

EXCLUSIVE
By Lord Ashcroft

AT an age when most young men are finishing their education or planning their “gap year”, Roman Pohorilyi created an ingenious device that is today seen as indispensable to his homeland of war-torn Ukraine.

On the very day Russia launched its illegal, all-out invasion – February 24, 2022 – Roman, then 22, and his friend, Ruslan Mykula, 27, unveiled an online map now used by millions of Ukrainians every day – as well as millions more people all over the world. Their DeepState map, along with its social media Telegram channel of the same name, have become widely regarded as the most detailed and reliable “open source” material of what is happening on the ground in the embattled country.

Furthermore, both young co-founders are now considered amongst the most expert commentators on the war given they have access to the most sensitive information imaginable. After Ukraine’s sensational strike behind enemy lines against Russian aircraft, for instance, Roman was quoted on the BBC as saying: “This can be considered one of the most brilliant operations in our history. We’ve shown that we can be strong, we can be creative and we can destroy our enemies no matter how far away they are.”

I met Roman in Odesa, Ukraine’s magnificent southern sea port, where for the second successive year I was the lead sponsor of the Black Sea Security Forum and he was a guest speaker at the three-day event.

Later, in an exclusive interview, the bearded young tech expert spoke of his pride at being able to establish a tool that is used by Ukraine’s military leaders, frontline soldiers, political leaders and civilians alike.

“It’s a great honour to be helping my country and to have achieved all this at such a young age,” he told me.

The two founders met at the “Revolution of Dignity” in Ukraine in early 2014, when deadly clashes between protestors and the state in Kyiv culminated in the ousting of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych and, soon afterwards, the outbreak of the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian war.

At that time, Roman was a politically-minded schoolboy, aged just 14 years old. The DeepState story began six years later in February 2020, two years before Russia’s all-out invasion, when Roman was a 20-year-old law student, and Ruslan, then 25, was working in marketing.

THEY shared a fondness for technology and international news so they started a Telegram channel which carried short reports on everything from the Covid pandemic to the civil war in Syria and from the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War to the George Floyd protests in the US. Later they began sourcing news about Russia and the Taliban’s offensive in Afghanistan.

By late 2021 and early 2022, as Russian troops massed on their border, the two young men concentrated the focus on Ukrainian news, yet at this point their Telegram channel had only 3,000 “subscribers” who paid nothing for their information.

“In the build-up to the invasion, we started tracking Russian troop movements because we realised something highly suspicious was going on. Then after the invasion, we carried on doing this but in a much more comprehensive way,” said Roman, now 26, who is single and lives in Kyiv. Immediately after the invasion, he collected an AK-74 assault rifle and went to help defend his home city of Irpin for two weeks, while Ruslan continued to

‘It is a tool that is used by Ukraine’s military leaders, frontline troops, politicians and ordinary people’

work on their new DeepState map. Irpin soon became one of the most destroyed cities of the first month of the war.

Roman’s elderly grandparent’s lives were only saved because they crawled out of the city on their hands and knees to avoid enemy fire.

“Russia destroyed my home city, killed some of my friends and I can never forgive them for this,” he told me. Having defended his home city, Roman was soon back working with Ruslan on their DeepState map.

Initially, they used Google Maps as their platform but, by the end of March 2022, Google blocked the map for alleged “violations

of their rules of service”. Ever resourceful, the two friends commissioned a computer programmer to create an alternative, independent platform for their map.

Within days, it was up and running once more and, by June of the same year, it was amongst the 25 most popular websites in Ukraine.

DeepState’s growth in just over three years has been staggering and it now has more than 800,000 Telegram subscribers.

By February last year, the DeepState map had been viewed more than a billion times. Up to 100,000 users are looking at the map at any one time.

What started as a bit of unpaid “fun” for

two young men is now operated by more than 100 people, a mix of paid staff and volunteers. DeepState is largely funded by donations but this is a patriotic, not a commercial, venture. Other sources of revenue are advertisements on their Telegram channel and merchandising.

Today, DeepState is run from a secret location in Kyiv.

In chat windows, thousands of photographs, videos and messages arrive every day showing missile strikes, Russian military equipment and other intelligence. Much of the work of the DeepState team is using various sources, including “geolocation”, to establish whether the information is genuine because

Russia, its spies and its sympathisers, are masters of misinformation. Once verified, however, changes are made to the map.

As of April 2025, the map is available to readers in English as well as Ukrainian and there are plans for German and Spanish language maps.

Some 70% of its audience is Ukrainian and the rest international. They say their map will never be available in Russian but there is a device on the site to enable Russian soldiers to surrender. In Russia, the map is officially banned on the grounds it is “undermining Russian sovereignty”.

