books.

The ePidtrymka program has continued to expand. On Feb. 14, Ukrainians over age 60 were able to [spend funds](#) from this program on housing and communal services. And beginning March 14, persons with disabilities could spend funds from the program on social needs and utility bills.

Also as of March 14, Ukrainians who returned for a COVID booster would receive an additional 500 hryvnia (\$17 USD). Payments are conducted via the Diia app.

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This system resembles other vaccination incentives seen elsewhere. In Greece, the “[Freedom Pass](#)” enabled the youth, age 25 and under to receive a cash incentive for getting vaccinated, and to spend that money on select categories, such as travel and concert tickets.

Many U.S. states and cities provided [incentives](#), such as [free french fries](#) and donuts, college scholarships and cash, to increase vaccination rates.

Many private employers in the U.S. and elsewhere have also provided cash incentives to their staff in a push to get them vaccinated, as [reported by The Defender](#) in February.

Moreover, the categorization of one’s personal expenditures, now [commonly practiced](#) by many banking institutions, has been viewed by some commentators as a broader prelude for control over people’s spending — such as via “personal carbon allowances,” as [reported by The Defender](#) in October 2021.

The concept of “programmable” digital money — meaning money that could be used only for certain purposes — is also a key [tenet](#) of the proposed central bank digital currencies, as [revealed](#) by the Bank of England.

Nevertheless, the low level of vaccine uptake in Ukraine — despite both positive and negative incentives — suggests that, pre-war at least, trust in government authorities had significantly [declined](#).

In fact, cash incentives have been [characterized](#) as being supported by the country’s “banking oligarchs,” as part of a “push for helicopter money,” explaining why the program was extended even as conflict brewed with Russia.

Looking at COVID subsidies — as well as war and conflict — Fabio Vighi, a professor of critical theory at Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales, [described](#) “the overarching aim” as being intended to “obfuscate the real issue at stake, which consists of pulling mountains of cheap money into the debt-addicted economy.”

In December 2021, Ukraine was [approved](#) for a \$150 million World Bank loan to “speed up vaccinations against COVID-19.”

Out of these funds, \$30 million would be “used for IT, communications and public outreach, capacity building and cold chain and waste management equipment,” according to the World Bank.

This presumably includes continued efforts to develop and deploy the Diia app, and comes on top of an additional \$155 million received by Ukraine earlier in 2021.

Digital apps launch a digital battleground during war

It appears now, since the commencement of the latest military conflict with Russia Ukraine's digital government services app has been flexibly converted into an instrument of war.

One now tried-and-true method is the distribution of cash subsidies, as [assistance](#) of 6,500 hryvnia (approximately \$221) was made available via Diia by the Ukrainian government, [tax free](#), to citizens in areas "affected by hostilities the most."

The payment restrictions previously in place also were [removed](#).

According to [Reuters](#), Ukrainians who lost their jobs as a result of the military conflict also will be eligible for a one-off payment from the government.

Rumors circulated widely online claimed this conflict-related subsidy was tied to one's vaccinations status, leading to "[fact-checks](#)."

However, it does [appear](#) that the payouts are available to citizens regardless of vaccination status, with the COVID subsidy system being used as an example to explain to the public how this new subsidy will be disbursed.

More onerously, though, is the news that the Diia app is being utilized as a weapon of war — to the enthusiastic approval of international media.

Wired, for instance, [described](#) Ukraine's digital ministry, which operates the Diia app, as a "formidable war machine."

Indeed, as Wired reports, the Diia app now includes the following war-related features:

- A quick way to donate money to the Ukrainian military, including [via cryptocurrency](#).
- A chatbot for submitting images and video of Russian troop movements in Ukraine.
- 24-hour streaming access to [television stations and newscasts](#) from Ukraine.
- A childrens' video channel.

This is in addition to a call posted by Fedorov on the social messaging app Telegram, for a motley crew of developers, designers, marketers and "security specialists" to join a [volunteer "IT Army"](#) — with 300,000 volunteers having been attracted thus far.

The online army's tasks include sharing the IP addresses of Russian websites and companies, in order for them to be targeted by DDoS (directed denial of service) attacks in an effort to knock them offline.

In addition, pro-Russian social media accounts "spreading false information" are reported via the efforts of this "IT Army."

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Anton Melnyk, an advisor to the Ukrainian digital ministry and head of Ukraine's tech ecosystem, [tweeted](#), "[s]ince the war in Ukraine began, Twitter has deleted more than 75,000 accounts for violations, manipulation and spam policies." Melnyk publicly thanked Twitter.

Indeed, Melnyk and Fedorov have [described](#) Twitter as "part of our war effort."

Melnyk spearheaded the campaign for "Big Tech" to cut off Russia, beginning with a request he sent to Apple, with whom, [according](#) to Wired, he maintained "good connections" due to a 2021 [agreement](#) stipulating Apple would support the Diia app.

Meanwhile, [according](#) to TIME, some \$63 million worth of donations have come in for the Ukrainian military, while the country's digital ministry has successfully engaged in a campaign of "shaming the world's largest tech companies into blocking services in Russia."

In this same article, Fedorov described this novel digital battlefield as "our home turf," while The New York Times also [reported](#) on how Fedorov "has turned technology, cryptocurrency and social media into modern weapons of war."

According to the Times, Fedorov stated:

"They [the Russians] have failed to notice that... governments must move towards becoming more and more like tech companies, rather than being rigid like a tank, like a war machine."

In turn, Melnyk [wrote](#) the following on his LinkedIn page:

"I will continue to work as hard as I can to make justice happen. Cyber attacks, cyber police, hacking units, Elon Musk with Starlink, Tim Cook with Apple, Google, YouTube, Meta, Netflix and Amazon with Bezos. Black methods have become white methods, hacking by default sounds positive as well as the public request to make Molotov cocktails by the police."

Ukrainian television stations — notorious for their [connections](#) to oligarchs who, in turn, are said to be closely connected to the government — have essentially now been [merged](#) into one station, under new wartime powers.

And in another connection with COVID-related measures, the chatbox where users can submit photos and videos strongly resembles a [similar tool](#) employed by New York City authorities in 2020, for the reporting of social distancing violations.

Wired described the above as a result of the broad support Ukraine enjoys among world leaders and "tech CEOs."

For instance, this "broad support" appears to have been evident when Facebook announced it would "temporarily" [allow](#) calls for violence against Russians — including Russian President Vladimir Putin — on its platform.

Facebook later quietly [rescinded](#) the policy, at least officially.

It remains to be seen whether [other proposals](#) for future features that were to be associated with the Diia app and the concept of "digital governance" in Ukraine — such as a digital census to have been performed in 2023 in conjunction with Apple — will take place under current circumstances.

Such proposals had been worked on, in part, by Sergii Vasylychuk, founder of Ukrainian blockchain company [Everstake](#). Vasylychuk also helped the country's digital ministry set up the crowdfunding platform for military donations.

Even with the “innovative” use of digital government apps as part of a wartime effort though, some observers remain unconvinced.

Emerson Brooking, a senior fellow with the Atlantic Council, told Wired: “The information war matters less as time goes on. The realities and calculations of war itself are now driving this conflict.”

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