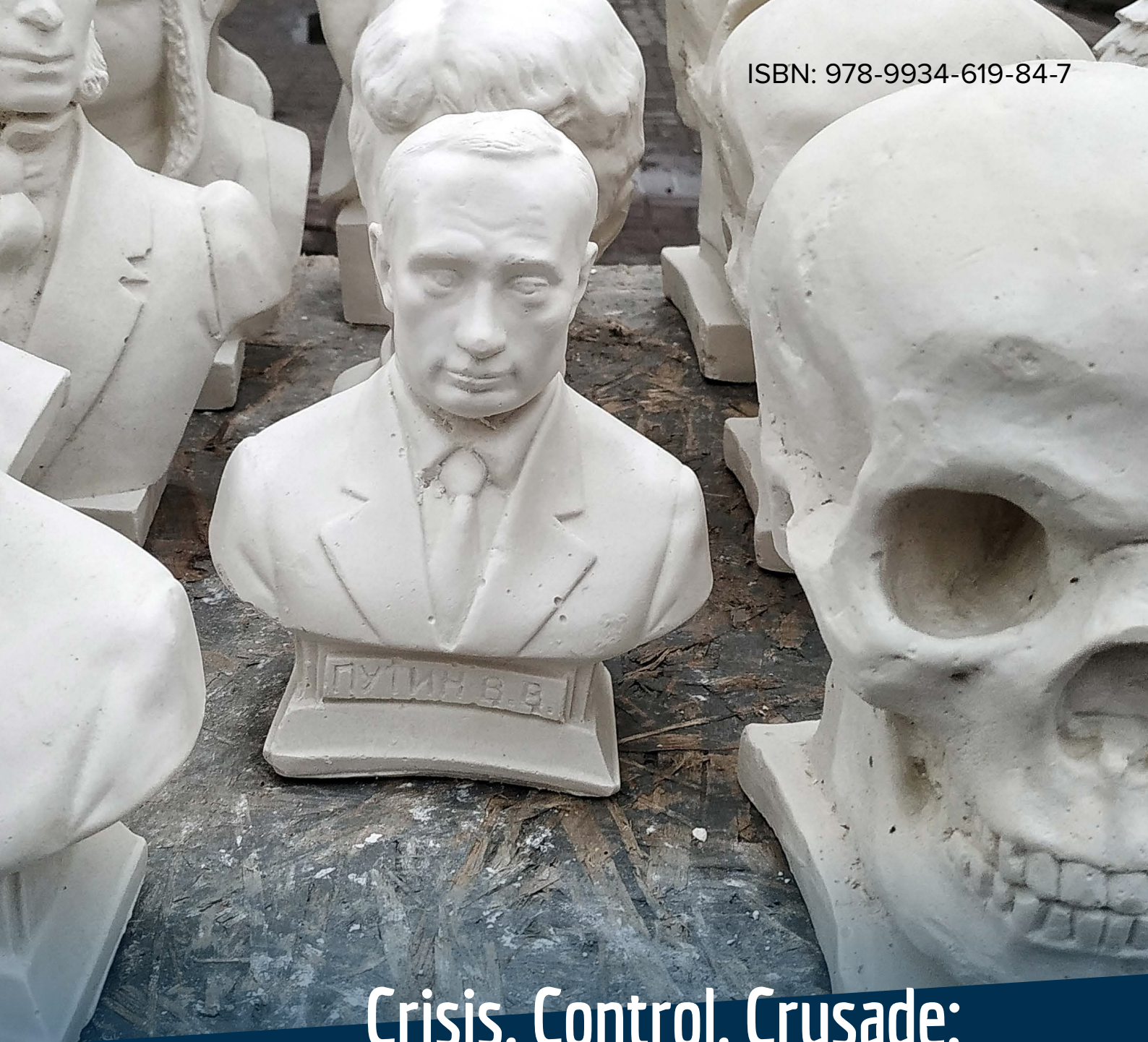


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Crisis, Control, Crusade: Russia's Propaganda Architecture

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The cover photograph visually portrays the report's principal themes. Taken at a street market in Kursk, Russia, on 17 March 2019, few could have imagined that, only several years later, the region would become an arena of combat operations and the subject of an analysis of Russia's communication strategy during the Ukrainian Armed Forces' Kursk offensive. The skull evokes memento mori—a warning about mortality and the transience of human life—while also reflecting the human cost hidden beneath narratives of war, heroism, and national glory. Its sculptural quality recalls the Russian state's use of historical memory, militarised imagery, and symbols of authority to shape public perceptions during crises. At the same time, the gypsum material appears solid and permanent, yet it is manufactured and fragile. It therefore serves as an apt metaphor for a propaganda architecture that projects strength and coherence while relying on carefully constructed narratives that may expose vulnerabilities under pressure.

Riga, August 2026

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Executive Summary

Analysis period: 1 January 2024–31 March 2025

Russia's capacity to maintain domestic support for a prolonged war rests less on the substance of individual messages than on the communication system that converts uncertainty into perceived strategic coherence. Through layered and temporally sequenced messaging, this system stabilises public interpretation during crises. This research, the fourth consecutive NATO StratCom COE examination of Russian internal communication

strategies, demonstrates that the Kremlin's propaganda apparatus has evolved from a rigid hierarchy into an adaptive ecosystem capable of absorbing shocks, testing narrative frames, and consolidating messaging across platforms. Understanding this architecture – its timing vulnerabilities, platform dependencies, and structural fault lines – is essential for designing effective strategic communication responses.

Research Scope

This study analyses 15 months of Russian domestic communication (1 January 2024 – 31 March 2025), processing approximately 3.13 million media units: 24,749 Russian state website articles, 1,224 television broadcast recordings, and 1.86 million Telegram posts from 414 channels, complemented by a comparative dataset of 1.25 million items drawn from independent Russian and foreign news portals, and social media platforms across a total

of 22 sampled foreign countries in their native languages. The methodology integrates text embedding analysis, sentiment measurement, temporal spike detection, and deep video analysis applied to images and short-form video. This scale and the methodological integration enable substantial empirical confidence in identifying how authoritarian communication systems function, adapt, and stabilise under prolonged military conflict.

Principal Case Studies

Case study	Analytical value
Kursk Offensive	Central case demonstrating the 3C and DTCA pattern; maps cross-platform coordination and reveals the 18-hour vulnerability window
Crocus Attack	Demonstrates narrative displacement; ISIS-K claim marginalised through Ukraine-linked framing despite no supporting evidence
Victory Day 2024	Historical memory as mobilisation infrastructure; fusion of 1945 commemoration with contemporary war justification
Trump/Peace Discourse	Peace framed as conditional and subordinate to Russian objectives; no evidence of genuine compromise preparation
Regional Communications	Differentiated messaging strategies for distinct audiences; ‘containment without aggregation’ of war costs

Principal Findings

1. Crisis → Control → Crusade (3C) Governs Russian Crisis Response

Across major investigated events – including the Kursk offensive, the Crocus terrorist attack, and the Nausëda–Kaliningrad incident (from a complementary case study) – Russian propaganda follows a reproducible three-phase sequence: Crisis → Control → Crusade (3C):

- Crisis (0–18h): informational disorganisation, delayed acknowledgement, narrative testing

- Control (18–72h): cross-platform consolidation and emotional framing
- Crusade (72h+): elevation into civilisational moral struggle.

This process is operationalised through a DTCA mechanism (Delay → Test → Consolidate → Amplify), creating predictable intervention windows, with the first 18 hours representing the system’s most exposed phase.

2. Platforms Perform Distinct Functional Roles with Differentiated Vulnerabilities

Russia’s propaganda system operates as a hierarchically organised communication ecosystem:

- state websites: institutional authority and policy baseline
- television: emotional mobilisation and moral instruction
- Telegram: speed, narrative testing, amplifi-

cation, and audience segmentation.

This differentiation generates platform-specific vulnerabilities, requiring targeted monitoring and intervention

3. Peace Discourse Functions as Legitimacy Management, Not Negotiation Signalling

Throughout 2024–25, peace rhetoric evolved towards conditional normalisation without substantive concession. External political events – notably Donald Trump’s electoral trajectory – functioned as narrative accelera-

tors, selectively amplified to reinforce perceptions of Western fatigue and instability, not as signals of genuine negotiating intent. Peace discourse primarily serves domestic legitimacy management.

4. War Losses Are Contained without Aggregation

High-casualty ethnic minority regions (Tuva and Buryatia) exhibit a strategy of ‘containment without aggregation’. Losses are acknowledged locally through heroism narra-

tives and funerary rituals, but prevented from scaling into national political grievances, producing acknowledgement without politicisation.

5. Historical Memory Operates as Mobilisation Infrastructure

Victory Day 2024 produced a deliberately staged, multi-platform communication surge, with messaging tightly concentrated around 9 May. The fusion of 1945 commemoration with contemporary war justification

has become fully routinised, transforming collective memory into active propaganda infrastructure and rendering dissent morally illegitimate.

Strategic Implications

These findings carry direct implications for counter-communication strategy. The 18-hour crisis window prioritises early detection and disruption over late-stage debunking. Platform differentiation suggests monitoring resources should be allocated according to threat intensity rather than distributed evenly. The peace-as-legitimacy finding indicates that Russian negotiation discourse should be

analysed as domestic legitimacy management rather than genuine diplomatic signalling. Regional communication patterns suggest that re-aggregating dispersed casualty data could expose fault lines the Russian system works to conceal.

Introduction: Research Context and Rationale

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has entered a prolonged phase in which military, economic, and political pressures intersect with domestic legitimacy concerns surrounding President Vladimir Putin's rule. As the war continues beyond initial expectations of rapid victory, the Kremlin's ability to sustain internal support depends not only on material coercion and repression apparatus, but on the ongoing operation of a complex domestic communication system. Understanding how this system functions, adapts, and persists under prolonged strain remains central to the long-term analytical agenda of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.

This study represents the fourth consecutive NATO StratCom COE examination of Russian communication strategies related to the war. It is explicitly designed as a continuation and comparative extension of three earlier studies covering previous phases of the conflict. The core objective was to preserve methodological and conceptual continuity while extending analytical depth to capture changes in narrative structure, platform dynamics, and regional differentiation over time.

However, as the research progressed, it became evident that continuity itself required re-examination. While core justificatory narratives persist, the mechanisms through which they are generated, stabilised, and circulated show patterns that extend beyond the scope of earlier analytical models. This report therefore addresses not only what narratives Russia

uses to justify the war internally, but how the internal communication system now operates as an adaptive ecosystem rather than a strictly hierarchical apparatus.

The report must be understood within a rapidly evolving international research landscape. Since 2022, NATO allies, European Union institutions, and academic researchers have developed increasingly sophisticated frameworks for analysing foreign information manipulation: the EU's Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) taxonomy,¹ which conceptualises and categorises hostile information activities across the full operational life cycle; the DISARM framework,² which provides a structured methodology for documenting and analysing adversarial information tactics, techniques, and procedures; and enhanced attribution methodologies.

The operational environment has also evolved dramatically, with Russian information operations now characterised less by overt state broadcasting than by covert proxy networks, influencer recruitment, and cross-platform coordination.³ Moreover, Western intelligence, including NATO allies, actively integrates kinetic operations into its information strategy in order to shape informational and psychological effects on the ground. The findings of this report contribute empirical depth to these analytical frameworks, particularly in relation to domestic audience segmentation and adaptive narrative targeting.

From Narrative Identification to Systemic Analysis

Earlier NATO StratCom COE research demonstrated that Russian domestic propaganda functions less as a persuasive message-

ing effort and more as a means of structuring interpretive boundaries.⁴ This aligns with research on contemporary authoritarianism,

suggesting that modern dictators rarely seek strict or total control over the information environment.⁵ Instead, they govern by setting discursive boundaries – defining which topics and interpretations are acceptable in the public sphere, particularly in social media environments. Such regimes rely less on overt repression and more on shaping perceptions of normality and consensus. This follows the ‘spiral of silence’ logic, which posits that individuals fear isolation and therefore tend to express opinions they perceive as dominant, while opinions perceived as being in the minority are less likely to be expressed.⁶ In modern authoritarian systems, audience attitudes are shaped not through constant persuasion, but through the structured management of the public environment.

That insight remains valid. However, findings from this 2024–25 analysis indicate that the Kremlin’s internal communication system has become more decentralised, temporally uneven, and regionally differentiated than in earlier phases.

Rather than producing tightly synchronised messaging cascades, the contemporary system increasingly tolerates narrative plurality, contradiction, and delayed consolidation. Semi-autonomous actors – particularly Telegram channels and military commentators – now frequently shape early framing during unexpected events, with official communication assuming a legitimising or stabilising role only later.

This evolution necessitated a shift in analytical emphasis. While narrative identification remains an important analytical tool, the current dataset allows for additional system-level analysis beyond narrative mapping alone. The research therefore expands towards system-level analysis, focusing on:

- temporal dynamics of narrative emergence and stabilisation
- cross-platform interaction between official and semi-official actors
- variation in messaging strategies across different internal audiences.

Research Goals

The research goals were refined as follows:

- Identify enduring narrative structures used by Russian authorities to justify the war to domestic audiences and assess their persistence across multiple phases of the conflict.
- Analyse how the internal communication system adapts to unexpected events, including moments of military, political, or security disruption, with particular attention to timing, fragmentation, and consolidation.
- Examine differences in communication strategies across internal audience segments, including regional variation and proximity to military risk. Assess the effectiveness and durability of

narratives over time, moving beyond presence or absence towards indicators of narrative resilience, amplification, and reuse.

- Compare the current phase of Russian internal communication with earlier phases, identifying structural continuities, operational changes, and emerging vulnerabilities relevant for future strategic communication analysis.

These goals reflect a deliberate shift from static narrative cataloguing towards a longitudinal understanding of authoritarian communication under prolonged pressure. The Russian Federation’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, initiated in February 2022, has necessitated a comprehensive domestic communication strategy to maintain public support and justify the military operation to Rus-

sian audiences.⁷ Understanding the evolution and mechanisms of this strategic communication effort remains essential to comprehending the information dimension of contemporary conflict and developing effective counterstrategies.

This research project represents the fourth phase in the NATO StratCom COE's ongoing examination of Russian domestic war

narratives, analysing the period from 1 January 2024 to 31 March 2025. Building upon three previous studies that examined earlier phases of the conflict, this research provides both continuity and fresh insights into how the Kremlin's messaging strategies have adapted to changing battlefield realities, domestic pressures, and international developments.

Report Structure

The research document begins with a methodology section, where media datasets are briefly described and analysed, with emphasis on the selection of data sources and the volume of data collected. The methodology section also includes a subsection that outlines the main models and frameworks used in the analysis.

The core of the analytical section examines case studies of events that occurred in or are closely related to Russia during the research period. The selection of the case studies was based on several factors:

- high media coverage – identified through spike analysis of media coverage in Russia
- strong emotional engagement – identified through sentiment analysis showing which events had strong public reactions
- continuity with previous research – to offer continuation of yearly reporting
- illustrative value – demonstrating how the Russian communication network operates and what narratives are used to justify the long-lasting war in Ukraine.

After careful assessment, the report examines the following case studies, selected to capture both high-impact events and recurring strategic themes in Russian communication:

- 1. Kursk Offensive Operation by Ukrainian Forces** – the central case study of the

report, marking the biggest military pivot during the research period. The study is used to map cross-platform coordination and narrative consolidation during a major operational shock, which sets a theme and framework for other case studies.

- 2. Victory Day Parade** – a continuation from last year's report, assessing how symbolic legitimacy narratives are maintained and adapted.
- 3. Crocus Terrorist Attack** – a high-emotion domestic crisis used to examine attribution dynamics, scapegoating, and the rapid spread of disinformation claims.
- 4. Peace Negotiations and Donald Trump** – analysis of how the Russian media frames prospects for peace and reinterprets shifts in perceived US–Russia relations.
- 5. Mobilisation in the Tuva and Buryatia regions** – a regional case study on how local institutions operationalise mobilisation and sustain compliance narratives far from the front.

The main case studies are presented in the body of the report, while additional analyses are included in the appendices. These include spike analysis – a contextual study of events in the Russian media landscape that received exceptional coverage, creating 'spikes' or peaks in daily media mentions – and a complementary case study on the Nauséda–Kalinograd story from January 2025 which strongly supports several research conclusions.

The report provides conclusions and recommendations based on the analytical findings, aiming to uncover new insights into the Russian communication apparatus and providing guidance for future operations and

research. It includes a comparison of this study with the previous NATO StratCom COE reports, followed by a set of practical recommendations on the topics and methods to continue working on in the research to come.

Methodology

Data Acquisition

While the data configuration adhered to the approaches established in previous reports, this year Repsense expanded the scope and volume of analysis. Rather than coding a representative percentage of mentions, the research team conducted comprehensive analysis of all available content from the designated channels. This approach enabled cross-validation using absolute quantitative

measurements and reduced reliance on sampling-based inference.

To ensure analytical continuity and comprehensive event coverage, the study timeframe was extended from the very beginning of 2024 until 31 March 2025, providing a complete 15-month window.

Russian State Websites

Domain	Institution	Number of articles collected
Mil.ru	Ministry of Defence of the RF	10,526
Council.gov.ru	Federation Council of the RF	3,559
Government.ru	Government of the RF	3,425
Mid.ru	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the RF	2,905
Kremlin.ru	President of the RF	2,181
Duma.gov.ru	State Duma of the RF	1,960
Scrf.gov.ru	Security Council of the RF	193
Total		24,749

Russian Television Shows

TV channel	TV show	Airtime	Type	Recordings collected
Россия-1 (Russia-1)	60 минут (60 minutes)	Daily, prime time, sometimes twice a day	Socio-political talk show	529
Россия-1	Вести недели (Vesti Weekly)	Weekly, Sunday evenings	News and analytical programme	38

Россия-1	Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым (Evening with Vladimir Solovyov)	Monday–Thursday, late evenings	Disinformation-focused and satirical political talk show	234
Channel One	Время (Time)	Daily, prime time in evenings	National daily news programme	423
Total				1,224

Russian Telegram Channels

During the research period, **1.86 million** Telegram posts from **414** channels (listed in Appendix 1) were collected and analysed. Telegram channels were selected to best accommodate the analysed case studies and general thematic picture: 66 channels can be considered as military bloggers or war analysts, 32 channels are associated with the highest state

officials, 50 channels are connected to Russian news agencies and media outlets, 31 channels come from Ukrainian or international sources that discuss Russia’s war against Ukraine, 98 channels derive from specific Russian or Ukrainian border regions, and 137 are other popular Russian channels identified in previous reports or selected for their relevance.

Complementary Datasets

Several case studies presented in this report incorporated supplementary media data packages extending beyond state-controlled Russian sources. These packages included content from independent Russian news portals, as well as social media and articles from media outlets in neighbouring European states and NATO member nations. Relevant mentions were identified in 22 coun-

tries: Belarus, Canada, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

These complementary datasets contributed to the addition of 1.25 m media mentions (Figure 1).

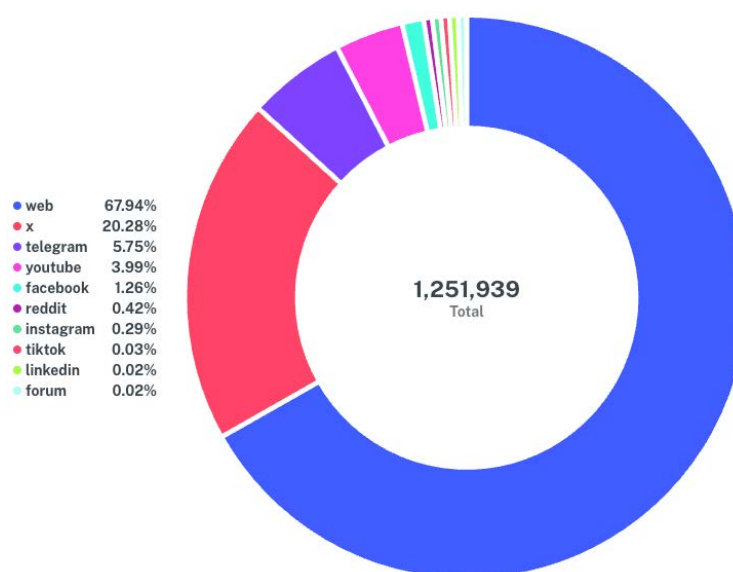


Figure 1. Share of complementary dataset mentions by media type

Analysis Methods

Processing Pipeline and Text Embeddings

Repsense relies on its core technology of semantic analysis of media content on the basis that quantitative analysis is not enough. Figure 2 shows a general data processing pipeline schema, where all media must go through a multi-step process of being ingested, transformed into text format, given contrib-

utor data, transformed into text embeddings, and processed with AI solutions (communication narrative analysis, vectoral storyline clustering analysis, deep video analysis) and other models to then be available in specified modules.

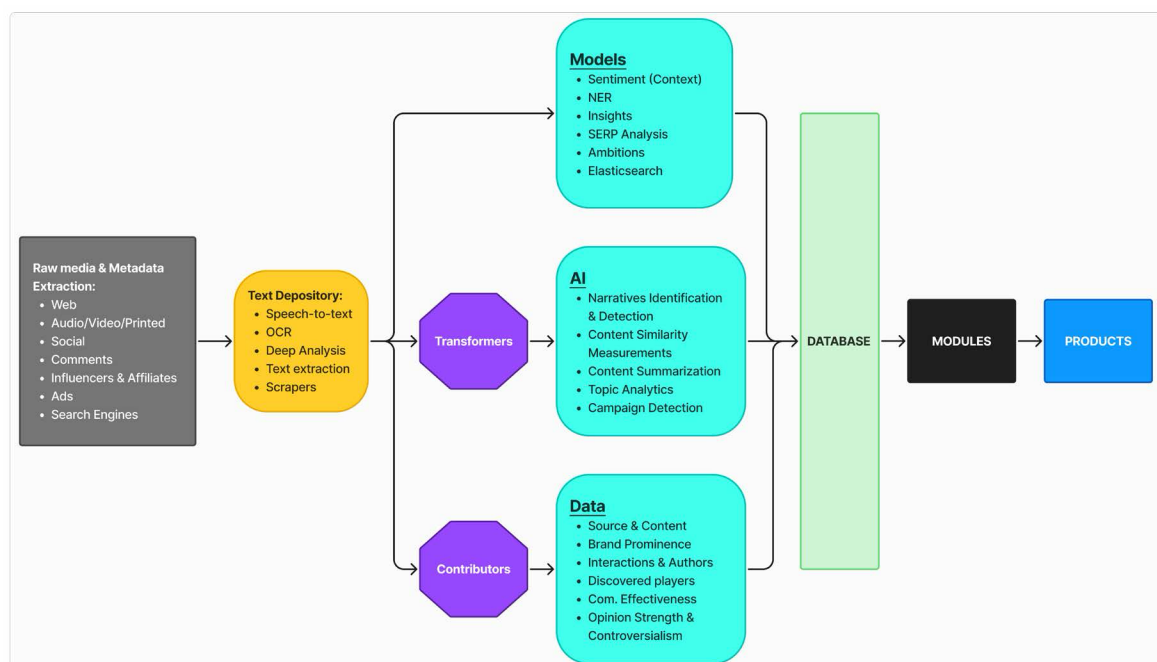


Figure 2. Repsense media processing pipeline

Every analysis of new media begins with converting each media entry into text format and extracting as much meaningful metadata from each file as possible. Speech-to-text, optical character recognition, and other methods are applied to ensure this step.

The next step is text and metadata content search based on predefined entities and keywords, applying Boolean analysis rules.

During this step the relevancy of a given text is evaluated, and the most important sentences are given markers.

Texts are also run through a set of different models and are given external metadata contributors such as reach, source authority, and similar scores. This is all part of Repsense's Adler model (Figure 3).

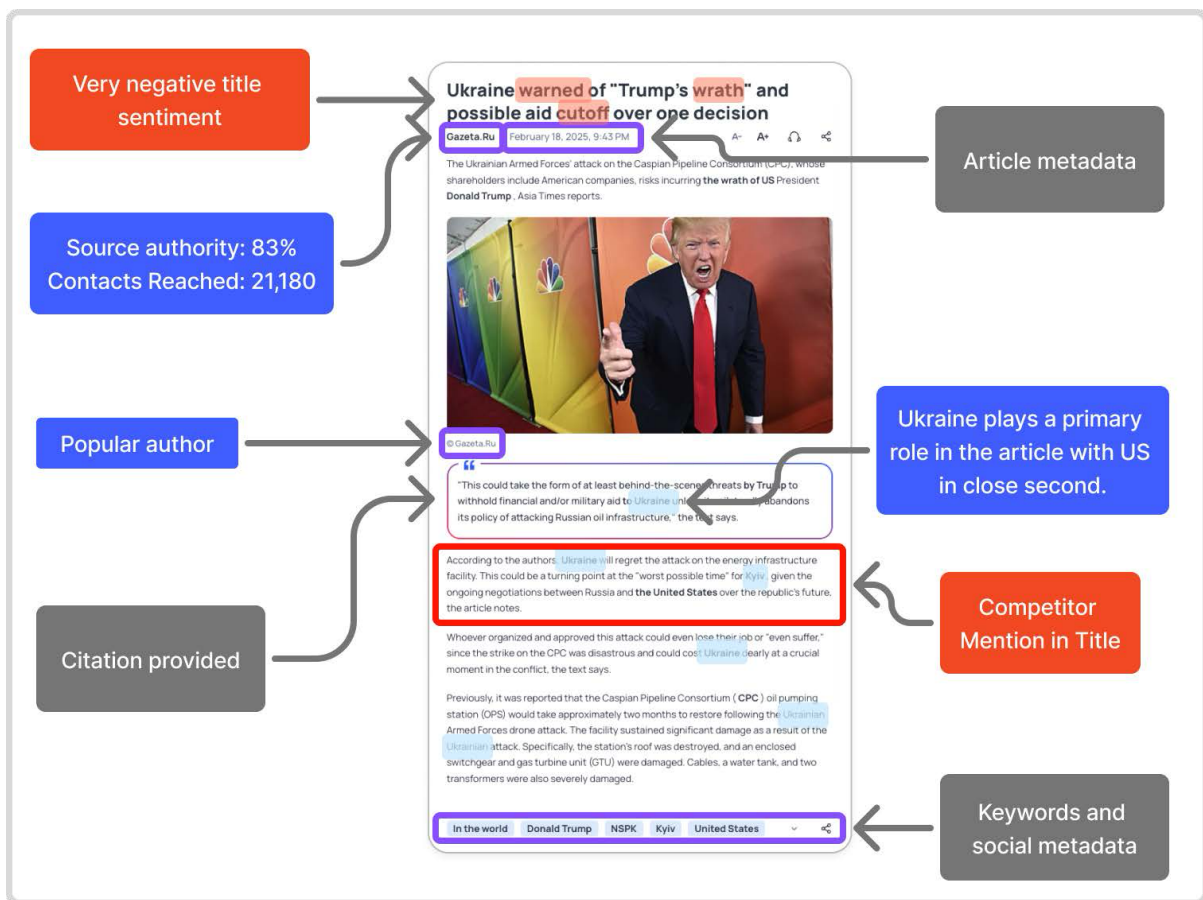


Figure 3. Repsense Adler analysis model

The final step of the processing pipeline is the semantic analysis of texts, for which text conversion to text embeddings (vectors) is required. Repsense uses a monolingual text em-

beddings model (Figure 4), 'Jina Embeddings v2', and a special large language model (LLM) for text translations.

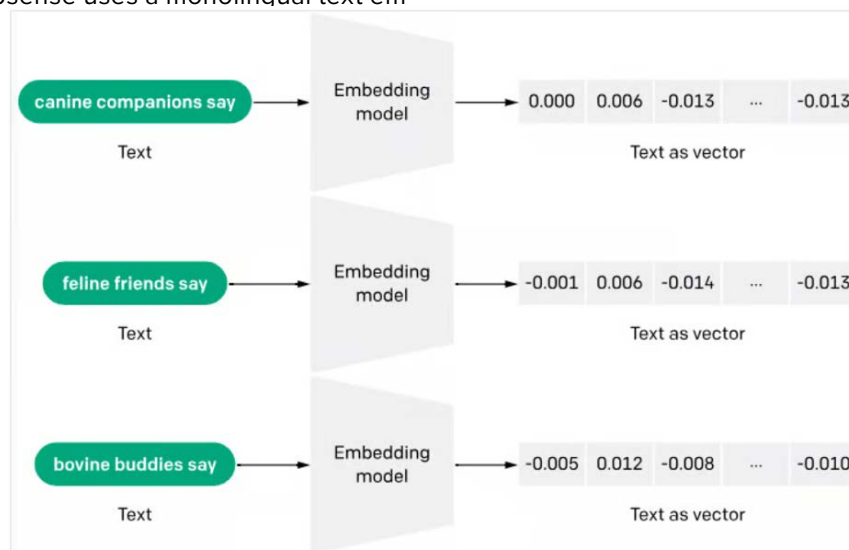


Figure 4. Repsense text embeddings model

Texts converted to vectors can then be perceived as dots in a vector space, where each of the dots represents a media text, and

the position of each dot is determined by the semantic meaning of its text (Figure 5).

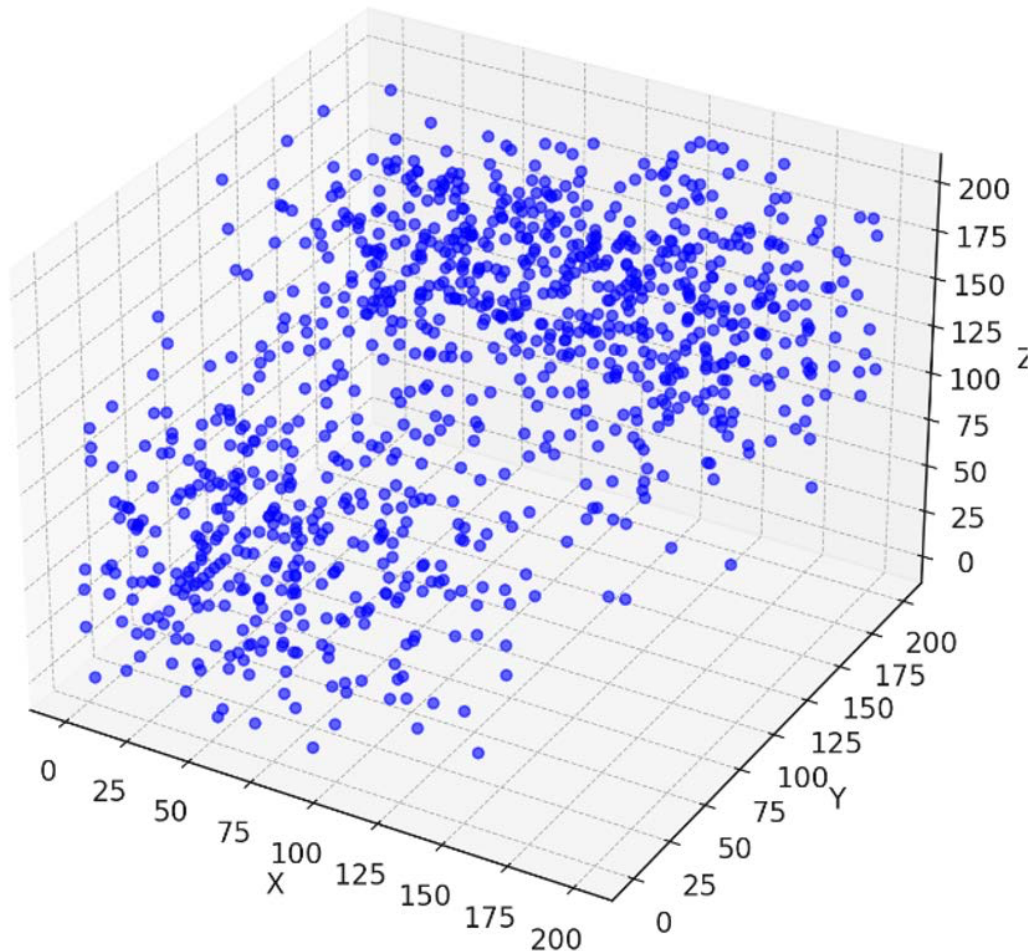


Figure 5. Vector space visualisation

Narrative and Statement Analysis

Based on the cosine similarity, the Adler model can determine which texts are semantically (not just by keywords) the most similar to each other. In other words, the closest dots in the vector space represent semantically similar texts.

If some of the dots in the vector space are predefined as known texts that describe

a certain communication narrative, narrative analysis can be applied to the processed texts, during which the Adler model determines whether a certain media text is closer to the narrative cluster centre than a set threshold and therefore 'matches' the narrative (Figure 6).

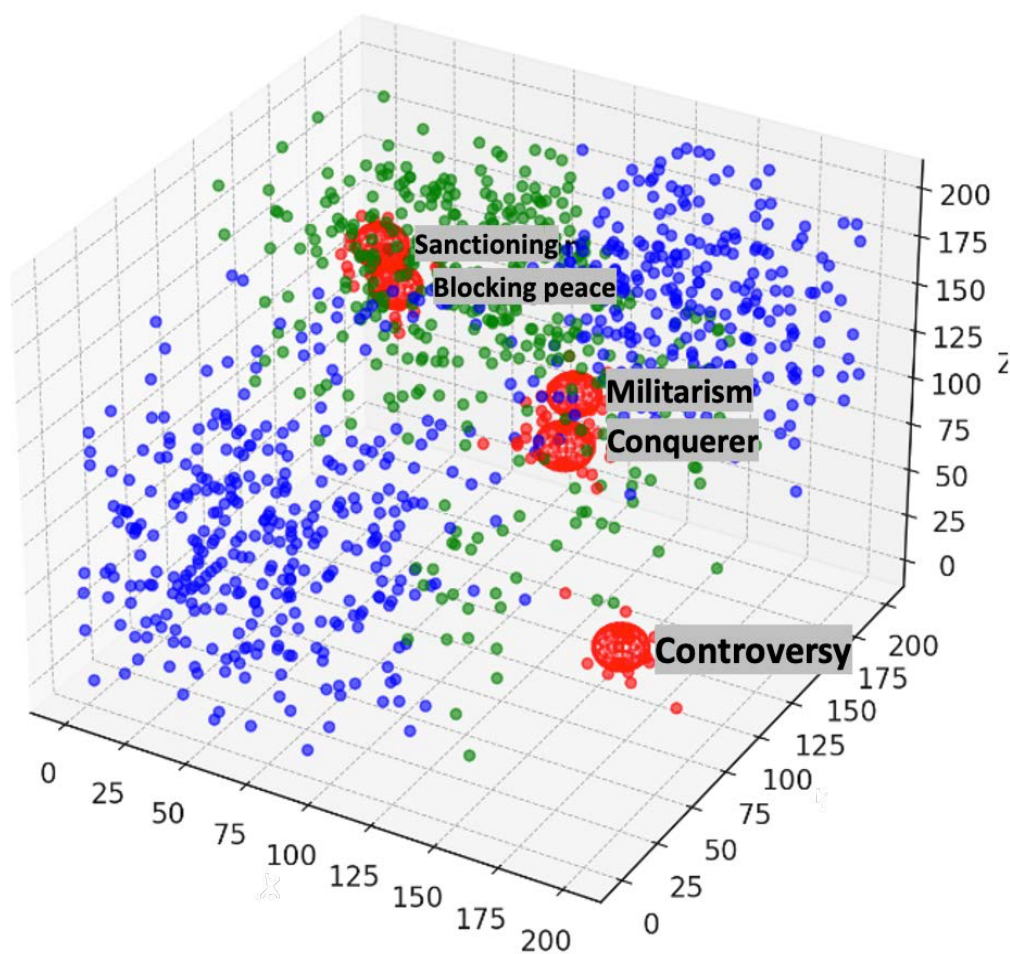


Figure 6. Narrative clustering. Legend: blue dots = text that did not match narratives; green dots = text that did match narratives; red dots = statements that describe a certain narrative; red clusters = narratives.

This research project ran with 30+ narratives at once and every single one of the ~3.13 m texts were run through this process.

Narrative analysis enables researchers to quickly assess how media data falls within

pre-known branches of communication, and its description by multiple statements also allows them to dig deeper into the roots of narrative prominence and to examine which arguments are impacting the narrative presence.

Storyline Analysis

The vector space with all the sample texts in it can be manipulated through clustering techniques, finding communities of similar texts, grouping them as in Figure 7.

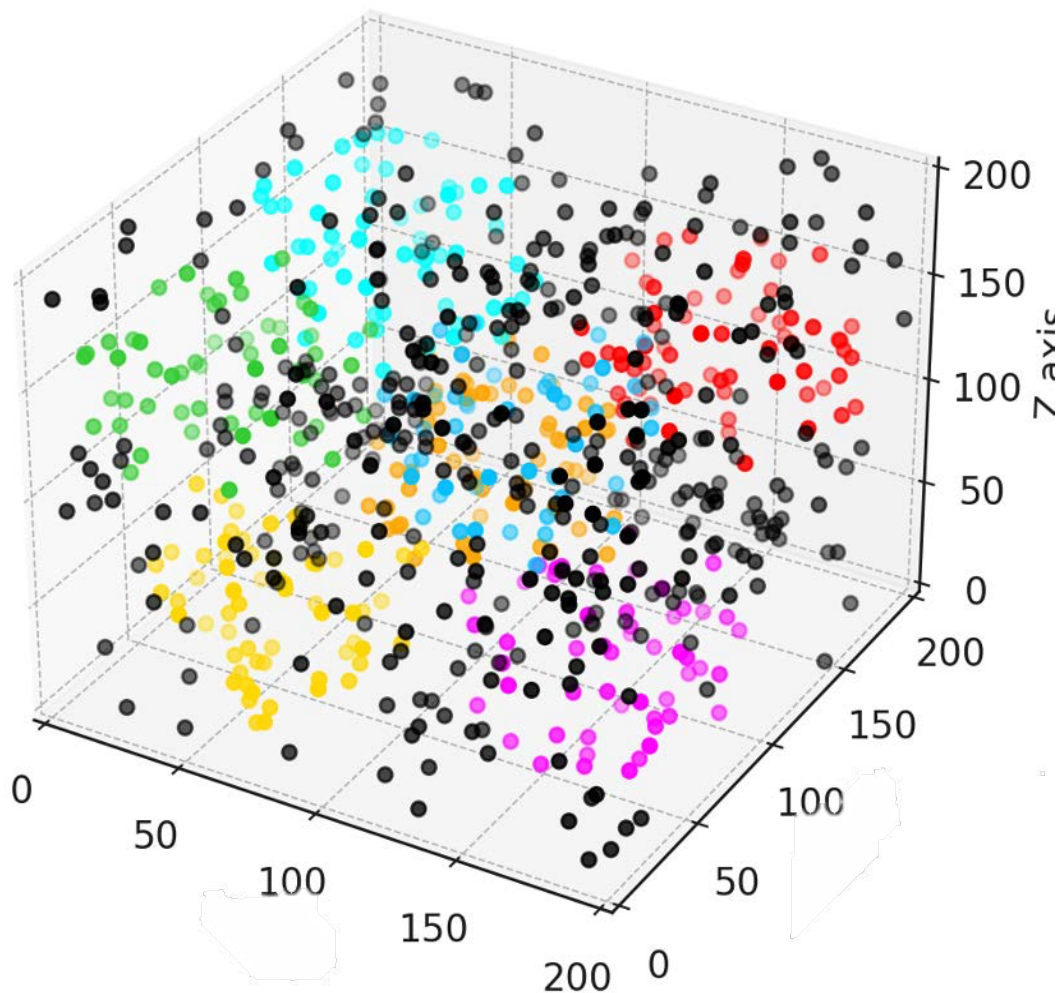


Figure 7. Storyline clustering

Repsense performs this technique to produce clusters of semantically similar texts that ultimately represent a specific topic or story happening in the sample of texts. Each such cluster is sent to the text generative LLM, where it is assigned a generated cluster title and a longer explanatory description of the sample.

