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Weaponizing Ho Chi Minh in Vietnamese Discourse on the War in Ukraine

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Mắt Thần (Divine Eye), a state-linked Facebook page, has been attempting to mobilize pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian sentiments through the use of two old videos about Ho Chi Minh from Ukrainian sources that it considers offensive. Picture: Banner of Facebook Page of *Mắt Thần* (Divine Eye) at <https://www.facebook.com/MatThan.Official>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Since Russia invaded Ukraine, the Vietnamese government has appeared sympathetic to Moscow, unwilling to denounce its aggression. Facing criticism from some quarters of the public, Vietnam's propaganda machine has used social media channels to justify the government's position.
- *Mắt Thần* (Divine Eye), a state-linked Facebook page, has mobilized pro-Russia and anti-Ukraine sentiments by publishing videos on two old Ukrainian media items about Ho Chi Minh that it considers offensive.
- The controversial episode has led to conflicting reactions from Ukrainian and Russian authorities, as well as Vietnamese netizens, who are themselves divided over the war.
- Divine Eye's attempt to "weaponize" Ho Chi Minh to mobilize public support for Vietnam's stance on the Ukrainian conflict is another example showing that, more than 50 years after his passing, Ho Chi Minh's emotional appeal remains a useful tool for Vietnam's propagandists.
- However, the reach of Divine Eye's videos is rather limited, and the effectiveness of this propaganda remains unclear.

INTRODUCTION

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Vietnamese official press has presented itself as non-partisan. However, given Vietnam's historical ties with Russia, and Moscow's present role as Hanoi's main arms supplier, the Vietnamese government has appeared sympathetic to Moscow, and has been unwilling to denounce its aggression.¹ Vietnam abstained on two United Nations (UN) General Assembly resolutions that condemned the invasion and voted against the suspension of Russia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council. On 19 April 2022, the Russian News Agency also announced that Vietnam and Russia are planning to hold a joint military exercise in 2022.² Yet, many Vietnamese intellectuals and members of the public have held a contrary view, condemning Russia's invasion and showing support for Ukraine.

Against this backdrop, there have been indications that Vietnam's propaganda machine has used different tools and narratives to justify its initial position on the conflict, often on social media. This article looks at how *Mắt Thần* (Divine Eye), a state-linked Facebook page, has mobilized pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian sentiments by digging up two old media items about Ho Chi Minh from Ukrainian sources that the page considers offensive. The episode shows that more than 50 years after his passing, Ho Chi Minh remains not only an important source of legitimacy for the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) but also an effective mobilizing symbol for its propaganda machine.

According to Divine Eye's self-description,³ it is a media critic and a "multidimensional" information sharing channel. The page was created on 29 March 2021. As of 22 May 2022, it had 606,000 followers and followed no one. Divine Eye's first video was uploaded on 27 April 2021. Since then, the page has posted between five and seven political videos per day, each 12-13 minutes long. Since 21 November 2021, Divine Eye has also posted the same materials on other channels, such as *activepress24.com* and *canhco.net*, suggesting that it is a propaganda platform that seeks to maximize its reach to the Vietnamese public. The page's pro-state tone and the significant volume of materials it produces every day also suggests that it is well-resourced and backed by Vietnam's official propaganda machine. It has also been identified by some researchers to be among the largest pro-Russia Facebook pages/groups in Vietnam.⁴

Divine Eye's logo is similar to the Divine Eye symbol in Caodaism, a syncretic religion in southern Vietnam, which reminds followers that God sees everything. However, the logo seems to have been copied from an image of the esoteric evil eye, the glance of which is believed to destroy or harm anyone on whom it falls. Ironically, the original logo was first posted online by a Ukrainian-Israeli artist who strongly denounced the Russian war in Ukraine.⁵

Initially focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic and the South China Sea dispute, Divine Eye has since February 2022 switched its attention to Russia's war in Ukraine and adopted a markedly pro-Russia and anti-Ukraine tone. Towards this end, it posted on 19 March 2022 a video in which it appealed to the Vietnamese public to be irate over the fact that "Ukrainian Media Made a Film Insulting President Ho Chi Minh – Calling Him a Dictator of History".⁶

The video, which is 12 minutes and 42 seconds long, refutes two media items produced in Ukraine: a 2013 article and a 2017 documentary. Divine Eye accused these media items of slandering Ho Chi Minh by calling him a dictator. By 22 May 2022, the video had been viewed 1.5 million times and shared 3,500 times, gathering 43,000 reactions and 12,000 comments.

