



## America-Eurasia Center The America-Ukraine Program

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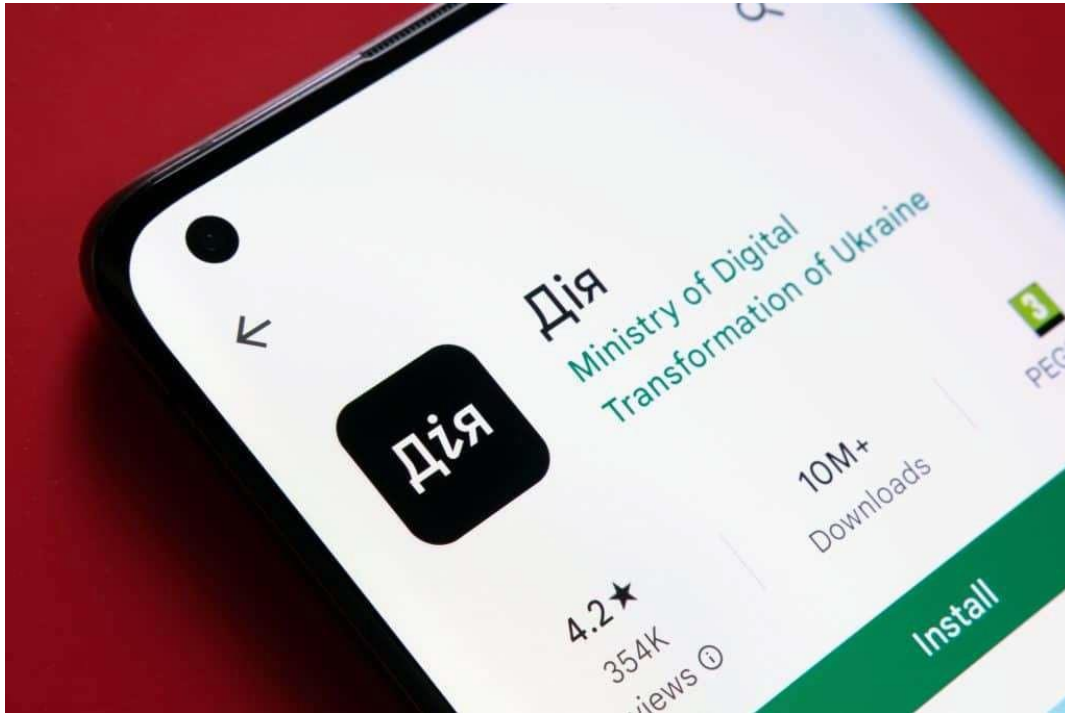
### Paper to Pixels: Diia and Ukraine's Digital Transformation



Image Credit: The Atlantic Council of the United States

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# Paper to Pixels: Diia and Ukraine's Digital Transformation



Diia app available for download on a smartphone. Photo Credit: biometricupdate.com

## Introduction

Accessing government services can often be an irritating and exhaustive process. From long lines to impatient staff, dealing with government bureaucracy is rarely an enjoyable experience. This is especially true of countries where civil services are impaired often by issues of corruption and mismanagement. As part of the Ukrainian government's efforts to address these issues, and to bring the country into a new era of quick and transparent bureaucracy, the mobile app Diia was launched. Built in partnership with USAID, the app enables its users to access over 120 government services. From digital passports to business registries, Diia has been instrumental in greatly improving both the quality and accessibility of government services in Ukraine. It has been increasingly important since Russia's full-scale invasion of the country in 2022. With many

Ukrainians being displaced by the war, the ability to quickly access government documents and services from anywhere in the world has been invaluable.



Ukrainian Anti-Corruption Protest in 2017. Photo Credit: Newsweek

### **Digitalization and Fighting Corruption:**

Ukraine suffers from a long history of government corruption. In 2022, Transparency International rated Ukraine as having a Corruption Perception Index Score of 33/100 and being ranked 116 out of 180 countries. It is for this reason that recent Ukrainian administrations have worked to promote digitization as a part of anti-corruption campaigns. Digital services, as compared to local offices for example, are perceived as being less likely to promote corruption. Online applications can't be bribed or threatened and do not have any family connections to be referenced. Through providing a transparent means for accessing government services, apps like Diia allows Ukrainians to engage civil services in ways they were unable to before. According to a poll conducted by the non-profit E-Governance Academy, 38.7 percent of Ukrainians had to deal with corruption when applying for a passport. This is consistent with reports from the Ukrainian State Migration Service which recorded 17,000 open criminal cases regarding passport forgery between

2019 and 2020. Since the launch of Diia however there has yet to be a single instance of forgery related to the digital passports provided by the app.

## **Reception:**

The public reception of Diia has been broadly positive. According to polling conducted by E Governance Academy, all Ukrainians polled reported a positive or mostly positive experience. Reviews for the app on Apple's App Store have similar results with the app receiving a 4/5-star rating for users. Complaints regarding the app have mostly related to technical issues and an apparent lack of services for expats, according to the reviews. The warm reception of Diia by its users seems to indicate a strong future for the app as well as any other digitization efforts in Ukraine, assuming they perform at least as well as Diia.

## **Ukraine's Internet Warfront:**

In 2022 there were roughly 34.3 million internet users in Ukraine. By 2023 however, that number had decreased by roughly 5.7 million. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, internet infrastructure in many parts of the country have been decimated with even government and military forces struggling to operate under the conditions. This has created a situation where many Ukrainians may experience great struggles in accessing their government services, many of which have been increasingly delegated to Diia. The work of Elon Musk in providing Ukraine with access to the internet via the Starlink system has been instrumental in alleviating many of these issues. Using the system, local internet service providers have been able to connect to war ravaged cities otherwise cut off from the internet and the important services which are needed. This arrangement however has not come without controversy. Areas of Ukraine already under Russian occupation have been denied access to Starlink and are forced to make use of Russian services and with it all of the regime's restrictions. Ukrainian and Western news media is strictly prohibited on the Russian

servers and indicating loyalty to Kiev in even small ways such as having a Ukrainian phone number in one's contacts can result in severe consequences.



Ukrainians walking past a Kyivstar store after a Russian cyberattack on the ISP. Photo Credit: NBC News

Those affected by conflict aren't left unaddressed by Ukraine's digital services. Since the app's inception, Ukrainians who have been displaced by Russian aggression (Eg. those who have fled from Crimea or the Donbass) are able to access IDP or Internally Displaced Person certificates on Diia. In November 2021 there were roughly 307,500 such certifications on the app with likely many more since 2022.

## **Concerns and Conspiracies:**

As discussed previously, Ukraine is a country that has been historically plagued with corruption. Subsequently, fears of government incompetence have not been absent from Diia. This is perhaps best seen in conspiracy theories which have circulated in online circles claiming that Diia is part of a shadowy initiative by the World Economic Forum to track and control individuals' private information and institute a system of social credit. These claims have been broadly debunked as the information which is available to Diia is documentation which the Ukrainian government already possessed and predictions of a social credit system being implemented through the app have, so far, have failed to materialize. Although having caused little effect to the Ukrainian government's efforts to bring the country into an age of digitization, these conspiracies stand as a reminder of the looming issue of misinformation in the internet age.

## **Conclusion:**

Diia has allowed Ukrainians to experience government services in ways which make even the residents of wealthier countries envious of its speed and ease of use. Covering over 120 government services, Diia has effectively taken the country's bureaucracy out of the office and onto the internet and done so to the applause and positive feedback of its citizenry. However, as Russian aggression and the lasting effects of corruption plagues Ukraine, Diia's greatest challenges may be on the horizon.

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