This text-embeddings-based analysis technique is used in situations where either the sample of texts is unknown and the nar-

ratives are not yet discovered, or when the sample size of the texts is too big, and therefore it becomes an analysis of a smaller subset of topics rather than a big batch of individual texts. In practice, topic analysis is often used together with narrative analysis and can either help discover new statements of a known narrative or analyse texts that initially did not match any of the narratives.

Deep Video Analysis

RepSense’s newest technological model solves the issue of limited data available about popular social media posts, as they usu-

ally have no description or a short and irrelevant one (Figure 8).

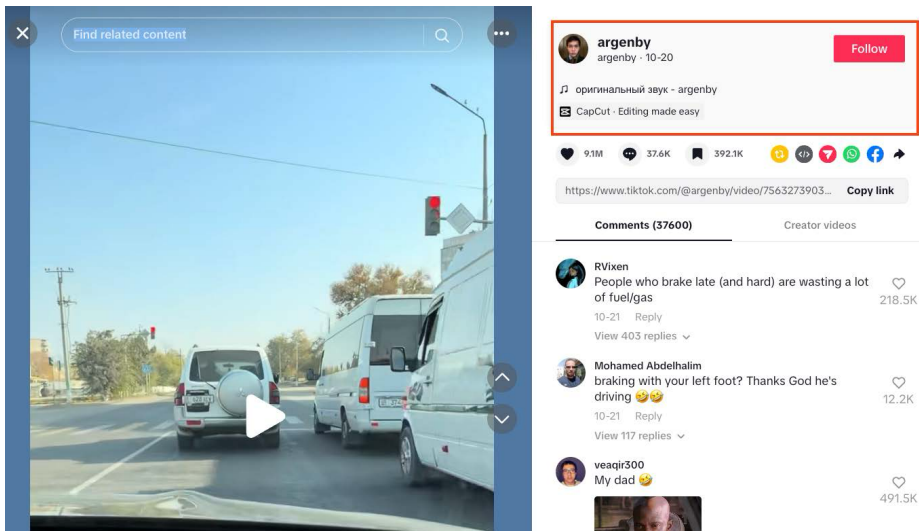


Figure 8. A TikTok video with 9M+ likes and 100M+ views has an empty description field, which makes it a ‘ghost’ for traditional social media posts analysis methods

The deep video analysis model analyses the content files of short videos or images and extracts significantly more additional important information about each social media entry. This is done by analysing the audio com-

ponent of the content (including background music) and extracting all relevant information about what appears on the screen visually (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Deep video analysis by Repsense

Deep video analysis, currently applied to YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok content, was performed on a smaller subset of data when analysing the Kursk offensive case study. This method combines LLMs to generate video titles and descriptions, evaluate content using specific ratings (e.g., disinformation risk on a 1–10 scale), and detect objects

mentioned or visible in the content based on predefined categories.

The deep video analysis model represents a pioneering approach to productised social media monitoring and in-depth post analysis at scale. This method may be applicable to future analyses involving short-form video content across multiple platforms.

Sentiment Analysis

Repsense performed sentiment analysis on all the analysed text using a self-trained sentiment analysis model, DistilBERT. This model analyses the sentiment of each text's sentences separately and only includes those sentences that match any relevant entities. Therefore, a final score between –100% and +100% can be recorded for a single entity or for the text as a whole (in that case the position of each sentence in the text becomes important

as well). The sign shows negative/positive polarity direction while the absolute number [0; 100] is evaluated as the amplitude of strength/confidence of a sentence depending on its wording. For example, the sentence 'HAMAS fighter has been eliminated' can score –17%, while the sentence 'HAMAS Terrorists were brutally torn into pieces by rocket explosions' can score –94%.

Named-Entity Recognition (NER)

Repsense uses a NER model to statistically identify emerging prominent actors within the communications landscape. This method provides new insights and suggests additional entities and keywords for monitoring.

The NER model was applied throughout the analytical section to identify the most prominent people, institutions, and regions in the data sample.

Spike Analysis

Spike analysis is a widely used analysis method that plots mention dynamics within a data sample to identify its 'spikes' (Figure 10). By analysing the spikes, researchers can

quickly discover the main events throughout the sample without analysing the entire data sample.

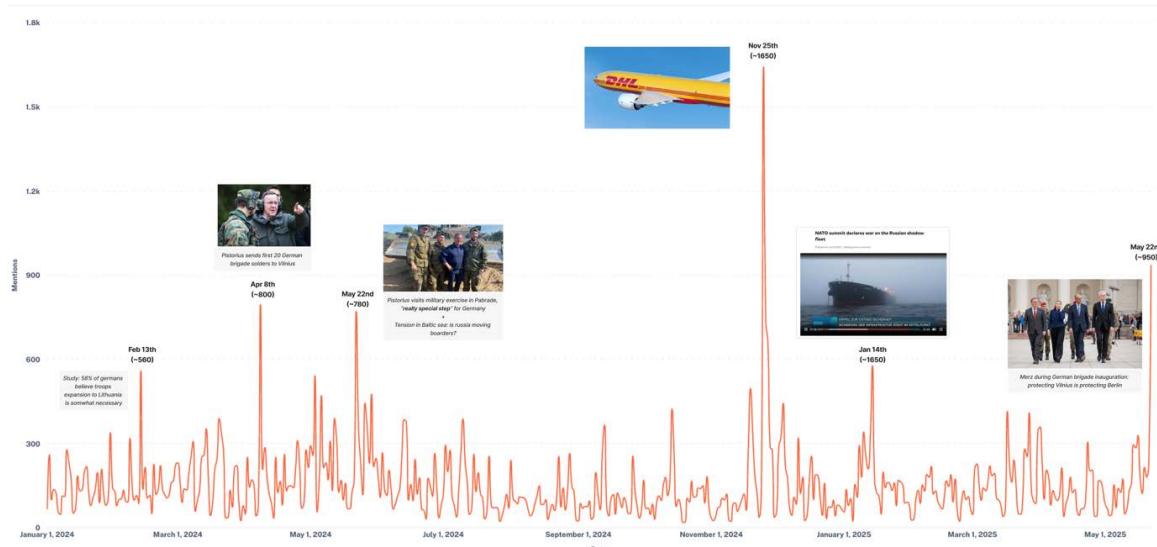


Figure 10. An example of spike analysis

Spikes in the main dataset of Russian Telegram channels, TV shows, and official websites were analysed to identify the most significant stories of the research period in quantitative terms. Appendix 2 contains an analysis of the largest spikes in the main dataset.

However, quantitative selection based on activity spikes can be complemented by qualitative methods. Qualitative selection can be performed through narrative dynamics analysis (partially covered in the 'Narrative and Statement Analysis' section) or through sentiment analysis of all mentions.

Analysis Results

[1] Kursk Offensive Operation by Ukrainian Forces

Section summary

Object of analysis	Ukraine’s offensive operation in the Kursk region
Research timeframe	1. 5–16 August 2024 (start of the offensive) 2. 12–31 March 2025 (latest developments within the research timeframe) Dataset: Russian official and non-state channels and social media, complemented by foreign articles and social media posts.
Analysis methods	1. Quantitative analysis 2. Spike detection 3. Storyline analysis 4. Narrative analysis 5. Regional Telegram groups sample analysis 6. Disinformation spread assessment 7. Deep video analysis
Intended purpose	The Kursk offensive is the biggest military topic of the research timeframe; its controversial launch, surprising success, and questionable finale create a perfect environment for disinformation to spread across and outside Russia. The purpose of this analysis is to identify and assess those disinformation flows – establishing which narratives gained traction, where they originated, and how they evolved as the offensive progressed – in order to provide a clearer picture of the information war running alongside the military one.

On 6 August 2024 Ukraine launched a surprise cross-border operation into the mainland of Russia heading towards the Kursk region (Figure 11). This offensive marked the first significant Ukrainian incursion into Russian territory since the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022. The offensive aimed to disrupt Russian logistics, divert troops from the front in eastern Ukraine, and demonstrate Ukraine’s ability to take the fight beyond its borders.⁸ On the first days of the invasion, a highly discussed topic was the surprise factor, as the operation was kept secret and even the closest supporters of Ukraine (the US and Europe)

were not informed in advance about the operation.⁹

Russian intelligence evidently did not anticipate the operation, as demonstrated by the rapid invasion of substantial Russian territory while Russians struggled to divert personnel and equipment from other locations of the ‘usual’ front, where most of the reserves were kept for Russia’s planned large-scale autumn/winter offensive operations into Ukraine.¹⁰ Russia failed to react quickly, and Russia’s border security issues were unveiled; the fact that the frontline could be in Russia was a psycholog-

ical challenge for Russians to overcome. This generated communication themes that not only labelled Ukrainians ‘the real terrorists’, but also publicly criticised the Russian govern-

ment. State narratives subsequently sought to rally Russians for defence, thereby justifying ongoing war operations.¹¹



How Ukraine Overcame the Transparent Battlefield to Achieve Operational Surprise in Kursk

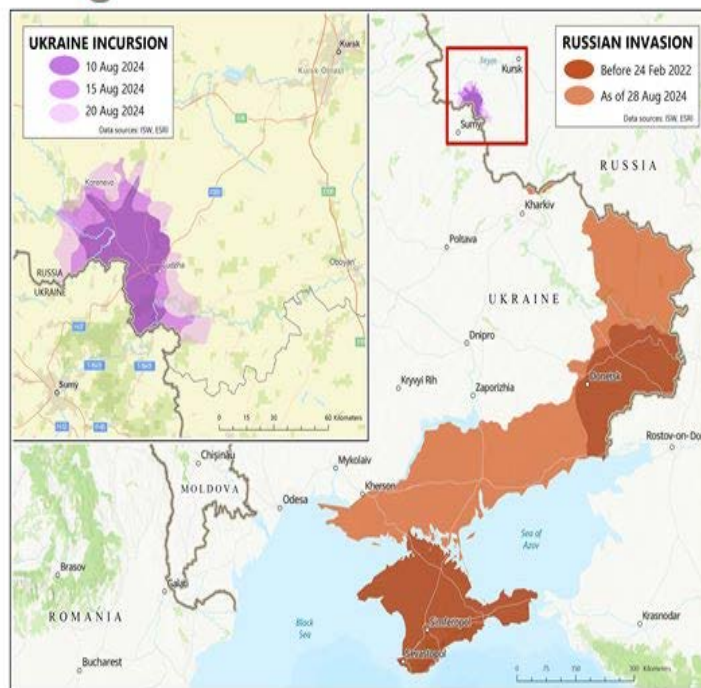


Figure 11. Ukraine's incursion into Russia's Kursk region map (source: Dorsel Boyer and ISC Robert K. Becker, 'How Ukraine Overcame the Transparent Battlefield to Achieve Operational Surprise in Kursk', U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, G-2, Red Diamond, 19 August 2024)

The Ukrainian incursion into the Kursk region reached its peak in late August 2024, after which Russian forces gradually regained territory. By early 2025 Moscow claimed to have re-established control over most areas, with full territorial recovery announced on 26 April 2025 (note: this date falls outside the research period ending at 31 March 2025).¹²

The analysis focused on two timeframes (5–16 August 2024 and 12–31 March 2025)

from the research period for the special data configuration because of the massive volume of media coverage of the events, and because they captured the most important developments at the beginning and end of the Kursk incursion. These timeframes corresponded to activity spikes identified by analysing daily topic mentions in Russian Telegram posts, television programmes, and articles on state websites throughout the research period (Figure 12).

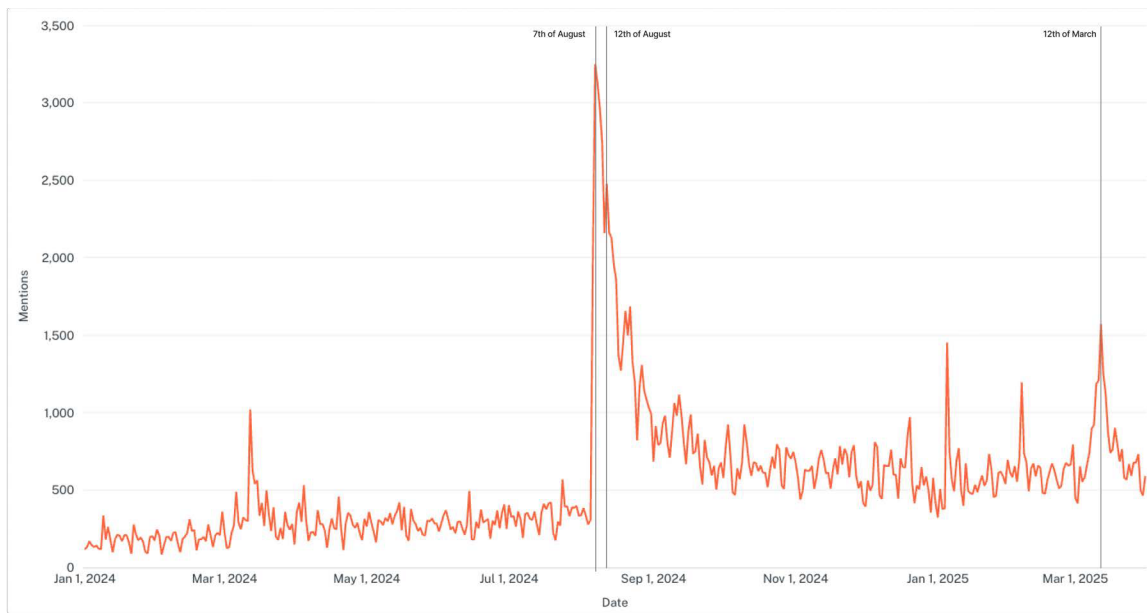


Figure 12. Keyword 'Kursk' dynamics in Russian media

While the decision to launch the incursion offered potential advantages – such as diverting Russian forces from other fronts and disrupting planned offensive operations – it also divided opinion in Western capitals. Critics viewed the move as tactically short-term and insufficiently coordinated with Ukraine's key military supporters in the US and Europe.¹³

Sentiment analysis of the main dataset revealed that the unexpected incursion into

Russia triggered the most negative month of the research period. The incursion's start date (6 August 2024) produced an average sentiment of negative 40.1%, making it the second most negative day in the sample, surpassed only by the Crocus terrorist attack at negative 40.9% (Figure 13). This initiated a period of sustained negative sentiment spanning several weeks.

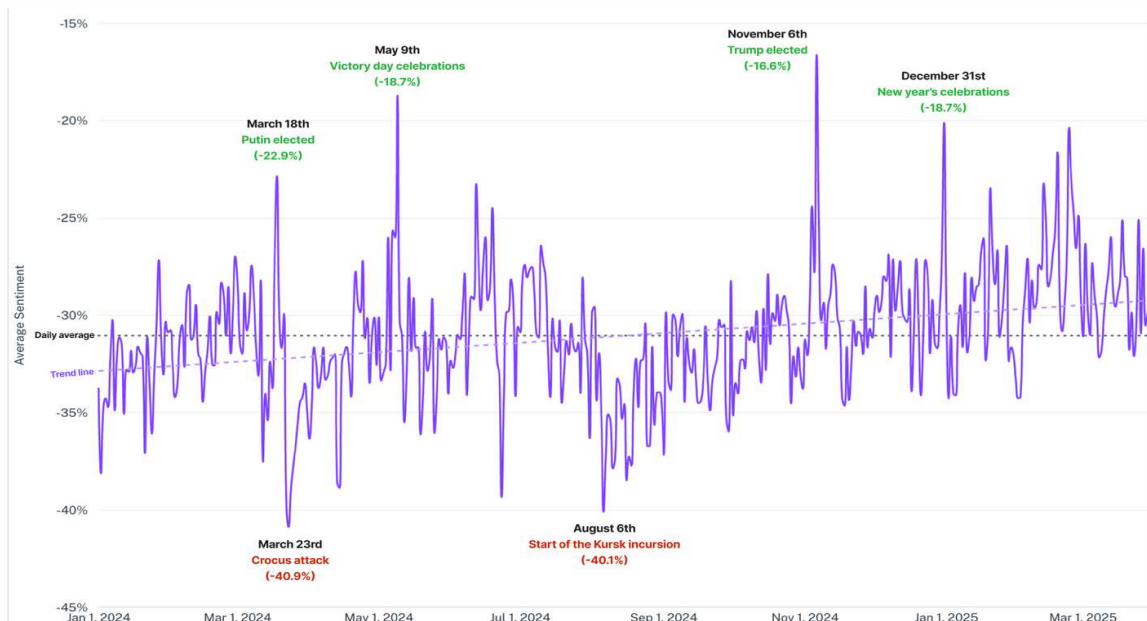


Figure 13. The daily average sentiment dynamics of Russian internal communication texts

Russian Media

State websites

First timeframe (August 2024)

During the first timeframe 707 articles were collected from state websites, distributed by domain as shown in Figure 14.

Sixty-three state website articles (9% of collected total articles) covered Ukraine’s invasion of the Kursk region.

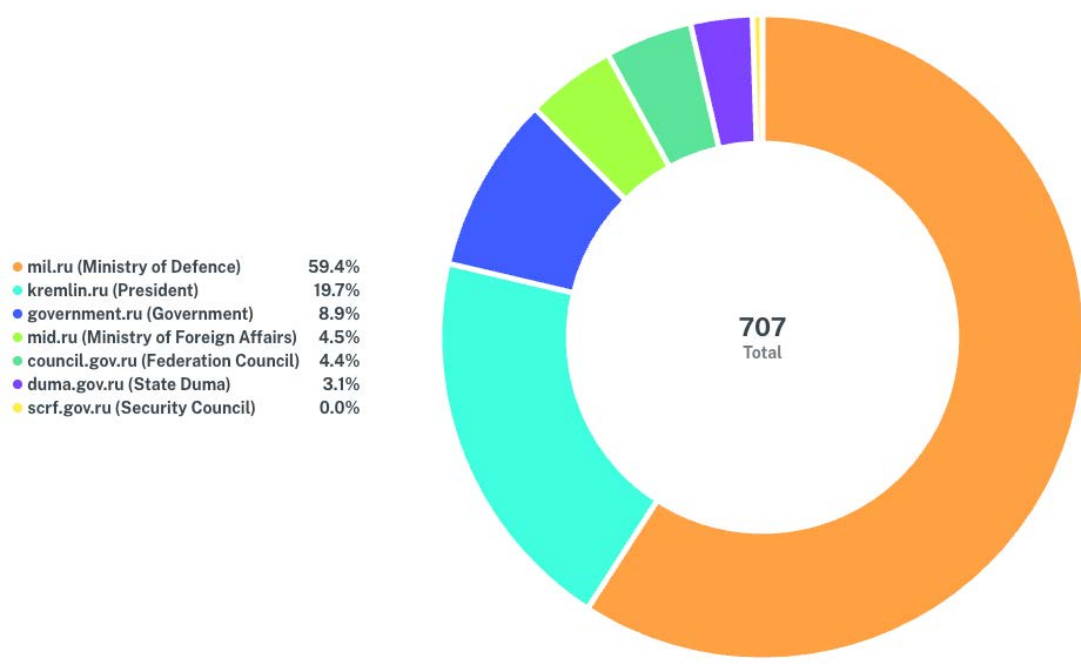


Figure 14. Distribution of Russian state website mentions by domain, first timeframe

Summary

During 6–8 August, coverage focused on halting the incursion, emphasising strike reporting and air defence operations. Between 9 and 12 August, reporting shifted to more detailed accounts of ground control while increasing civil protection messaging – evacuations, financial assistance, and state aid – to project stability amid ongoing operations. From 13 to 16 August, the volume increased and patterns stabilised: regular strike reports, frequent drone interception claims, and consistent ground updates, accompanied by recurring attribution of responsibility to Kyiv and Western actors. The tone remained assertive and operational – strike, intercept, assist – with minimal acknowledgement of setbacks.

The narrative evolved from urgent defensive action to routinised operational control, combining military reporting with welfare signalling to maintain public confidence and legitimise sustained operational commitment.

Media mainly covered:

- Repelling the incursion with strikes: reports emphasise Russian air and artillery strikes against ‘enemy manpower/equipment concentrations’ in border districts of Kursk Oblast, portraying continuous offensive action to push Ukrainians back.¹⁴
- Air defence is effective: frequent notes that drones and missiles – BPLA, ‘aircraft-type’ unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) – were intercepted by Russian air defence; the message is that the sky is controlled and attacks are contained.¹⁵
- Ground control in border areas: situation updates about contact lines, artillery duels, and the actions of specific groupings of Russian forces in the Kursk border zone; stresses order and coordination.¹⁶
- Civil protection, evacuation, and aid: coverage of evacuations, temporary accommodation, social payments, federal and regional assistance, and emergency regimes – framing the state as responsive and in control of civilian safety.¹⁷
- Political framing: Kyiv and the West to blame. The incursion is attributed to the ‘Kyiv regime’, with mentions of ‘terrorism’ and references to Western/NATO involvement; responsibility for escalation is shifted externally.¹⁸

Detected narratives that promote or justify the war:

- Defensive righteousness/‘special military operation (SMO)’ framing: mentions of the SMO and ‘defending civilians’ present the fighting as a necessary protective mission rather than aggression.¹⁹
- Mobilisation normalisation: references to volunteers, contract service, and commendations of ‘heroism’ normalise participation and personal sacrifice.²¹
- Dehumanisation/terrorism labels: casting the adversary as ‘terrorists’ or ‘Nazis’ reduces empathy and legitimises harsher measures.²⁰
- Externalisation of blame: assigning culpability to the Kyiv authorities and ‘the West/NATO’ frames continued war as compelled by outside threats.²²

Second timeframe (March 2025)

For the second timeframe 1,133 articles were collected from state websites, distributed by domain as shown in Figure 15.

Eighty-seven state website articles (8.8% of collected content) covered the developments of Ukraine’s invasion into Kursk Oblast.

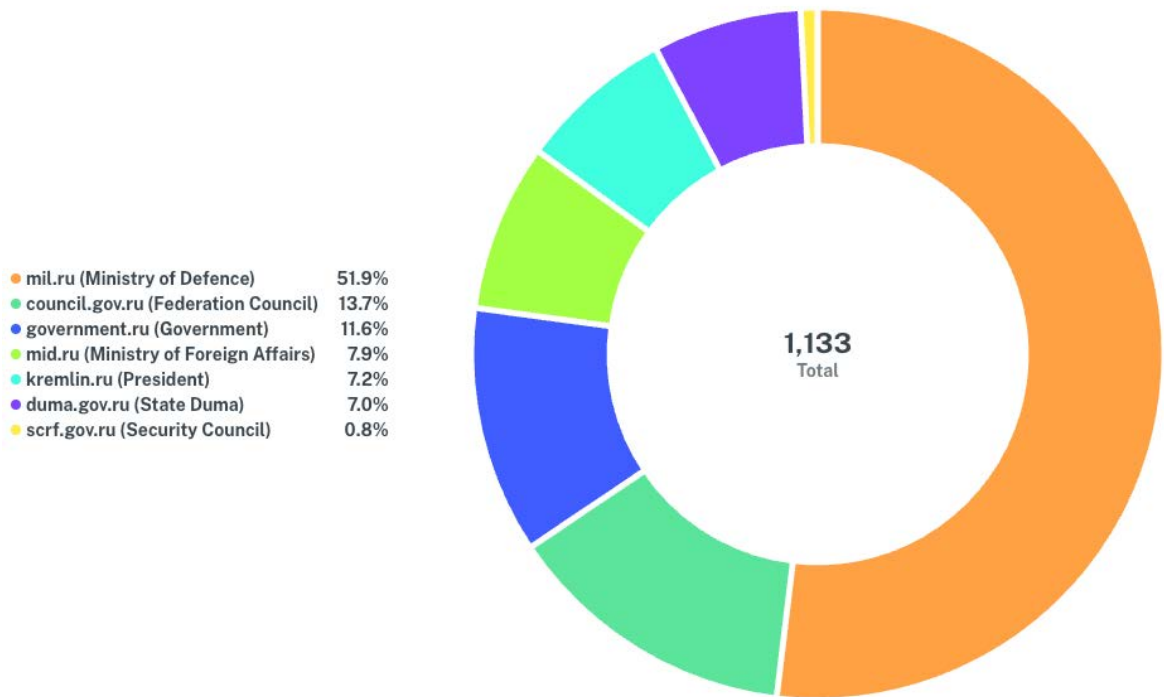


Figure 15. Distribution of Russian state website mentions by domain, second timeframe

Summary

Coverage sustained a combat-operations rhythm, led by strike reports and border-area control updates, with air defence intercepts a close third. Messaging peaked on 19 March, then gradually tapered off. Civil protection items (evacuations, payments) regularly projected state responsiveness. War-justification frames emphasised a defensive mission and patriotic duty, while dehumanising labels

persisted but did not dominate, and mobilisation content was minimal. Compared with August 2024, this period feels more routinised – fewer dramatic casualty claims, more procedural military summaries. Overall the narrative asserted control and continuity: Russia strikes, intercepts, stabilises, and cares for civilians while assigning blame to Kyiv and, secondarily, the West.

Media mainly covered:

- Precision strikes and crew operations: reports centre on *aircrew actions* and *air-artillery coordination*, showing ‘crews’ and ‘personnel’ carrying out precise strikes on Ukrainian targets in border areas. Emphasis on professionalism, control, and repeated operational success.²³
- Destroyed equipment and Ukrainian formations: articles list *machines*, *armoured vehicles*, and *Ukrainian units* ‘eliminated’ or ‘suppressed’, often with numbers of vehicles or soldiers – a metrics-driven narrative stressing enemy losses rather than Russian progress.²⁴

- Government administration and civilian updates: texts discuss *regional authorities*, *programmes*, and *announcements* often civilian or bureaucratic, not strictly military. Portrays a functioning government managing life and recovery amid conflict.²⁵
- Drone interceptions and air defence alerts: routine statements about BPLA shoot-downs over Kursk Oblast, some-

times specifying times and Ministry of Defence statements. Communicates constant vigilance and technological readiness.²⁶

- Military formations and unit heroisation: mention of groupings '*North*', motor-rifle regiments, and individual soldiers, often praising discipline or bravery. Frames the army as structured, experienced, and morally upright.²⁷

Detected narratives that promote or justify the war:

- Endurance and professionalism: the war is justified through images of well-trained crews and orderly defence, not ideology.²⁸
- Enemy depletion: emphasis on destroying Ukrainian manpower and equipment conveys inevitability of Russian advantage.²⁹
- Technological superiority: air defence success symbolises a competent, modern Russia.³⁰
- Honour and discipline: soldiers' orderliness and bravery legitimise the ongoing campaign as dutiful service.³¹

Compared with August 2024, which exhibited crisis-driven messaging and heightened emotional framing, March 2025 coverage adopted a more technocratic and procedural character. Messaging transitioned from urgent defensive imperatives to emphasis on operational stability and professional military conduct. While heroic narratives persisted, they appeared in more measured form. Civilian governance themes and capability-focused narratives gained prominence relative to the earlier period.

Russian TV shows

First timeframe (August 2024)

During the first timeframe, 33 Russian television recordings were collected, 29 of which mentioned Kursk.

Summary

Russian television framing of Kursk-related events prioritised narrative construction over factual reporting. Programming consistently attributed responsibility to Ukraine while suggesting Western involvement and emphasised Russian operational stability. Frequent brief references to drone interceptions and claimed operational successes maintained a perception of control without substantive detail. Civilian-focused segments highlighted state assistance, evacuations, and official ac-

tivity to project administrative continuity. The primary persuasive approach combined adversary delegitimation with valorisation of Russian military duty, supplemented by studio commentary providing interpretive context. Television coverage emphasised narrative certainty and moral framing, employing commentary and characterisation to reinforce audience alignment rather than to provide information.

Media mainly covered:

- Studio blame and moral framing: hosts and guests argue that Ukraine is at fault, using moralising language and framing Russia as righteous and the opponent as illegitimate.³²
- Losses and ‘success’ updates: recurring talk of ‘destroyed/suppressed’ Ukrainian equipment and formations; the point is to show progress and control rather than provide verifiable detail.³³
- Air defence and drone talk: short, repetitive segments about drones and intercepts; presented as routine proof that threats are handled promptly.³⁴
- Human interest and authority reassurance: appeals to civilians; aid, payments, evacuations, and regional leaders ‘on it’. The message is stability and care despite hostilities.³⁵
- Panel speculation and conspiratorial cues: roundtables suggest Western orchestration or hidden motives, using insinuations more than evidence.³⁶

Detected narratives that promote or justify the war:

- Enemy delegitimisation – 27 recordings: opponents described in derogatory or ideological terms.³⁷
- Moral duty and heroism – 18 recordings: emphasis on sacrifice, duty, and honour of Russian forces.³⁸
- Normalisation of military service – 9 recordings: volunteer and contract service presented as routine.³⁹

Second timeframe (March 2025)

During the second timeframe analysis, 63 Russian television recordings were collected, 45 of which discussed topics related to Kursk.

Summary

Between 12 and 31 March 2025, Russian television heavily covered the Kursk front, shifting from battlefield updates to emotionally charged moral narratives. Early broadcasts focused on situational reports and tactical ‘victories’. Midway through the period, recordings centred on heroism, unity, and Putin’s composure amid Western ‘provocations’. By

late March, rhetoric intensified into civilisational framing, with Russia defending itself and its values against the West’s aggression. The tone evolved from defensive caution to triumphant moral justification, reinforcing public belief that continued fighting was both inevitable and righteous, while minimising any discussion of losses or humanitarian consequences.

Media mainly covered:

- Battlefield developments in Kursk Oblast: detailed coverage of ongoing clashes around Sudzha and border settlements, emphasising tactical updates, Russian advances, and the destruction of Ukrainian units.⁴⁰
- Heroic defence and commemoration: frequent segments glorifying Russian soldiers and volunteers, featuring personal stories, medals, and emotional appeals to sacrifice.⁴¹

- NATO and Western orchestration: Ukraine's actions portrayed as directed by NATO command, with Western intelligence and weapons depicted as the true source of escalation.⁴²
- Putin's calm leadership and diplomacy: repeated framing of Putin as composed

and peace-seeking, contrasting his demeanour with alleged Western provocations.⁴³

- Domestic strength and unity under pressure: reports highlighting civilian morale, economic stability, and national unity despite external threats.⁴⁴

Detected narratives that promote or justify the war:

- Defensive necessity: the Kursk fighting is described as a 'forced response' to NATO-Ukrainian aggression, casting Russia's actions as essential for survival.⁴⁵
- Sacred duty and heroism: soldiers' bravery and civilian solidarity serve to moralise the conflict as a patriotic, almost spiritual, mission.⁴⁶
- Civilisational confrontation: the war is presented as a broader struggle between a decaying West and a morally superior Russia defending traditional values.⁴⁷

The framing of these narratives evolved significantly over the research period. From August 2024 to March 2025, Russian television shifted from moralising blame and routine control language towards grand, civilisational storytelling. Early coverage sought legitimacy through enemy delegitimisation and managed normality; by spring 2025, rhetoric became openly crusading, with heroic sacrifice, spiritual mission, and Russia's defensive destiny against a corrupt West dominating the discourse.

Telegram posts

First timeframe (August 2024)

For the first timeframe analysis, approximately 61,700 Russian Telegram posts were collected. The following are the most prominent topics and narratives detected in this sample of Telegram posts:

- First surprised reports about Ukrainians breaching the border.⁴⁸
- Ukrainians are killing civilians on Russia's land (Figure 16).⁴⁹



Figure 16. Screenshot of a Telegram post (source: ЧП / Крым, Telegram, 8 August 2024)

- Ukrainians are portrayed as 'Nazis', terrorists, slaves, and generally a side with lower morale and no clear purpose.⁵⁰
- Russian air defence leaves no chances for Ukrainian UAVs to do any damage.⁵¹
- Russians are successfully fighting off

Ukrainians who suffer heavy losses on this front. This shows signs that the attack cannot be a surprise and Russian government not only knew about it but had an action plan prepared.⁵²

- The Kursk invasion was an action from Ukraine that made no sense; it is a suicide against 'old Russia'. Maybe it was done for a better negotiating position as they are trying to create an appearance of 'success', even using photomontage (Figure 17).⁵³



Figure 17. Screenshot of a Telegram post (source: HeronVestnik, 8 August 2024)

- Urging Russians to trust official sources as there are many disinformation sources.⁵⁴

- Call for mobilisation, call to join Russian forces for defence, call to be strong and united.⁵⁵
- Emergency, evacuation, aid to the region, blood donations.⁵⁶
- Admission that the situation is getting more complex; Ukraine manages to achieve success in battles.⁵⁷
- The West does not approve this attack by Ukrainians and questions whether it can pay off.⁵⁸
- Ukrainians are attacking critical energy sector objects – Sudzha gas metering station, Kurchatov nuclear power plant (NPP).⁵⁹
- Vengeful Russian hackers are attacking Ukrainian websites.⁶⁰
- Ukraine is using Western weapons to attack Kursk Oblast.⁶¹
- Ukraine is supposedly flying drones over Belarus, President Lukashenko moves his

troops to the border, Russians are expecting Belarusians to join the fight.⁶²

Among the Russian Telegram channels monitored, 49 channels were tracked that were **specifically associated with the Kursk region** and the cities of Sudzha and Kurchatov (see Appendix 1). During the first period, approximately 94.9% of the 11,000 posts addressed the Kursk incursion operation. Regional Telegram channels adopted predominantly militarised messaging. Early posts focused on Ukrainian advances and destruction in border towns such as Sudzha, while mid-period messages centred on air alerts and defensive successes. Later updates shifted towards restoration and civil order, though pro-war messaging persisted. Emotional appeals, reports of heroism, and administrative reassurances combined to normalise invasion-related violence. The dominant tone evolved from shock and fear to stoic endurance, with Telegram functioning both as a warning system and a tool for sustaining patriotic mobilisation among local audiences.

Media mainly covered:

- Civilian impact and official coordination: many posts described how local authorities were reacting to Ukrainian attacks – reporting civilian casualties, damaged homes, and emergency responses. Regional leaders were quoted promising support, providing humanitarian aid, and coordinating evacuations. The tone portrayed the state as organised and caring, ensuring help reached everyone affected by the invasion. This narrative helped reinforce confidence in regional and federal authorities during the crisis.⁶³
- Constant alerts and air defence actions: Telegram channels acted as real-time alert systems, warning residents of missile or drone attacks, announcing ‘air raid alerts’, and later reporting when the threat was over. These updates were continuous and repetitive, keeping attention fixed on danger from Ukraine. The narrative implied

that Russian air defence was effective, always ready, and successfully neutralising incoming attacks.⁶⁴

- Civil protection and behaviour instructions: a large group of posts focused on guiding civilians – how to seek shelter, avoid windows, and remain calm during explosions. These messages resembled emergency broadcasts but were delivered in an informal Telegram tone. The narrative emphasised resilience and discipline – urging people to act responsibly while trusting the authorities’ instructions.⁶⁵
- Patriotism and local heroism: many posts celebrated Russian soldiers, border guards, and anti-air units defending the Kursk Oblast. Air defence successes were described in heroic terms, often with short patriotic phrases or exclamation marks. This created a morale-building effect – por-

traying locals and soldiers as united, brave, and fighting for their homeland. The tone mixed pride with anger at the enemy, reinforcing the legitimacy of ‘defensive war’.⁶⁶

- Local identity and emotional engagement: regional Telegram channels mixed war news with community storytelling – photos of destroyed houses, personal testimonies,

and emotional appeals like ‘stay strong, Kursk’. Some posts invited readers to send their own footage or reports. This fostered a feeling of belonging and participation. It also made the conflict feel closer and more personal, helping maintain high engagement with local audiences.⁶⁷

Detected narratives that promote or justify the war:

- Portrayed Ukraine as an aggressor attacking peaceful Russian regions.
- Framed Russia’s actions as ‘defence of civilians’ and ‘response to terrorism’.
- Emphasised unity, resilience, and the heroism of local defenders. This rhetoric reinforced the idea that continuing the war was both necessary and moral to protect Russian land and people.
- Comparison with general topics and narratives in Russian Telegram from other groups

Compared with broader Russian Telegram channels, Kursk-region channels were far more localised, practical, and defensive in tone. While national channels emphasised propaganda – portraying Ukrainians as ‘Nazis’, promoting Russia’s military readiness, and speculating on geopolitical motives – Kursk-based channels focused on real-time alerts, civilian safety, and local resilience. Their content reflected immediate survival concerns and regional identity rather than ideological framing. In contrast, national outlets disseminated strategic justifications and moral narratives designed to shape broader Russian perception of the invasion.

Second timeframe (March 2025)

The following are the most prominent topics and narratives detected in this sample of Telegram posts about Kursk during the second period:

- Russian forces are clearing the remaining Ukrainian soldiers out of the Kursk Oblast.⁶⁸
- Ukrainians are commanded to withdraw from Kursk Oblast.⁶⁹
- Many Ukrainians are dying; Zelenskyy is to blame.⁷⁰
- The Kursk offensive operation was a total failure.⁷¹
- Putin visits Kursk and pays respect to war heroes.⁷²
- Joint Russian forces help to ensure future safety of the region. Everyone is helping now; Russia is keeping up morale.⁷³
- Trump requests Putin to spare Kursk fighters; Putin gives time for them to surrender.⁷⁴
- People are returning to Kursk.⁷⁵
- Ukrainians continue their terror against civilians, energy infrastructure, and cultural buildings, and are also stealing from local citizens (Figure 18).⁷⁶

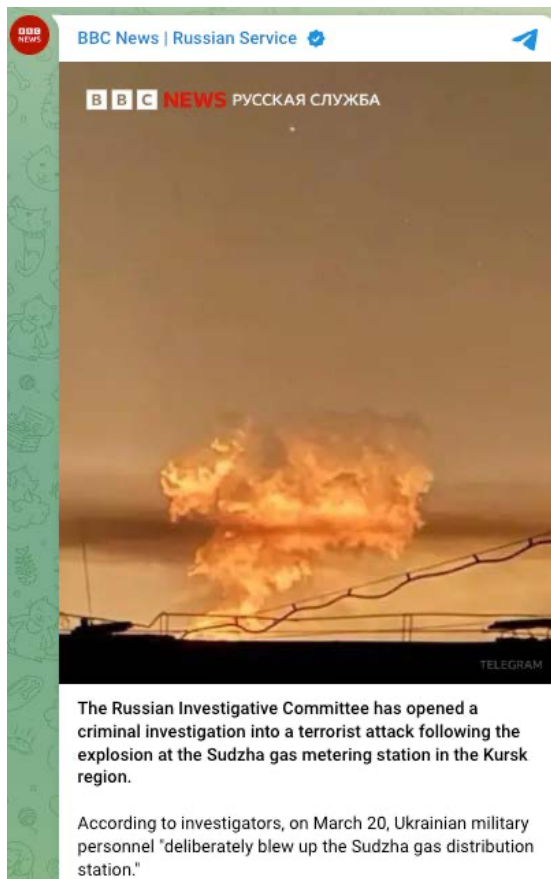


Figure 18. Screenshot of a [Telegram post](#) (source: BBCRussian, 21 March 2025)

The second timeframe differed significantly from the first: most Telegram posts about the Kursk operation originated from local channels rather than major national channels, which focused primarily on negotiations between Trump and Putin. The Kursk issue became increasingly localised over time.