Figure 1 - Screenshot of Divine Eye's Video (21 May 2022)



One day after publishing the post, Divine Eye reinforced its argument with another video, asserting that “Ukrainians Must Feel Ashamed When They Learn That Not Only Russia But the Whole World Respects Uncle Ho”.⁷ The video opens with an image of a monument of Ho Chi Minh erected in Moscow in 1990 with a superscription across the screen: “Uncle Ho – An Icon Revered by the Entire World, But Ukrainians Still Fall into an Unforgivable Mistake.” This is followed by an image of Lenin’s monument being destroyed and then images of numerous monuments honouring Ho Chi Minh in countries around the world. By 22 May, this video had garnered 45,000 likes, 2,800 shares, 3,100 comments, and 965,000 views. Both posts are among the most visible and discussed videos that Divine Eye has ever produced.

It is notable that the two Ukrainian media items that Divine Eye refers to in its videos were published long ago and gained little attention until the page dug them up. The first video referred to an article published in April 2013 by Oleg Bagan, the current Director of the Dimitry Dontsov Scientific and Ideological Center in Drohobych in western Ukraine, in the online newspaper *Українська Правда* (Ukrainian Truth). Written after the death of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, the article evaluated his “left-populist” policies and connected them to Lenin’s policies and how these resulted in great suffering and loss of life. The author then claimed that Lenin’s policies were repeated by various charismatic leaders of dictatorial regimes such as Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Pol Pot, Kim Il Sung, Fidel Castro, Josip Broz Tito, Muammar Gaddafi, and Saddam Hussein.⁸ This was the only

mention of Ho Chi Minh in Bagan's article. As of 21 May 2022, more than nine years after its publication, the article had been read only 280 times.

The second Ukrainian media item mentioned by Divine Eye was produced over four years ago. On 7 November 2017, the centenary of the October Revolution, the Ukrainian 24TV channel published a 12-minute documentary titled "Ho Chi Minh – a God-like Elder-Dictator with a Bolshevik Heart." The documentary was made by Andriy Konkov, a Ukrainian journalist and news editor of the channel, as part of his "Dictators" series.⁹ Konkov described Ho Chi Minh's childhood and his trips to France, the Soviet Union, China, and other places. He also discussed Ho Chi Minh's role in the liberation of Vietnam from the French. However, Konkov also called Ho Chi Minh an agent of the Kremlin and raised topics considered politically sensitive in Vietnam, such as Ho Chi Minh's relationships with women; the 1953-56 Land Reform, which he said took 100,000 lives; and the repression of intellectuals. He concluded that Ho Chi Minh was a dictator of an authoritarian state. It is important to note that 24TV channel has a very limited daily viewership of 1.1% in Ukraine.¹⁰ By 22 May 2022, the video had only registered 4,826 views, nowhere close to the viewership of some of Konkov's other works that on average garnered around 50,000 views each.

UKRAINIAN AND RUSSIAN OFFICIAL REACTIONS

In March 2018, several months after the release of Konkov's video, Oksana Yurinets, a member of the Ukrainian Parliament and head of a parliamentary group for inter-parliamentary relations with Vietnam, wrote a letter to the director of 24TV channel at the request of then-Vietnamese Ambassador to Ukraine Nguyen Anh Tuan. In the letter, Yurinets demanded that the channel "refute unreliable information" in the video as it "undermines Ho Chi Minh's prestige" and "misleads local people, especially those who are sympathetic with Ho Chi Minh and Vietnam." However, she did not specify what information she wanted removed, and nothing was done about the video.¹¹ Whatever the case, Vietnamese propagandists ignored it for five years as they did Bagan's article for nine years. The fact that Divine Eye dug up these old media items to mobilize anti-Ukraine sentiments following Russia's invasion of Ukraine could hardly have been a coincidence.