DeepState uses a colour-coded system to track territorial control. For example, red

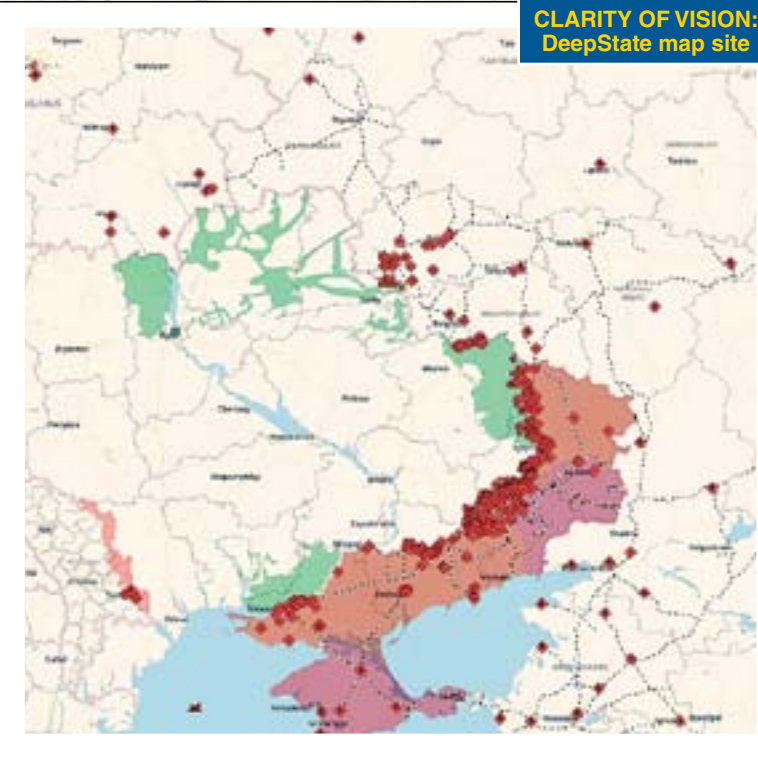
marks the areas currently controlled by Russian forces, green marks territory regained by Ukraine after the Russian occupation and blue marks the areas regained by Ukrainian less than two weeks previously.

Because the DeepState map can be openly viewed by everyone, it has not been without its controversies and the weight of responsibility to have the information displayed to be accurate and up-to-date weighs heavily on Roman’s young shoulders.

Meet the enterprising trainee lawyer who helped invent a unique website used by millions of people every day to monitor what is happening on the ground in war-torn Ukraine



MAPMAKER: Lord Ashcroft, left, with DeepState co-founder Roman Pohorilyi. Main, destroyed buildings in Kyiv Oblast



CLARITY OF VISION: DeepState map site



WAKE OF WAR: Refugees flee eastern city of Kramatorsk in wake of invasion. Below, battleground near Kharkiv



“People’s lives are at stake so we take our role very seriously,” he said.

DeepState makes no pretence at being neutral: it is firmly on the side of Ukraine and it often works hand-in-hand with the nation’s military. The map reveals only enemy positions, including Russian defences and command headquarters.

For operational security reasons, DeepState does not pinpoint Ukrainian units – only the territory they have taken.

The Ukrainian military, from soldiers on the ground to those planning strategy from command bunkers, now provide most of the source material for the map.

On occasions, including when land was seized during Ukraine’s invasion of Russia’s Kursk region last year, the co-founders agreed with the Ukraine military to withhold sensitive information that might have been useful to Russia. “Our greatest reward is to help destroy the enemy,” Roman said.

However, the two men draw the line at blatant misinformation because DeepState has a reputation for accuracy to uphold.

Once that reputation is lost, it would be hard, even impossible, to regain. “We would rather close down the project altogether, than be a source of lies,” Roman said.

Today respected news organisations from Ukrainian television news channel 24 Kanal to the BBC to the President’s Office in Ukraine to foreign newspapers cite DeepState’s information as a reliable source.

Russia has repeatedly tried to hack and destroy the site but so far unsuccessfully. The co-founders are also aware that Russian spies or sympathisers will try to infiltrate their workplace as either paid staff or volunteers so strict security checks are used to stop such activities.

IN SOME cases, polygraph tests are used on potential staff and volunteers and when people start off working for DeepState they only have access to low-level material. “The selection process is rigorous. As people prove their trustworthiness, they move up the ranks and get greater access. But the most sensitive material is only accessible to Ruslan and me,” Roman said. This means both men have to be cautious with their own personal security in case Russian agents try to kill or abduct them.

What does the future hold for DeepState and Roman personally? “The project will carry on until the whole of the map turns green [meaning the whole of Ukraine is liberated]. Until then, all our resources are dedicated to that aim,” he said.

“We have this huge resource so that after the war, we will look at re-deploying it either in Ukraine or perhaps abroad. We will adapt it depending on what is needed but we hope our experience and skills can be used again in some way.

“But who knows what the future holds. Ruslan and I may return to our original professions: I may go back to training as a lawyer and he may go back to working in marketing. Anything is possible.”

● Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft

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