During the second timeframe, approximately 95.5% of over 9000 local posts addressed the Kursk incursion operation. Regional Telegram channels demonstrated an established wartime routine. Unlike the chaotic coverage of August 2024, this period exhibited systematic communication structures: warnings, combat footage, and reassurance in continuous cycles. Posts emphasised regional discipline, leadership attention, and effective air defence, constructing a narrative of endurance and normalisation. War had become routine: threats were anticipated, responses rehearsed, and heroism institutionalised. Civilian audiences were kept alert yet reassured, reflecting a society adapted to sustained militarisation.

Media mainly covered:

- Local militia pride and leadership visits: posts highlighted local defence units like 'Rylsk militia "Medved"', showing their combat readiness and patriotism. Mentions of official visits, including by national leaders, reinforced legitimacy and pride in local resistance efforts.⁷⁷
- Air raid warnings and civilian safety: channels continued to function as emergency alert systems, warning residents of incoming missiles or drones. The tone was procedural – urging people to hide in shelters, stay away from windows, and remain calm.⁷⁸
- All-clear messages and restored normality: once each wave of danger passed, channels immediately announced 'all-clear' signals, indicating restored safety. This cycle of threat and reassurance normalised a permanent state of tension but conveyed stability under control.⁷⁹
- Combat footage and emotional mobilisation: videos and posts branded 'Infantry/Brutality of War/Kursk' circulated widely, showing fighting scenes, destroyed vehicles, or Ukrainian casualties. These served both as propaganda and emotional stimulation, blurring news and entertainment.⁸⁰

Detected narratives that promote or justify the war:

- Posts glorified local militias, stressed Russian unity against external threats, and portrayed Ukraine as aggressive and deceitful.
- Regular references to successful air defence operations and leadership presence portrayed the situation as under control and the war as defensive, necessary, and righteous.

Compared with nationwide Russian Telegram channels, Kursk-region channels in March 2025 focused on routine defence, civil

discipline, and emotional normalisation, while national channels framed the situation as a strategic victory and moral triumph. Regional outlets emphasised air raid warnings, local militias, and leadership visits to sustain resilience and control, avoiding overt triumphalism. National narratives, meanwhile, celebrated Ukraine’s defeat, blamed Zelenskyy, praised Putin’s leadership, and dramatised ‘Ukrainian terror’. Kursk channels projected stability under siege, whereas broader Russian channels amplified victory, revenge, and the restoration of order for a nationwide audience.

How communication in Kursk-specific Telegram groups shifted over months

Between August 2024 and March 2025, communication in Kursk-region Telegram channels evolved from crisis response to war-time normalisation.

In August 2024, messages were urgent, chaotic, and fear-driven – full of breaking news about Ukrainian advances, air raid alerts, and civilian panic. The tone was defensive and emotional, centred on survival, local casualties, and official reassurances. Telegram served as an emergency lifeline and propaganda tool simultaneously, amplifying patriotism while managing public anxiety.

By March 2025 these same channels displayed a structured, almost bureaucratic

rhythm. Alerts, ‘all-clear’ messages, and air defence reports followed a predictable format. The chaos had been replaced by routinised wartime communication emphasising order, endurance, and local heroism. Posts about local militias, leadership visits, and successful air defence operations conveyed control and moral strength rather than alarm.

In short, Kursk’s Telegram space shifted from immediate crisis management to institutionalised information control – transforming the invasion from a shocking event into an everyday, managed state of war.

Telegram channel	Main communication focus
Top	
Gubernator_46	Governor’s channel promoting leadership activity, morale, and state-controlled narratives of stability and heroism.
Seym Kursk	Official government communications, logistical updates, and humanitarian coordination.
Middle	
46 КАНАЛ (46 Kanal)	Regional news outlet sharing official updates, civilian alerts, and verified information from authorities.
Kanal46Kursk	Mix of local defence news, drone activity, and public safety instructions; often mirrors regional administration tone.

Kursk Info 46	Regional news aggregation channel mixing local developments, political statements, and patriotic framing.
Kurskaya Telega	Real-time emergency alerts and ‘all-clear’ messages, functioning as a civil defence broadcast channel.
KurskTvoy	General interest and patriotic content; reposts of official news, local pride, and morale-boosting stories.
SVOdki/WarHistoryAl-conAfter (linked)	Broader military analysis channels reposted in Kursk groups, offering pro-Russian strategic commentary.
<i>Bottom</i>	
IncidentKursk	Community-oriented incident reporting – explosions, drone strikes, or other emergencies in the region.
Prigran Dozor/Grani-ca046	Border-monitoring groups focused on frontline activity and local militia involvement near the frontier.
Rodnaya Sudzha	Hyperlocal updates from Sudzha area, focusing on frontline conditions, local defence units, and volunteer aid.
SVO Segodnya	Propagandistic war content showing combat footage, soldiers’ bravery, and Ukrainian losses.
Tre_Kyrsk	Civic engagement and crowd reporting – users send in videos, photos, or questions about local incidents.
TREVOGA46	Dedicated alert channel posting repeated missile and drone warnings and all-clear notifications.

Table 1. Network analysis of the most prominent Kursk-related Telegram channels

Together, the Kursk-related channels (Table 1) form a hierarchical ecosystem:

- Top layer (Gubernator_46, Seym Kursk) → official coordination and morale.
- Middle layer (46 Kanal, Kursk Info 46, Kurskaya Telega) → local news and alerts.
- Bottom layer (IncidentKursk, TREVOGA46, Tre_Kyrsk, SVO Segodnya) → emotional amplification, user reports, and propaganda circulation.

Web articles

First timeframe (August 2024)

For the first timeframe analysis, approximately 81,500 Russian non-state web articles were collected. The most popular domains (exceeding 1,000 mentions within the timeframe) were:

- rodina.news (1,965)
- mirtesen.ru (1,809)
- mk.ru (1,596)
- bezformata.com (1,436)
- vseмир.ru (1,281)
- gazeta.ru (1,278)
- smi.media (1,186)
- 360.ru (1,163)
- smi.today (1,160)
- lenta.ru (1,114)
- osnmedia.ru (1,073).

The most popular topics and narratives discussed in web articles within the first time-frame were:

- Ukrainians are brutally killing civilians, including pregnant woman and children.⁸¹
- Ukrainians are Nazis, terrorists, thieves, and war criminals.⁸²
- Zelenskyy is sending Ukrainians to imminent death.⁸³
- Ukraine's attempted incursion was stopped.⁸⁴
- The situation in Kursk is described as difficult by the local authorities.⁸⁵
- Russia's air defence is working well.⁸⁶
- Foreign black-market organ surgeons have been spotted in the Sumy region.⁸⁷
- Glory to Kursk defenders – they must unite and kill the Nazis once and for all.⁸⁸
- The West is criticising Ukraine's decision to launch the attack. The narrative is retransmitted in Russia to give support to its fighters and to divide Western opinion on the attack (Figure 19).⁸⁹

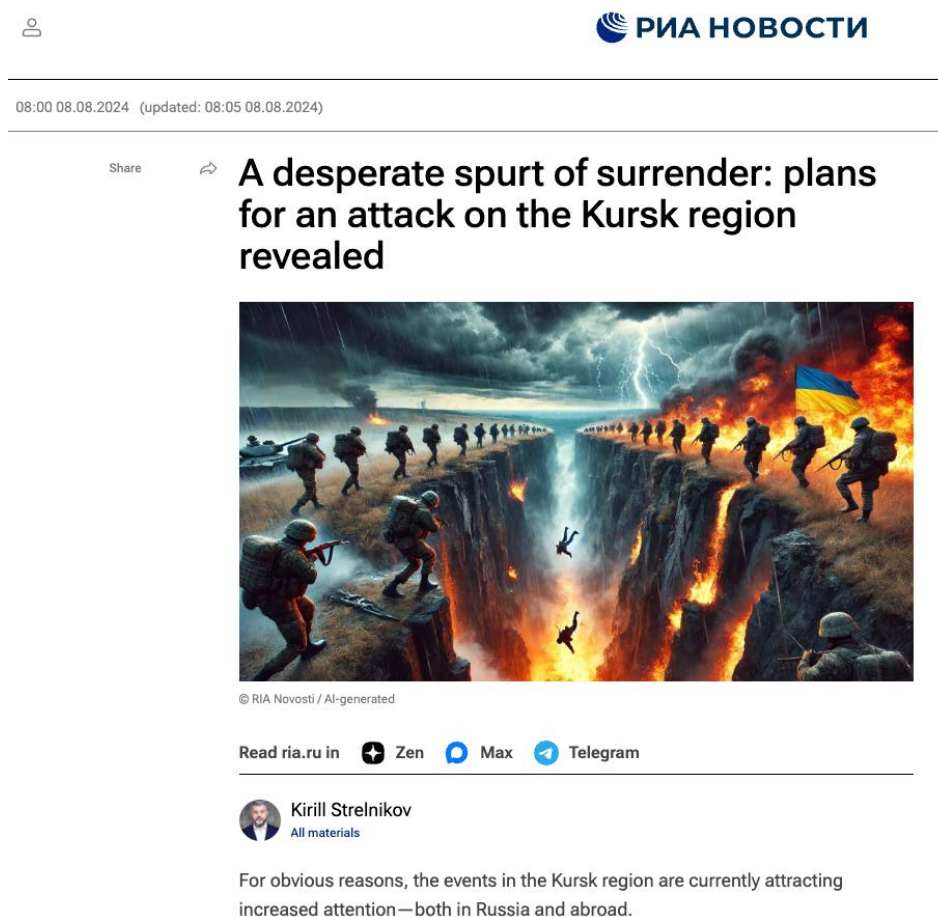


Figure 19. Screenshot of a [web article](#) from ria.ru (source: Kirill Strelnikov, 'A desperate spurt of surrender: Plans for an attack on the Kursk region revealed', RIA Novosti, 8 August 2024)

- Ukrainians are destroying cultural buildings.⁹⁰
- Georgians are helping Ukraine in Kursk.⁹¹
- The purpose of US and German weapons in Kursk is being discussed; can Ukraine use Western weapons there and what would that mean in terms of West–Russia confrontation?⁹²

- Military aid is to be delivered to Kursk.⁹³
- Kursk Oblast locals are experiencing cyberattacks from Ukraine.

Most of the topics and narratives revealed here can be found in other media types,

Second timeframe (March 2025)

For the second timeframe analysis, approximately 62,700 Russian web articles were collected. The most popular domains (exceeding 1,000 mentions within the timeframe) were:

- club-tm.ru (1,488)
- rodina.news (1,209)
- mk.ru (1,180)
- bulbanews.ru (1,091)
- tmbw.ru (1,032)
- ridus.ru (1,026).

The most popular topics and narratives discussed in web articles within the second timeframe were:

- Increasingly more missing people are found in liberated areas of Kursk Oblast.⁹⁴
- Sudzha has been retaken by Russia.⁹⁵
- Praise the participants of Russia's war in Ukraine, who liberated Kursk Oblast. Putin has commended their heroism.⁹⁶
- Ukrainians continue to kill civilians.⁹⁷
- Ukrainian soldiers are surrounded in Kursk Oblast, hiding in basements; the entire situation is being called a disaster for them.⁹⁸
- Polish, British, and German mercenaries committed the most brutal atrocities in the

but many of these sources are important because they influence what is cited in Telegram posts that reach even broader audiences. Stories also emerged about foreigners fighting in Kursk or the use of Western weapons there.

Kursk region, Putin labelled them all as terrorists, and captured fighters are being sent to jail.⁹⁹

- The Russian government is providing support to rebuild the Kursk region by sending money and providing free education for young people.¹⁰⁰
- Russian sources claimed (unverified) that Ukraine lost over 70,000 servicemen in Kursk.¹⁰¹
- Ukraine is breaching the energy infrastructure security agreement by destroying the Sudzha gas metering station using American HIMARS missiles.¹⁰²

Web articles in this period had decreased interest in the topic, as at the same time the front pages were occupied by negotiations and calls between the US and Russia in efforts to bring about peace.

Across both periods, Russian web coverage of the Kursk operation consistently portrayed Ukrainians as brutal aggressors and 'Nazis' killing civilians, while glorifying Russian defenders and emphasising effective resistance. These stable narratives reinforced moral superiority and national unity. By March 2025, however, the focus shifted towards reconstruction, heroism, and territorial 'liberation' – highlighting Putin's praise, rebuilding efforts, and Western mercenary atrocities – reflecting Russia's transition from defensive justification to victorious, state-led restoration framing.

Other social media

This section includes Russian-language mentions from the following social platforms: YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, and Reddit.

First timeframe (August 2024)

For the first timeframe analysis, 5,112 Russian-language social media posts were collected. Of these, 3,519 (68.8%) discussed the Kursk invasion.

Summary

Mentions of Kursk surged from 5 August to sustained intensity on 6–7 August, peaking on 9 August, mirroring early breakthrough and ambush reporting. After 10–12 August, updates settled into routine battlefield reporting, but justificatory rhetoric rose, topping out on 15 August (the highest war-justification narrative count). The tone evolved from shock and alert to managerial: official briefings, evacua-

tion guidance, infrastructure repair, and ‘countermeasures’. By 14–15 August, strike and drone content spiked, and messaging pivoted to resilience and punishment, aligning with widely reported large-scale strike activity and an emergency posture.

Overall mood: initial alarm → procedural stabilisation → justificatory hardening.

Media mainly covered:

- Frontline and border updates: frequent reports on the Sudzha–Korenevo axis, settlement-level changes, military operations, and movement along roads and highways. Reports were typically brief and frequent.¹⁰³
- Strikes and drone activity: coverage of artillery, missile, first-person-view (FPV) drone and UAV operations, interceptions, explosions, casualty claims, equipment losses, and counter-attacks, often accompanied by video evidence.¹⁰⁴
- Civilian impact and infrastructure: evacuations, power and water disruption, road closures, damage to residential areas and public facilities, and official guidance on relocation and public safety.¹⁰⁵
- Official communications: statements from the Ministry of Defence, regional governors, and military bloggers, including emergency declarations, casualty and equipment figures, mobilisation measures, and emergency regime announcements.¹⁰⁶
- Western attribution: framing of the conflict as confrontation with the ‘collective West’ and NATO, discussion of sanctions, and claims of Western orchestration.¹⁰⁷

The most frequent frames presented the conflict as defensive, attributed escalation to Western and NATO involvement, and emphasised military heroism – consistent with public support mobilisation strategies.

Platform-specific analysis revealed distinct patterns:

- YouTube (3,150 posts): highest volume and Kursk focus (78.4%). Greatest proportion of war-justification content (28.9%).
- Facebook: high topical relevance (86.7% Kursk-related) with moderate justification messaging (16.7%). Content focused on local updates and official communications.
- Instagram: low conflict relevance (16.9% Kursk-related, 1.6% justification content). Predominantly non-conflict material and neutral reposts.
- TikTok: negligible Kursk-related coverage in the sample.
- Niche platforms (Reddit, LinkedIn): minimal volumes but high topical focus when present. Justification rates occasionally elevated, though small sample sizes limit conclusions.

Second timeframe (March 2025)

For the second timeframe analysis, 1,623 Russian-language social media posts were collected. Of these, 1,534 (94.5%) discussed the Kursk invasion.

Summary

During March 2025, Russian-language social media discussions around Kursk transformed into a hybrid of globalised propaganda and localised morale maintenance. Early March posts mixed cross-language reporting and Western influencer videos, but mid-month content turned inwards – emphasising unity, faith, and defensive perseverance. The tone became less sensational, more ritualised:

prayers for soldiers, gratitude to volunteers, and vows to ‘defend until victory’. Ukrainian-language posts provided mirrored battlefield updates, while pro-Russian channels reframed these as proof of Western provocation. The emotional register settled into weary determination rather than alarm – suggesting fatigue and normalisation of a long-term conflict.

Media mainly covered:

- Russian counteroffensive and tactical gains: posts described Russian advances near Sudzha, Lgov, and Rylysk, emphasising regained control over contested settlements, destruction of Ukrainian units, and frontline stabilisation. Messaging was confident and militarily precise, presenting operations as planned counterstrikes rather than reactive measures.¹⁰⁸
- Ukrainian drone and missile attacks on Kursk Oblast: a substantial theme focused on nightly drone raids, intercepted missiles, and resulting damage. Russian sources emphasised air defence effectiveness and characterised Ukrainian strikes as terrorist actions against civilians and infrastructure.¹⁰⁹
- Civilian impact and evacuation efforts: content highlighted evacuations, temporary shelters, power grid restoration, and humanitarian assistance. The dominant frame emphasised resilience and unity – communities enduring hardship while authorities responded decisively.¹¹⁰
- Official military and government communications: frequent reposts of Ministry of Defence briefings and gubernatorial statements reported neutralised saboteurs, casualty figures, and logis-

tics updates. These official narratives reinforced perceptions of control and operational order.¹¹¹

Detected narratives that promote or justify the war:

- Defensive patriotism: the conflict was framed as defence of Russian territory and population. Kursk was portrayed as a symbol of national resistance, with participation characterised as duty and loyalty.
- Terrorism attribution: Ukrainian drone and missile strikes were presented as deliberate attacks on civilians. Consistent references to terrorism served to legitimise retaliation and position Russia as victim rather than aggressor.
- Spiritual resilience: content appealed to faith and moral endurance, urging citizens to trust divine justice, support military personnel, and accept temporary hardship for a righteous cause.
- Western attribution and mobilisation appeals: commentary increasingly linked Ukrainian actions to NATO coordination and Western weapons supplies.¹¹²
- Western encirclement: the conflict was justified as a response to Western provocation and NATO coordination. Kursk was presented as evidence that Russia was defending itself against collective Western aggression.
- Retributive justice: narratives emphasised the moral necessity of punishing attackers and achieving complete victory. Strikes were depicted as justified retribution for Ukrainian or Western actions.

Differences by platform

YouTube featured operational summaries and frontline footage, often narrated by pro-war content creators or embedded correspondents. Telegram provided raw battle-field footage and casualty updates that subsequently migrated to Facebook and other platforms, where commentary reframed con-

tent into patriotic narratives. Instagram and short-form video formats emphasised military heroism, evacuation efforts, and symbolic musical content. Regional news pages combined official press releases with eyewitness accounts, projecting local authenticity.

The two timeframes compared

Between August 2024 and March 2025, Russian-language social media narratives around the Kursk front evolved from chaos to control. In 2024, posts reacted emotionally to Ukraine's sudden incursion: full of shock, vengeance, and emergency rhetoric. By March 2025 the tone had hardened into disciplined routine: daily reports of Russian counteroffensives, drone interceptions, and civilian endur-

ance replaced panic with structure. War-justification language also matured, shifting from 'de-Nazification' and revenge towards 'defence', 'faith', and 'duty'. The Kursk operation became normalised as a permanent moral mission, presented less as crisis response and more as a righteous, collective defence of the homeland.

Foreign Media Analysis

Analysis of foreign media mentions in this and other case studies provides an important complementary perspective to Russian domestic communications. This approach enables the assessment of Kremlin narrative prop-

agation in foreign media, while recognising that substantial Russian audiences consume foreign media content, including messaging targeted at diaspora and pro-Russian communities abroad.

Web articles

First timeframe (August 2024)

During the first timeframe (5–16 August 2024), 94,430 web articles from 22 foreign countries were collected (Figure 20). The following were selected to represent neighbouring European states and NATO member

nations: Belarus, Canada, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the US.

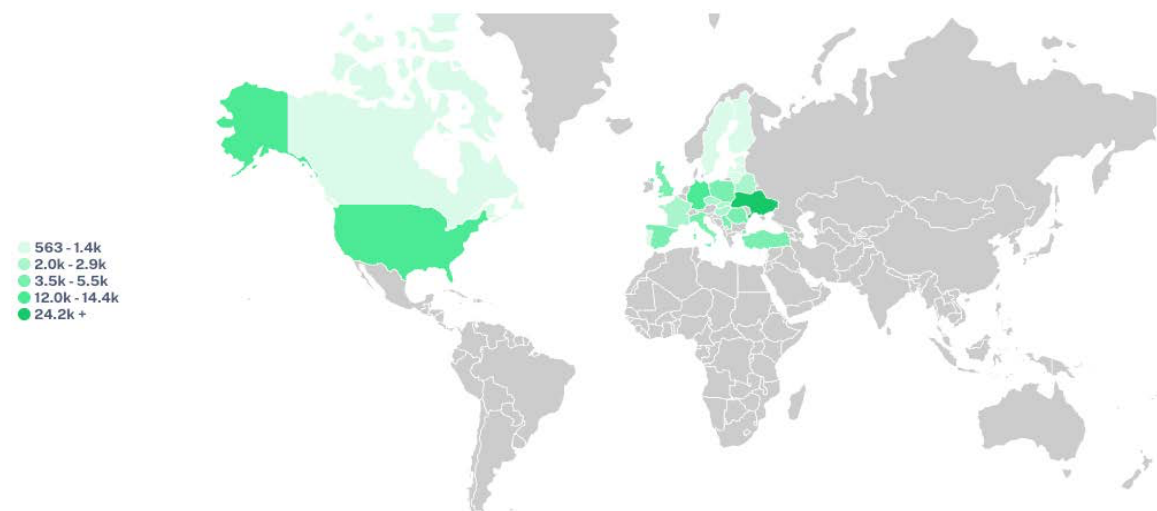


Figure 20. Distribution of web article mentions by country for the first timeframe

The goal was to analyse how the launch of the Kursk offensive was covered in other

countries and whether the positions matched the Kremlin narratives discovered previously.

Media mainly covered:

- The attack versus Russia was not accidental at all.¹¹³
- We are not sure how long Ukraine can continue this active phase of incursion, and need time to understand what the actual goals of Ukraine are.¹¹⁴
- Russia is conceding heavy losses and Ukraine is doing surprisingly well.¹¹⁵
- Putin is panicking and feeling humiliated.¹¹⁶
- Ukraine is using Western weapons in Kursk; discussions on whether it is allowed to do so; US, Germany, and Britain approve.¹¹⁷
- The incursion will be beneficial because it will relieve pressure on other frontlines. It also shows that Russia was not

prepared and at this stage the war is not going to plan.¹¹⁸

- Belarus is preparing an army along the border – should Europe be afraid of war escalation?¹¹⁹

Detected disinformation narratives:

- Energy security threat: claims that the Ukrainian incursion into Sudzha would cause astronomical gas price increases for Europeans due to the gas metering station located there.¹²¹
- Civilian casualty allegations: accusations that Ukrainian forces were deliberately targeting and killing civilians.¹²²
- Overstated defensive success: claims that Russian forces had halted Ukrainian advances when operations remained ongoing.¹²³
- Provocation framing: widespread reporting of statements by President Putin characterising the Ukrainian action as a major provocation.¹²⁴
- Exaggerated Ukrainian losses: claims of heavy Ukrainian casualties unsupported by verifiable evidence.¹²⁵
- Russians are angry at their government for not being prepared for this incursion.¹²⁰
- Western conspiracy narratives: allegations that Western powers jointly planned the incursion with Ukraine.¹²⁶
- Nuclear facility threat claims: unverified allegations from both sides regarding risks to the Kurchatov NPP.¹²⁷
- Peace process dismissal: claims that the incursion would not contribute to peace negotiations, contradicting assessments that it provided Ukraine with enhanced negotiating leverage.¹²⁸
- Chemical weapons allegations: repetition of Russian government accusations that Ukraine employed chemical weapons in Kursk Oblast.¹²⁹
- Retaliatory threat amplification: amplified rhetoric regarding potential Russian retaliation against Ukraine and Western nations in response to the Kursk situation.¹³⁰

Second timeframe (March 2025)

During the period of the second timeframe (12–31 March 2025), 58,931 web articles from 22 foreign countries were collected (Figure 21).

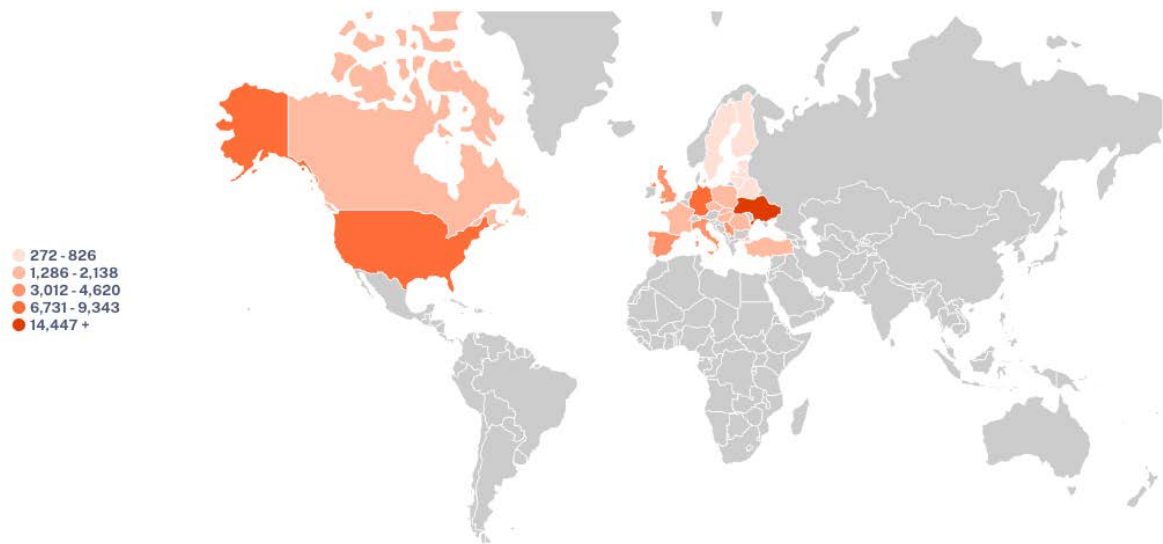


Figure 21. Distribution of web article mentions by country for the second timeframe

Despite substantial mention volumes in each sample, most articles referenced Kursk exclusively within the context of ongoing negotiations and assessments that it no longer

represented a viable negotiating tool for Ukraine. However, several additional topics and narratives were identified.

Media mainly covered:

- Ukrainian force status in Kursk: reports indicated Ukrainian forces remained under pressure, though operational status remained unclear.¹³¹
- North Korean military involvement: coverage of captured North Korean soldiers potentially being transferred to Seoul,

alongside allegations of 3,000 additional North Korean troops deployed to support Russian operations.¹³²

- Counter-propaganda efforts: Ukrainian media outlets actively published content attempting to refute Russian disinformation narratives.¹³³

Detected disinformation narratives:

- Surrender ultimatum: claims that President Putin offered Ukrainian forces safe passage if they surrendered and withdrew from Kursk Oblast.¹³⁴
- Ukrainian retreat allegations: unverified reports of mass Ukrainian casualties during alleged retreat operations, described using extreme imagery.¹³⁵

- Gas infrastructure sabotage dispute: conflicting allegations from Ukraine and Russia regarding responsibility for damage to the Sudzha gas metering station, with contradictory claims about violations of energy infrastructure protection agreements.¹³⁶
- Journalist casualty claims: allegations that Ukrainian forces killed two Russian journalists.¹³⁷

- Nuclear facility threat claims: allegations that President Zelenskyy was consider-

ing sabotage operations against NPPs in Russia.¹³⁸

Tweets on X

Due to data volume constraints, X content was analysed only for the first timeframe (5–16 August 2024), during which approxi-

mately 203,000 messages were collected. The following principal topics and narratives were identified.

Ukraine-favourable topics:

- Defensive warfare milestone: content highlighting the fact that Russia was defending its own territory for the first time in over two years of conflict.¹³⁹
- Russian unpreparedness: posts emphasising Ukrainian advances and Russian military bloggers' criticism of government unpreparedness and inadequate response capabilities.¹⁴⁰
- Negotiation leverage: assessments that Ukraine's territorial gains strengthened its position for potential future negotiations.¹⁴¹
- Local population sentiment: claims that Sudzha residents welcomed Ukrainian forces and expressed dissatisfaction with Russian governance.¹⁴²

Russia-favourable topics:

- Weapons employment restrictions: claims that Ukraine avoided using Western-supplied weapons in Kursk Oblast to prevent direct NATO–Russia confrontation.¹⁴³
- War crimes allegations: accusations of Ukrainian forces targeting civilians, religious sites, and vehicles, employing intimidation tactics.¹⁴⁴
- Limited strategic objectives: characterisation of the incursion as primarily aimed at public relations gains and demonstrating resolve to Western supporters.¹⁴⁵
- Ukrainian casualty underreporting: allegations that Ukrainian losses in Kursk were substantial but unreported.¹⁴⁶
- Strategic risk assessment: characterisation of the operation as excessively risky.¹⁴⁷
- Escalation concerns: speculation regarding potential Russian escalatory responses, including the employment of nuclear weapons.¹⁴⁸

Deep Analysis of Video Content

The initial phase of the Kursk campaign was marked by significant informational volatility, with millions of messages circulating across social platforms within a short period. Visual content – images and short videos – dominated this activity, particularly on X and Telegram, where posts frequently relied on imagery rather than substantive textual explanation.

To examine this dynamic, the Deep Analysis model was applied to a targeted sample of social media content, demonstrating the analytical value of extracting information beyond post descriptions, which are often absent or insufficient – especially in short-video formats.

During the first timeframe of the case study (5–16 August 2024), 13,592 images and

short videos were processed using this model, resulting in 4,057 content units assigned to the Kursk case. Most of the content originated from

YouTube (3,196 items), followed by Instagram (625) and TikTok (236), produced by a total of 1,232 creators.

YouTube analysis

Summary

The dataset consists predominantly of coverage from August 2024 addressing Ukraine's incursion into Kursk Oblast. Video content clusters into multilingual news segments, expert analysis, and field footage documenting border operations, territorial advances, drone and missile strikes, and civilian evacuations. Russian-language content frequently features regional officials, Ministry of Emergency Situations (EMERCOM) operations, and humanitarian assistance programmes, while international outlets focus on operational objectives, sustainability assessments, and escalation risks.

A minority of content explicitly frames Ukrainian actions as self-defence or counter-terrorism operations, or alternatively as acts of aggression. A smaller subset challenges specific claims or identifies potentially staged or mislabelled footage. References to prisoners of war (POWs) and surrenders appear less frequently than coverage of evacuations and diplomatic activities. The sample reflects both rapid operational developments along the border and concurrent information operations concerning territorial gains, casualty figures, and operational legitimacy, with recurring footage of strikes, military convoys, and population displacement in Kursk Oblast.

The five main topics across the dataset:

1. Russian-language operational and regional updates (Kursk and Belgorod Oblast focus): Ministry of Defence briefings, evacuation operations, artillery and drone strikes, and statements from local authorities.
2. English-language analytical content and international news coverage: contextual analysis of the Kursk incursion, operational maps, and tactical and strategic assessments.
3. Spanish-language television news segments: daily conflict summaries incorporating Kursk-related footage within broader coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war.
4. German-language analytical programmes: situational assessments from outlets including Deutsche Welle, Die Welt, and Bild, featuring maps and strike analysis.
5. Field footage and compilation videos: military columns, FPV and loitering munition strikes, aftermath documentation; some content reflecting partisan editing.

The main topics regarding the Kursk operation:

- Official statements and diplomacy (1,107 videos): the largest content cluster, comprising press conferences and official responses. Russian officials (President Putin, Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov, Ministry of Defence spokespeople) characterised the incursion as a terrorist attack or provocation aimed at disrupting peace negotiations. Ukrainian officials (President Zelenskyy, Commander Syrskiy, military briefers) presented the operation as defensive action and tactical shaping near the border. International commentary featured EU and

US officials affirming Ukraine's right to self-defence while clarifying Western non-involvement in direct operations.

- Civilian impact and evacuation (1,067 videos): content depicting humanitarian consequences within Kursk Oblast, including evacuation convoys, damaged residential areas, fires, and temporary shelters. Coverage of EMERCOM and Red Cross aid distribution, field kitchen operations, and tent facilities. Local residents describing shelling and displacement experiences.
- Border crossings and reconnaissance operations (1,061 videos): content focused on initial territorial penetration, featuring Ukrainian small unit or drone reconnaissance footage near Sudzha, Korenevo, and Glushkovo. Russian sources labelled these as diversionary reconnaissance group activities. Frequent characterisation as cross-border sabotage or terrorist operations, documented through aerial or closed-circuit television footage. This content established the conflict's geographic parameters and generated competing narratives.
- Operational developments and territorial control (1,027 videos): content depicting or claiming territorial advances and defensive operations. Ukrainian footage celebrating captured settlements, destroyed equipment, and artillery operations. Russian content showing defensive repositioning or successful repulsion of attacks. Extensive use of map animations, drone surveillance, and coordinate overlays. This category represents the core of military coverage and principal vector for competing information claims.
- Drones and strike operations in Kursk Oblast (914 videos): content dominated by drone warfare, including FPV strikes, loitering munition operations, and aftermath documentation of damaged convoys. Coverage of strikes on civilian infrastructure including fuel storage facilities, railways, and power substations.

Frequently redistributed through Telegram channels and commentary platforms. This content category combines tactical intelligence documentation with information operations.

- Humanitarian aid and recovery (383 videos): content emphasising relief efforts, including Russian Red Cross, EMERCOM, and volunteer organisation activities distributing food, medical supplies, and shelter. Official statements regarding assistance for displaced border residents. Content typically reinforces governmental legitimacy narratives and emphasises societal resilience over combat operations.
- POWs and surrenders (222 videos): limited but symbolically charged – Ukrainians parading captured Russian soldiers or vice versa. Short clips showing prisoners under interrogation, blurred faces, or exchanges of captives. Both sides using footage to claim morale superiority or enemy collapse. High propaganda value relative to volume.

Detected narratives that promote or justify the war (8.4% of Kursk-related videos):

- Self-defence and counterterrorism framing: Russia portrayed as protecting border regions and civilian populations from attack.
- Historical legitimisation: occasional references to World War II and characterisation of territory as historically Russian.
- Western provocation narrative: Western military assistance characterised as escalation compelling Russian military response.

Assessment: these narratives serve to legitimise military operations and reframe the Ukrainian incursion from a defensive failure into a morally and historically justified mission.

Disinformation and manipulation indicators (4% of Kursk-related videos):

- Recycled or mislabelled footage: combat videos from previous engagements or different locations presented as current Kursk operations (e.g., archival footage from Donetsk presented as current Kursk content).
- Unverified casualty claims: exaggerated loss figures or fabricated surrender reports lacking evidence.

- Content authenticity disputes: videos labelled as fake (фейк), staged (постановка), or edited (монтировано) by opposing sources.

Counter-narrative operations: open-source intelligence (OSINT) and fact-checking channels identifying manipulated content, while Russian sources accuse Ukraine of fabrication.

Assessment: these techniques aim to shape perception of operational reality by undermining adversary content credibility or generating information confusion.

Representative video examples

The following video examples illustrate key content categories identified in the analysis:

- Operational combat footage: first-person perspective of military convoy operations and aftermath of rocket strike. Demonstrates typical frontline documentation distributed through social media platforms.¹⁴⁹
- International institutional response: European Commission statement affirming Ukraine's right to self-defence and detailing support mechanisms. Represents official international positioning on operational legality.¹⁵⁰

- Humanitarian response operations: EMERCOM temporary accommodation facilities for displaced Kursk Oblast border residents. Illustrates Russian governmental humanitarian messaging.¹⁵¹
- Diplomatic support framework: European Commission reiteration of self-defence principles and European Peace Facility assistance programmes. Demonstrates sustained international support narrative.¹⁵²
- Compiled operational overview: multi-source compilation of incursion footage, artillery strikes, and disputed operational claims. Exemplifies aggregated content common in information environment.¹⁵³

Instagram analysis

Summary

The Instagram sample centres on Ukraine's incursion into Russia's Kursk Oblast, distilled into short reels and tiles. Posts cluster around official statements, evacuations and aid, and combat visuals (FPV strikes, aftermath scenes, quick map animations). Many clips feature local authorities and emergency services addressing displacement and repairs, while international explainers provide concise context and expected objectives. A smaller

number highlight POWs and surrenders or tactical breakdowns of drones and artillery. Narrative framing appears in limited doses: some accounts justify actions as self-defence or anti-terror or as retaliation, and a smaller set dispute claims via debunking or mislabelling alerts. Overall, Instagram favours rapid, visual storytelling, emphasising immediacy, displacement, and recurring strike footage in Kursk Oblast.

Media mainly covered:

- Frontline and territorial gains – 136 posts (22.6%): short clips claim advances, positions taken, or attacks repelled, frequently incorporating map overlays or drone footage. Opposing sources characterise identical locations using competing terminology ('liberated' versus 'held').
 - Drones and strike operations in Kursk Oblast – 131 posts (21.7%): FPV and loitering munition footage documenting vehicle strikes, storage facility attacks, and infrastructure damage, followed by aftermath documentation. Content emphasises tech and precision, driving high engagement.
 - Civilian impact and evacuation – 125 posts (20.7%): evacuations, damaged housing, and shelters highlight displacement and aid lines. Narrative emphasis on immediate civilian needs (power supply, heating, medical care) rather than combat operations.
 - Official statements and diplomacy – 110 posts (18.2%): formatted content quoting officials and institutional statements on legal frameworks, attribution of responsibility, and policy responses. Predominantly subtitled excerpts or summary compilations of official briefings.
 - Border crossings and reconnaissance activities – 106 posts (17.6%): content focuses on entry points, small unit actions, and near-border skirmishes. Framing varies from 'incursion/raid' to 'terrorist sabotage', depending on source.
 - Information operations and narratives – 62 posts (10.3%): meta-analytical content examining propaganda techniques, verifying geolocation data, and identifying manipulated footage. Some accounts provide systematic assessments distinguishing authentic from fabricated content.
 - POWs and surrender claims – 46 posts (7.6%): brief prisoner documentation and surrender assertions employed as evidence of operational momentum. Limited contextual information; editing frequently emphasises psychological impact.
 - Humanitarian aid and recovery – 45 posts (7.5%): content documenting EMERCOM and volunteer organisation activities, including supply distribution, camp establishment, and infrastructure repair. Messaging emphasises service continuity and societal resilience.
- Detected narratives that promote or justify the war (4.8% of Kursk posts):
- Self-defence framing: operations characterised as protection of Russian territory and population from external aggression.
 - Counterterrorism narrative: actions portrayed as response to terrorist activities targeting civilians and infrastructure.
 - Retaliatory justification: military operations presented as necessary retaliation for prior Ukrainian actions.
 - Historical legitimisation: references to historical Russian territorial claims and World War II precedents.
 - Western proxy narrative: conflict characterised as Russian response to NATO-backed Ukrainian aggression, with Western powers positioned as primary adversaries.
- Disinformation and manipulation cues (2% of Kursk videos):
- Content authenticity disputes: posts labelled as fabricated, staged, or misattributed by opposing sources.

- Temporal misattribution: archival footage presented as current operational content.
- Geolocation disputes: content with contested or incorrect location claims.
- Verification activities: OSINT methodologies employed to authenticate or debunk contested material.
- Counter-accusations: reciprocal allegations of fabrication between opposing partisan sources.