On 21 March, two days after the release of Divine Eye's first video, *VOA Vietnamese* published a report in which Nataliya Zhynkina, Ukraine's Chargé d'Affaires in Vietnam, claimed that digging up and using these two old media items was "part of an information war, with the aim of causing enmity between the people of Ukraine and Vietnam." Zhynkina stressed that the pieces got almost no attention in Ukraine and noted that Ukrainian delegations to Vietnam always respectfully visited Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum. She also added that there was a high school named after Ho Chi Minh in Kyiv, and in 2015, the Ukrainian Library of Parliament held an exhibition on "Ho Chi Minh and Ukraine" to mark the 125th anniversary of his birth. Zhynkina alleged that "the origin of this attack is an information source on Facebook, which broadcasts false content and propaganda from Russia".¹² On 23 March, Divine Eye struck back by accusing Zhynkina of causing a

controversy “to force Vietnam to act to protect Ukraine” and condemning her for meeting with “the opposition” in Vietnam.¹³

The episode also garnered attention from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On 6 April 2022, at her weekly briefing, Maria Zakharova, the Ministry’s spokeswoman, was asked by a representative of the Ministry’s journal, *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn*’ [International Life], about the reactions in Vietnam to the Ukrainian media items “insulting” Ho Chi Minh. Zakharova commented that: “[T]his is a highly unsavoury story. At the same time, it is the norm for the Kiev regime and those who follow its mainstream of twisting history.”¹⁴ The response suggests that Zaharova was unaware of the nature of the two Ukrainian media items, or that she intentionally associated the dated productions of two individuals with the official view of the current Ukrainian government. On 15 April, the excerpts related to Vietnam from Zakharova’s briefing were posted on the website of the Russian Embassy in Vietnam in both Russian and Vietnamese.¹⁵ On 17 April, Divine Eye posted a video praising the response of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. By 22 May, the video had garnered 290,000 views, 1,200 comments, 12,000 reactions, and almost 1,000 shares.¹⁶ The whole episode suggests that Divine Eye is closely connected to pro-Russian interests.

VIETNAM IN-BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

There are some fallacies in Divine Eye’s videos. The creators of the videos conveniently chose to focus on Konkov’s claim that Ho Chi Minh was a dictator and ignore all other facts mentioned by him, such as Ho Chi Minh’s role in liberating Vietnam from French colonialism. Moreover, the videos also assign collective guilt to the Ukrainians, extending the blame for the old media items created by two individuals on the current Ukrainian government and President Zelensky, who only assumed office in 2019. However illogical this approach is, some comments on the videos show that it seems to work. One Facebook user claimed that the defeat of Ukraine, which according to him is ruled by a clown (a reference to Zelensky’s previous career as a comedian), is the joy and happiness of the Russian people, whom the author conflates with the Soviet Union, and is also the joy of Vietnamese citizens since “the clown dared to speak ill of the leader of our country Vietnam.” This disregard for logic impedes balanced, well-informed discussions, by appealing to emotions instead.

Most Divine Eye followers respond to these emotional cords by asserting their love, respect, and veneration for Ho Chi Minh. They found Divine Eye videos skilfully produced and convincing. One follower called Konkov (or TV24 channel, or Ukrainians in general—it is unclear from the sentence), “idiots and a bunch of stupid reactionaries, who do not know anything about the great and respected leader, Ho Chi Minh.” Another one claimed that “[t]hose who dare to offend the beloved leader of the Vietnamese people, Uncle Ho Chi Minh, will be cursed by the whole world and their country will be ravaged by war!” Another credited Divine Eye’s video for changing his opinion on the war—while he had initially supported the Ukrainians, his sympathies had now switched to the Russians as he felt that the Ukrainians had abused the Vietnamese people.

Obviously, Divine Eye caters to an “echo chamber”—a very specific self-selected audience that supports its views.¹⁷ However, among them, there was a small number of reactions that were critical of Putin and Russia. One comment noted that both Vietnam and Ukraine are independent countries, and no country has the right to impose what path another must take. Another comment asked: “Why force them to follow dictatorial socialism, while they want to follow the capitalist way, the way of independence, and freedom? Forcing Ukraine to follow the way it does not want shows that Putin belongs in the jungles, not in the domain of international law.”

Divine Eye’s anti-Ukrainian position does not seem to align with the view of the broader Vietnamese public. For example, Dien Nguyen An Luong and Amirul Adli Bin Rosli find that Vietnamese internet users are often critical of the government’s stance vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine.¹⁸ There have even been some demonstrations and projects in Vietnam where people collect money, clothes, medicine, and other goods to send to Ukraine as many Vietnamese feel affinity with Ukraine or are appalled by Russian aggression.¹⁹ Divine Eye is trying to persuade opponents of the Vietnamese government’s approach and those on the fence to fall in line, behind Uncle Ho.

