

# Ukraine uses US facial recognition technology to terrorize families of dead Russian soldiers

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Ukraine is employing US-made facial recognition technology to scan the faces of dead Russian soldiers and, after having matched the images to online profiles, sending the photos to the relatives of the deceased.

The practice, which is a clear violation of Geneva Conventions and protocols that state that the bodies of dead soldiers must be afforded respect and cannot be subject to ill treatment, was reported on by the *Washington Post* last Friday. The American newspaper described the macabre and demented campaign, however, as if it were a legitimate military tactic, albeit one that might backfire.

According to Ukrainian officials cited in the story, the US firm Clearview AI gave the country the technology. It has since been used to conduct more than 8,600 facial recognition searches. With the photos of dead Russian troops in hand, a database of 20 billion images from social media and the internet is sifted through in order to identify the individuals. About 10 percent of searched images are from VKontakte, Russia's most popular social media site.

Ukraine's IT Army, a volunteer force of hackers working directly for Kiev, has sent photos of corpses to 582 families. The *Post* article emphasizes their efforts to contact, in particular, mothers of the dead.

"A stranger sent a message to a Russian mother saying her son was dead, alongside a photo showing a man's body in the dirt—face grimacing and mouth agape," reported the newspaper. "The recipient responded with disbelief, saying it wasn't him, before the sender passed along another photo showing a gloved hand holding the man's military documents."

The mother replied, "Why are you doing this? Do you want me to die? I already don't live. You must be enjoying this."

She is correct. The *Post* implies that the aim of the photo-sending campaign is to sway the Russian population against the Putin government but notes that it is likely to be "seen inside Russia not as a welcomed exposure to the truth but as a humiliation by the enemy" and trigger the opposite reaction.

Observing that a "dangerous new standard for future conflicts" is being set, Stephanie Hare, a surveillance researcher in London told the *Post*, "If it were Russian soldiers doing this with Ukrainian mothers, we might say, 'Oh, my God, that's barbaric.' And is it actually working? Or is it making them say: 'Look at these lawless, cruel Ukrainians, doing this to our boys?'"

Both the Ukrainian and American military, which are aiding and abetting this work, are fully aware that the primary impact of this practice will be to drive Russian families mad, with the likely outcome that it tilts them towards support for Moscow's invasion. Thus, the only clear purpose is to revel in Russian deaths and feed the most depraved anti-Russian sentiments, which are central to the ideology of Ukraine's far right.

The highest levels of the Ukrainian state are involved in this work. Three government agencies confirmed use of the technology—the National Police, the Defense Ministry and a third agency that asked Clearview to keep its identity confidential. In addition, two other government institutions are employing the software, but Clearview declined to name them for unknown reasons.

Clearview AI executive Hoan Ton-That, a descendant of the Royal Family of Vietnam, according to the company's website, told the *Post* that "more than 340 officials across five Ukrainian government agencies now can use its tool to run facial recognition searches whenever they want, free of charge."

The company "holds weekly, sometimes daily, training calls over Zoom with new police and military officials looking to gain access."

Both the relationship between Clearview AI and Kiev and the practice of sending photos of cadavers to Russian families is being directed by Washington.

Contact between the Ukrainian government and the New York City-based Clearview AI was initially made in early March through Clearview advisory board member Lee Wolosky, a former US ambassador who has held posts under four US presidents in the areas of national security and

counter-terrorism and most recently was special counsel to President Biden. The company's advisory board is stacked with other former top US officials, including Richard Clarke, Owen West and Thomas Feddo.

Clearview AI sells access to its technology to 3,100 active users, including the FBI and Department of Homeland Security. Raymond Kelly, the former police commissioner of New York City, also sits on the advisory board.

The deployment of the Clearview technology on the battlefield in Ukraine is part of the American government's massive arming of the country, which has included \$2.6 billion in weapons deliveries, including tanks, anti-tank missiles and other advanced weapons systems, in just the last few weeks.

Beyond tormenting Russian families, Ukraine is using this technology to scale up its internal repression. According to the *Post*, an individual at Ukraine's Digital Transformation Ministry told the company that Kiev is using "the system to identify people who had been detained in the country and check their social media for anything suspicious, including their 'range of contacts,'" with over 1,000 searches done in just a few weeks.

Imperfections in Clearview's technology mean that many may be misidentified. Such mistakes, in a country where vigilante lynchings are now rampant, could easily result in immediate death for the accused. As Albert Fox, executive director of the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, told Reuters, "We're going to see well-intentioned technology backfiring and harming the very people it's supposed to help."

Furthermore, the Ukrainian government is arresting people on the basis of allegations that they are pro-Russian "traitors." Millions of Ukrainian citizens, however, are of Russian or mixed ancestry, and speak Russian at home. They could easily, on the basis of little, no or distorted evidence, be accused of aiding the enemy. The weaponizing of Clearview's technology in the context of a conflict that can easily escalate into a fratricidal internal war has grave implications, as the use of the software to identify individuals' "range of contacts" poses the prospect of a mass terror campaign directed against large sections of Ukraine's population.

In a February investor presentation, Clearview AI declared it is seeking to raise \$50 million to vastly expand its operations and data collection powers so that "almost everyone in the world will be identifiable." In addition to the fact that the proxy war in Ukraine, with no end in sight, will serve as a reliable source of revenue for both Clearview AI and the entire US defense industry, it is a training ground for new methods of war and repression.

Ton-That told the *Post* that his company's efforts are a

"good example for other parts of the US government to see how these cases work."

The article in one of the US leading liberal newspapers was notable for its blasé attitude towards what are clearly war crimes being committed by Ukraine. It never even used the term or made mention of international law with regards to the treatment of the dead. It said nothing about well documented public displays of Russian soldiers' bodies, floggings of alleged Russian sympathizers and ethnic minorities, or other recent heinous examples of Kiev's forces taunting the relatives of dead troops.

In one video circulating on social media currently, the Ukrainian military is seen contacting by video chat the mother of a Russian soldier named Ilya.

"Ilya is gone. He got sick and died. He got lost. That was his first mistake. The second mistake is that he got lost in Ukraine. And his third and final mistake he [made is] that he died," stated the laughing Ukrainian soldier. He adds, "Dogs will eat him. That's all. We don't even have time to bury them. We don't have time to bury them. We are killing too many too fast."

The Russian government is accused of genocide and war crimes by the US and its NATO allies. The media everywhere repeats these claims, which as of yet remain to be investigated or proven according to international standards. But the Ukrainian military's brutal acts against civilians and soldiers, which they advertise on social media as a point of pride, are ignored or, in the present case with regards to Clearview's technology, treated as a tactic worthy of experimentation.

This is revealing in two respects. First, it demonstrates that the claim that Kiev is waging a war, with the support of the US and NATO, in defense of a democratic country intent on securing the rights and liberty of its people is a lie. Second, it shows what Washington and its allies are prepared to do to Russians and all others who fall in their gun sights in the future.



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