Representative video examples

The following video examples illustrate key content categories identified in the analysis:

- Multi-topic operational summary: compilation addressing border incursion dynamics, drone strikes, prisoner claims, and civilian casualties. Demonstrates

Assessment: Instagram demonstrated significantly lower rates of war-justification narratives (4.8%) and disinformation content (2%) compared to YouTube, which exhibited approximately double these percentages (8.4% and 4% respectively). This suggests platform-specific variation in information operation intensity, with long-form video platforms showing higher concentrations of manipulated or justification-focused content.

typical aggregated content format common on Instagram.¹⁵⁴

- Territorial advancement documentation: coverage of Ukrainian force movements into Kursk Oblast. Represents standard operational update content distributed through social media.¹⁵⁵

TikTok analysis

Summary

The TikTok sample spotlights short, highly visual updates on Ukraine's actions in and around Russia's Kursk region. The dominant strand shows border-area incursions and near-frontline snippets – flag removals and raisings, brief firefights, and drone or aftermath clips. A sizeable share highlights civilian impact, including damaged streets and evacuations, but with minimal background. Some English explainer reels frame the events in a

broader war context, while Spanish-language clips trend alongside wider geopolitics. Dedicated humanitarian or debunk-style reels are absent in this small Kursk subset. Narrative framing is limited but present: an occasional self-defence or retaliation claim and one post disputing footage authenticity. Overall, TikTok favours fast, caption-led vignettes over longer context, emphasising immediacy and shareability.

Media mainly covered:

- Spanish-language geopolitical content with Latin American focus – 100/236 (42.4%): Spanish news content addressing regional politics (Venezuela/Maduro, broader Latin American topics) distributed alongside Russia–Ukraine coverage, incorporating anti-fascist political narratives.
- Russia–Ukraine operational explainers with Kursk coverage – 59/236 (25.0%): English-language news content providing border event summaries, territorial control updates, and conflict timelines with Kursk Oblast prominence.
- Italian and European institutional content – 38/236 (16.1%): Italian-language

news packages and European institutional coverage, including commemorative events, leadership statements, and headline summaries.

- Mexican political and diplomatic coverage – 22/236 (9.3%): content addressing President Sheinbaum’s inauguration and diplomatic protocol, occasionally intersecting with Russia-related references.
- Commercial and miscellaneous content within conflict feeds – 17/236 (7.2%): Automotive and trade-related content (including Zaporizhzhia references) appearing within conflict-focused information streams.

Main topics regarding Kursk operation (only ~5% videos were about Kursk, small sample):

- Border incursion headlines: brief news-format clips emphasising the fact of cross-border movement into Kursk

Representative video examples

The following video examples illustrate key content categories identified in the analysis:

- **Headline-focused conflict summary:** major network coverage emphasising the incursion event and leadership response rhetoric. Demonstrates typical brief, event-focused format.¹⁵⁶

Oblast rather than operational details. Content focused on the incursion event itself with minimal tactical context.

- **Leadership statements and strategic positioning:** content featuring leadership commentary (particularly President Zelenskyy), references to retaliatory capabilities, missile systems, and peace negotiation positioning. Emphasis on strategic intent rather than ground-level operations.
- **Symbolic territorial control:** brief footage documenting symbolic markers of control shifts, including flag changes, street-level imagery, and resident testimonials suggesting alterations in administrative authority.
- **Compiled narrative summaries:** extended video packages with voice-over narration synthesising multiple days of events into cohesive accounts.

- **Contested operational narrative:** international broadcaster presenting aftermath footage alongside acknowledgment of conflicting claims.¹⁵⁷
- **Symbolic control documentation:** brief footage of territorial control markers (flag removal). Represents platform’s emphasis on visual symbols over detailed tactical analysis.¹⁵⁸

Object detection

The Deep Analysis model can also be tasked with assigning various ratings to each content piece, as well as detecting objects that were visually shown or mentioned, but only from specific preset categories. This time, the system was tasked with detecting objects from the following categories:

- Discussion topics
- Activities
- Politicians
- Celebrities
- Illegal activities
- Political direction
- Extremist symbols
- Locations

Military equipment Tables 2 and 3 show the top detected objects for each category within the analysed sample.

Discussion topics	Activities	Politicians	Celebrities
Ukraine war (638)	Military operations (671)	Vladimir Putin (1,033)	Elon Musk (25)
Ukraine-Russia conflict (500)	News reporting (335)	Volodymyr Zelenskyy (923)	Oleksandr Syrskyy (19)
Military operations (417)	Evacuation (298)	Joe Biden (75)	Taylor Swift (17)
Russia-Ukraine conflict (340)	Speaking (204)	Oleksandr Syrskyy (69)	Volodymyr Zelenskyy (12)
Military conflict (334)	Military action (202)	Valery Gerasimov (64)	Valery Gerasimov (10)
Russia-Ukraine war (266)	Reporting (189)	Alexei Smirnov (62)	Christoph Wanner (8)
Military strategy (257)	Military operation (162)	Donald Trump (50)	Oleksiy Arestovych (8)
Territorial control (167)	Reporting news (111)	Putin (45)	Vladimir Putin (8)
Military offensive (156)	Driving (108)	Vyacheslav Gladkov (44)	Yevgeny Prigozhin (7)
Ukraine-Russia war (154)	Military combat (97)	Alexey Smirnov (33)	Oleksandr Syrsky (6)
Border incursions (147)	Meeting (91)	Kamala Harris (28)	Vinesh Phogat (6)
Civilian casualties (144)	Explosion (83)	Dmitry Medvedev (25)	Yuri Podolyaka (6)
Civilian evacuation (138)	Civilian evacuation (82)	John Kirby (25)	Emmanuelle Chaze (5)
Ukraine conflict (132)	Military conflict (80)	Nicolás Maduro (23)	Muhammad Yunus (5)
War in Ukraine (123)	Military movement (67)	Claudia Sheinbaum (22)	Sabrina Singh (5)
Border security (105)	Warfare (64)	Lindsey Graham (22)	
Peace negotiations (94)	Explosions (57)	Aleksey Smirnov (20)	
Ukrainian offensive (89)	Military briefing (54)	Alexander Lukashenko (19)	
Humanitarian aid (85)	Political speech (54)	Mykhailo Podolyak (17)	
Drone attacks (84)	Political meeting (52)	Richard Blumenthal (16)	
Evacuation (83)	Drone strike (50)	Sergei Shoigu (16)	
Kursk region (80)			
International relations (78)			

Military aid (67)			
War (61)			
Border conflict (59)			
Evacuations (56)			
Military actions (52)			
Prisoner exchange (51)			

Table 2. Top detected objects in the categories discussion topics, activities, politicians, and celebrities

Illegal activities	Political direction	Extremist symbols	Locations	Military equipment
Killing (62)	Pro-Ukrainian (1,062)	Z symbol (65)	Kursk (28)	Armoured vehicle (5)
Warfare (56)	Pro-Russian (927)	Soviet symbols (9)	Kursk region (26)	Tank (5)
War (20)	Anti-Russian (581)	Russian military emblem (6)	Moscow (10)	Military trucks (4)
Destruction of property (19)	Neutral reporting (111)	Swastika (4)	Ukraine (10)	Ka-52 helicopter (3)
War crimes (18)	Pro-Russian narrative (90)	Donetsk People's Republic flag (3)	Sudzha (9)	Military truck (3)
Invasion (13)	Anti-war (82)	St George ribbon (3)	Russia (8)	Self-propelled artillery (3)
Destruction (8)	Neutral (68)	V symbol (3)	Kursk oblast (7)	Tanks (3)
Assassination (7)		Al-Qaeda (2)	Belgorod (6)	Anti-tank obstacles (2)
Attacks on civilians (7)		Freedom of Russia legion flag (2)	Sumy region (5)	Armoured personnel carrier (2)
Civilian casualties (7)		German military cross (2)	Crimea (4)	Drones (2)
Explosion (7)		ISIS (2)	Belgorod region (3)	FPV drones (2)
Murder (7)		Wagner Group logo (2)	Donetsk (3)	Helicopter (2)
Bombing (6)			Donetsk region (3)	Mi-28 helicopter (2)
Drug trafficking (6)			Kherson (3)	Military vehicles (2)
Military attacks (6)			Korenevo (3)	T-64 tank (2)
Shelling civilian buildings (6)			Kyiv (3)	2A36 Giatsint-B howitzer (1)
Torture (6)			Rylsk (3)	76.2 mm gun (1)
			Bryansk (2)	Anti-drone cage (1)

Table 3. Top detected objects in the categories illegal activities, political direction, extremist symbols, locations and military equipment

Nuclear Weapons and Atomic Targets

However intense and brutal the war in Ukraine may be, the threat of nuclear catastrophe remains ever-present. Nuclear power – both power plants and weapons – poses genuine concerns for Western nations and Ukraine, while Russia has systematically exploited nuclear threats as tools of manipulation and fear.

Many dangerous outage risks were associated with Chernobyl and Europe's largest NPP in Zaporizhzhia, which has been the target of shelling and nearby drone attacks.¹⁵⁹ This has created serious nuclear-safety concerns, while Russians are using the threat of nuclear escalation as a manipulation tool. Although the threshold for nuclear weapon use remains ambiguous, top Russian officials, in-

cluding Vladimir Putin, have repeatedly stated that Russia would deploy its nuclear arsenal if subjected to a massive attack by Western countries.

Given the high-stakes nature of this topic, Russia's narrative campaigns around it, and widespread discussion of the war's horrors amid the Kursk incursion developments, all mentions from the main Russian media dataset – comprising Telegram, official websites, and television – were analysed to identify content matching the search queries атомн.* (atomic, primarily associated with the energy sector and NPPs) and ядерн.* (nuclear, primarily associated with nuclear weapons). See Figure 22.

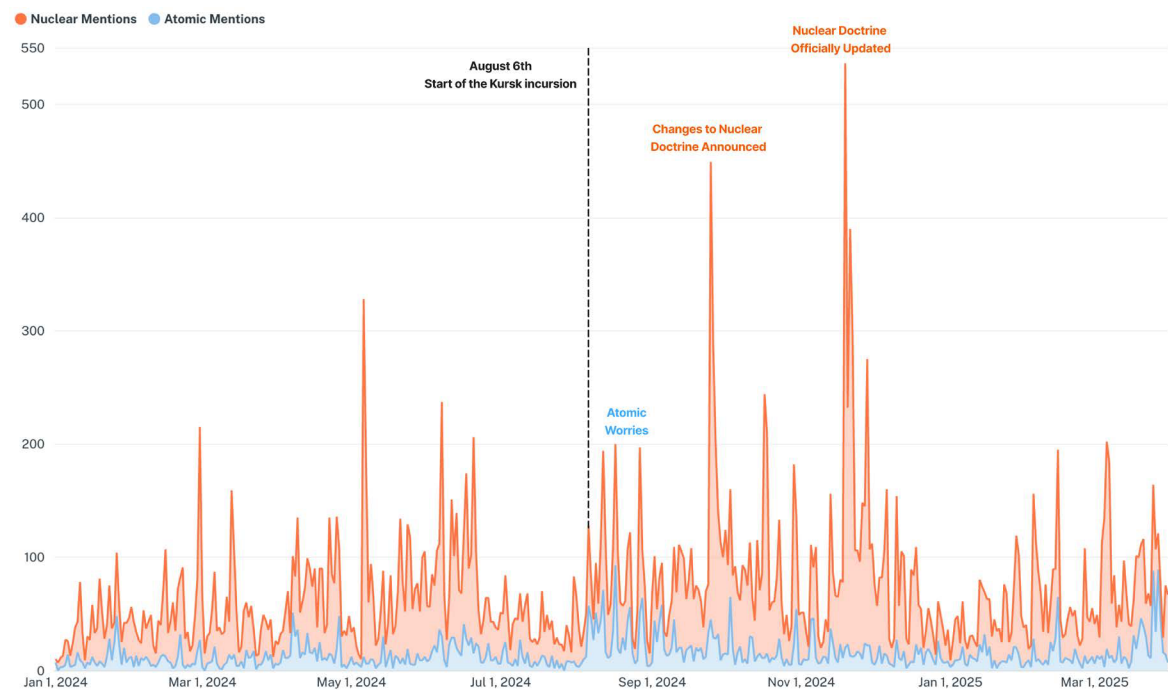


Figure 22. Daily mention dynamics of the keywords 'atomic' and 'nuclear' in Russian media'

'Atomic' mentions

Following the Kursk incursion, Russian media coverage exhibited heightened focus on nuclear safety concerns, particularly regarding military operations near the Kursk NPP in Kurchatov, with narratives characterising Ukrainian forces as nuclear terrorists. Most

mentions of nuclear-related keywords during the research period occurred during this time-frame, from the start of August 2024 until the end of September 2024. The following represents the most prominent spike in nuclear-themed coverage and associated events.

9 August 2024 (51 media mentions):

This spike coincided with the initial phase of the Kursk offensive and security concerns regarding the Kursk NPP. Kursk regional officials described the situation as ‘extremely tense’, advancing narratives that Ukrainians target NPPs while using US weapons and that they would try to use the situation as a blackmail chip.¹⁶⁰ The topic of US weapons being used in terrorising Russia was also covered in Russian

TV recordings (60 минут, Россия-1, 12 August 2024): ‘In the ongoing debate surrounding allegations of American weapons involvement in the Kursk battle, a contentious issue has emerged. Questions have been raised regarding the potential use of American weapons in the conflict, sparking intense scrutiny and debate among military officials and analysts’ (Figure 23).



Figure 23. Screenshot from the Russian TV show 60 минут, Россия-1, 12 August 2024

17 August 2024 (93 media mentions):

The spike can be associated with the topic ‘Russian Foreign Ministry warns of Kyiv re-

gime’s alleged plot to attack Kursk Nuclear Power Plant’ (Figure 24).



Figure 24. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the swodki account, 17 August 2024

28 August 2024 (64 media mentions):

The spike can be associated with two sub-topics, 'All employees of the Kursk Nuclear Power Plant and the NPP-2 construction site should contact their company management regarding access control'¹⁶¹ and 'Kurchatov, the city where the Kursk Nuclear Power Plant is located will be closed to entry and surrounded by checkpoints.'¹⁶²

5 September 2024 (58 media mentions): The spike was created by the information published by Rosatom (the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation) about radiation levels staying stable at Kursk NPP but also a consideration that 'The Kursk Nuclear Power Plant may be shut down.'¹⁶³

3 October 2024 (65 media mentions): This spike related to an incident in which a Ukrainian UAV was intercepted near the Kursk NPP. Russian media characterised the event as an attempted attack on the nuclear facility, though the UAV's destruction occurred in a non-nuclear building and caused no damage to the power plant itself (Figure 25). The incident generated significant coverage despite there being no impact on the nuclear infrastructure.

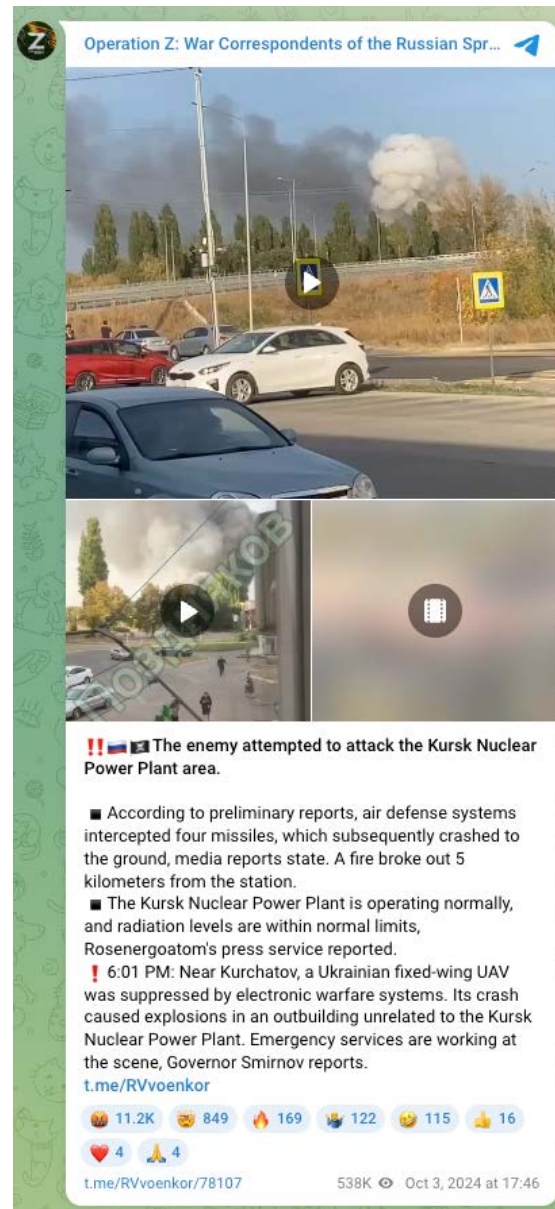


Figure 25. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the RVvoenkor account

The initial focus on nuclear safety concerns during the incursion's first weeks appeared designed to undermine Western support for Ukrainian operations, which reportedly commenced without extensive prior consultation with international partners. This period marked efforts to portray Ukrainians as nuclear terrorists and to undermine their quick success factors. At the end of September, one and a half months after the start of the incursion, the West recognised the short-term success of the incursion, and there was a shift in Russia's actions and communication.

‘Nuclear’ mentions

Russians started revising their nuclear doctrine and pushed for adjustment to it, lowering the nuclear weapon use threshold in case of a massive attack by Western countries.¹⁶⁴ This doctrinal adjustment period generated two distinct spikes in nuclear-related keyword mentions.

25, 26, 27 September 2024 (404, 257, 172 media mentions respectively): These spikes coincided with Russian announcements regarding revisions to the Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence.¹⁶⁵ Coverage also

incorporated statements by President Zelenskyy regarding threats to the Zaporizhzhia NPP.¹⁶⁶

19, 20, 21, 22 November 2024 (516, 209, 377, 284 mentions respectively): These spikes corresponded to Russia’s formal adoption of the revised nuclear doctrine.¹⁶⁷ Russian-language social media commentary characterised the update sceptically, noting that Ukraine launched ballistic missile strikes against Russian territory the same day without triggering the threatened nuclear response.¹⁶⁸

Russian state television coverage employed elevated rhetoric in framing the nuclear doctrine revision:

- Vladimir Putin signs new nuclear doctrine, signals strategic shift: official doctrine change lowering the nuclear-use threshold and redefining deterrence priorities.
- President Putin lowers Russia’s threshold for nuclear response: discussion of circumstances and rationale for nuclear weapon employment, emphasising pre-emptive or tactical options.
- Russia warns of nuclear retaliation in response to escalation: framing of doctrine change as retaliatory deterrence, reinforcing Russia’s stance against NATO or US involvement.
- Putin’s remarks on nuclear powers amid recent tensions: focus on presidential authority and rhetoric in legitimising nuclear posture adjustments.
- Global leaders unite to prevent nuclear conflict: external perspectives addressing international diplomatic responses and destabilisation concerns.
- US post-nuclear deterrence capabilities re-examined: comparative analysis of US/NATO readiness and strategy relative to Russia’s updated framework.
- Strikes targeting Russia: key players and implications – linkage between doctrine change and potential pre-emptive or retaliatory strikes, with discussion blurring distinctions between tactical and strategic employment.
- Nine Russian state television programmes addressed the nuclear doctrine topic during 19–23 November 2024, including daily coverage on flagship current affairs programmes 60 минут (60 Minutes, Russia-1), Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым (Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, Russia-1), and Время (Time, Channel One).

The period of nuclear threats symbolises the shift in Russian strategy concerning the Kursk incursion. While its primary targets were to undermine the attack and divide opinion over its success and the ethics of using it, the changes in the nuclear doctrine in the autumn of 2024 indicated Russia’s willingness to use nuclear threats as deterrence protocol to try to prevent a ‘Kursk incursion 2.0’ in the future.

Assessment: The period of nuclear threat escalation symbolises a strategic shift in Russian communications regarding the Kursk incursion. While initial messaging aimed to delegitimise the Ukrainian operation and undermine Western support for its tactical and

ethical justification, the autumn 2024 nuclear doctrine revision demonstrated Russia's employment of nuclear deterrence rhetoric as a preventive measure against potential future cross-border operations.

Metro Map Analysis

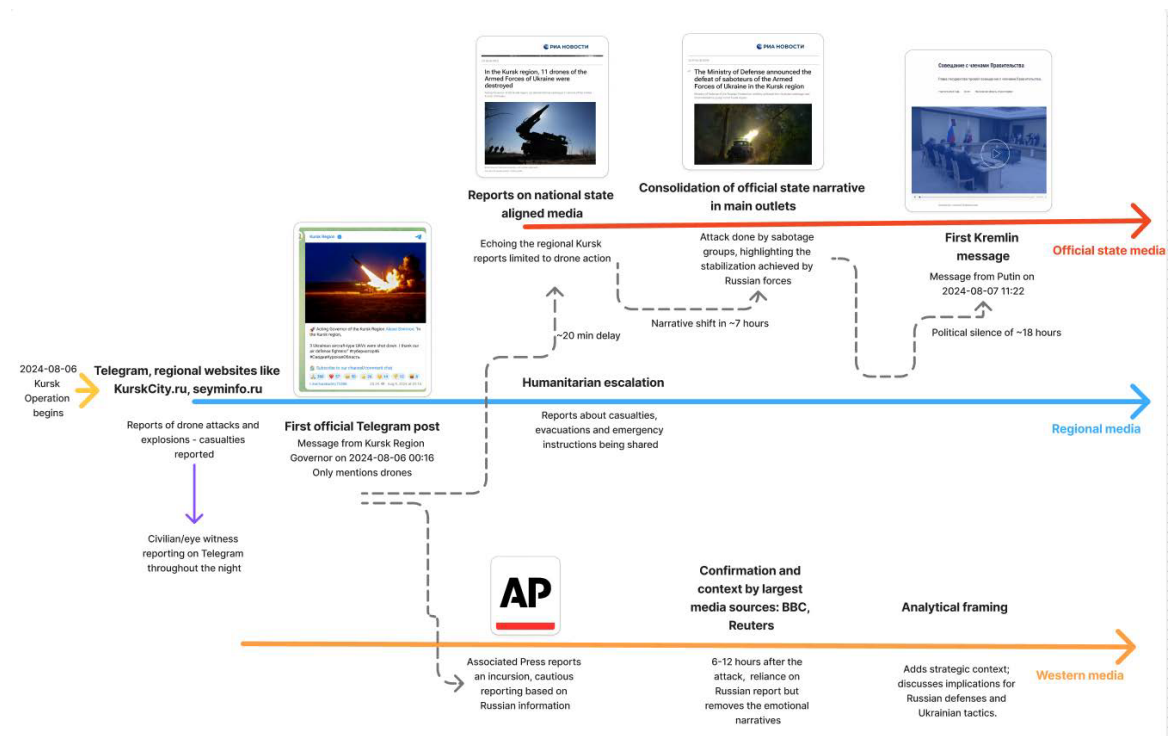


Figure 26. Metro map analysis of the Kursk invasion

Figure 26 displays how Russia handles the initial stages of a crisis. Because of the operation's element of surprise, the official state media and the Kremlin did not have a narrative in place. It took around seven hours for the official state media to develop a consolidated narrative, which was then copied across the rest of the media channels. The official message from the Kremlin also came quite late – over 18 hours after the start of the attack. This could signal difficulty in developing a coherent story and hesitance to communicate before a full narrative is developed.

Russia's use of a very similar communication playbook when reacting to unexpected crises can be seen twice more in this report: as part of the case study of the Crocus terrorist attack and during the complementary case

study of the Nausëda–Kaliningrad story.

The analysis also shows the difference between the narratives of regional and national media – regional channels, mainly on Telegram, focused much more on reporting humanitarian casualties and sharing real-time information, whereas national media channels were slower and attempted to maintain a highly contained narrative, highlighting Russia's ability to deal with the incursions.

In terms of Western media, the initial stories published mainly used regional Russian accounts of the situation, due to a lack of official information from Ukraine or other reliable sources. However, the narratives shared accounted for this and avoided an emotional tone.

Conclusions of the Case Study

The case study examined the two most consequential periods of the **Kursk campaign** – its launch (5–16 August 2024) and a late phase as lines stabilised (12–31 March 2025) – across Russian state websites, prime-time TV, Telegram (national and hyperlocal), wider web outlets, and other social platforms, and took a comparative look at coverage in twenty-two foreign regions. We combined quantitative volume trends and spike detection with storyline and narrative analysis, then layered in regional Telegram sampling, disinformation tracing, and deep video review to examine how messages migrated and hardened over time.

Findings converge on a consistent pattern: Crisis → Control → Crusade. In August 2024, official sites and TV framed the incursion as emergency defence, pairing strike claims and air defence intercepts with welfare signalling (evacuations, payments) to project managerial calm. Telegram in the border districts functioned as a civil-defence grid – alerts, ‘all-clear’, and practical instructions – while national channels supplied moral labels (‘terrorists’, ‘Nazis’) and enemy losses. By March 2025 the tone turned procedural and technocratic on state sites, emotionally ritualised on TV (heroism, unity, civilisational struggle), and routine-bureaucratic on local Telegram (threat and reassurance loops). Web articles shifted from shock and blame to reconstruction, decorations, and ‘liberation’ language. **Across platforms, justificatory frames matured from urgent self-defence to an almost sacralised endurance narrative** anchored in professionalism, technological competence, and duty.

Segmenting by media type and region clarified why topics looked different: TV moralised and nationalised the stakes; state portals normalised operations through administrative cadence; local Telegram localised fear into discipline and participation; broad web outlets seeded motif stories (Western orchestration, ‘mercenaries’, organ-harvesting hoaxes) that Telegram then amplified; foreign-region coverage partly mirrored Kremlin lines (especially around ‘terrorism’ and Western weapons), but also carried counter-frames on Russian unpreparedness and Ukrainian surprise, exposing where Moscow’s narratives met resistance.

What this teaches about Russia’s crisis playbook and pretext construction: Moscow blends kinetic claims with social-welfare optics to stabilise morale; externalises blame to Kyiv and the West to justify escalation; routinises mobilisation through everyday informational rituals; and, as events evolve, elevates the frame to ‘civilisational defence’ that renders prolonged war both necessary and righteous. This stack – **managerial competence, moral delegitimisation of the enemy, and patriotic sacralisation** – creates durable consent for continued operations.

Deep video analysis was tested as a **future prospect methodology to review authentic footage** from staged or decontextualised clips. This layer moves analysis beyond ‘what was said’ to ‘who moved it, when, and why’, enabling targeted counter-messaging and timely risk alerts.

[2] Victory Day Parade

Section summary

Object of analysis	Victory Day celebration events and dominant topics during that period
Research timeframe	2–15 May 2024 Dataset: official and non-state Russian channels and social media.
Analysis methods	1. Boolean text search using the query Побед.* (victory) 2. Spike detection 3. Storyline analysis 4. Media type comparison between state-owned sources and unofficial sources 5. Disinformation assessment
Intended purpose	Victory Day celebrations featured prominently in previous analyses: this section continues that examination, tracking how these narratives have evolved and providing new insights into their development.

Victory Day – the annual commemoration of the Soviet Union’s so-called ‘triumph’ over Nazi Germany – has long been recognised as one of the Kremlin’s most powerful propaganda instruments. The 9 May celebrations provide a ritualised moment when historical memory, national identity, and contemporary politics converge, allowing the Russian state to transform collective remembrance into active justification for present-day aggression. Understanding how this symbolic mobilisation evolves over time is essential for tracking Russia’s long-term strategies for legitimising war and shaping public opinion.

In the previous analysis, researchers examined how Victory Day was weaponised across official communications, Telegram, and state television to promote a unified pro-government narrative.¹⁶⁹ Its commemoration portrayed Russian soldiers in Ukraine as the moral heirs of those who supposedly defeated Nazism and framed 9 May as a moment of

joyful national unity. The West and Ukraine were also accused of attempting to suppress or discredit the holiday. Through coordinated messaging across multiple platforms, Russia positioned itself as the guardian of the 1945 victory legacy, casting its invasion of Ukraine as a pretend continuation of the eternal struggle against fascism.

This section builds on that foundation by analysing the 2024 Victory Day communications to assess how these narratives have evolved, intensified, or shifted in response to the ongoing war. The analysis examined official government communications, non-state Russian media outlets, Telegram channels, and other social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and X. This multi-source approach enabled us to trace not only what the state communicated, but how its messages were amplified, adapted, and distributed across Russia’s information ecosystem.

Sentiment Analysis

According to the sentiment analysis, 9 May ranked as the second most positive day in Russian media across the 15-month research timeframe (Figure 13). The date, increasingly mythologised by Russian officials to boost military morale, saw an influx of positive sentiment from 7 May. This coincided with large-scale celebrations for Putin's renewed presidential inauguration and followed the mourning period after the March 2024 Crocus terrorist attack.

The sacred status of Victory Day celebrations provides state officials an opportunity to communicate topics that are typically more difficult to introduce. A surge in mentions of 'mobilisation' was registered in the main dataset of Russian media messages across the research period. While the most pronounced daily spikes correlate with events in Ukraine related to tightening mobilisation or military recruitment laws, the rolling weekly activity trends indicate sustained increases in mobilisation discourse within Russia more broadly (Figure 27).

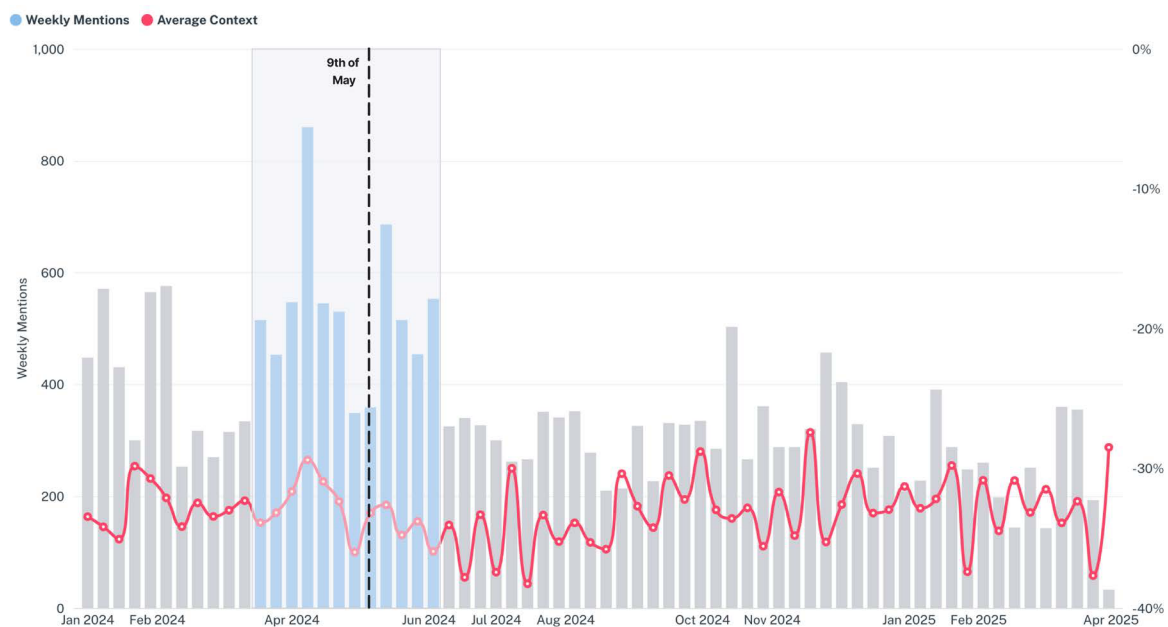


Figure 27. The weekly mentions dynamics of the term 'mobilisation' in Russian media

From April to May 2024, the Russian Telegram ecosystem actively managed public expectations regarding potential new mobilisation rounds. Posts employed a dual framing of denial and reassurance: while 'debunking' reports of planned conscription, they simultaneously emphasised the continuous need for 'personnel replenishment' and 'contract

reinforcement'. This technique allowed content producers to perform official denial while implicitly preparing audiences for sustained recruitment. Posts commonly contrasted Russia's 'organised mobilisation system' with what was described as Ukraine's 'chaotic conscription', projecting calm procedural authority.

Official Russian Websites and Television

Official Russian government platforms used Victory Day 2024 messaging to link historical commemoration with contemporary war justification. Three core institutions dominated the narrative: the Kremlin, the Ministry of De-

fence, and both chambers of parliament. The messaging remained consistent with previous years: celebrating the Great Patriotic War as the foundation of Russian statehood and a legitimising frame for the conflict in Ukraine.

Main topics covered:

- The official Kremlin webpage¹⁷⁰ featured President Putin's meeting with members of the government on 6 May. He strategically linked Russia's wartime economic mobilisation to the legacy of 1945, framing recent national crises – the pandemic, Western sanctions, and international isolation – as trials that had strengthened rather than weakened the state. *'We passed that test with flying colours,'* he declared, adding that Russia had *'strengthened our international position, placing Russia's security and sovereignty at the forefront of all tasks'*. This crisis narrative served a clear purpose: to present hardship as proof of resilience and to position the upcoming holiday as validation of national resolve.
- Three days later, speaking at the Red Square military parade, Putin made the historical-contemporary link explicit. After honouring the Soviet generation that *'crushed Nazism, liberated the peoples of Europe, and reached the heights of valour'*, he pivoted immediately to current combatants: *'All those who participated in the special military operation are our heroes. We bow to your fortitude, self-sacrifice, and dedication. All of Russia stands with you.'*¹⁷¹ This rhetoric merges the events of World War II with the current war in Ukraine.
- Parliamentary faction leaders echoed this framing uniformly, suggesting coordinated messaging rather than independent political expression. United Russia's Vladimir Vasiliev tied military action to electoral legitimacy, claiming that *'our soldiers and officers – the heirs of the victorious generation – are restoring historical justice'* and citing Putin's recent presidential victory as *'proof of our unity and solidarity'*. Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov invoked existential threat: *'Only by uniting can we preserve the Russian World, ensure victory, and secure the future of our country.'*¹⁷²
- Leonid Slutsky, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, employed the most explicit language: *'They slit the throat of the Nazi hydra, and we will repeat this on the field of this sacred and noble special military operation.'* This violent imagery demonstrates how Victory Day rhetoric frames military aggression as moral duty.
- Sergei Mironov of A Just Russia personalised remembrance through family memory (*'I pass on the memory of my father, who defended Leningrad, to my children and grandchildren'*), while New People's Aleksey Nechayev emphasised generational continuity through what he called *'the most important lesson – a lesson without empty chatter, a lesson for life'*. Both framed the holiday not as reflection or reconciliation, but as transmission of duty.
- State television coverage during the Victory Day period reinforced these official narratives without deviation, with prime-time broadcasts reproducing the same themes of generational continuity, anti-Western sentiment, and linkage between 1945 and the current war against Ukraine. The uniformity across presi-

dential speeches, parliamentary statements, and television programming confirmed a coordinated messaging strategy rather than independent editorial choices.

The official communications marking Victory Day 2024 thus once again demonstrated how remembrance of the Great Patriotic War serves as a vehicle for legitimising Russia's current military and political course. In speeches and publications across state institutions, the past and the present were deliberately fused: the victory of 1945 was portrayed

as the moral and historical foundation for the struggle being waged today. The recurring reference to 'heirs of the victors' and the consistent framing of the war against Ukraine as a continuation of the fight against Nazism reinforced the Kremlin's long-standing effort to transform commemoration into justification. Rather than reflecting on loss or reconciliation, the official message sought to affirm national resilience, obedience, and unity under presidential leadership – turning Victory Day into both a ritual of remembrance and a statement of ongoing mobilisation.

Non-State Web Articles

Analysis of non-state Russian media – 124,847 mentions in traditional outlets and 5,345 across social media platforms – revealed how official Victory Day narratives cascaded through regional and local information networks. While these sources lacked the

institutional authority of Kremlin statements, they performed a crucial function: translating central propaganda into localised, emotionally resonant messaging that embedded state ideology within civic life, family traditions, and youth education.

Main topics covered:

- The dominant theme across regional coverage was 'Global celebrations and remembrance on Victory Day', a framing that portrayed the holiday as both universally celebrated and morally instructive. Local commemorations followed a consistent template that combined ritual observance with explicit pedagogical intent. In Yasnogorsk, municipal authorities organised a flower-laying ceremony attended by local leaders, clergy, veterans' organisations, and the youth movement Dvizheniye Pervykh. Official reports emphasised the event's educational mission: '*Victory Day is not only a day of remembrance but also a lesson of patriotism for the younger generation. It is our duty to honour the memory of the fallen heroes and preserve the truth about their sacrifice.*'¹⁷³
- Regional officials amplified this messaging through appeals to collective identity and inherited heroism. In Nizhny Novgorod, Duma chairman Evgeny

Lyulin framed Victory Day as the foundation of national unity: '*Victory Day unites our country through a shared sense of pride in the feats of our ancestors. It reminds us that the courage and labour of millions – soldiers and workers alike – brought our nation this great triumph.*'¹⁷⁴ The rhetorical move here was significant: by attributing victory to collective labour rather than individual agency, Lyulin reinforced the notion that national achievement requires unified effort under centralised authority – a clear parallel to contemporary expectations of public compliance with state mobilisation.

- More explicitly, several regional leaders drew direct lines between World War II soldiers and current combatants. Rashid Temrezov, head of the Karachay-Cherkess Republic, made the connection clear: '*Today's servicemen, including our compatriots who take part in the special military operation, are follow-*

*ing the example of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers who liberated the world from Nazism. Victory will be ours.*¹⁷⁵ In Volgodonsk, Mayor Yury Marinenko stated: *'Today, Russian soldiers are again fighting Nazism, just as their ancestors did.'*¹⁷⁶

This pattern appeared with striking consistency across geographically disparate regions, suggesting coordinated messaging guidance rather than organic interpretation. Local officials were executing a centrally designed communication strategy using regional voices to amplify federal narratives.

The significance lies in propaganda localisation. While Kremlin speeches target national audiences, regional commemorations

embed identical narratives within trusted community settings: schools, municipal ceremonies, youth organisations. When a local mayor repeats the 'fighting Nazism again' formulation, it transforms distant geopolitical rhetoric into immediate civic reality, making federal propaganda feel like local truth.

By 2024 the fusion of Victory Day commemoration with Ukraine war justification had become so normalised that local authorities reproduced it reflexively. Every municipal ceremony became an affirmation of ongoing military aggression, creating a propaganda infrastructure operating simultaneously at multiple scales, each reinforcing the same core message: remembering 1945 means supporting 2024.

Telegram

Pro-Kremlin Telegram channels reproduced official Victory Day narratives with greater emotional intensity and social accessibility than did government websites (Figure 28). Posts combined patriotic imagery, personal anecdotes, and wartime nostalgia to create

content optimised for viral sharing. While the messaging mirrored official statements, the format and tone were calibrated for maximum resonance with ordinary users rather than institutional audiences.

Main topics covered:

- The core narrative remained consistent: an unbroken moral lineage between the Great Patriotic War and the current war on Ukraine. Channels opened with formulas explicitly linking the two conflicts: *'Three years ago I wrote a post for Victory Day, and today it still feels the same: we are fighting again, just as they fought then, side by side with our ancestors.'*¹⁷⁷ This temporal collapse was reinforced through appeals to family memory and educational duty. Posts invoked intergenerational transmission: *'Teachers tell how the peoples of the USSR defended the world from fascism, and we must not forget this truth.'*¹⁷⁸
- More ideologically explicit channels framed the holiday in sweeping historical terms. Taynaya Kantselyariya declared: *'Victory Day is a symbol of the indestructible will of the Russian people. The USSR fought not only against Hitler's army but against the entire industrial and technological power of Europe.'*¹⁷⁹ This framing positioned Russia as perpetually besieged by a hostile West, casting contemporary sanctions and military aid to Ukraine as continuations of historical aggression against Russian civilisation.