CONCLUSION

Ho Chi Minh, both during his life and after, has played an important role in the mobilization of Vietnamese citizens to support the CPV and its policies. His personality cult has been indispensable in this process.²⁰ Generations of Vietnamese have been raised with the avuncular image of Ho Chi Minh, and been taught to love and be devoted to Uncle Ho. Although the grip of the Ho Chi Minh cult on Vietnamese minds has been weakening in recent years, the CPV still uses it to keep the Vietnamese in line.²¹ Divine Eye’s attempt to “weaponize” Ho Chi Minh in mobilizing pro-Russia and anti-Ukraine sentiments, and by extension public support for Vietnam’s stance on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, is yet another example of Ho Chi Minh’s emotional appeal remaining a useful tool for Vietnam’s propagandists, more than 50 years after his passing.

The effectiveness of this propaganda remains unclear, especially since the reach of Divine Eye’s videos is rather limited. Where Vietnam’s official position is concerned, Hanoi has announced that it will provide Ukraine with US\$500,000 in humanitarian aid. During a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C. on 11 May, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh also reaffirmed Vietnam’s position of respecting the UN Charter, principles of international law, states’ independent sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as addressing all disputes through peaceful means without use or threat of force.²²

While short of calling out Russia, the statement’s neutral undertone suggests that despite its voting on the UN’s resolutions to preserve ties with Russia, Vietnam also wishes to

moderate its stance on the Ukrainian conflict to avoid hurting its relationship with Ukraine and with the West.

ENDNOTES

¹ For an analysis on the pro-Russian online sentiments in Vietnam, see Hoang Thi Ha and Dien Nguyen An Luong, “The Russia-Ukraine War: Unpacking Online Pro-Russia Narratives in Vietnam” *ISEAS Perspective* 2022/44, 27 April 2022. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-44-the-russia-ukraine-war-unpacking-online-pro-russia-narratives-in-vietnam-by-hoang-thi-ha-and-dien-nguyen-an-luong/>.

² “Rossia I Vietnam Provedut Novye Mezhdunarodnye Uchenia” [Russia and Vietnam to Hold New International Military Exercises], *TASS*, 19 April 2022, <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/14407641>.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/MatThan.Official>. At the end of May, the page was inaccessible for several days.

⁴ See, for example, Hoang Thi Ha and Dien Nguyen An Luong, “The Russia-Ukraine War.”

⁵ The two images are carbon copies. The artist has many other similar images. See: <https://www.etsy.com/il-en/listing/944657825/esoteric-evil-eye-svg-2-turkish-eye-svg>

⁶ I am indebted to Nina Grigoreva, my former classmate in Russia, for drawing my attention to this video that served as a starting point for this article. See, Mất Thần, “Phần Nộ! Truyền Thông Ukraina Làm Phim Xúc Phạm Chủ tịch HCM, Đổ Lỗi Cho Việt Nam” [Get Indignant! Ukrainian Media Made Films Insulting President Ho Chi Minh, Blaming Vietnam], 19 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/MatThan.Official/videos/3131807903757662/>. While the official page of Divine Eye has been restored, the video remained inaccessible as of 7 June. However, it can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1114053539171034> and on some Youtube channels.

⁷ Mất Thần, “Người Ukraina Sẽ Phải Xấu Hổ Khi Biết Rằng Không Chỉ Nga Mà Cả Thế Giới Kính Nể Bác Hồ” [Ukrainians Must Be Ashamed To Learn That Not Only Russia But The Whole World Respects Uncle Ho], 21 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=329331582501785> Like the previous clip, this one is inaccessible on Divine Eye’s page as of 7 June, but can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3196205573951482>.

⁸ Oleg Bagan, “‘Чавес – вічно живий!’ Кілька тез про типологію одного явища” [‘Chavez is alive forever!’ Several Theses on the Typology of One Phenomenon], *Українська Правда*, 18 April 2013, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/columns/2013/04/18/6988429/>

⁹ Андрій Конько, “Хо Ши Мін – “богоподібний старець-диктатор” з більшовицьким серцем” [Ho Chi Minh is a ‘God-like Elder-Dictator’ with a Bolshevik’s Heart], 7 November 2017, https://24tv.ua/ho_shi_min_bogopodibniy_starets_diktator_z_bilshovitskim_sertsem_n886343

¹⁰ “Channel 24,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Channel_24_\(Ukraine\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Channel_24_(Ukraine))

¹¹ “Нардеп від БПП заступилася за комуністичного лідера” [The People’s Deputy from the BPP Stood Up for the Communist Leader], *24TV*, 21 March 2018, https://24tv.ua/ru/nardep_ot_bpp_vstupilas_za_kommunisticheskogo_lidera_n941296.

¹² VOA Vietnamese, “Đại biện Ukraine ở VN: Xới lên bài viết về Hồ Chí Minh là ‘tấn công thông tin’, gây thù hằn,” [Ukrainian Chargé d’Affaires in Vietnam: Digging Up Articles About Ho Chi Minh is an ‘Information Attack’, Inciting Hatred], 21 March 2022, <https://www.voatiengviet.com/a/dai-bien-ukraine-o-vn-xoi-len-bai-viet-ve-ho-chi-minh-la-tan-cong-thong-tin-gay-thu-han/6494295.html>

¹³ It is published on the Divine Eye’s alternative websites on 23 March 2022: Nam Anh, “Đại Diện Ukraine Tại Việt Nam Lên Tiếng Về 2 Ấn Phẩm ‘Tấn Công Thông Tin’ Gây Thù Hằn” [Ukrainian Representative in Vietnam Speaks Out About 2 Publications – ‘Propaganda Attacks’ Inciting

Hatred], <https://canhco.net/dai-dien-ukraine-tai-viet-nam-len-tieng-ve-2-an-pham-tan-cong-thong-tin-gay-thu-han-p597427.html> and <https://activepress24.com/dai-dien-ukraine-tai-viet-nam-len-tieng-ve-2-an-pham-tan-cong-thong-tin-gay-thu-han>.

¹⁴ Брифинг официального представителя МИД России М.В.Захаровой, Москва, 6 апреля 2022 года [Briefing of the Official Representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs M. V. Zakharova, Moscow, 6 April, 2022].

https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/video/briefingi/1808254/#19, transcript in English “Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova,” Moscow, 6 April 2022, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1808254/.

¹⁵ The post in Russian: https://vietnam.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/iz_briefinga_m_v_zakharovoy/ and in Vietnamese: https://vietnam.mid.ru/vi/press-centre/news/tr_ch_cu_c_h_p_b_o_c_a_m_v_zakharova/.

¹⁶ “Bộ Ngoại Giao Nga Lên Tiếng Chỉ Trích Sự Thiếu Hiểu Biết Của Ukraina Khi Xuyên Tạc Về Chủ Tịch HCM” [“Russian Foreign Ministry Criticizes Ukraine’s Ignorance When Distorting [Representation] of President Ho Chi Minh”], 17 April 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/MatThan.Official/videos/1054424731812359>

¹⁷ Hoang Thi Ha and Dien Nguyen An Luong, “The Russia-Ukraine War.”

¹⁸ Dien Nguyen An Luong and Amirul Adli Bin Rosli, “Vietnam Netizens’ Reactions at Odds with Vietnam’s Stance on Ukraine,” *Fulcrum*, 16 March 2022, <https://fulcrum.sg/vietnam-netizens-reactions-at-odds-with-vietnams-stance-on-ukraine/>.

¹⁹ This is based on numerous posts on Facebook as well as conversations with Vietnamese and expats living in Vietnam.

²⁰ See, for example, Olga Dror, “Establishing Hồ Chí Minh’s Cult: Vietnamese Traditions and Their Transformations,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 2 (2016), pp. 433-466.

²¹ More and more young Vietnamese do not see Ho Chi Minh as an indispensable element of their lives despite the state’s efforts. In the market economy, it is becoming more difficult to inundate book stores with books by or about Ho Chi Minh. As a result, the circulation of these works is quite limited. If in the past a publishing house would publish a 100,000 or 200,000 copies of such books, currently the run is often limited to 300 to 500 copies.

²² Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh Ahead of U.S.-ASEAN Summit”, 11 May 2022, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/220511_Prime_Minister_Chinh_0.pdf.

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