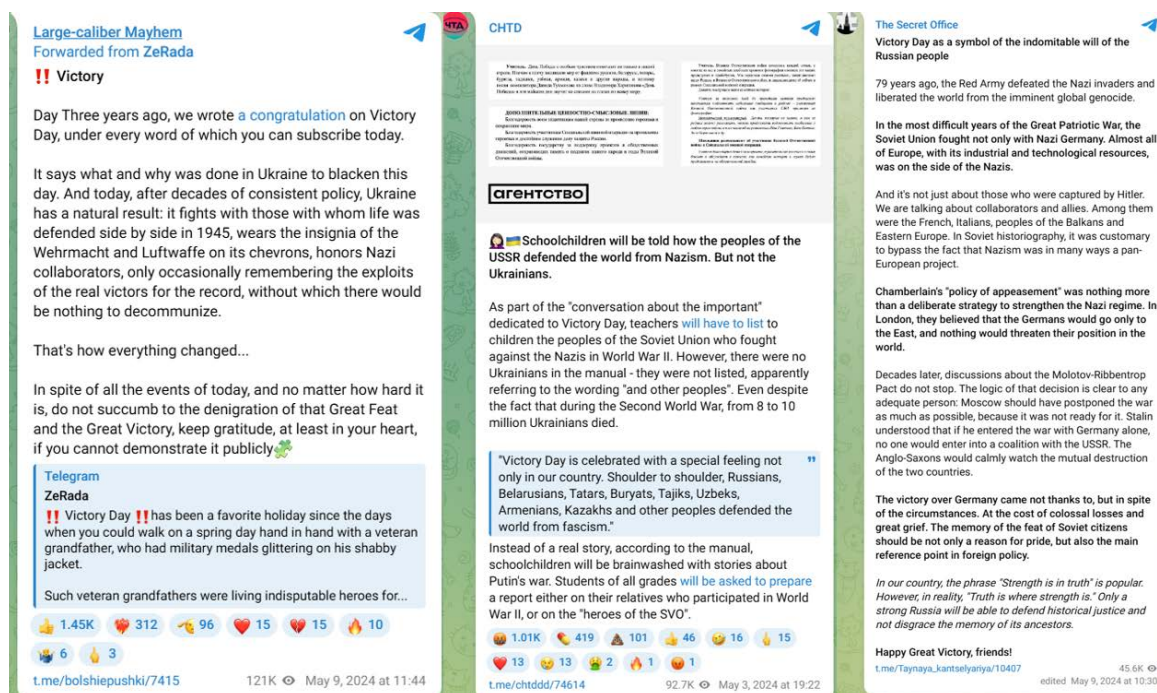


Figure 28. Screenshots of Telegram posts cited

Victory Day as Real-Time Narrative Framework

Two events during the commemoration period revealed how Telegram channels weaponise current incidents to reinforce Victory Day messaging. On 4 May, Russia's Interior Ministry briefly listed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and former President Petro Poroshenko in its 'wanted persons' database (Figure 29). Though the listings were quickly removed after media attention, the Kremlin confirmed the action, with vague accusations tied to 'crimes of the Kyiv regime' and claims from Russian-controlled Donetsk about 'aggressive war'.

Telegram channels immediately framed this bureaucratic manoeuvre as moral validation. By placing Ukrainian leaders on a wanted

list just days before Victory Day, the messaging equated them with criminals and 'terrorists', eroding their legitimacy as elected officials. References to 'aggressive war' and 'prohibited means' inverted reality, portraying Ukraine as the aggressor. The timing was deliberate: the incident allowed channels to present Victory Day not as a historical commemoration but as an ongoing struggle against a criminal regime, with Russian-occupied territories portrayed as legitimate authorities pursuing justice.

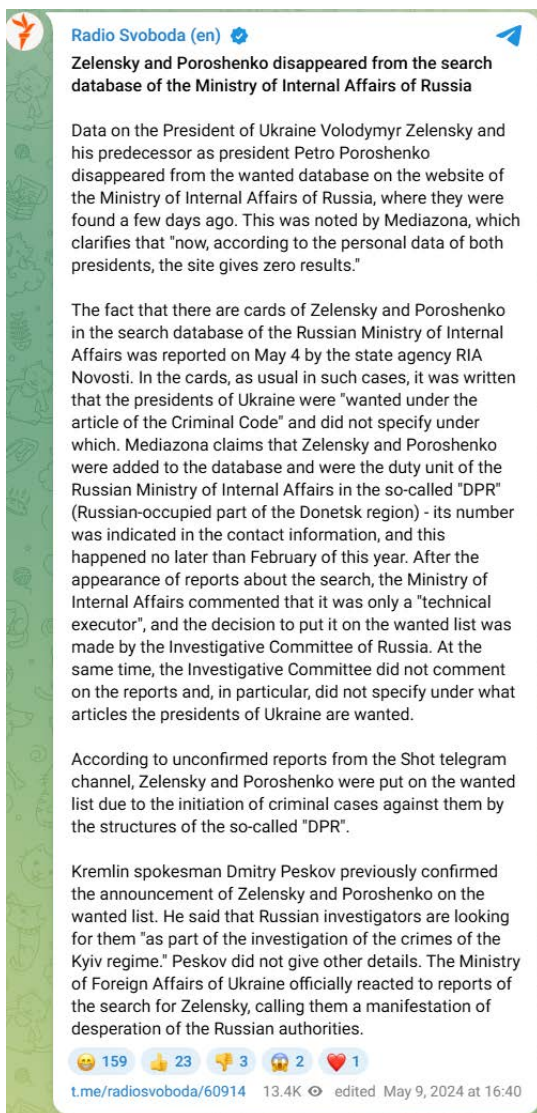


Figure 29. Screenshot of a Telegram post (source: Radio Svoboda (@radiosvoboda), Telegram)

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry condemned the listings as desperate propaganda, but on Telegram the narrative had already served its purpose: to reinforce the notion that Russia's war continues the moral mission of 1945.

The second incident was more dramatic. On the night of 9 May, Ukrainian forces launched coordinated drone and missile strikes on the Belgorod, Bryansk, and Krasnodar regions. Eight people were injured in Belgorod, including an 11-year-old girl, with damage to homes and infrastructure (Figure 30). Russian air defences claimed to have intercepted most projectiles, while strikes on an oil depot near Anapa caused fires, yet in Belgorod, just as with other Ukraine-bordering

regions of Russia, the Victory Day parade had to be cancelled.¹⁸⁰



Figure 30. Screenshot of a Telegram post

Telegram channels exploded with outrage calibrated for maximum emotional im-

pact. The strikes were framed not as military operations but as deliberate targeting of civilians on Russia's most sacred holiday. State-affiliated accounts emphasised the injured child as proof of Ukraine's 'Nazi character', with posts declaring: *'They attack us on Victory Day itself, just as the Nazis would have done.'* The imagery of a wounded child on 9 May created a powerful propagandistic parallel: if Nazis threatened Soviet children in 1941–45, then Ukraine threatens Russian children today.

Larger aggregator accounts like Oper_Goblin (Figure 31) synthesised both incidents into coherent messaging: *'Hitler's fascism was an ideology born of capitalism, it was in its time the essence of misanthropy endured by Western civilization. Only the Soviet Union could defeat it at that time.'* He references the current war: *'The current war in Europe and the revival of Nazism are not accidental and all this is unleashed not by suddenly distraught Western elites, as it is often understood in Russia, but by the world capitalist system that has incurably mutated into neoliberalism.'*¹⁸¹

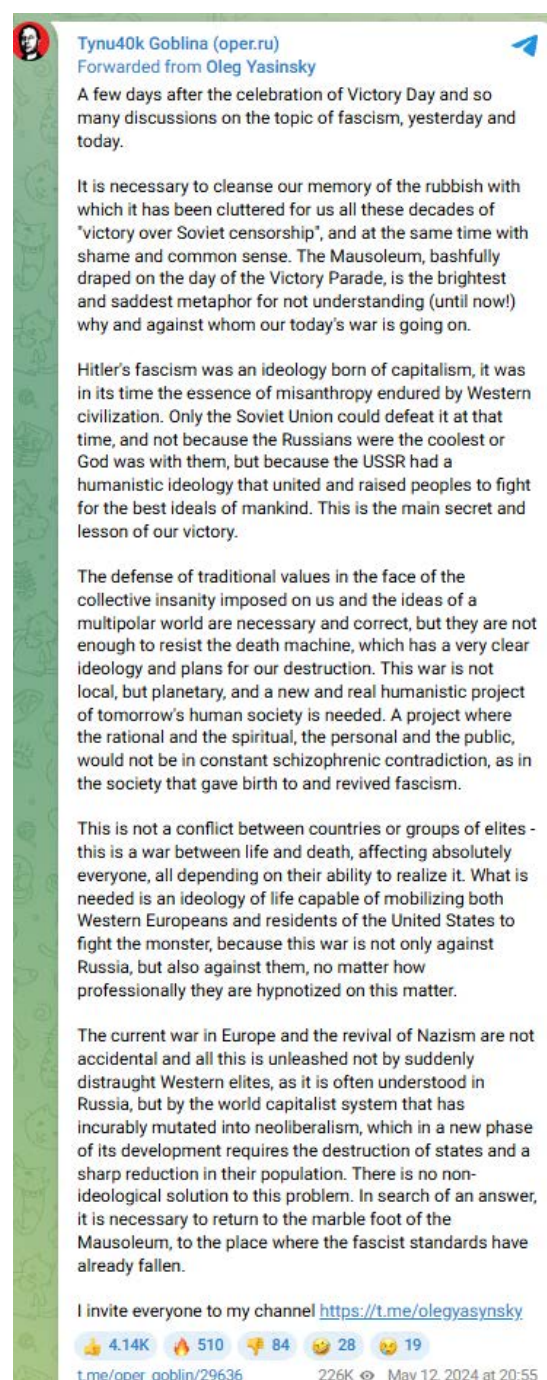


Figure 31. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the Oper_Goblin account (source: Oper_Goblin)

The emotional impact of these incidents was measurable in sentiment data. While 9 May recorded the highest volume of extremely positive Victory Day mentions overall, it also generated seven extremely negative items (sentiment score < -73%) and sixteen mentions below -65% sentiment, all focused on alleged Ukrainian disruption attempts: shelling,

monument vandalism, and cyber interference with broadcasts (Figures 32 to 34). This sharp polarisation reveals how Telegram channels weaponised outrage alongside celebration, using Ukrainian actions to intensify both patriotic fervour and anti-Ukrainian hatred simultaneously.

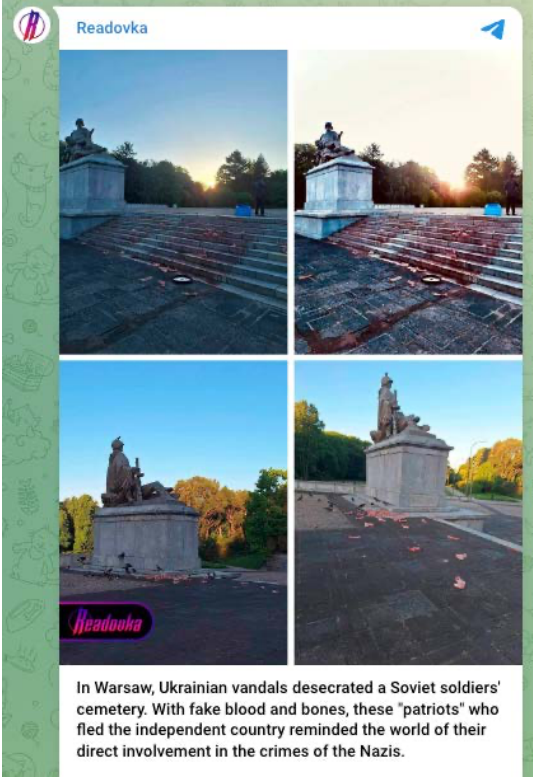


Figure 32. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the readovkanews account (source: Readovka (@readovkanews), Telegram, 18 March 2025)



Figure 33. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the rlz_the_kraken account (source: RLZ: The Kraken (@rlz_the_kraken), Telegram, 18 March 2025)



Figure 34. Screenshot of a Telegram post by the Moscow Times (source: moscowtimes_ru)

Across all monitored channels, anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian messaging was embedded within the celebratory tone, presenting the current war as a sacred continuation of 1945. Emotional appeals replaced direct military language, allowing channels to reach broad audiences without overt propaganda markers. The lexicon – Nazism, ancestors, memory, truth, gratitude, heirs, unity – mirrored official statements but was packaged for social resonance rather than institutional gravitas. The wanted list incident and 9 May strikes were not treated as separate news events but as evidence confirming the Victory Day narrative: that Ukraine represents resurgent fascism and that Russia's current war is morally identical to the struggle of 1945.

The coordination was evident not in identical wording but in synchronised themes and timing. Multiple channels with different editorial voices amplified one central idea: that defending the 'historical truth' of 1945 justifies present-day warfare and political cohesion. The format of posts (short texts, personal sto-

ries, curated video clips) suggested planned coordination around preset content lines rather than spontaneous user engagement.

Despite the ceremonial tone of Victory Day commemorations, Telegram messaging was shaped by intensified real-time propaganda. The holiday became not a pause from conflict rhetoric but an amplifier for it, where historical memory, emotional symbolism, and current events converged to normalise ongoing aggression.

Telegram's role in the Victory Day campaign was distinctive: it translated institutional propaganda into peer-to-peer communication while simultaneously absorbing breaking news into historical narrative. Where official websites broadcast authority, Telegram channels simulated grassroots sentiment and manufactured urgency, creating the appearance of organic public outrage that originated in centralised messaging strategies. This distributed repetition across seemingly independent voices made state propaganda feel like collective conviction and a real-time crisis response.

Other Social Media Platforms

Summary

Analysis of Facebook, Instagram, and X (5,345 total mentions) revealed how Victory Day messaging extended beyond Telegram into platforms with different user demographics and international visibility. While the sam-

ple was smaller (282 Facebook mentions, 139 Instagram, 77 X), the content demonstrated coordinated efforts to project Russian narratives to broader audiences, including international observers.

Main topics covered:

- A Facebook post by state-affiliated outlet LIFE.ru promoted a story about Russian-controlled Kherson, where local radio allegedly broadcast Stalin's original 1945 Victory Day address on 9 May 2024. The post featured archival imagery of Stalin at his desk with the headline: *'Stalin's Victory Day greeting broadcast on radio in Russian-controlled Kherson'* (Figure 35). By invoking Stalin's symbolic authority in occupied Ukrainian territory, the content served dual purposes:

legitimising Russian control of Kherson and positioning the current military occupation as the continuation of Soviet liberation.

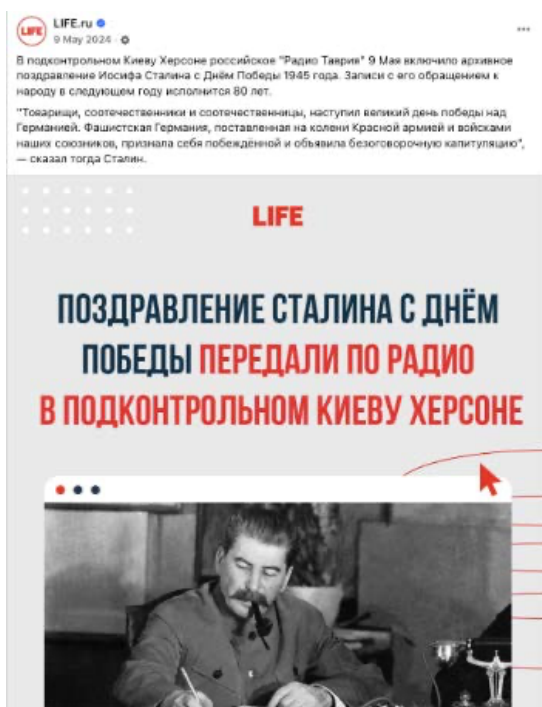


Figure 35. Screenshot of a Facebook post by LIFE.ru (source: Facebook, [post unavailable])

- On X, user Valery Akulinich framed Victory Day as active geopolitical struggle, claiming that after the Soviet Union lost 27 million lives defeating fascism, 'NATO and neo-Nazis from Ukraine are now trying to defeat Russia again' (Figure 36). The post included official video of Putin laying flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, blending state ceremony with inflammatory rhetoric. This format, targeted at international audiences on X, attempted to recast Western support for Ukraine as Nazi collabor-

ation, inverting historical memory to delegitimise contemporary alliances.

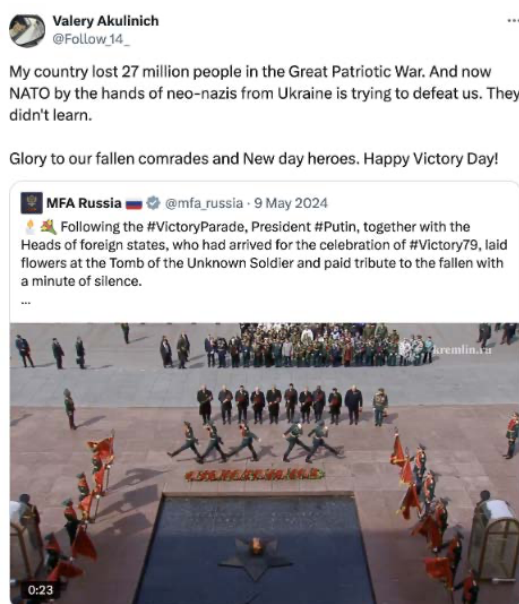


Figure 36. Screenshot of a tweet on X by Valery Akulinich

These platforms served a distinct function in Russia's Victory Day information campaign. Unlike Telegram's domestic peer-to-peer messaging or official websites' institutional authority, Facebook and X content projected Russian narratives outward, seeking to influence international perceptions and diaspora communities. The invocation of Stalin in occupied Kherson and the 'NATO-Nazi' framing on X demonstrate calculated efforts to weaponise historical symbolism for audiences beyond Russia's information ecosystem, where state control is less direct but narrative influence remains a strategic objective.

Conclusions of the Case Study

The analysis demonstrates that **Victory Day remained a central symbolic tool in the Kremlin's communication strategy**. The 9 May commemoration was framed not simply as a day of remembrance but as a sacred foundation of Russian statehood and a key instrument for legitimising the ongoing war against Ukraine.

The **dominant narrative consistently linked the victory over Nazi Germany in 1945 with present-day military action**. Russian soldiers were portrayed as 'heirs of the victors', while the conflict in Ukraine was framed as a renewed fight against Nazism. This fusion of past and present transformed historical memory into moral justification and presented war as a continuation of a historical mission. **The consistency of this framing** across all institu-

tional levels (from presidential addresses to municipal ceremonies to social media posts) **indicates centralised coordination** rather than organic public sentiment.

Victory Day messaging was highly coordinated and concentrated around 9 May, with the related texts count from Russian primary sources reaching over 5,000 on that single day, indicating a carefully staged communication peak. Official speeches, regional statements, and local commemorations repeated the same themes of unity, sacrifice, and loyalty, embedding state ideology into civic, educational, and family-centred narratives. This multi-platform synchronisation (spanning official websites, regional media, Telegram channels, and international social media) created an information environment where each channel reinforced identical messages while appearing to serve different audiences and purposes.

Importantly, **Victory Day communication unfolded simultaneously with intensified wartime propaganda on Telegram**. While commemorative content dominated the tone, parallel narratives portrayed Ukrainian leaders as criminals and Ukraine as a 'Nazi regime', particularly in response to missile and drone strikes on Russian regions. These developments evoked emotional parallels with World

War II, especially through the imagery of civilian and child victims, thereby reinforcing the moral framing of the conflict during the Victory Day period itself. The immediate absorption of real-time events (the wanted list for Ukrainian leaders, the 9 May strikes) into the commemorative narrative demonstrates Victory Day's function as an active interpretive framework that pre-emptively shapes how audiences understand contemporary events.

Overall the 2024 Victory Day narrative shows how commemoration and contemporary conflict messaging are deliberately synchronised. Rather than existing as a pause from war rhetoric, Victory Day functions as a narrative amplifier – where historical memory, emotional symbolism, and real-time events converge to normalise conflict, reinforce state authority, and present ongoing war as historically inevitable and morally justified. **By transforming legitimate political debate into historical betrayal, the Kremlin has weaponised collective memory to make dissent appear not merely unpatriotic but sacrilegious.** This propaganda technique proves far more resilient than easily identifiable falsehoods because it embeds manufactured justification within authentic commemorative sentiment.

[3] Crocus Terrorist Attack

Section summary

Object of analysis	Terrorist attack on Crocus City Hall (Moscow) on 22 March 2024
Research timeframe	1. 14–19 March 2024 (presidential elections) 2. 22–31 March 2024 (Crocus aftermath) Dataset: Russian official and non-state channels and social media, complemented by foreign articles and social media posts.
Analysis methods	1. Narrative analysis 2. Quantitative analysis by media type and region 3. NER analysis 4. Disinformation spread assessment 5. Metro map analysis
Intended purpose	The Crocus terrorist attack marked 22 March 2024 as the day with the lowest overall sentiment score in the research sample: this section assesses the disinformation campaign blaming Ukraine for the attack and tracks its spread across different media types within Russia and internationally.

On the evening of 22 March 2024, four masked gunmen in combat-style uniforms attacked the Crocus City Hall, a large concert venue in the Moscow region. The attackers used automatic rifles, pistols, knives, and incendiary devices. They opened fire on the crowd, slashed some victims, then set the building on fire. The fire spread, parts of the roof or structure collapsed, and smoke inhalation contributed to many casualties.¹⁸² The death toll was eventually reported at 149 people, with more than 600 injured, making it the deadliest terrorist attack on Russian soil since the 2004 Beslan school siege.¹⁸³

Soon the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (IS-KP/ISIS-K) – claimed responsibility for the attack. The Russian authorities swiftly arrested four suspects (identified as Tajik citizens) and later charged additional people, including six others in absentia accused of recruiting/training.¹⁸⁴

The Russian Investigative Committee stated the attack was *‘planned and carried out in the interests of the current leadership of Ukraine in order to destabilise the political*

situation in our country’. Ukraine denied involvement.¹⁸⁵ This tragic story soon became a blame game, accusing Ukrainians of launching a mass-scale terrorist attack and collaborating with ISIS.

Sentiment analysis identified 23 March 2024, the day after the attack, as the single most negative day in Russian media during the 15-month research timeframe (Figure 13). The analysis suggests that Russian media reaction to the events was fierce and emotional. The unexpected nature of the attack caused the media apparatus to reveal its strategic crisis management under stress – a pattern that appears to repeat under similar conditions, as demonstrated in the Kursk and Nauséda–Kalinograd case studies.

The purpose of this case study is to understand Russia’s disinformation narrative construction, examine the arguments in depth, and investigate whether these arguments spread beyond Russia’s borders into foreign media.

Timeframe after Russia's Presidential Elections

The Crocus attack occurred just days after Russia's presidential elections (15–17 March 2024), creating a significant shift in media sentiment within one week. Vladimir Putin secured his fifth term as president with approximately 87.3% of the votes – a substantial increase from the 76.7% he obtained in 2018. Western governments condemned the elections as undemocratic, with the White House National Security Council declaring them 'obviously not free nor fair'. In response to Western criticism, President Putin expressed willingness to escalate confrontation with the West, suggesting that a full-scale conflict with NATO was possible in the current geopolitical

climate.¹⁸⁶ However, questions remained about the strength of his position given Russia's military stalemate in Ukraine, economic decline, and the war's widespread impact on Russian families.¹⁸⁷

During the voting period, Russians opposing Putin organised a peaceful protest called 'Noon Against Putin', encouraging voters to cast ballots simultaneously at midday (Figure 37). This coordinated action demonstrated that significant segments of the Russian population did not support Putin or his policies.

WORLD • RUSSIA

In Russia, voting at noon becomes 'only way to speak out against Putin'

With no candidate in the presidential election, the opposition to Vladimir Putin and the war in Ukraine called on its supporters to vote at a fixed time on Sunday.

By Benoît Vitkine (Moscow (Russia) correspondent)

Published on March 17, 2024, at 7:04 pm (Paris), updated on March 17, 2024, at 8:14 pm • 5 min read • [Lire en français](#)



Subscribers only



Voters line up outside a polling station in Moscow, Russia, Sunday, March 17, 2024.
ALEXANDER ZEMLIANICHENKO / AP

Five minutes earlier, there was nothing but the dreary routine of a sparsely-frequented polling station in central Moscow. A few voters taking turns at irregular intervals in front of the assessors' desks.

Figure 37. Screenshot of an [article](#) from lemonde.fr (source: 'In Russia, voting at noon becomes "only way to speak out against Putin"', Le Monde (English edition), 17 March 2024



To assess opposition sentiment, ten ‘Russian Opposition’ (RO) narratives were created, each assigned approximately twenty

statements, and processed the relevant data sample using the Adler model.

List of RO narratives used in the analysis:

- War fatigue and desire for peace
- Personalised autocracy and manipulated elections
- Corruption and kleptocracy
- Economic stagnation and inequality
- Brain drain and demographic decline
- Youth opposition and generational rift
- Regional neglect and socioeconomic grievances
- Internet censorship and digital repression
- International isolation and scientific/cultural exclusion
- Military mismanagement and conscription problems.

During the election period from 14 to 19 March 2024, over 92,000 media mentions were collected (Figure 38). While this included a significant number from Russian Telegram channels, TV recordings, and state websites,

most mentions came from monitoring election-related keywords across other Russian media sources (Figures 39 and 40), particularly news portals (‘web’), which encompassed data from 2,722 different domains.

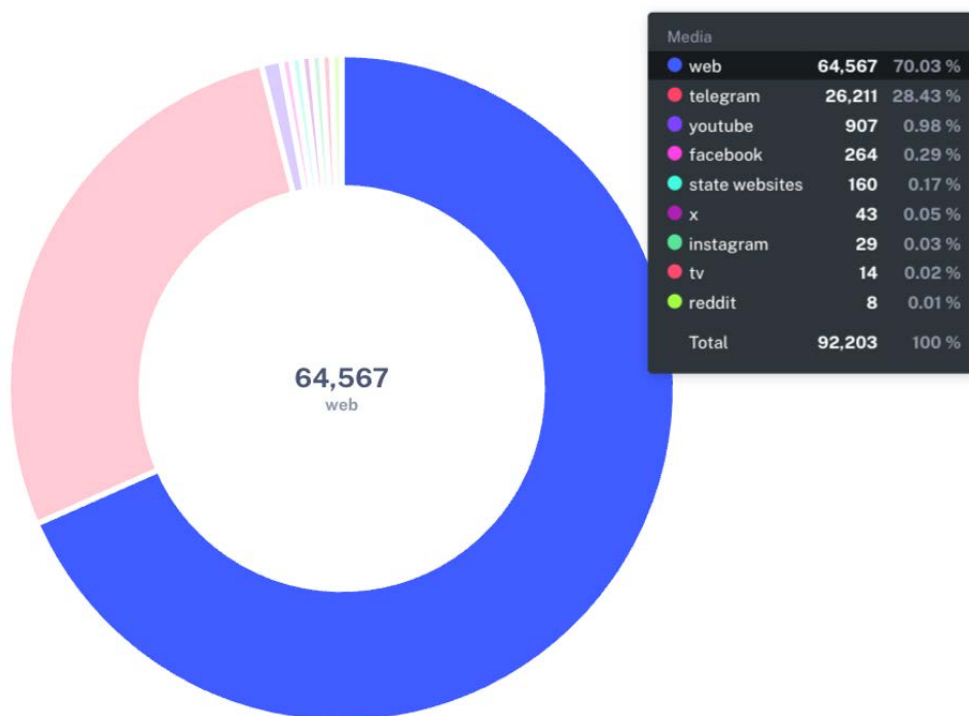
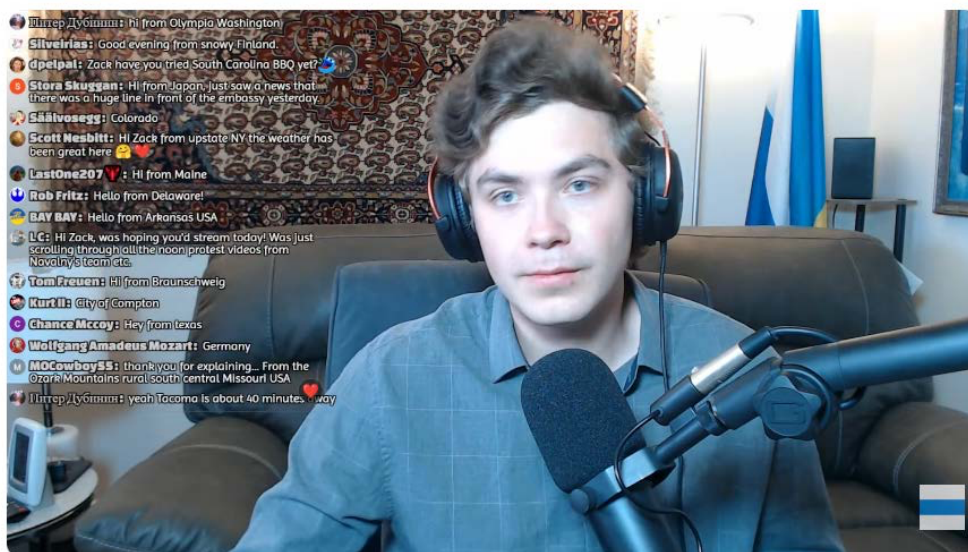


Figure 38. Share of Russian media mentions by media type during the presidential election period



Russian Elections LIVE



Zack the Russian

53,3 tūkst. prenumeratorių

Prenumeruoti

568



Bendrinti



Atsisiųsti



6 148 views Perduota srautu 2024-03-18

March 15-17 Russia has presidential elections. I call them the Elections of Putin. Everyone already knows that those elections are rigged. Therefore, I will tell you about the circus that is taking place in Russia and abroad.

Figure 39. Screenshot of a YouTube video from Zack the Russian (video unavailable)

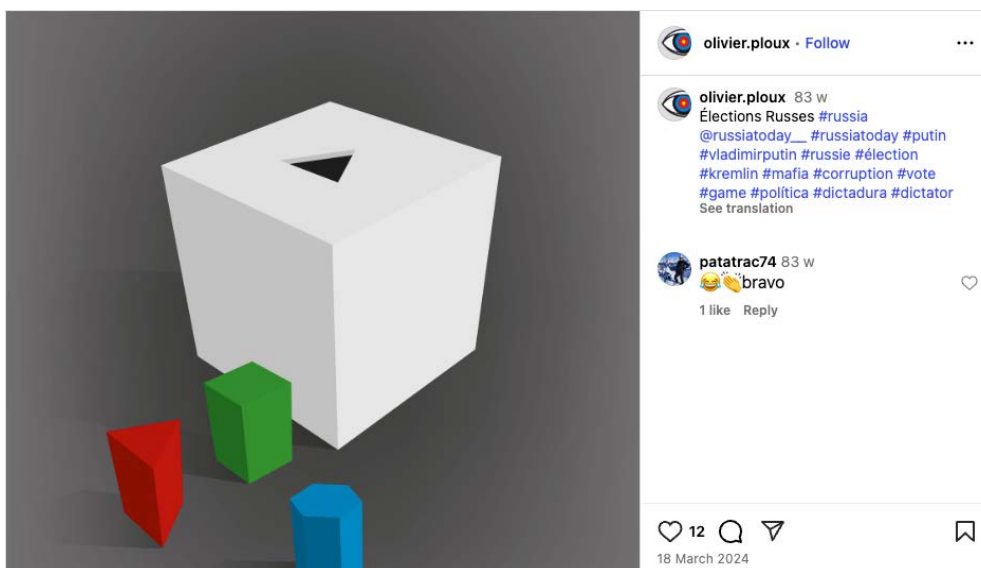


Figure 40. Screenshot of an Instagram post on the olivier.ploux account (source: olivier.ploux, 'Élections Russes', Instagram)

Approximately 11.5% of all mentions aligned with or potentially matched RO narratives. Two narratives dominated: war fatigue

and manipulated elections, followed by international isolation, internet censorship, and generational divides (Figure 41).

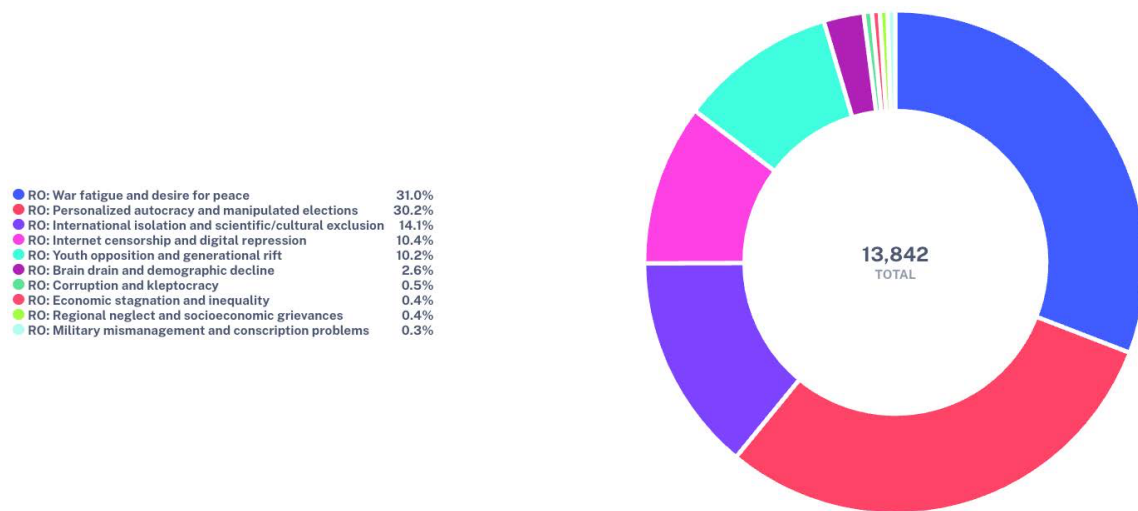


Figure 41. Share of Russian media mentions by RO narrative

To expand our understanding of the dominant RO narratives, their statement level was analysed. The dominant statement in the war fatigue narrative was that Russians want their government to focus more on internal

matters, and this statement was almost ten times more popular than the statement about Russians not wanting to lose any more lives in the war (Figure 42).

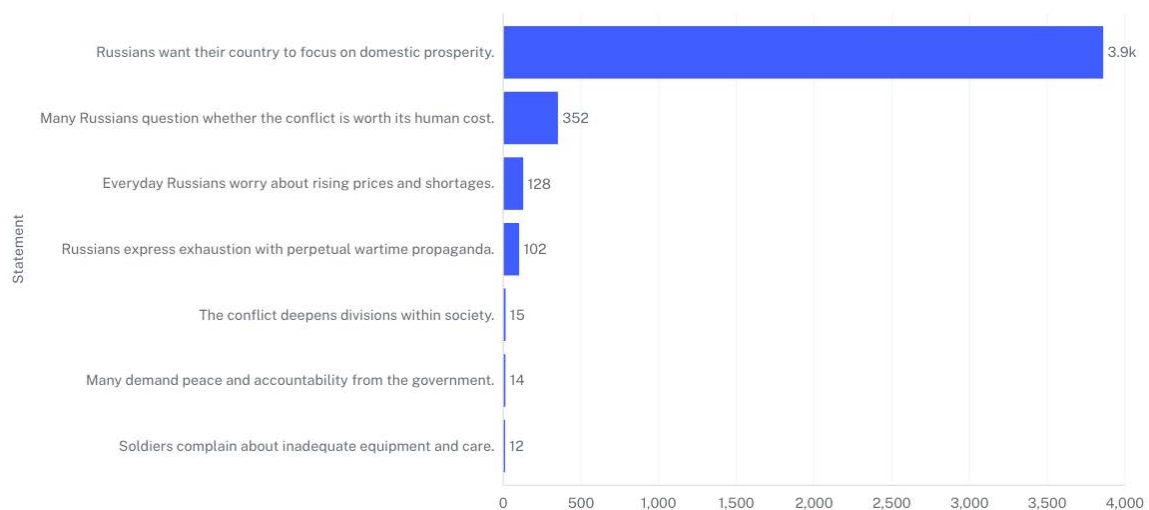


Figure 42. Share of Russian web articles by statement relating to the RO narrative 'War fatigue and desire for peace'

Meanwhile, the core of the second most popular opposition narrative (Personalised autocracy and manipulated elections) mainly relates to disappointment at the elections being

just for show, with far behind the previously discussed narrative that Russians saw no genuine opposition candidates on the ballot (Figure 43).

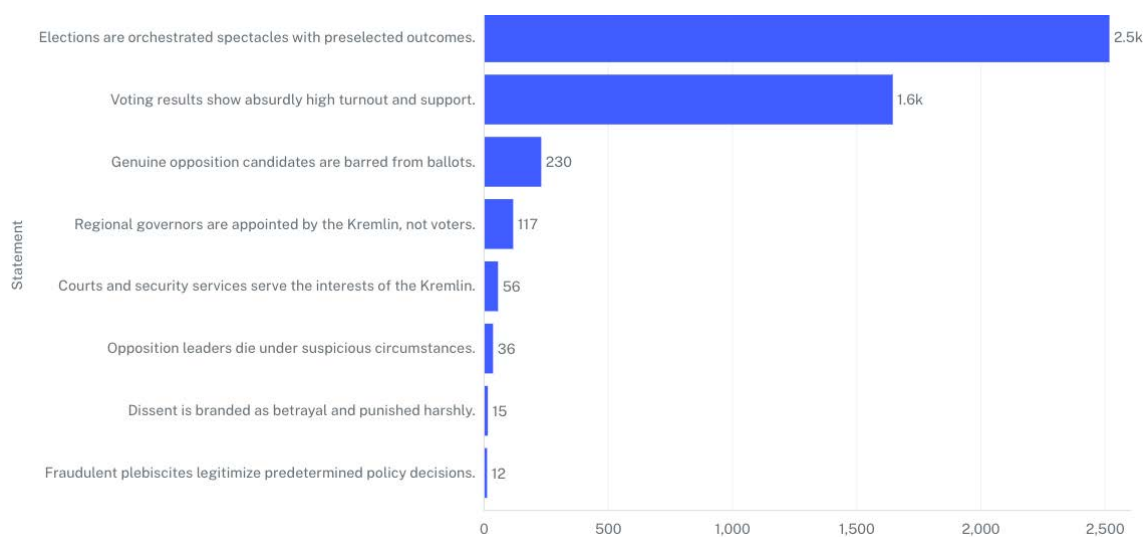


Figure 43. Share of Russian web articles by statement relating to the RO narrative 'Personalised autocracy and manipulated elections'

While opposition activity remained limited compared to widespread protests following Belarus's contested 2020 elections, visible dissent nonetheless presented challenges to Kremlin messaging regarding electoral legitimacy. Pro-Kremlin sources actively countered opposition narratives surrounding the election.

The Crocus terrorist attack on 22 March 2024 significantly altered the information environment. Media attention shifted immediately from election-related discourse to security concerns and national mourning. Opposition election narratives diminished substantially in the following weeks, while official messaging

emphasised national unity in response to the terrorist threat. Subsequent major election-related coverage occurred on 7 May during Putin's inauguration, which coincided with the lead-up to the Victory Day celebrations – a traditionally positive period in Russian state communications.

Assessment: The temporal proximity of the Crocus attack to the election period resulted in a dramatic shift in media focus and sentiment dynamics, effectively displacing critical election discourse from the information environment during a potentially vulnerable period for the Kremlin.

Crocus – Constructing the Narrative in Russia

Disinformation narrative: Ukraine is behind the Crocus terrorist attack.



Figure 44. Daily mentions of the keyword 'Crocus' in Russian media

Russian media coverage intensified on the evening of 22 March 2024 (Figure 44). To understand when the narrative blaming Ukraine emerged, the analysis shown in Fig-

ure 45 examined keyword searches for media texts mentioning both 'Crocus' and 'Ukraine', comparing their hourly dynamics against mentions of 'Crocus' alone.

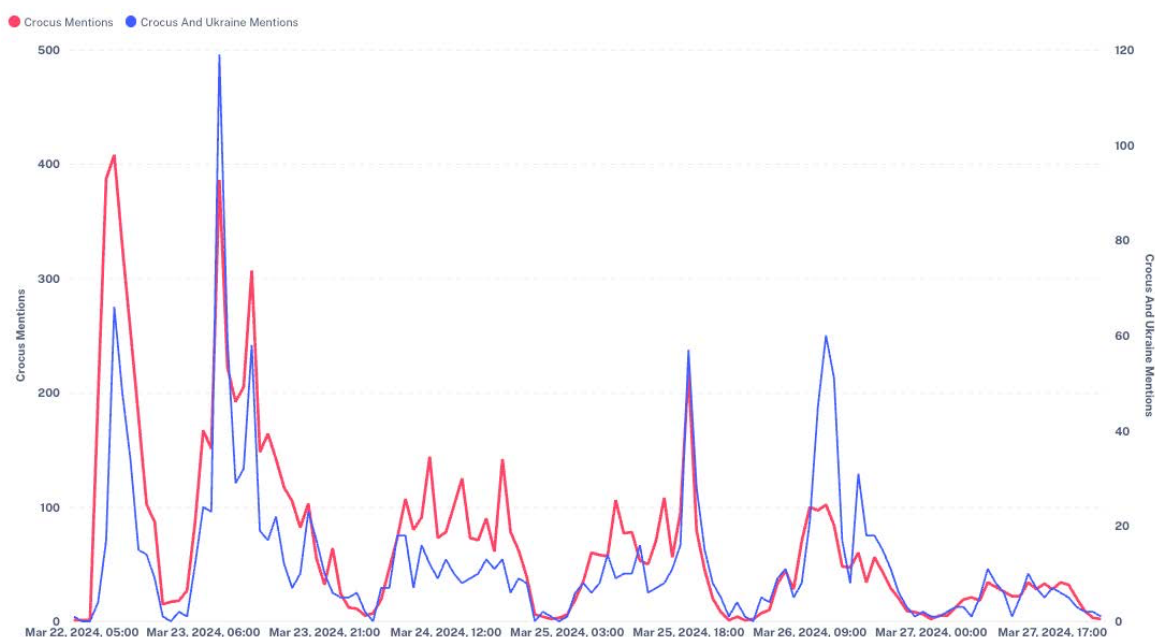


Figure 45. Hourly mentions of the keyword 'Crocus' versus the query 'Crocus' and 'Ukraine' in Russian media

The first spike in mentions of ‘Crocus’ alone nearly aligns with the first spike in the combined ‘Crocus’ and ‘Ukraine’ mentions, but with a telling delay. References to ‘Crocus’ alone began rising at 18:00 GMT, while mentions pairing ‘Crocus’ with ‘Ukraine’ only started climbing at 19:00 GMT. This indicates that initial reports from Moscow rarely mentioned Ukraine, but within an hour 16% of all coverage was already mentioning Ukraine.

The earliest detected Telegram messages casting suspicion on Ukraine cited two purported pieces of evidence: Ukrainian media had responded to the incident ‘too quickly’ (Figure 46) and one of the attackers had filmed the violence on his phone (Figure 47).

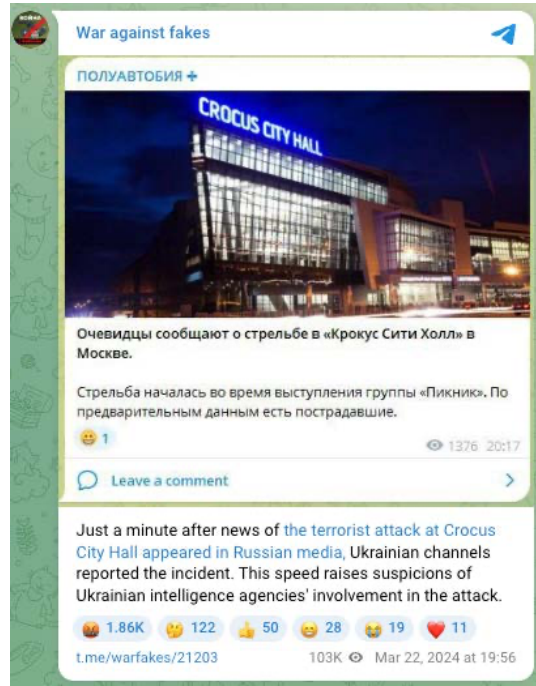


Figure 46. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the war-fakes account (source: Voyna s feykami (@warfakes), Telegram, 22 March 2024 at 19:56)

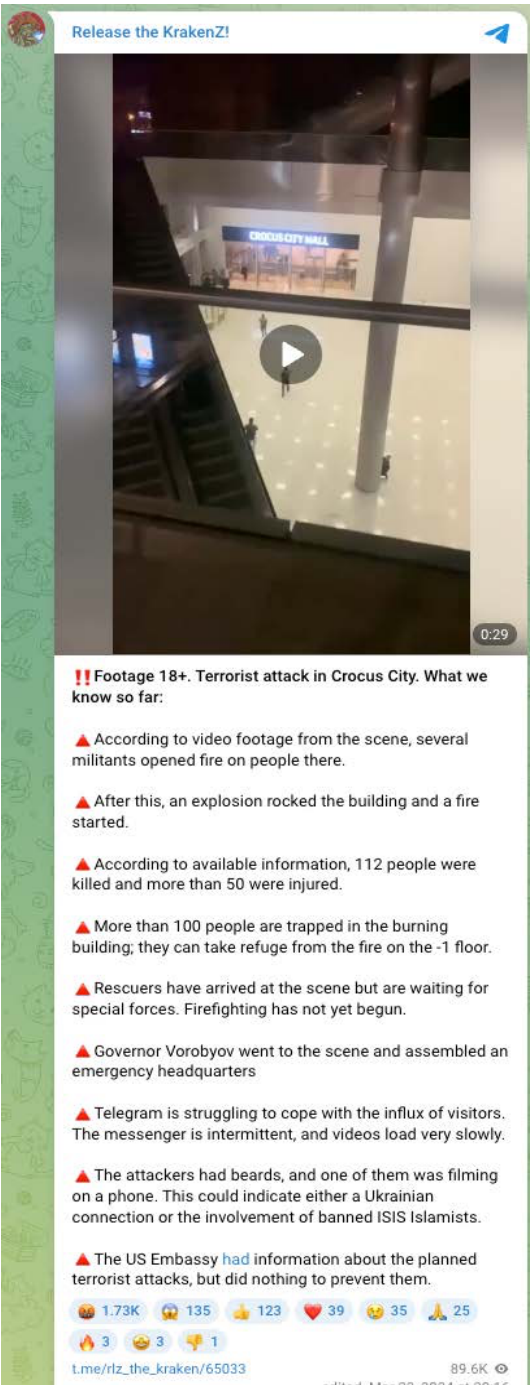


Figure 47. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the rlz_the_kraken account (source: Vypuskayte KrakenaZ! (@rlz_the_kraken), Telegram, 22 March 2024)

The next major spike occurred the following morning at 08:00 GMT, when Russian officers detained suspects near the Ukrainian border. Although ISIS later claimed responsibility for the attack, the fact that the suspects were reportedly fleeing towards Ukraine – despite Belarus being an equally plausible destination – provided sufficient pretext to launch

an extensive campaign blaming Ukraine for orchestrating the terrorist attack.

Putin's first official accusation against Ukraine appeared on state websites a day later.¹⁸⁸ Following this initial statement, mentions of Ukraine alongside Crocus rapidly proliferated across Russian media channels.¹⁸⁹

Spread to Foreign Media

Russian media quickly embraced the narrative that Ukraine orchestrated the Crocus terrorist attack, despite ISIS claiming responsibility just hours after the incident.¹⁹⁰ One of Russia's initial arguments cited the suspiciously rapid reaction by Ukrainian media and the fact that one attacker filmed the violence.

The next phase of the disinformation campaign was launched by Maria Zakharova, spokesperson for Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), who accused the US and Western countries of reacting too quickly to exonerate Ukraine, saying: *'The reaction of the American authorities to the terrorist attack on "Crocus City Hall" raises big questions about the basis on which the White House grants someone an indemnity, saying that Ukraine is not involved.'* She added: *'Even before any preliminary results of the investigation, the White House and State Department rushed to say that Ukraine has nothing to do with the "Crocus" terror attack ... They are literally exonerating Kyiv to divert suspicion from themselves.'*¹⁹¹ Dmitry Medvedev on his part was heating up the temperature by threatening to brutally destroy Ukraine's officials in a 'death for death' vendetta.¹⁹²

The final Russian disinformation position in the immediate aftermath was formulated by Putin on the basis of suspected terrorists being detained close to the border with Ukraine, suggesting that Ukrainians were behind the attack and were prepared to open the border to terrorists fleeing Moscow. Putin said: *'Of course, it is necessary to answer the question, why after committing the crime the*

Russia promoted three distinct Ukraine-blame narratives during the first 24 hours:

1. Ukraine reacted too quickly, and the terrorists were filming the attack.
2. Zakharova's narrative: the US claimed Ukraine's innocence too quickly.
3. Putin's narrative: somebody was waiting for the terrorists on the Ukrainian side of the border.

terrorists tried to go to Ukraine? Who was waiting for them there?,' and added: *'This atrocity may be just a link in a whole series of attempts by those who have been at war with our country since 2014,'* referring to Ukraine.¹⁹³

Many Western media sources cited Russian disinformation narratives and accusations regarding the terrorist attack; however, the majority also cited Ukraine's position and denial. Media outlets that cited the Russian position while excluding Ukraine's response were identified as potential carriers of disinformation.¹⁹⁴

The primary disinformation message, echoed widely, came from Zakharova's claim that the US was either complicit in the terrorist operation or concealing crucial information – otherwise, American officials could not have so quickly dismissed Ukrainian involvement.¹⁹⁵ The Serbian outlet nultacka.rs amplified this narrative: *'Americans started screaming that it wasn't Ukraine within 24 hours.'*¹⁹⁶ The conversation extended claims about US–ISIS connections, with similar extremist allegations having been made before the attack (Figure 48).¹⁹⁷



Figure 48. Screenshot of a [tweet](#) on X by DanielDumbrill (source: Daniel Dumbrill (@DanielDumbrill), X)

Several individual tweets on X supported the general blame on Ukraine but did not introduce new narratives beyond the position that this represented a warfare strategy by Ukraine.¹⁹⁸ The blame position is more visible on social media and blogs rather than official sites, with specialists' comments treated as authoritative sources.¹⁹⁹ Sources also emphasised China's role in echoing Russian blame-on-Ukraine statements, though this content primarily targeted local and near-region audiences.²⁰⁰

Despite some individual cases of Russian disinformation spreading into foreign media, the effect was minor, and reposts by secondary Western media did not significantly influence their audiences. The primary goal was likely to spread disinformation to Russian citizens and mobilise them to continue the war effort in Ukraine.

This assessment is supported by Russia's aggressive efforts to blame Ukraine even after ISIS claimed responsibility. Russia reportedly used digitally manipulated content to contradict Ukrainian officials' statements.²⁰¹ Notably, the US had warned Russia about potential ISIS attacks in the region during concerts two weeks before the attack (approximately 8 March 2024).²⁰²

Ukraine consistently promoted an alternative explanation, widely reported in Western outlets: that Putin planned the attack to blame Ukraine and create a provocation. Russia would exploit the incident to justify more aggressive military operations, inflame anti-Ukrainian sentiment among Russians, and facilitate broader mobilisation. The timing is notable – the attack came just days after the presidential elections and served to deflect controversies surrounding them.²⁰³

Metro Map Analysis

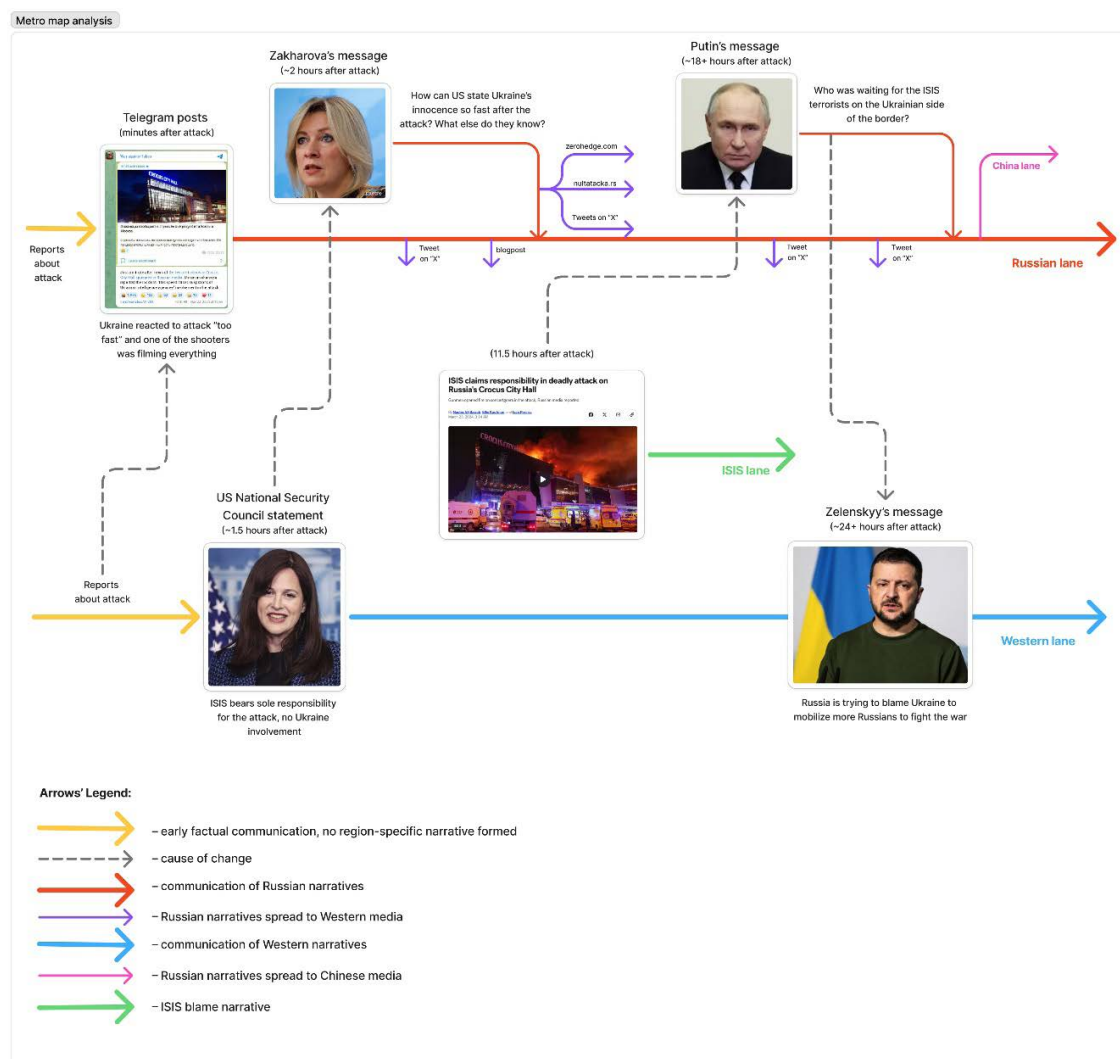


Figure 49. Metro map of Crocus crisis communication

Main findings (see Figure 49):

1. Russia promoted three distinct Ukraine-blame narratives during the first 24 hours following the Crocus terrorist attack:
 - A. Ukraine reacted too quickly, and the terrorists were filming the attack
 - B. Zakharova's narrative: the US claimed Ukraine's innocence too quickly
 - C. Putin's narrative: somebody was waiting for terrorists on the Ukrainian side of the border.
2. Russian Ukraine-blame narratives appeared in Western headlines primarily alongside Western counter-narratives rather than standing alone, and therefore the spread of disinformation into foreign regions was not effective.
3. The ISIS-blame narrative remained secondary and was overshadowed by the dominant Russia-Ukraine blame dynamic.

4. The Ukrainian and Western media framed Russia's Ukraine-blame messaging as propaganda designed to justify escalated warfare and increase domestic war mobilisation.

A similar communication pattern in Russia's reaction to unexpected crises was observed in two other case studies in this report: the Kursk offensive and the complementary case study on Nausėda–Kaliningrad.

Conclusion of the Case Study

The Crocus City Hall attack represents a stress test for the Russian domestic information system under conditions of shock, uncertainty, and narrative risk. The **case demonstrates how the ecosystem reacts when an event initially contradicts preferred strategic narratives and how narrative coherence is restored over time.**

In the immediate aftermath, Russian state communication was characterised by cautious ambiguity and narrative restraint. Early coverage across state websites and television avoided definitive attribution, instead emphasising operational response, condolences, and unity. This phase was marked by low emotional intensity and limited narrative specificity, indicating a deliberate pause while attribution and strategic framing were coordinated. Telegram channels, while faster and more speculative, remained broadly aligned with official uncertainty, with fringe claims appearing but not yet amplified.

As the situation stabilised, the ecosystem rapidly converged on a Ukraine-linked terrorism frame, marginalising the Islamic State's claim of responsibility. **This shift did not occur uniformly:** Telegram acted as a testing ground for increasingly assertive accusations, which were later validated and normalised by state television and official outlets. The Crocus case thus illustrates a recurring pattern in Russian information operations: riskier narratives are first probed in semi-controlled environments before being institutionalised. **Once consolidated, the narrative was reinforced through repetition, selective evidence, and moral framing,** presenting Russia as both victim and target of externally orchestrated violence.

Crucially, the case highlights how **conflicting explanations are managed not through direct contradiction but through nar-**

rative displacement. The Islamic State explanation was neither fully addressed nor openly debated; instead, it was crowded out by an alternative storyline that better served domestic mobilisation and external blame attribution. Emotional escalation followed narrative stabilisation, with heightened anger, calls for vigilance, and reinforcement of wartime framing.

From a counter-strategy perspective, the Crocus case demonstrates that **Russian information control does not rely on immediate narrative dominance but on temporal sequencing: delay, test, consolidate, and amplify. This creates exploitable windows:** early ambiguity phases where competing interpretations circulate and external messaging can gain limited traction. Once consolidation occurs, narrative reversal becomes significantly harder.

The key lesson is that effective counter-information efforts should focus less on late-stage debunking and more on early detection of narrative probes – especially on Telegram – and on disrupting the transition from speculative framing to official endorsement. Crocus demonstrates that the most decisive moment in Russia's information operations is not the final message but the process by which uncertainty is transformed into certainty.

[4] Peace Negotiations and Donald Trump

Section summary

Object of analysis	Public opinion on a potential peace deal in the Russia-Ukraine war and the changes upon the election of Donald Trump as the president of the US
Research timeframe	1. 14–15 July 2024 (Trump assassination attempt) 2. 5–7 November 2024 (Trump wins elections) 3. 12–14 February 2025 (Putin–Trump first call) 4. 18–19 February 2025 (Riyadh talks between the US and Russia) 5. 28 February – 2 March 2025 (Zelenskyy kicked out of the White House) 6. 11–12 March 2025 (Jeddah talks between the US and Ukraine) 7. 18–19 March 2025 (Putin–Trump second call) Dataset: Russian official and non-state channels and social media, complemented by foreign articles and social media posts.
Analysis methods	1. Boolean text search with queries Байден:*, Харрис:*, Трамп:*, мир, переговоры:*, перемири:* (Biden, Harris, Trump, peace, negotiation, ceasefire) 2. Spike detection 3. Storyline analysis 4. Narrative analysis 5. Comparison between different media types 6. Sentiment analysis 7. Analysis of narrative statements
Intended purpose	This section analyses how Russian public sentiment regarding peace negotiations evolved over the research timeframe and examines what shifts Donald Trump’s election as US president caused in Russian domestic communication.

On 20 January 2025 Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 47th President of the United States following his electoral victory over Kamala Harris on 5 November 2024. Prior to his election, Trump repeatedly attributed responsibility for the Ukraine conflict to the Biden administration, stating that the war would not have occurred under his leadership. Trump also pledged to end the conflict within 24 hours of his inauguration.

Ukrainian and Russian responses to Trump's election diverged significantly. A March 2025 survey by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology found that over half of Ukrainians believed Trump's mediation efforts might produce an unjust peace settlement.²⁰⁴ Russian official commentary, conversely, expressed favourable expectations, with Presidential Press Secretary Peskov stating on election day that *'Trump's presidency would be a blow to Ukraine.'*²⁰⁵

Russian media anticipated that Trump's approach to the conflict might yield outcomes more aligned with Russian interests compared to the explicitly anti-Kremlin positions of Kamala Harris or Joe Biden.

Sentiment analysis of Russian Telegram posts supports this assessment (Figures 50 to 53): 6 November 2024 – the day Trump's victory was announced – recorded the highest (most positive) average daily sentiment across the entire 15-month research period. However, analysis identified 21 mentions on 6 November with exceptionally negative sentiment scores (below -60%) which characterised the

election outcome as detrimental to Ukraine and Europe. This minority of negative content demonstrates how polarised interpretations coexisted within a predominantly positive Russian media environment.

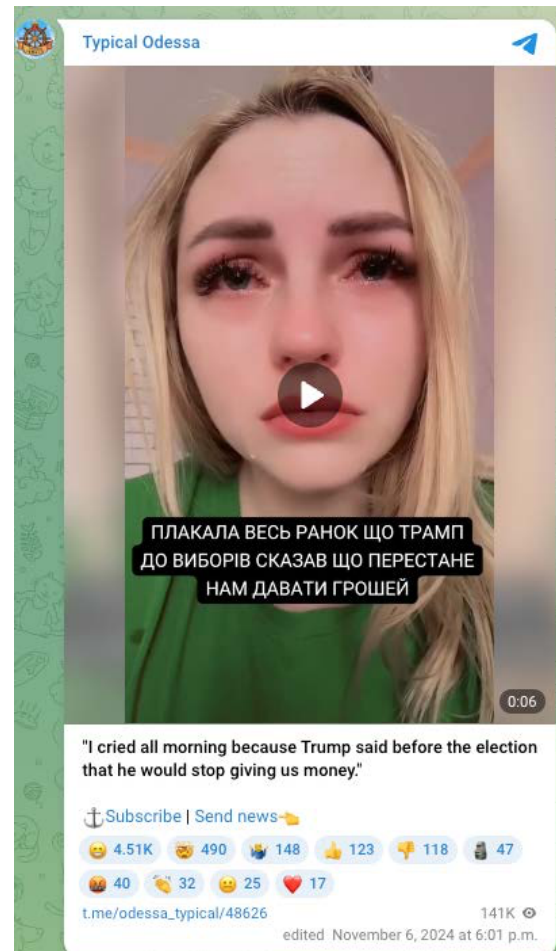


Figure 50. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the odesa_typical account (source: Tipichnaya Odessa (@odesa_typical), Telegram, 6 November 2024)



Figure 51. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the ASupersharij account (source: Anatoliy Shariy (@ASupersharij), Telegram, 6 November 2024)



Figure 52. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the swodki account (source: Swodki (@swodki), Telegram, 6 November 2024)



Figure 53. Screenshot of a Telegram post by dimsmirnov175 (source: Telegram, 6 November 2024)

Nevertheless, Trump's election registered significantly higher positivity than either 18 March 2024 (Putin's re-election) or 26 January 2025 (Lukashenko's re-election). The US elections proved to be the most salient political event for Russian public sentiment within the research timeframe. Regarding sentiment positivity levels, Trump's election as US president can only be compared to celebrations such as Victory Day or New Year's Eve (Figure 13).

The trend line visible in the sentiment dynamics of Figure 13 also shows that, during the last period of the research timeframe, average sentiment levels increased, with statistically more positivity present in the media. From the event studies, this can be associated with the election of Donald Trump as US president as well as the prospects of a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine that could be facilitated by Trump's team.

Regarding Donald Trump and other US presidential candidates, Trump consistently received the most favourable coverage in Russian media. The level of interest in Trump following his election was substantially higher compared to coverage of Biden, signalling a perceived shift in opportunities for engagement with the US under the new administration (Figure 54). Trump was always the front-runner candidate for Russians, and they made this clear.

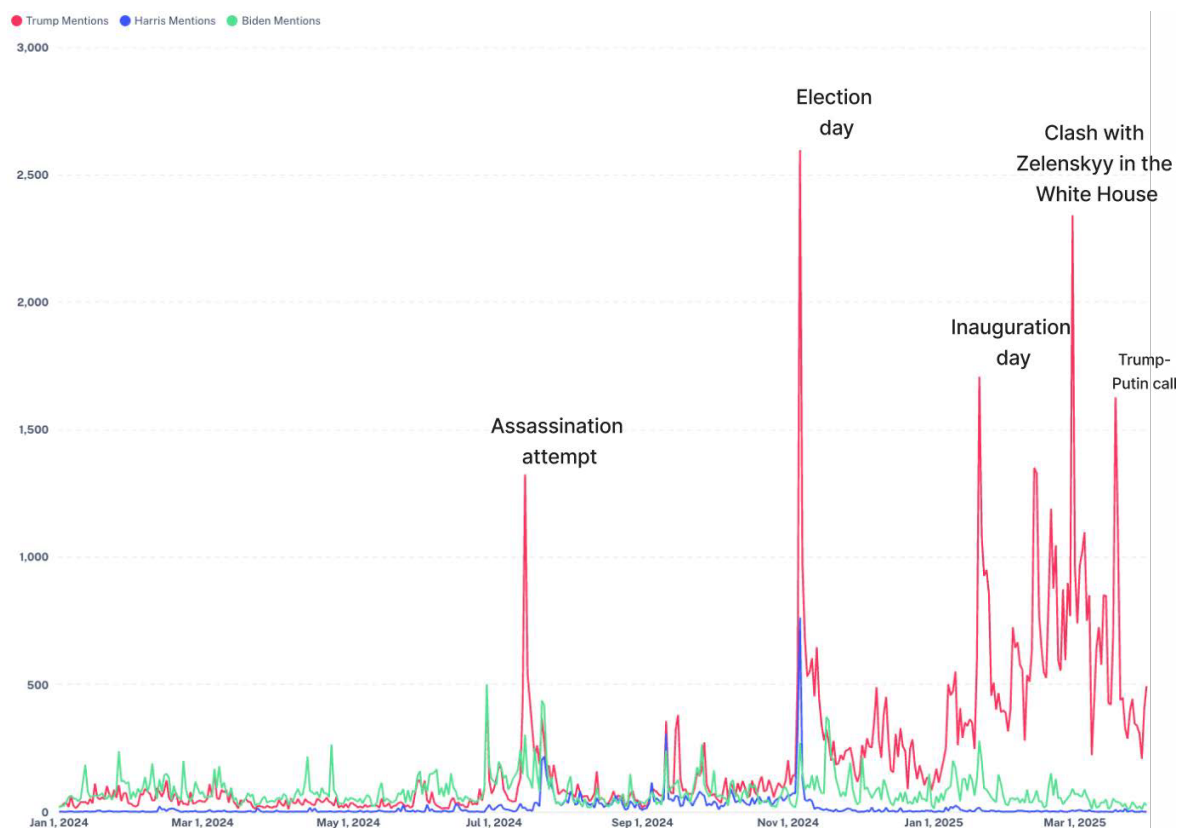


Figure 54. Mentions of Trump (in red), Biden (in green), and Harris (in blue) on Russian Telegram channels, TV shows, and state websites over the research timeframe, with the most important spikes labelled (source: Repsense)

On 13 July 2024, at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, shots were fired at Donald Trump. He survived with an injury to his ear (Figure 55).²⁰⁶ Russia did not offer official condolences after the assassination attempt, and Russian state websites did not cover the events extensively. Only one *duma.gov.ru* domain article cited Duma chairman Vyacheslav Volodin, who made controversial statements about how this attack resulted from a divided US administration, stating: ‘*Trump’s position on the Ukrainian issue could have led to an act of aggression*’ and claimed that ‘*the United States, through its long-standing policies, has literally reached the brink of civil war*’, citing opinion polling indicating that ‘*37% believe that civil war is likely if Biden is re-elected president*’.²⁰⁷

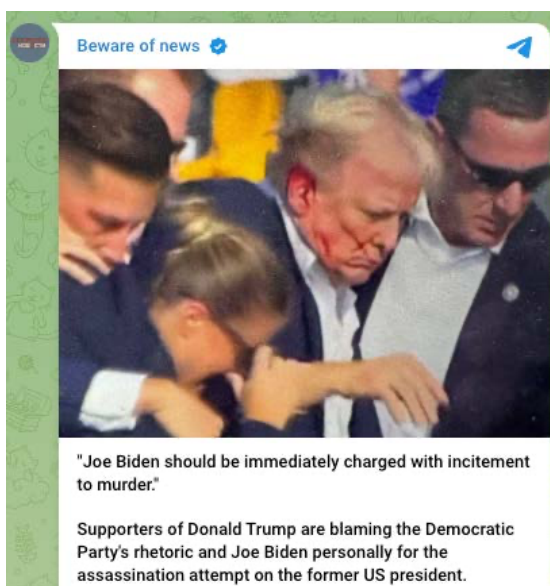


Figure 55. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the ostorozhno_novosti account (source: Ostorozhno, novosti (@ostorozhno_novosti), Telegram, 14 July 2024 at 12:17)

Russia's favouritism towards Trump was harder to hide in less controlled environments. Just a day after the assassination attempt, some Russian shells with the words 'For Trump' appeared on Telegram (Figure 56).



Figure 56. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the AzarenokCTV account (source: Azarenok CTV (@AzarenokCTV), Telegram, 14 July 2024 at 14:00)

No Clear Prospect of Peace Deal before Trump's Inauguration

While Donald Trump represents a controversial figure in peace negotiations, prior to his election, prospects for a potential peace agreement appeared considerably more uncertain in Russian public discourse. Figure 57 presents the frequency of the keywords 'ceasefire', 'negotiations', and 'peace' in Russian media throughout the research period. This case study examines Russian public at-

titudes towards potential peace agreements and assesses whether Russian audiences were being conditioned to accept a negotiated settlement. Within the evolving landscape of public opinion and battlefield developments, Trump's election introduced a series of events that generated unprecedented levels of Russian media attention compared to any point during the three years of war.

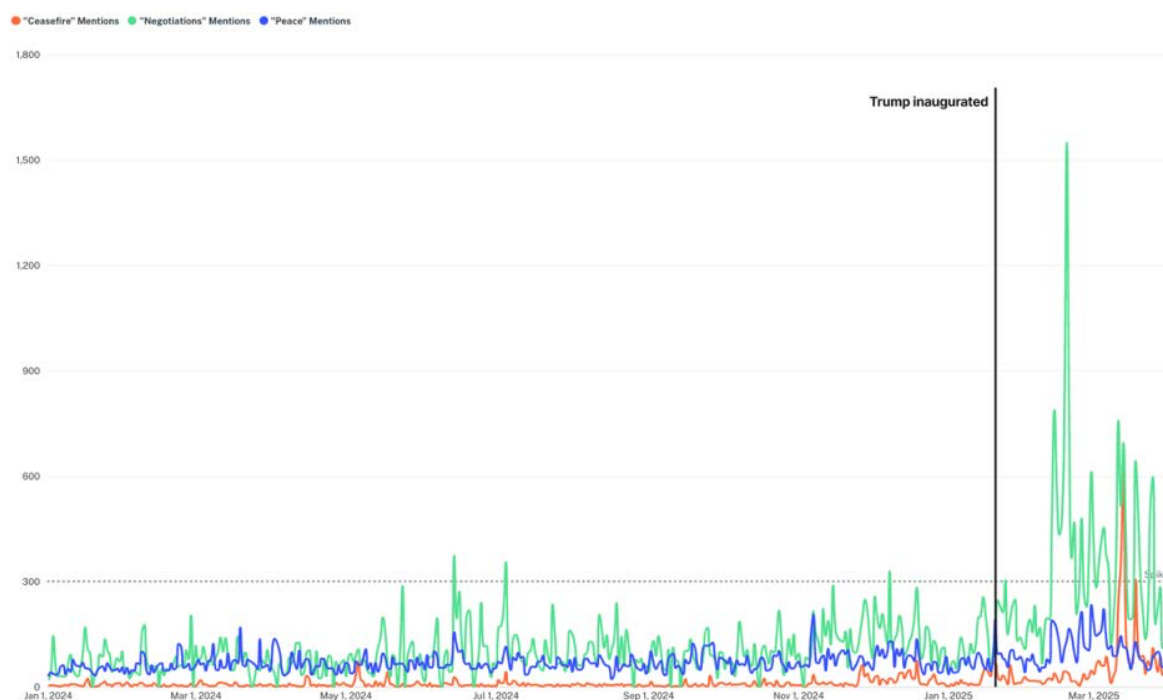


Figure 57. Mentions of ‘ceasefire’ (in orange), ‘negotiations’ (in green), and ‘peace’ (in blue) on Russian Telegram channels, TV shows, and state websites over the research timeframe

This trend illustrates a significant shift in Russian discourse regarding the Ukraine conflict following Trump’s election. Mentions of ‘ceasefire’ and ‘negotiations’ increased substantially, while ‘peace’ (*mir*) keyword dynamics showed more modest growth. This discrepancy is partially attributable to the Russian word *mir* (мир) meaning both ‘peace’ and ‘world’, resulting in numerous contextual uses unrelated to conflict resolution discussions.

Our analysis identified the highest-volume days for peace-related keyword mentions during each month preceding Trump’s 20 January 2025 inauguration.

16 January 2024 (236 mentions):

Russian commentary on peace and negotiations was dominated by statements from senior officials, including State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin, who argued that negotiations are impossible with the current Ukrainian leadership and that peace can only follow the completion of Russia’s military objectives. Russian official sources and pro-government channels dismissed international discussions on Ukraine, including meetings held at the World Economic Forum in Davos, as illegit-

imate and incapable of producing peace because Russia was excluded. These narratives framed diplomatic initiatives as Western pressure tactics rather than genuine efforts to end the conflict. Overall, Russian messaging portrayed peace not as a mutual compromise but as a conditional outcome to be imposed after military success, while assigning responsibility for the continuation of the war to Ukraine and its Western partners.

9 February 2024 (300 mentions):

Russian discourse on peace and negotiations was strongly shaped by reactions to Vladimir Putin’s interview with US journalist Tucker Carlson, which was widely cited as reaffirming Russia’s readiness for negotiations under conditions previously proposed. Russian officials and pro-government commentators argued that Moscow had repeatedly sought peace, including during the Istanbul talks in 2022, and claimed these efforts were undermined by Western interference and Kyiv’s refusal to negotiate. Statements attributed to Russian leadership framed Ukraine’s legal ban on negotiations and Western military support as the main obstacles to peace, rather than Russian actions. Overall, peace was presented as

achievable only if Ukraine accepted Russian security demands and territorial realities, with negotiations portrayed as blocked by political decisions rather than a lack of willingness from Moscow.

19 March 2024 (281 mentions): Russian discussion of peace and negotiations was closely tied to Vladimir Putin's re-election and post-election commentary, with officials and pro-government sources portraying the vote as confirmation of public support for continuing the war until Russia's objectives were achieved. Statements attributed to Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov and other officials acknowledged signals from the US about dialogue, but stressed that no negotiations were possible under pressure or on Western terms. Russian narratives rejected the idea of a ceasefire as a tactical pause beneficial to Ukraine, instead framing peace as possible only after recognition of Russia's territorial and security demands. Overall, negotiations were depicted as theoretically open but practically blocked by Ukraine and the West, while the election outcome was used to legitimise a hardline stance against compromise.

12 April 2024 (240 mentions): Russian discussion of peace and negotiations was strongly anchored to anniversary framing of the war, particularly the tenth anniversary of the conflict in Donbas. Several posts explicitly revisited the question of returning to the Istanbul negotiations of 2022, presenting them as a viable peace framework allegedly rejected by Kyiv under Western pressure. Statements and commentaries by figures such as the pro-Kremlin Ukrainian politician Viktor Medvedchuk framed European leaders as deliberately preventing peace and portrayed negotiations as possible only if Ukraine abandoned its current political course. Overall, peace was depicted not as a future compromise but as a missed opportunity already destroyed by Ukraine and its allies, with historical milestones used to legitimise Russia's current refusal to make concessions. Notably, during his meeting with Putin, Lukashenko also suggested returning to the Istanbul agreements (Figure 58).



Figure 58. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the kontext_channel account (Kontekst (@kontext_channel), Telegram, 12 April 2024 at 09:26)

24 May 2024 (360 mentions): Russian discussion of peace and negotiations focused heavily on reactions to renewed international initiatives promoted by Ukraine, particularly references to the upcoming Swiss-hosted peace conference, which Russian officials and pro-government commentators dismissed as meaningless. Statements attributed to Russian Foreign Ministry representatives, including Maria Zakharova, framed the conference as a Western-led attempt to impose conditions on Russia without dialogue, emphasising that Moscow was neither invited to participate nor

interested in doing so. Russian narratives reiterated that negotiations were only possible on the basis of previously discussed frameworks, most notably the Istanbul agreements, and only if Ukraine abandoned what were described as 'ultimatums' and Western control. Overall, peace was presented as deliberately obstructed by Kyiv and its allies, while Russia positioned itself as open to talks in principle but only under terms that reflect its military and political demands, noting that Putin would agree to freeze current frontlines.

14 June 2024 (519 mentions): Russian discourse on peace and negotiations was dominated by reactions to Vladimir Putin's public statement outlining Russia's conditions for ending the war, delivered ahead of the Swiss peace conference on Ukraine. Russian officials, state media, and pro-government Telegram channels framed Putin's proposal as a clear and realistic peace offer, emphasising demands for Ukraine's withdrawal from claimed territories, neutrality, and the lifting of sanctions. In contrast the Swiss-hosted conference was widely dismissed as illegitimate and 'anti-Russian', with repeated claims that it excluded Moscow and therefore could not produce peace. Overall, negotiations were presented as possible only on Russia's terms, while responsibility for rejecting peace was shifted onto Ukraine and Western states supporting the conference. The collective West was pictured as the side that was unable to accept the conditions (Figure 59).

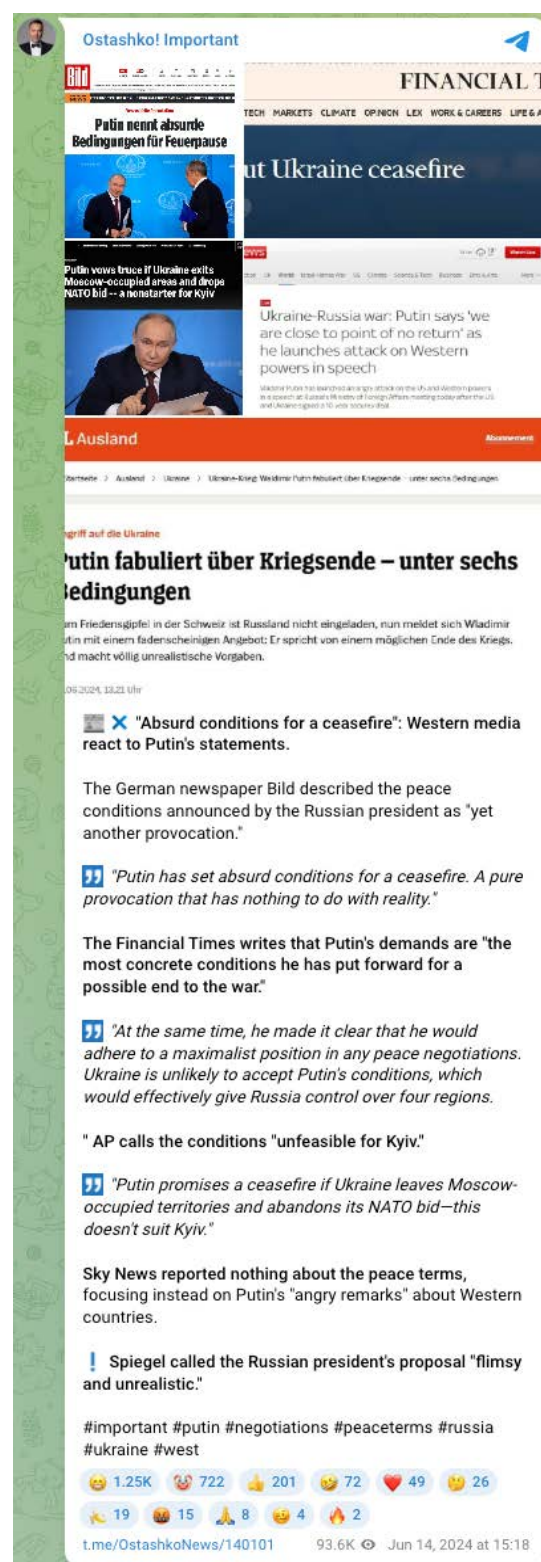


Figure 59. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the OstashkoNews account (source: Ostashko News (@OstashkoNews), Telegram, 14 October 2024 at 12:34)

5 July 2024 (466 mentions): Russian discourse on peace and negotiations revolved around continued reactions to Vladimir Putin's June peace conditions and their international reception, with officials and pro-government commentators insisting that Russia's position had been clearly stated and formally conveyed. Russian media and Telegram channels emphasised statements from Kremlin representatives, including Dmitry Peskov, arguing that Ukraine and its Western supporters deliberately ignored Russia's proposals while publicly simulating interest in peace. References to diplomatic activity stressed that Western-led formats and discussions remained unacceptable because they excluded Russia and refused to acknowledge its territorial and security demands. Overall, negotiations were portrayed as stalled not because of Moscow's unwillingness, but because Ukraine and the West allegedly rejected any settlement that did not amount to Russia's strategic victory.

19 August 2024 (294 mentions): Russian discussion of peace and negotiations was shaped by reports of diplomatic contacts involving Vladimir Putin, including coverage of his meeting in Azerbaijan and statements about Russia's readiness for dialogue under previously stated conditions. Several posts cited Putin's remarks that Russia was prepared to negotiate, while simultaneously stressing that talks with the current Kyiv leadership were unacceptable, a line repeated across pro-Kremlin Telegram channels and state-aligned media. International media, including *The Economist*, were selectively quoted to argue that Ukraine was reassessing its strategy and that Western support was no longer sufficient to force Russia into concessions. Overall, negotiations were framed as possible only according to Russia's terms and timeline, with Russian narratives emphasising that external diplomatic activity merely confirmed Moscow's long-standing position rather than creating new conditions for peace.

25 September 2024 (302 mentions): Russian discussion of peace and negotiations was strongly influenced by reactions to international diplomatic activity around Ukraine, including references to statements made during

the UN General Assembly in New York and renewed Western calls for negotiations. Russian officials and pro-government commentators dismissed these signals as performative, arguing that they ignored Russia's repeatedly stated conditions and were designed to shift responsibility for the war onto Moscow. Posts citing Vladimir Putin and Kremlin representatives reiterated that Russia remained open to talks in principle, but only if Ukraine recognised territorial realities and abandoned what were described as externally imposed 'ultimatums'. Overall, negotiations were framed as stalled not by Russia's position, but by Western-led diplomatic formats that excluded Moscow while publicly simulating a search for peace.

24 October 2024 (344 mentions): Russian discussion of peace and negotiations was closely tied to Vladimir Putin's public remarks made around the BRICS summit, including responses to questions from foreign journalists about the possibility of talks on Ukraine. In these statements Putin reiterated that Russia was not rejecting negotiations but stressed that any dialogue was impossible without Ukraine's recognition of territorial changes and Russia's security demands, a framing widely amplified by pro-Kremlin Telegram channels. International commentary was selectively quoted, including *Foreign Affairs* and *Politico*, to argue that Western elites were beginning to acknowledge the need for negotiations, even if governments publicly delayed them. Overall, negotiations were presented as inevitable but deliberately postponed by the West and Kyiv, while Russia portrayed itself as maintaining a consistent conditional openness to peace on its own terms.

7 November 2024 (302 mentions): Associated with Trump's election victory and analysed separately in this case study ('Victory in the US Elections' section).

19 December 2024 (344 mentions): Russian discussion of peace and negotiations was dominated by Vladimir Putin's year-end public statements, widely quoted by TASS and pro-Kremlin Telegram channels, in which he reiterated that Russia was ready for negotiations but only on the basis of previously stated

conditions and ‘realities on the ground’. Multiple posts compiled and amplified Putin’s key quotes, presenting them as proof that Moscow remained open to dialogue while accusing Ukraine and the West of blocking talks for political reasons. Western media, including *The Financial Times*, were selectively quoted to argue that pressure on Kyiv to negotiate was growing and that continued escalation risked prolonging the war unnecessarily. Overall, peace was framed as achievable in principle, but only if Ukraine abandoned its current position, with Russian narratives emphasising that responsibility for the lack of negotiations lay with Western capitals rather than Moscow.

Throughout 2024, Russian discourse on peace negotiations evolved from outright dismissal to conditional normalisation, but without any substantive softening of demands. In the first half of the year, negotiations were framed as either impossible or already sabotaged by Ukraine and the West, with peace presented

only as a post-victory outcome following Russia’s military success – a narrative reinforced by anniversaries of the ‘Donbas war’ and Putin’s re-election.

From spring onwards, particularly around the Swiss peace conference and Putin’s ‘conditions for peace’ in June, Russian rhetoric became more procedural and formalised: Moscow repeatedly asserted readiness for talks while rigidly defining acceptable terms, using Western diplomatic activity as proof that others were refusing ‘realistic’ solutions. By autumn and year’s end, negotiations were increasingly portrayed as inevitable but deliberately delayed by Western capitals for political reasons, with selective references to Western media used to suggest growing fatigue and dissent, setting the stage for Trump’s election to be framed not as a policy shift, but as external confirmation that Russia’s long-standing position would ultimately prevail.

Victory in the US Elections

On 5 November 2024 Donald Trump won the US presidential election. Although polling data generally indicated Trump as a slight favourite over Kamala Harris, the margin of victory proved surprisingly decisive.²⁰⁸ Russians were euphoric as their whole nation supported more right-wing Trump as opposed to pro-Ukrainian Harris, and therefore this victory was supposed to be an auspicious sign in terms of the progression of the war: ‘Russia has won.’²⁰⁹ Notably, 6 November 2024 registered the highest average sentiment score for

Russian Telegram posts throughout the entire research timeframe.

On election day and the two subsequent days (5–7 November 2024), approximately 71,200 media mentions were collected from Russian state websites, Russian television broadcasts, Russian Telegram channels, Russian news articles, and social media posts from Russia and twenty-two other countries. Figures 60 and 61 show their distribution by country and media type respectively.

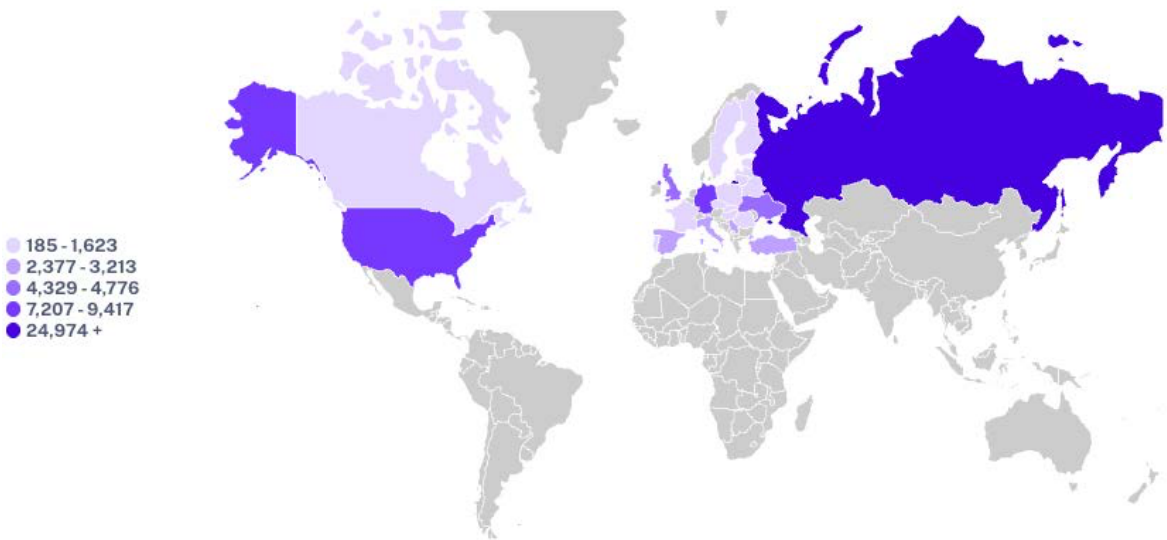


Figure 60. Distribution of mentions by country

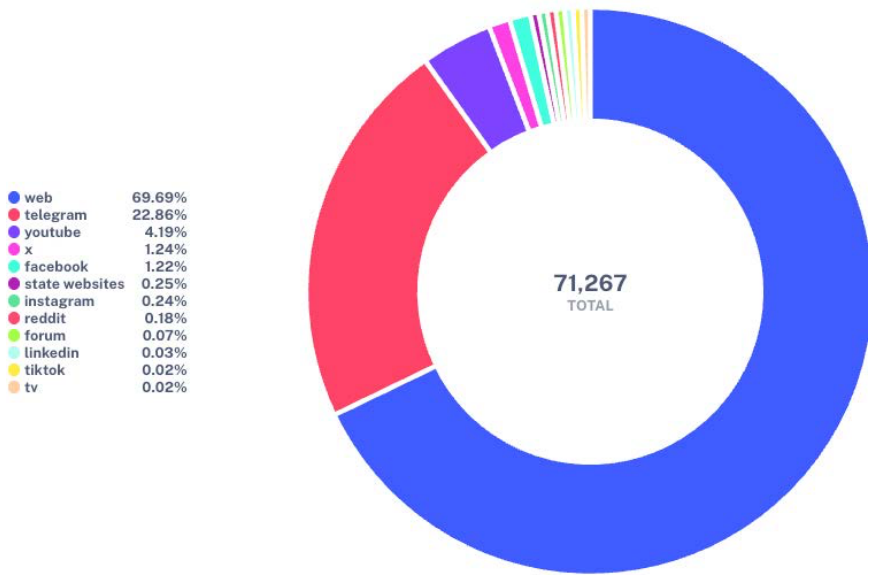


Figure 61. Distribution of mentions by media type

Storyline analysis

Russian state websites

A total of 209 articles from official Russian state websites were collected during the three-day timeframe. Figure 62 shows their distribution by domain.

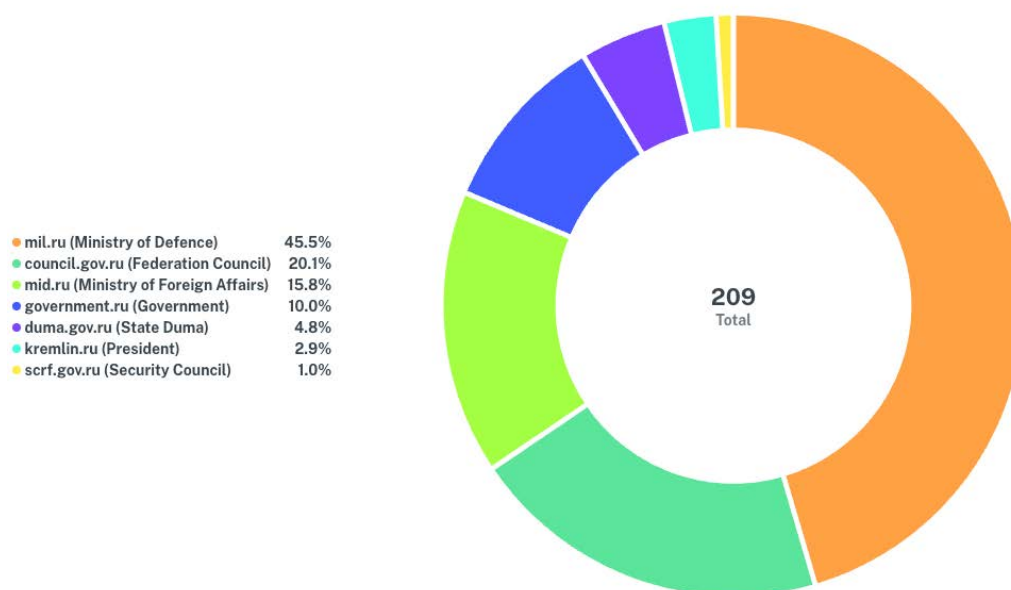


Figure 62. Distribution of Russian state website mentions by domain

Only one state-media article was published that mentioned Donald Trump. An article from the Russian Ministry of Defence site mil.ru discussed the threats posed to Russia by Ukraine and mentioned that: *‘During a meeting with US presidential candidate Donald Trump in October 2024, the head of the Kyiv regime, Zelenskyy, in an ultimatum demanded accelerated NATO membership or permission*

*to possess nuclear weapons.’*²¹⁰

This limited state-website coverage may reflect Russia’s strategic decision to minimise official commentary on US matters, with more direct positions expressed through alternative platforms. Of 13,925 state website articles published in 2024, only 27 mentioned Trump, representing a notably low proportion.

Russian TV shows

Our analysis examined eleven Russian state television programmes broadcast during the three-day period surrounding Trump’s election (5–7 November 2024), including daily coverage on the flagship programmes *60 минут* (60 Minutes, Russia-1), *Вечер с Владимиром*

Соловьёвым (Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, Russia-1), and *Время* (Time, Channel One).

In contrast to state websites, television broadcasts referenced Trump frequently, with over 400 mentions across various programmes and contexts.

Main themes:

- Euphoria and relief: presenters and guests described his victory as a *'turning point'* and *'sign of global justice'*.
- Contrast with Kamala Harris: she was depicted as *'fully controlled by the Ukrainian lobby'* and *'an extension of the Biden line'*.
- Diplomatic expectations: several reports claimed that *'Trump will first call Putin to discuss ending the Ukrainian war.'*
- Repetition of Zelenskyy–Trump 'ultimatum' story, referencing claims that Zelenskyy demanded NATO entry or nuclear rights from Trump (echoing narratives from the mil.ru article).

War-related mentions were most frequent (more than 550), framed through the lens of Trump's victory:

- End of Western support: pundits predicted that Trump's return would weaken the US and European aid to Kyiv.
- Peace on Russian terms: commentators argued Trump could force Ukraine to negotiate, validating Moscow's strategy.

- Blaming Kyiv: recurring stories about 'Ukrainian provocations in Kursk' and 'Attacks on nuclear facilities', positioning Russia as responding defensively.

Around 350 mentions had references to Russia and Putin, focusing on national strength and vindication:

- Russia's patience rewarded: narratives described Trump's win as proof that 'The world is tired of anti-Russian hysteria.'
- Strategic opening: hosts speculated that a Trump administration might lift sanctions, open dialogue, and legitimise Moscow's territorial control.
- Domestic tone: coverage blended patriotic confidence with warnings to 'Remain vigilant', suggesting optimism but cautious expectations.

Assessment: Russian television portrayed Trump's victory as favourable for Moscow, detrimental to Kyiv, and potentially decisive for ending the war on terms advantageous to Russia.

Russian Telegram posts

Out of 15,737 Telegram posts captured during the three-day interval, 4,127 (26.2%) mentioned Donald Trump.

Focus on Trump:

- Trump-centric coverage: Trump featured prominently in over half the analysed posts (approximately 2,500 keyword mentions). Numerous posts provided real-time updates on state-by-state results and Electoral College vote tallies.²¹¹
- Contrast with Harris: dozens of posts framed Harris as a continuation of

Biden's Ukraine policy and 'anti-Russia' posture, while Trump was portrayed as more transactional and inclined to 'deal-making'.²¹²

- Trump could end the war: posts repeatedly forecast early calls or talks that could 'stop the war' or force talks, often with confident tone and little sourcing.²¹³

Focus on Ukraine's war:

- Weaker support for Kyiv: a frequent claim was that Trump's victory would curb or complicate the US or Western aid, pushing Kyiv towards talks.²¹⁴

- Negotiation framing: widespread dissemination of narratives suggesting potential settlement on terms unfavourable to Ukrainian interests.

Focus on Russia:

- Strategic opening and validation: many posts read Trump's win as a vindication of Moscow's line and a chance to reset terms with the West.²¹⁵

- Sanctions would ease or 'wouldn't work': a smaller but persistent thread predicted sanctions erosion or ineffectiveness under Trump.²¹⁶

Main disinformation narratives:

1. Ukraine is a failed state
2. NATO or the West are the real aggressors and divided
3. Zelenskyy is using nuclear blackmail
4. Sanctions will fall/do not matter
5. The West is split – Europe will follow.

TikTok videos

Only eleven TikTok videos which mentioned both Trump and Ukraine in the description field were captured. The videos were captured from Finland, Mexico, the US, Spain, Italy, and Portugal.

TikTok reactions to Trump's 2024 victory were largely cautious or critical, with most videos reflecting mild concern or irony rather than celebration. Discussions centred on global uncertainty, potential shifts in Ukraine and Gaza, and speculation about renewed US–Russia dialogue. While some clips acknowledged Trump's pragmatic image, most stressed risks of instability or weakened Western unity. Compared with Telegram's triumphalist tone, TikTok content was more analytical, global, and emotionally restrained, focusing on consequences rather than celebrating Trump's return (Figure 63).

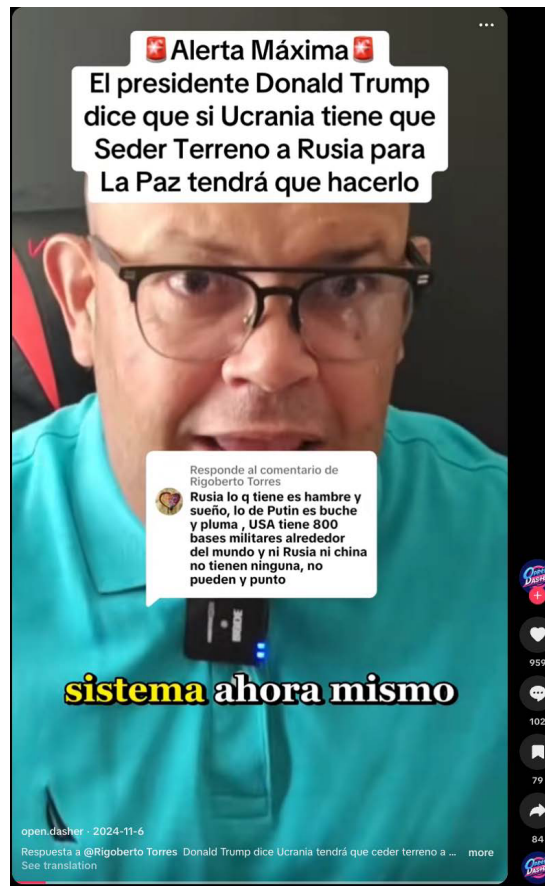


Figure 63. Screenshot of a TikTok video by open.dasher (page unavailable)

Facebook posts

Facebook discussions following Trump's 2024 victory were more fragmented and reflective than overtly celebratory. Russian and pro-Russian pages portrayed the result as proof of Western fatigue and a chance for sanctions relief. Ukrainian and Western users

focused on fears of reduced US support for Kyiv. Common narratives centred on Trump's potential to broker peace, American political division, and optimism in Moscow for renewed dialogue with Washington, blending geopolitical commentary with populist messaging.

Main topics and narratives:

- The US was divided amid Trump's victory: Facebook posts hailed Trump's win as restoring 'the American people's will' while underscoring deep political division and fatigue with establishment politics.²¹⁷
- Ukraine and war implications: many speculated Trump would push Kyiv into peace talks or cut aid, echoing claims that 'the war can end in 24 hours'.²¹⁸
- Russia's reaction, optimism: posts highlighted Kremlin-friendly voices interpreting the election as validation of Russia's geopolitical stance.²¹⁹
- European/Western reaction: Coverage framed EU's responses as anxious but pragmatic, acknowledging Trump's influence on future transatlantic relations.²²⁰

Foreign Telegram posts

Non-Russian Telegram channels framed Trump's win through pragmatic geopolitics rather than triumphalism. A recurring strand cast him as a dealmaker who could trigger talks or a ceasefire, while others highlighted US social fatigue and political division. Several outlets anticipated a recalibration of West-

ern aid to Kyiv and reported (rather than endorsed) cautious Kremlin optimism. Sanctions and 'realpolitik' surfaced in analysis pieces, often speculating about narrower conditional support packages and hard bargaining ahead – not sudden policy U-turns.

Main topics and narratives:

- Trump as peacemaker: channels described Trump as likelier to press for talks or a limited ceasefire, positioning negotiations as a near-term lever rather than a grand settlement. The tone was pragmatic: expect bargaining and linkage to aid, not instant peace.²²¹
- US political fatigue: coverage emphasised US polarisation and 'election exhaustion', arguing that domestic fractures would shape foreign policy bandwidth.²²²
- Western aid recalibration: rather than a total cutoff, outlets discussed tougher conditions, slower tranches, and leveraging aid to force Kyiv into talks. The underlying idea: support persists but becomes narrower and more explicitly tied to negotiations.²²³
- Sanctions speculation: analysis pieces floated the idea that sanctions policy might be reshaped at the margins under a more transactional White House. The expectation was bargaining tied to battlefield dynamics and talks, not blanket relief.²²⁴

Instagram posts

Instagram discussions around the US 2024 elections mixed celebration, satire, and speculation (Figures 64 and 65). Posts emphasised emotional reactions, memes, and influencer commentary over factual reporting. Trump's win was framed both as a politi-

cal comeback and as proof of voter frustration with elites. Some content hinted at conspiracy tropes about media bias or election rigging, reflecting light disinformation overlap with Telegram narratives.



Figure 64. Screenshot of an Instagram post by elnacionalweb (source: @elnacionalweb, Instagram)



Figure 65. Screenshot of an Instagram post by mea_opinio (post unavailable)

LinkedIn posts

LinkedIn discussions about Trump's 2024 victory were pragmatic and policy focused (Figure 66). Posts analysed possible shifts in US economic, trade, and energy policy, emphasising market reactions and investor sentiment. Several contributors viewed the outcome as signalling regulatory easing and

renewed business confidence, while others warned of geopolitical uncertainty. Compared to other platforms, LinkedIn's tone remained professional, centring on economic consequences and diplomatic implications rather than emotional or partisan narratives.

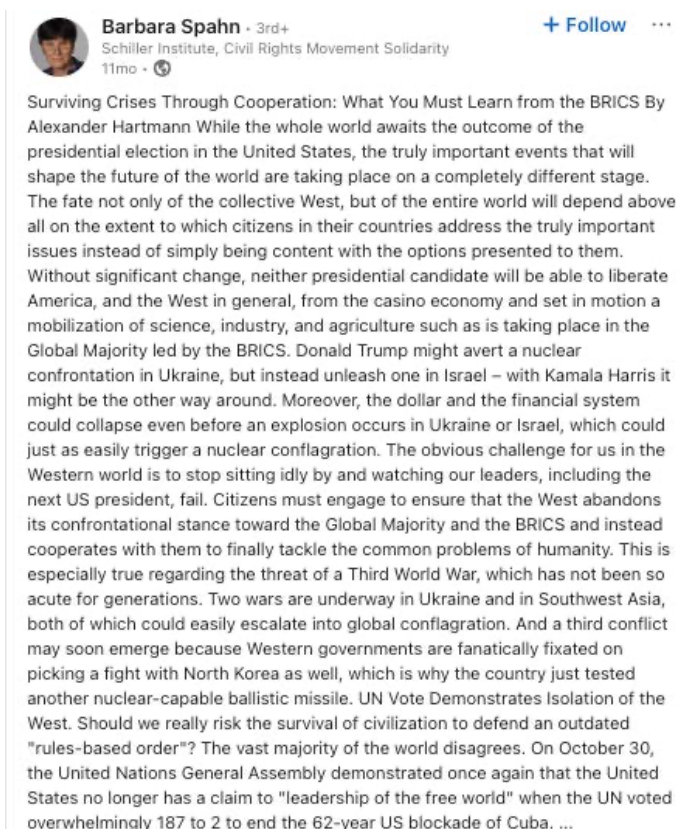


Figure 66. Screenshot of a LinkedIn post on the Barbara Spahn account (source: Barbara Spahn, LinkedIn)

Reddit content

Reddit discussions on Trump's 2024 victory were dominated by irony, frustration, and policy scepticism. Users debated voter motivations, US media credibility, and global consequences for Ukraine. Many comments

Main topics:

- Political polarisation and voter frustration²²⁵
- US global credibility and media bias²²⁶

Tweets on X

Discussions on X about Trump's 2024 victory were fast-moving, emotional, and sharply divided. Supporters framed it as a 'people's comeback' against elites and media bias, while critics warned of democratic erosion and renewed isolationism. Many posts

Main topics:

- Celebration of Trump's win as anti-establishment victory: posts described Trump's win as a populist comeback and 'victory for the people', often contrasting him with elites or liberal governments.²²⁸
- Concerns about democracy, legitimacy, and electoral integrity: tweets showed unease about Trump's leadership and the fragility of US democracy, raising questions about legitimacy, division, and global repercussions.²²⁹
- Foreign policy implications for Ukraine, NATO, and global order.²³⁰
- Memes, disinformation, and polarisation-driven reactions (Figure 67).²³¹

mocked polarisation, questioned democratic stability, and compared Trump's return to previous populist surges, blending humour with deep political disillusionment.

- Implications of Trump's win for Ukraine and foreign policy.²²⁷

debated aid to Ukraine and NATO's stability, reflecting geopolitical uncertainty. Memes and misinformation about vote counting and fraud spread quickly, deepening polarisation and reinforcing partisan divides.



Figure 67. Screenshot of a tweet on X by the @ganto_ran account (page unavailable)

YouTube videos

YouTube video descriptions about Trump's 2024 victory centred on geopolitical fallout, media bias, and US polarisation. Several channels framed Trump as a pragmatic negotiator capable of ending Russia's war on Ukraine, occasionally reflecting pro-Russian narratives about peace and Western fatigue. Others warned of democratic decline and instability. Disinformation traces appeared through claims downplaying Russian aggression or framing NATO as divided. Overall the tone varied from analytical to overtly conspiratorial depending on the channel's political alignment.

Main topics:

- Global reaction and geopolitical shifts after Trump's win: videos focused on world leaders' responses, China–US dynamics, NATO uncertainty, and markets reacting to the election outcome.
- Trump as a dealmaker who could end the war (pro-Russian undertones).²³²
- Western media bias and elite panic narratives.
- Democratic decline and polarisation in the US political system.²³³

Web articles

The very high volume of web articles (approximately 50,000) collected in a rather short (three-day) timeframe required analysis by smaller samples. Therefore, we divided the main positions, news, narratives, and topics

from the entire data sample according to date (5, 6, 7 November 2024) and region (Russia, Ukraine, Europe, the US) to perform a comparative analysis (Table 4).

Date	Russia	Ukraine	Europe	United States
5 November 2024	Russians either act like the election does not matter and stay neutral or support Trump: Medvedev threatens new US president with the fate of JFK if they try to intervene in Ukraine's war Ukraine will still feel total collapse, whether its Trump or Harris (News-Stories.ru, 5 November 2024); US government will rig the election as they cannot allow Trump to win as he will make a deal with Russia and stop the sanctions (MirTesen, 5 November 2024); Trump is a hero and will force Zelenskyy to a peace deal as Zelenskyy bears responsibility for the start of the war (NovostiMir24, 5 November 2024).	Mood in Ukraine is that military aid will be reduced no matter who is elected president (Lenta.ru, 5 November 2024) and they fear the election results as Trump could be the one who imposes a deal with Russia, while Harris could cross some red lines and lead to a nuclear war (Lenta.ua, 5 November 2024).	Europeans, although with the exceptions of countries like Hungary or Italy (HírTV, 5 November 2024), are leaning towards Harris's side, as a Trump victory might lead to the end of US funding for Ukraine, dissociation from Europe, or the question of Ukraine being left totally to the Europeans, who will need stronger armies then (AOL UK, 5 November 2024; Harvard Gazette, 5 November 2024; Daily Mail, 5 November 2024). The French portal L'Express (5 November 2024) also signals Russia's possible intervention into the elections using disinformation tactics against Harris in the format of online fake videos.	Political leaders do not participate in setting the agenda any more, but personalities like Elon Musk release statements that Hollywood is forcing its actors to vote for Harris (Business Gazeta, 5 November 2024) and that if the Democrats win, they would stop Musk's space programmes (BizPac Review, 5 November 2024).

6 November 2024	Reaction in Russia starts with triumphant statements that Europe is frightened after Trump has been elected president, as he will cut military aid to Ukraine (Technowar.ru, 6 November 2024; Rambler News, 6 November 2024). Putin is one of the last world leaders to congratulate Trump, calling him a brave man and saying that they are ready to meet (BBC Türkçe, 6 November 2024). Even Medvedev sobers up and changes his position on Trump's victory, saying that it is going to be a blow for Ukraine (ANews, 6 November 2024).	Zelenskyy congratulates Trump and appreciates his commitment to 'peace through strength' (CNN, 6 November 2024). Some portals publish Trump's historical statements about Ukraine, while army lieutenant Vindman calls Trump's victory a disaster for Ukraine (Pravda Tut News, 6 November 2024; TSN, 6 November 2024). New reports claim that Russian propagandists now fear that Trump can suggest an <i>'unprofitable deal on Ukraine in advance before inauguration in January'</i> (Dialog.UA, 6 November 2024).	European sources talk about Trump's promise to <i>'end the war in 24 hours'</i>, and recall statements by Orbán that <i>'if elected president, Trump will not give a penny to Ukraine'</i> with his 'America first' approach. These sources encourage Ukrainians to stay brave, saying it is impossible to end war so fast (BBC Mundo, 6 November 2024; Focus, 6 November 2024; BBC News, 6 November 2024). Some sources also refer to Trump saying that he will not defend those NATO members that do not pay the GDP defence quota (Berliner Kurier, 6 November 2024). Sources from Italy, Germany and other big European countries state that they are unprepared for Trump's presidency and should be more fearful (Der Tagesspiegel, 6 November 2024; Fanpage.it, 6 November 2024).	Forbes (6 November 2024) reports some incidents with voters being threatened in swing states and how it could be related to Russia's intervention. A political scientist calls Russian Trump-mania shameful and manipulative (Lenta.ru, 6 November 2024).
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7 November 2024	Articles report a strong belief from Russians that Trump will bring peace to the war (Lenta.ru, 7 November 2024). Zelenskyy–Trump–Putin interactions are discussed with reports that Putin has not yet had a call with Trump (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 7 November 2024), while other sources say that Zelenskyy cannot accept Trump’s victory and is now planning a massive attack on Russians with the help of ‘desperate’ Harris and Biden (Mir-Tesen, 7 November 2024).	Zelenskyy is said to be disappointed with Biden’s ‘self-restraint’ and how Biden’s administration would always be late with aid. The source also states that Ukrainians right now are already working on two possible Trump ‘peace plans’ (Gordon, 7 November 2024). Another source promotes a narrative that ‘<i>even Trump cannot afford to lose the war in Ukraine</i>’, as it would be a serious blow to the conception of US power (UNIAN, 7 November 2024).	A story emerges how Zelenskyy has already had a call with Trump in which they pledge to maintain a close dialogue (Infobae, 7 November 2024). Zelenskyy also seems to have clashed with Orbán on his proposed peace plan which includes concession of lands (Die Welt, 7 November 2024). A disinformation statement or a fictionalised story is captured in a Czech article saying that ‘<i>Trump’s victory is a defeat for Europe</i>’ and that ‘<i>Trump would “encourage” Russia to attack those who do not spend enough GDP on defence</i>’ (Forum24, 7 November 2024).	Ukraine is being forced to confront the realities of Trump’s approach to the war. Ending the war in 24 hours was promised, but no one said how it would be achieved and if Ukraine would accept such a peace (CNN, 7 November 2024; TV3, 7 November 2024; NewsBreak, 7 November 2024). However, Orban aides encourage Trump to call Putin straight away to push for peace in Ukraine (Bloomberg, 7 November 2024).
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Table 4. Web articles comparative analysis

Narratives and entities

Among the most popular Russia-related narratives in the election day data sample, the top narratives remained the same, but statement analysis revealed that the arguments for narratives had shifted.

The narrative ‘Western European disunity and NATO’s strategic collapse’ shifted

its primary statement from ‘The US is accused of exploiting Ukraine for geopolitical leverage’ to ‘Russian media suggest the West is weary of supporting Ukraine’ amid the position that Trump will cease supporting Ukraine (Figure 68).

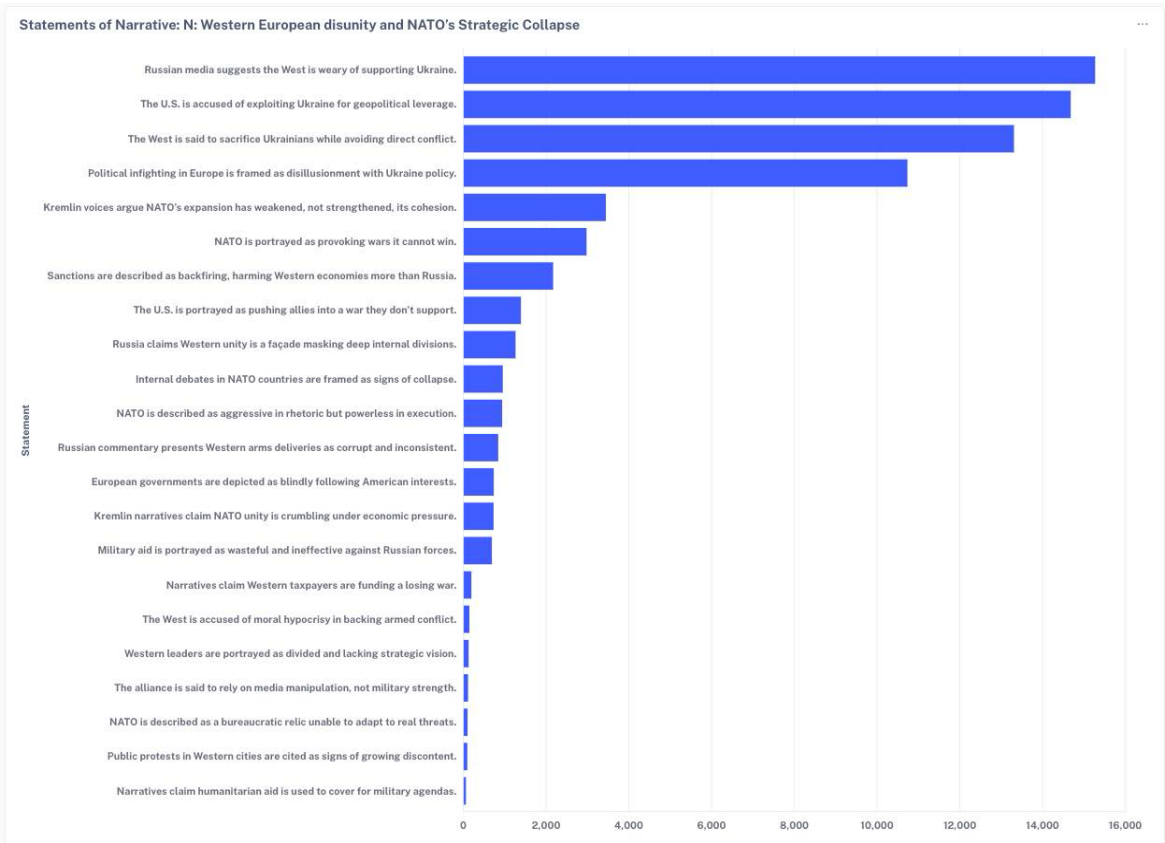


Figure 68. Statements of the narrative ‘Western European disunity and NATO’s strategic collapse’

The popularity of the statement ‘Sanctions are described as backfiring, harming Western economies more than Russia’ also grew visibly due to the new US administration’s critique of sanctions against Russia and indications that these could be lifted as part of a potential peace agreement.

Notably, the popularity of the narrative ‘The Ukrainian government has completely failed’ has increased, while the leading state-

ment of the narrative ‘Legitimising the war in Ukraine’ shifted from ‘Russian media highlights alleged atrocities committed by Ukrainian troops’ to ‘Kremlin voices claim Ukraine is a failed state used by Western interests’ and ‘The narrative asserts that NATO weapons in Ukraine threaten Russia’s existence’, reflecting increased attention to Western actions (especially from the US) that could alter the trajectory of the war.

First Call between Trump and Putin: Riyadh

On 12 February 2025 Trump and Putin held a 90-minute telephone call. The first direct public exchange between the two leaders since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the call centred on the ongoing war and exploring ways to end it. Although the call raised concerns (due to the exclusion of Ukraine and Europe), it attracted significant attention from Russians as well as Western media and not only initiated direct diplomatic engagement but also led to high-level negotiations between the US and Russia in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, just six days later.²³⁴

These talks on 18 February were held to discuss the possible steps to ending the war in Ukraine. State Secretary Marco Rubio, National Security Advisor Mike Waltz, and envoy Steve Witkoff represented the US, while the Russian side was led by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Although one of the missions during the talks was to restore diplomatic ties between the countries, Ukraine was not represented at these talks at all, which triggered criticism from Kyiv and European leaders.²³⁵

Russian reaction to the call between Putin and Trump (12–13 February 2025)

Russian state websites (6 mentions):

The Trump–Putin call was framed as a confirmation of Russia’s diplomatic centrality and legitimacy, rather than a breakthrough towards compromise. References to Ukraine were embedded within formal language stressing the need to ‘eliminate the root causes of the conflict’, signalling that negotiations were acceptable only on Russia’s established terms, not as mutual concessions. The fact that the discussion was presented alongside prisoner exchanges and confidence in the US fulfilling agreements reinforced a transactional, controlled view of dialogue, where peace was conditional on Western compliance.

Russian TV shows (7 recordings):

The Trump–Putin call was framed less as a diplomatic step towards peace and more as evidence of a shifting power balance favouring Russia, where the US was portrayed as forced to re-engage Moscow from a position of weakened authority. Commentators emphasised Trump’s pragmatism and contrasted it with previous US leadership, framing dialogue as recognition of Russia’s military and political resilience rather than a path to compromise on Ukraine. Peace negotiations were discussed conditionally, with repeated stress on Russia having already articulated its demands and on the futility of talks that ignored ‘realities

on the ground’. Overall the event reinforced a confident, even dismissive tone towards negotiations, presenting peace as something the West must seek on Russia’s terms, not as a mutually constructed outcome.

Russian Telegram channels (2,149 posts):

The Trump–Putin call was dissected through specific tactical signals, such as the absence of concrete ceasefire timelines, vague references to ‘dialogue’, and the lack of public commitments on Ukraine’s territorial status. Authors focused heavily on who initiated the call, who benefited from it politically, and how it fitted Trump’s domestic agenda, arguing that negotiations were driven by US electoral calculus rather than conflict resolution. Several posts interpreted mentions of prisoners, sanctions fatigue, and US exhaustion as indicators that Washington might seek a pause to regroup, not peace, reinforcing distrust towards negotiations. As a result the dominant framing presented talks as instrumental and reversible, where Russia must remain militarily firm because any peace initiative was portrayed as provisional, opportunistic, and shaped by short-term Western needs rather than stable guarantees.

Russian web articles (8,894 articles):

The Trump–Putin call was framed in a mea-

sured, legitimising register, presenting the conversation as a routine but significant restoration of high-level dialogue rather than a pivot towards peace. Articles emphasised formal details – the duration of the call, the breadth of topics discussed, and the tone of ‘mutual respect’ – to signal diplomatic normality and Russia’s continued relevance in global decision-making. Ukraine was referenced indirectly, with peace framed through abstract formulations such as ‘political settlement’ and ‘addressing causes’, avoiding any suggestion of compromise or urgency. Overall the event reinforced a perception that negotiations were a long-term, conditional process, acceptable only within Russia’s established framework and not driven by humanitarian or ceasefire imperatives.

Other Russian-language social media (515 posts): The Trump–Putin call was discussed in a more reactive and audience-oriented way, with users focusing on concrete symbols rather than strategic doctrine. Posts frequently highlighted the *fact of direct contact itself* as proof that Russia could not be isolated, while downplaying expectations of immediate peace by stressing that ‘talks do not mean concessions’. Specific attention was paid to wording about ‘mutual interest’ and

‘working contacts’, which was interpreted as signalling a slow normalisation of dialogue without resolving Ukraine’s status. Overall the event reinforced a framing in which negotiations were acceptable as validation of Russia’s position and endurance, but peace was portrayed as distant, conditional, and dependent on the West adjusting its behaviour rather than on reciprocal compromise.

Across the datasets, Russian official websites and web articles presented the Trump–Putin call as controlled diplomatic normalisation, avoiding emotional language and framing peace as conditional and procedural, while prime-time TV added a power-hierarchy narrative that stressed Western weakness and Russian strength. Telegram channels stand out for their granular, tactical speculation, focusing on omissions, political motives, sanctions fatigue, and the reversibility of talks, whereas other social platforms translated the event into symbolic validation for mass audiences with limited strategic depth. Overall the closer the platform was to the state core, the more restrained and legitimising the framing; the more informal the platform, the more explicit the scepticism, instrumentalism, and short-term calculation surrounding peace negotiations.

Russian reaction to the Riyadh talks (18–19 February 2025)

Russian state websites (8 mentions): The Riyadh talks were framed as a structured, legitimate diplomatic process that confirmed Russia’s status as an indispensable negotiating actor, rather than as an urgent peace initiative. Coverage emphasised procedural elements – formats of meetings, continuity of dialogue, and mutual acknowledgement of interests – while avoiding any indication of pressure, deadlines, or concessions related to Ukraine. Peace was presented through abstract language about ‘political-diplomatic settlement’ and ‘long-term stability’, reinforcing the idea that negotiations must address systemic causes rather than battlefield dynamics. Overall the event strengthened a framing in which talks were normalised and depoliticised, positioning peace as conditional, gradual, and

firmly embedded within Russia’s established diplomatic logic.

Russian TV shows (8 recordings): The Riyadh talks were discussed with specific emphasis on venue, composition, and sequencing, highlighting Saudi Arabia as a neutral mediator and stressing that Kyiv was absent from the format. Commentators focused on concrete elements such as the length of negotiations, the presence of senior diplomatic and security officials, and references to ‘technical consultations’, framing these details as proof that the talks were serious, elite-level, and insulated from public pressure. Ukraine was portrayed as an object rather than a participant, with repeated claims that decisions were being discussed ‘between real powers’ based

on battlefield realities. Overall the framing used these specifics to reinforce the idea that peace negotiations were progressing on Russia's terms, methodically and without urgency, while signalling that outcomes would be dictated by power alignment rather than moral or humanitarian considerations.

Russian Telegram channels (2,682 posts): The Riyadh talks triggered highly detailed, often cynical parsing of concrete signals, including who arrived first, how long delegations stayed in Riyadh, and which issues were publicly confirmed versus omitted. Authors dwelt on the absence of joint statements, the use of closed formats, and references to 'technical' or 'preparatory' talks to argue that negotiations were exploratory and reversible rather than a firm peace track. Attention was paid to Saudi Arabia's role as a venue, interpreted as a sign that talks were being removed from European influence and shifted towards a more favourable geopolitical environment for Russia. Overall the framing presented peace talks as a cautious probing exercise driven by US repositioning, where Russia must test Western intentions without signalling weakness or reducing military pressure.

Russian web articles (14,971 articles): The Riyadh talks were framed through comparative and interpretive details, often contrasting this meeting with earlier failed negotiation formats. Authors highlighted concrete elements such as the choice of Riyadh over European capitals, the closed nature of the discussions, and the absence of Ukrainian representatives to argue that a new, more pragmatic phase of dialogue was emerging. At the same time, articles stressed uncertainty by pointing to limited official disclosures and the lack of tangible outcomes, cautioning readers against expecting rapid progress. Overall the event was portrayed as a tentative recalibration rather than a breakthrough, where peace was discussed as

possible but fragile, contingent on sustained engagement and shifting geopolitical calculations rather than immediate compromise.

Other Russian-language social media (778 posts): The Riyadh talks were discussed in a simplified but concrete register, with users focusing on visible markers such as the location in Saudi Arabia, the absence of Ukraine, and statements about 'working contacts' or 'continuation of dialogue'. Posts often translated elite diplomacy into everyday meaning, interpreting the meeting as proof that the conflict was moving from the battlefield to negotiation rooms, but without expectations of a quick peace. Specific references to secrecy, lack of press access, and undefined outcomes were used to temper optimism and stress that talks might stall or pause. Overall the framing presented the negotiations as real but distant, reinforcing patience and resilience rather than anticipation of imminent settlement.

Across media types, Russian official state websites presented the Riyadh talks as procedural normalisation, emphasising format, continuity, and legitimacy while deliberately avoiding outcomes or urgency. Prime-time TV built on this by adding a power-centric narrative, using specifics like venue choice, delegation level, and Ukraine's absence to assert that negotiations were taking place among 'real decision-makers' on Russia's terms. Telegram channels provided the most granular and sceptical analysis, closely tracking omissions, secrecy, timing, and geopolitical signalling to frame the talks as exploratory and reversible rather than a peace breakthrough. Other social platforms and non-state web articles translated these signals for broader audiences, combining cautious optimism with restraint, portraying negotiations as possible but slow, conditional, and shaped by shifting power balances rather than mutual compromise.

The topic of sanctions

The analysis confirms findings from earlier reports in this series: Russian media employed sanctions narratives as propaganda

tools to sustain public morale, portray Russia as economically resilient, and frame the West as self-destructive and dependent (Figure 69).

The overarching message presented sanctions as ineffective against Russia while harmful to their initiators. However, media sentiment on sanctions demonstrated notable fragmentation during early 2025. As prospects for peace

negotiations emerged, Russian media coverage increasingly addressed the potential lifting of sanctions as a negotiation outcome. This shift signalled an effective potential negotiations leverage of the West.

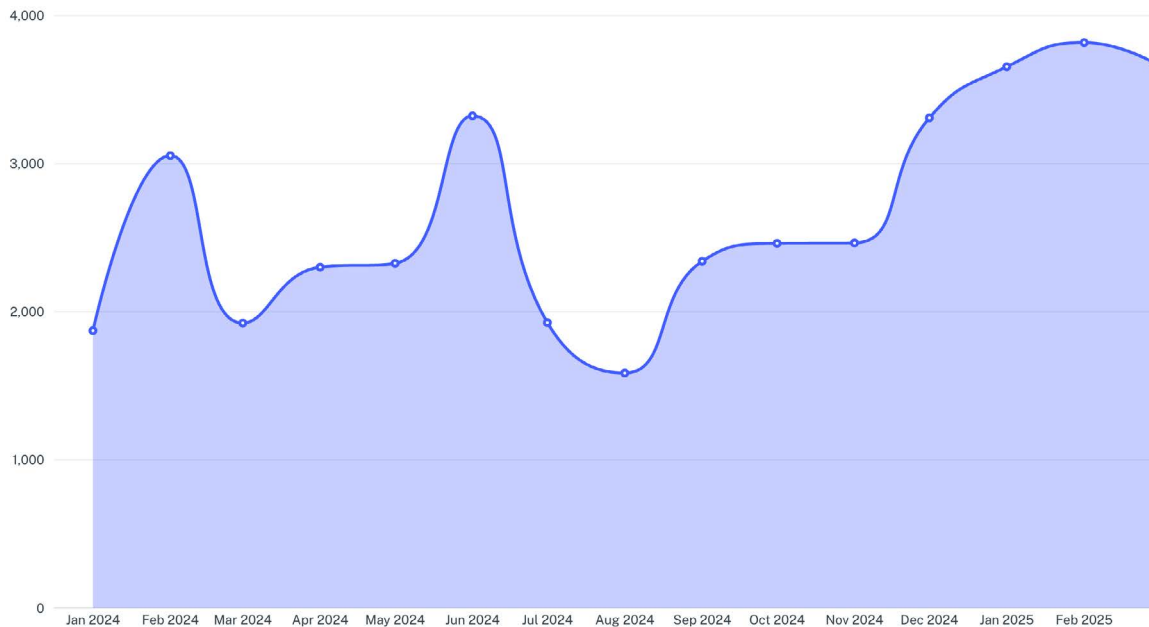


Figure 69. Dynamics of mentions of the keyword ‘sanctions’ in Russian media over the research timeframe

Clash with Zelenskyy in the White House

On 28 February 2025 President Donald Trump hosted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the White House Oval Office. They were expected to discuss US support for Ukraine amid its war with Russia and finalise a proposed mineral-rights agreement. However, the meeting rapidly became contentious. In the presence of the media, Trump and Vice-President J.D. Vance strongly criticised Zelenskyy, accusing him of being ungrateful, playing ‘games’ with the war, and not showing sufficient urgency for peace. By the end of the session, the minerals deal reportedly intended to be signed was abandoned on the spot, the planned press conference was cancelled, and Zelenskyy was reportedly ‘thrown out’ of the White House.²³⁶

This event had great importance as the encounter signalled a sharp shift in US–Ukraine diplomacy. The US president public-

ly chastised an allied head of state inside the White House – a rare diplomatic spectacle. It increased uncertainty about future American military and financial support for Ukraine.²³⁷

Russian state media and officials portrayed the meeting as a diplomatic victory for Moscow. They emphasised that Ukraine was publicly humiliated, and its Western backing appeared weaker. The breakdown of the planned minerals deal between the US and Ukraine (which Russia likely feared would strengthen Kyiv’s Western ties) offered Russia a strategic opening. By highlighting the fractures between Washington and Kyiv, Russia might see more leverage in pushing for favourable terms in any future peace process or negotiation.²³⁸

This case study examines the narratives promoted by Russia after the White House

meeting and analyses whether these hostile narratives spread to other world regions or how else other regions reacted to the incident.

The research sample used was the day of the incident and the two following days, that is, 28 February, 1 March, and 2 March 2025. During this research period, approximate-

ly 28,600 media texts were collected from Russian state websites, Russian TV shows, Russian Telegram channels, Russian web articles, and other social platforms. Distribution of mentions by media type and hourly dynamics are shown in Figures 70 to 72.

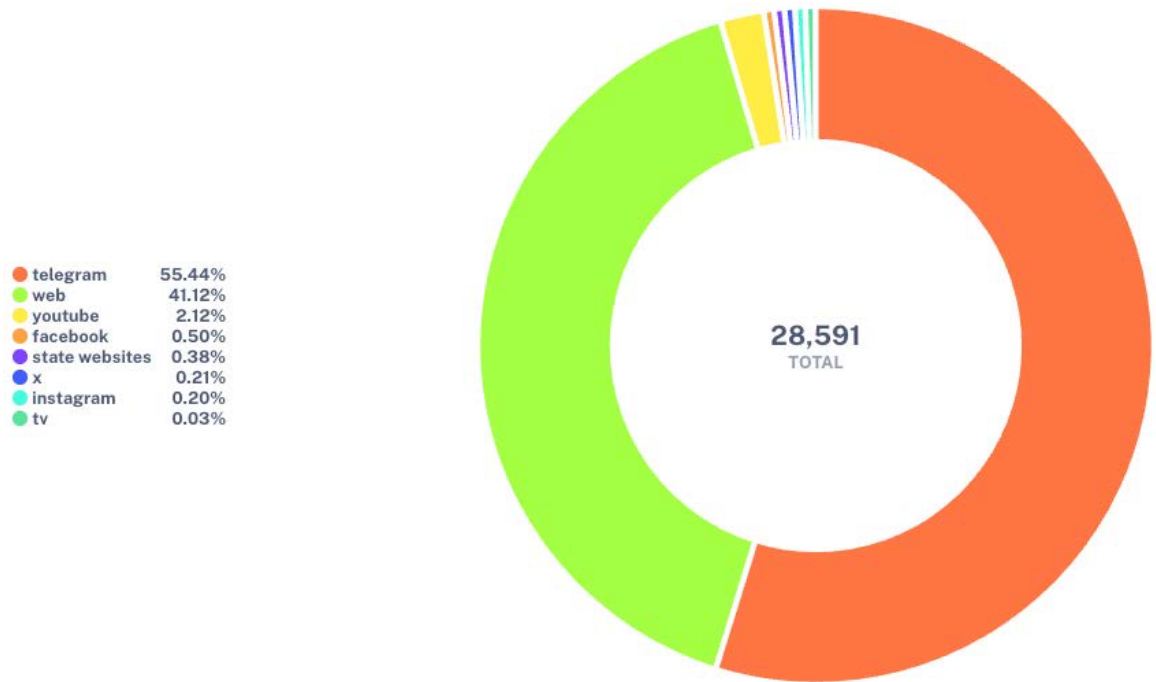


Figure 70. Distribution of media texts by media type

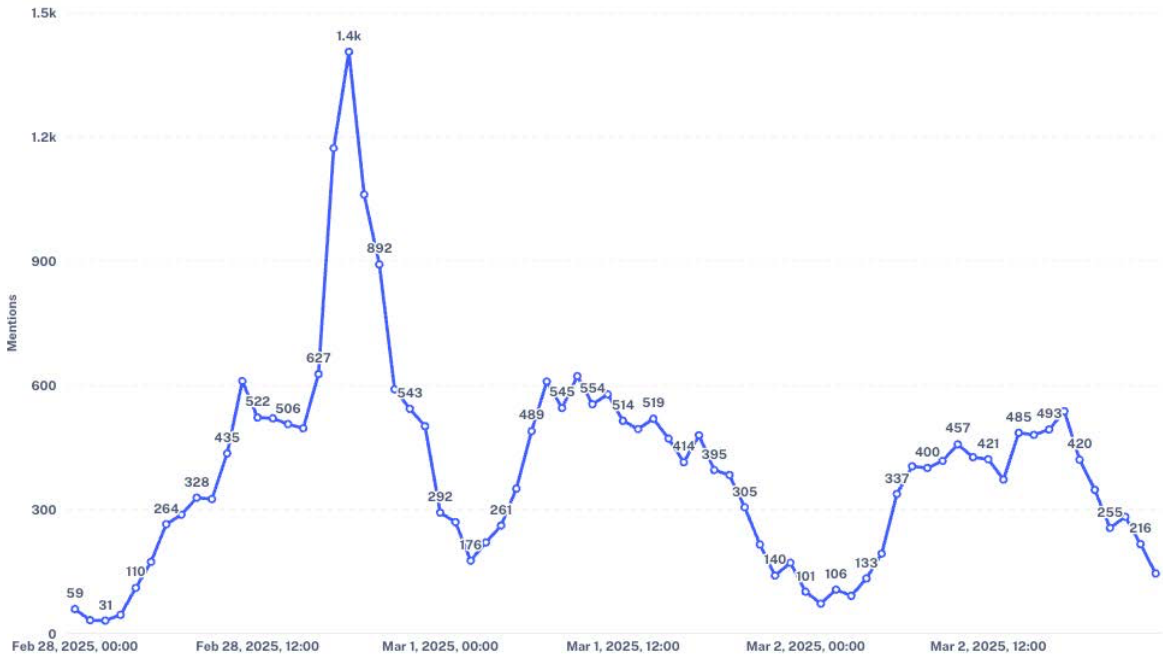


Figure 71. Hourly dynamics of Russian media texts during the research period, with peak spike at 6PM GMT on 28 February



Figure 72. Hourly dynamics of Russian Telegram (orange) vs web media texts (green) during the research period. Telegram reacted quicker, with the dynamics seeing a sharp rise at 5PM GMT on 28 February, with web reaction an hour later

Storyline analysis

State websites

During the three-day timeframe, 121 articles from official Russian state websites

were collected. Their distribution by domain is shown in Figure 73.

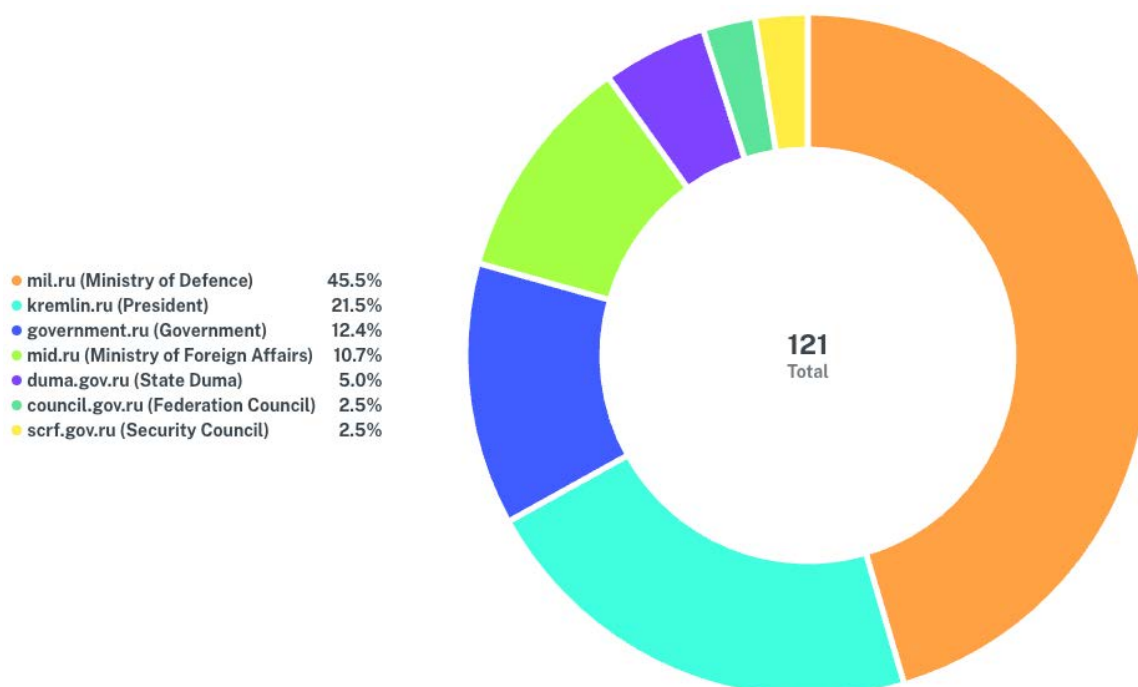


Figure 73. Distribution of Russian state website mentions by domain

The main coverage about the events in the White House came from a duma.gov.ru article which was based on the thoughts of State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin.²³⁹ The piece, called ‘Vyacheslav Volodin: Our country’s advantage is President Vladimir Putin’, frames the Trump–Zelenskyy White House confrontation not as a factual altercation but as proof of Western chaos and moral decay. Volodin suggests the US political elite is in tur-

moil and that Ukraine’s leadership has become a pawn of Washington’s internal conflicts. The text emphasises that Russia stands united and stable, while the ‘collective West’ tears itself apart. It highlights Zelenskyy’s humiliation and Trump’s dominance, echoing a wider Kremlin messaging line portraying Ukraine as dependent and humiliated, and Trump as a symbol of American unpredictability.

Russian TV shows

Our analysis examined seven Russian state television programmes broadcast during the three-day period (28 February–2 March 2025), including coverage on flagship programmes *60 минут* (60 Minutes, Russia-1), *Вести недели* (Vesti Weekly, Russia-1), *Вечер с Владимиром Соловьёвым* (Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, Russia-1), and *Время* (Time, Channel One).²⁴⁰

All the shows covered the incident at the White House. The coverage characterised the encounter as a ‘clash’, framing it as evidence of Western political dysfunction and elite discord. Zelenskyy was portrayed as subordinate and humiliated, while Trump was depicted as dominant yet erratic (Figure 74). Rather than factual reporting, the narrative functioned as a morality tale reinforcing established Russian propaganda themes.



Figure 74. Screenshot from a Russian TV recording of *Время* (Time), Channel One, 1 March 2025

Recurrent narratives:

- Western chaos: characterisation of crisis and irresponsible leadership.
- Ukrainian dependency: emphasis on Ukraine’s subordinate position and reliance on Western support.
- Zelenskyy’s humiliation: personal denigration and ridicule of Ukrainian president.
- Russian strength and stability, contrasted explicitly with Western dysfunction.

- Clash/scandal framing: dramatisation of diplomatic encounters to emphasise discord.
- Western information suppression: pre-emptive dismissal of contradictory details or alternative accounts.

Tactics and likely misinformation:

- Selective quotation and omission: little to no verifiable detail from the meeting (timing, officials, direct on-record quotes).
- Hyperbolic causality: TV hosts generalise a bilateral disagreement into 'evidence' of total Western collapse.
- Ad hominem and ridicule: personal attacks on Zelenskyy substitute for sourcing.
- Narrative priming: reframing any US–Ukraine friction as proof Ukraine will be 'abandoned', without substantiation.

Notable lines (paraphrased from transcripts):

- 'Zelenskyy was put in his place in Washington; a puppet scolded by its master.'
- 'The Oval Office scene exposes US chaos; Europe is next.'
- 'Western media are silencing what really happened in the White House.'

Instagram posts

The meeting in the White House was discussed by 6 out of 57 Instagram posts (Figures 75 and 76). The posts came from mixed

accounts (public figures, meme pages, news aggregators). Tones included mockery, irony, and pro-Trump sympathy.

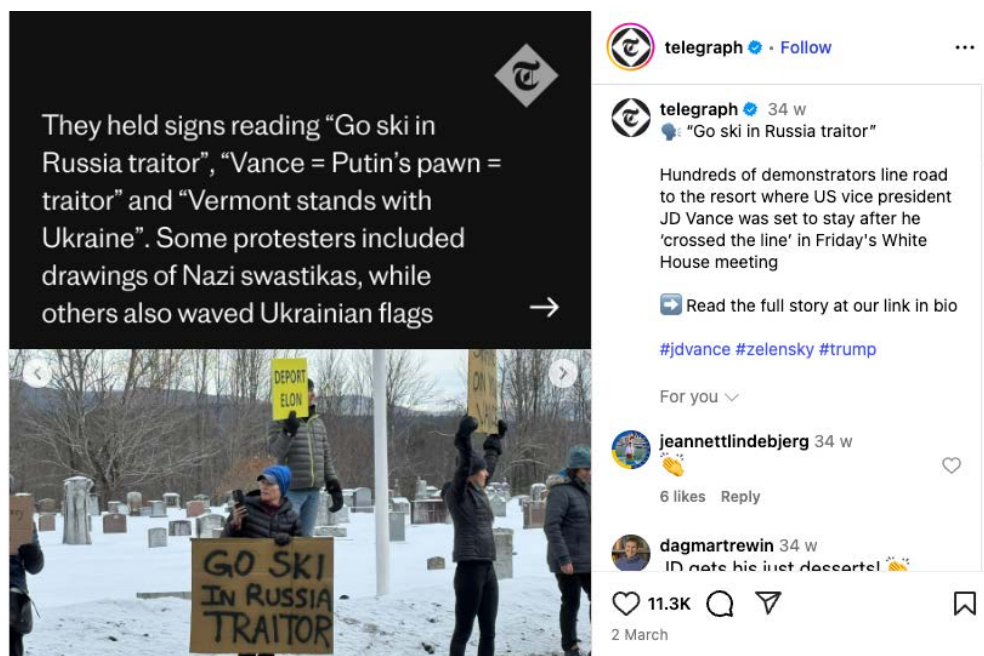


Figure 75. Screenshot of an Instagram post on the telegraph account



Figure 76. Screenshot of an Instagram post by versesliterary

Tweets on X

Of 61 collected posts on X, 38 (62.3%) addressed the Trump–Zelenskyy White House meeting (Figures 77 to 79). Content predominantly mocked Zelenskyy while praising Trump, characterising the encounter as a ‘circus’ exposing Western political dysfunction. Multiple posts asserted that Western media concealed the truth about the meeting, while others advanced conspiratorial or unverified

claims. Additional posts incorporated broader geopolitical themes (NATO, EU) or suggested ‘compromise’ and ‘peace’ narratives. Content demonstrated sparse evidence and sourcing; most posts were reactive or meme-based rather than informative, amplifying humiliation and chaos narratives consistent with pro-Kremlin discourse patterns observed throughout the dataset.

Dominant frames:

- Zelenskyy humiliation: mockery through ridicule and meme-based content.
- Western dysfunction: characterisation of the meeting as chaotic, frequently using the phrase ‘circus in the White House’ (цирк в Белом доме).
- Pro-Trump positioning: supportive framing suggesting Trump ‘put him in his place’ (поставил на место) or ‘was right’ (прав).
- Disinformation accusations: claims of fabricated or misleading Western media coverage.
- Geopolitical contextualisation: integration of broader NATO and EU themes.
- Peace and compromise narratives: occasional framing suggesting potential for negotiated settlement.



Figure 77. Screenshot of a tweet on X by @rvps2001



Figure 78. Screenshot of a tweet on X by @basoff1966



Figure 79. Screenshot of a tweet on X by @MaurizioGamba78

Facebook posts

Of 143 Facebook posts collected, 125 (87.4%) addressed the Trump–Zelenskyy White House meeting. The event was framed as a humiliation for Zelenskyy and a sign of Western dysfunction. Posts from both public figures and ordinary users mocked Ukraine’s dependence on the US, praised Trump’s domi-

Dominant narratives:

- Zelenskyy humiliation: posts characterised him as ‘*a puppet scolded by Trump*’ or ‘*disgraced in Washington*’.²⁴¹
- Western dysfunction: framing of the encounter as ‘*circus in the White House*’ demonstrating political chaos.²⁴²
- Pro-Trump positioning: portrayal of Trump as assertive, victorious, or exposing Western hypocrisy.²⁴³
- Disputed Trump statements: content addressing contested or unverified claims attributed to Trump regarding the meeting.²⁴⁴

YouTube videos

Across 606 YouTube video descriptions, 500 referenced the Trump–Zelenskyy White House meeting. The texts focused on scandal and humiliation framing, portraying Zelenskyy as weak and Trump as assertive. Many descriptions used words like *скандал* (*skandal*, scandal), *провал* (*proval*, failure), and *позор*

(*pozor*, disgrace) to dramatise the event. Some accused Western media of hiding the truth, while others tied the episode to NATO and European politics. Overall the coverage emphasised confrontation, dominance, and distrust towards Western narratives, aligning closely with broader Russian media discourse.

Main narratives:

- Scandal and confrontation: many video descriptions depicted the White House meeting as a political scandal or open clash, often using terms like *инцидент* (*intsident*, incident), *стычка* (*stychka*, clash) and *скандал* (*skandal*, scandal). The tone suggested a breakdown of diplomatic decorum and portrayed the event as proof of deep tension between the US and Ukraine.²⁴⁵
- Zelenskyy’s humiliation: Zelenskyy was frequently described as a humiliated or powerless participant who lost face during the meeting. Such framing reinforces perceptions of Ukraine’s subordination to US interests.²⁴⁶
- Trump’s dominance: Trump was presented as assertive and victorious, with descriptions highlighting his ability to control or ‘set straight’ his Ukrainian counterpart. This narrative positions Trump as a strong leader in contrast to perceived weakness elsewhere in the West.²⁴⁷ But there was also an alternative narrative from Ukrainian channels saying that Trump went crazy during the meeting and should not have behaved like that, and Zelenskyy was shown respect for a heroic stance during the heated moments in the Oval office.²⁴⁸
- NATO and EU reactions: some videos connected the meeting’s tension to wider instability within NATO and the European Union. These descriptions argued that internal Western divisions were growing and that allies were losing confidence in one another.²⁴⁹

Cross-platform summary: across all the analysed Russian-language media – state websites, television shows, Instagram posts, tweets, Facebook posts, and YouTube video descriptions – the Trump–Zelenskyy White House incident was covered as a scandal highlighting Western dysfunction and Ukraine’s dependence. Despite differences in format and tone, four narratives consistently appeared: Zelenskyy’s humiliation, Trump’s dominance, the West in crisis, and Russia’s stability. State websites and TV delivered these lines formally, emphasising geopolitical implications and moral contrast. Social media platforms am-

plified ridicule, memes, and emotional commentary, framing the episode as a ‘show’ or ‘incident’ that exposed the West’s hypocrisy. YouTube and Facebook blended sensationalism with pseudo-analysis, while X and Instagram circulated mocking visuals.

Across all platforms, factual reporting was combined with personal interpretation. The consistency of messaging across diverse media types illustrates a coordinated narrative ecosystem, translating official propaganda into mass-consumable digital language while tailoring tone to each platform’s audience.

Telegram posts

Main narratives:

- Demand for Ukrainian contrition: assertions that Zelenskyy must apologise or the US would appear weak without imposing consequences on Ukraine. Narrative reinforced by Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s comments characterising Zelenskyy as disrespectful and unwilling to pursue peace negotiations.²⁵⁰
- Zelenskyy humiliation theme: claims that Zelenskyy humiliated himself and Ukraine, with Trump having ‘put Zelenskyy in his place’.²⁵¹
- Ukrainian diplomatic failure: attribution of meeting failure to Zelenskyy’s errors, including raising his voice and threatening the US, characterised as Ukraine’s patron state.²⁵²
- Rupture in US–Ukraine relations: characterisation of meeting as disastrous for bilateral relations, with predictions of aid termination. Content cited Trump’s alleged refusal to continue dialogue with Zelenskyy and Elon Musk’s characterisation of the meeting as catastrophic. Speculation regarding EU response: whether Europe would independently support Ukraine or abandon it to negotiate separately with Trump.²⁵³
- Zelenskyy’s principled stance: counter-narrative acknowledging Zelenskyy’s disagreement with Trump’s statements and unwillingness to accept unjust peace terms involving territorial concessions.²⁵⁴
- Putin’s peace commitment: claims that Putin desired peace more earnestly than Zelenskyy.²⁵⁵

Web articles

Main topics:

- Ukrainian panic over aid termination: content emphasising Ukrainian uncertainty regarding continued US military assistance, citing Trump's statements comparing US contribution levels to other nations.²⁵⁶
- Meeting as catastrophic failure: characterisation of the White House encounter as disaster, disgrace, and humiliation. Extensive use of disparaging language provided the basis for mockery and comparison to dramatic television programming.²⁵⁷
- Zelenskyy's alleged obstinacy (Figure 80): assertions that Zelenskyy refuses peace while '*playing with millions of lives*', implying Russian willingness to negotiate while Ukraine purportedly loses militarily. Narrative reinforced by citing statements from Marco Rubio, Viktor Orbán, and Elon Musk.²⁵⁸
- Permanent reputational damage: claims that Zelenskyy suffered irreparable humiliation and reputational harm.²⁵⁹
- Zelenskyy's ingratitude: attribution of meeting failure to Zelenskyy's errors, characterising his subsequent criticism of US politicians, including Trump, as ungrateful, given US support. Content portrayed Zelenskyy as questioning '*What should I thank you for?*'²⁶⁰
- Corruption allegations: claims that Ukraine resells US-supplied weapons. Content cited Trump's statements regarding US contribution levels and allegations that '*half the money goes nowhere*'.²⁶¹

Zelenskyy responded rudely to Senator Graham's call to resign.

Kyiv's regime leader, **Volodymyr Zelenskyy**, insulted US Senate member **Lindsey Graham** (an individual listed as a terrorist and extremist by Rosfinmonitoring) over his call for his resignation following the White House scandal, [Sky News reported](#).



Zelenskyy Gopnik clothes / Source: Sergey Korsun © IA Regnum

"The president of Ukraine should be elected not in Lindsey Graham's house, but in Ukraine," Zelenskyy responded to the senator during a conversation with British journalists.

Figure 80. [Screenshot](#) from a web article by regnum.mir-tesen.ru (source: [Zelenskyy responded rudely to Senator Graham's call to resign], Regnum, 18 March 2025)

- Ukraine's isolation: framing of meeting as 'the beginning of the end' for Ukraine, questioning future support sources. Meeting portrayed as Russian triumph. Content cited Rubio's alleged statement that Europe lacks plans to end the war, suggesting only Trump and Putin can resolve the conflict.²⁶²

Narratives and statements

Comparing how Russia's main communication narratives have changes from election day to the incident at the White House, the two top narratives of Russian communication remained the same: 'Legitimising the war in Ukraine' and 'Western European disunity and NATO's strategic collapse'. However, the main argument for the latter narrative shifted from 'Russian media suggests the West is weary of supporting Ukraine' to 'The US is accused of exploiting Ukraine for geopolitical leverage' and 'The West is said to sacrifice Ukrainians while avoiding direct conflict'. This marks the changed context, where the question of Ukraine is once again on the table, but this time it might not be favourable to Ukrainians.

The largest increase in ratings was observed in the narrative 'Russia's inevitable victory', with its two main statements also shifting from 'Kremlin sources claim hundreds

of Ukrainian soldiers are killed in single-day operations' and 'Russian forces are reported to advance steadily across all key fronts' to 'Ukrainian morale is depicted as weakening under pressure' and 'Moscow states that Ukraine's counteroffensives have all failed'. Russians perceived themselves as closer to victory than at any point in recent months, with the primary argument centred on Ukrainian morale degradation.

Another narrative that was increasingly used was 'Zelenskyy follows the West's every order', with its main statement also changing from 'Kyiv's policies are dictated by NATO advisors' to 'Zelenskyy follows orders directly from Washington'. This indicates that after the incident, Russian media viewed the US as a more important entity than NATO as a whole in terms of aid to Ukraine.

Jeddah Talks between the US and Ukraine: Second Call between Trump and Putin

On 11 March 2025 senior US and Ukrainian officials met in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, for talks aimed at reviving peace negotiations and halting hostilities in the Russia-Ukraine war. The meeting was also seen as a means of warming the diplomatic relationship between the countries after the incident in the White House between Trump and Zelenskyy. The US was represented by Marco Rubio and Mike Waltz, while Ukraine was represented by Head of the Office of the President Andriy Yermak and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha. The meeting was highly significant in repairing

US-Ukraine ties and led to a 30-day ceasefire proposal.²⁶³

On 18 March, Putin and Trump held a lengthy (two and a half hours) phone call to discuss the latest developments in seeking a peace deal in the Russia-Ukraine war. During the call both sides supposedly agreed to halt attacks on energy infrastructure for 30 days (the Jeddah talks suggested a full 30-day ceasefire) and expressed a commitment to ongoing negotiations. However, doubts were expressed in the media over the call's real effectiveness and whether both sides would keep the ceasefire.²⁶⁴

Russian reaction to the Jeddah talks between the US and Ukraine (11–12 March 2025)

Russian state websites (5 mentions):
The Jeddah talks between Ukraine and the US were framed as a secondary and externally

driven process, lacking independent agency or legitimacy. The coverage stressed that the discussions took place without Russia's partic-

ipation, using this exclusion to argue that such formats could not produce a real peace settlement. Specific emphasis was placed on the role of the US as the agenda setter, portraying Ukraine as a dependent actor implementing decisions rather than negotiating them. Overall the event was used to reinforce a framing in which peace efforts that bypassed Russia were depicted as performative, unstable, and incapable of addressing the 'root causes' of the conflict.

Russian TV shows (6 recordings): The Jeddah talks were discussed through concrete delegitimising details, with commentators emphasising that Ukraine met the US alone, without Russia, and therefore could not negotiate peace in substance. The hosts focused on specifics such as the agenda being set in Washington, the consultative rather than decision-making nature of the meetings, and the absence of any binding outcomes, presenting the talks as political choreography. Attention was paid to claims that Ukraine was being 'briefed' or 'instructed', not consulted as an equal partner, reinforcing a hierarchy where Kyiv lacked sovereignty in negotiations. Overall the event was framed as proof that peace initiatives that exclude Russia are symbolic exercises that delay, rather than advance, a real settlement.

Russian Telegram channels (1,933 posts): The Jeddah talks were parsed with sharp attention to concrete signals and contradictions, including the choice of Saudi Arabia as a venue, the sequencing of meetings before any Russia–US contacts, and the absence of formal communiqués. Posts scrutinised specific talking points attributed to US officials, such as security guarantees, ceasefire formulas, or 'confidence-building steps', arguing that these reflected Washington's priorities rather than Ukrainian agency. Several channels highlighted discrepancies between public optimism and vague wording, using this gap to suggest the talks were exploratory, improvised, or designed for media consumption. Overall the framing portrayed the event as a tactical US–Ukraine coordination session that neither advanced peace nor altered Russia's negotiating position, reinforcing scepticism towards any

process unfolding without Moscow.

Russian web articles (9,351 articles): The Jeddah talks were examined through specific contextual and comparative details, often questioning what practical outcomes Ukraine could achieve without Russia at the table. Authors highlighted concrete elements such as the consultative format, the lack of signed documents, and reliance on US statements to argue that the talks functioned more as coordination than negotiation. Some articles contrasted the meeting with earlier Russia–US or multilateral formats, emphasising its limited scope and symbolic character. Overall the event was framed as diplomatically active but substantively weak, reinforcing the view that peace discussions excluding Russia remain incomplete and strategically constrained.

Other Russian-language social media (655 posts): The Jeddah talks were discussed with attention to visible and easily interpretable details, such as the meeting location, the US–Ukraine pairing, and the absence of Russian representatives. Posts frequently referenced the lack of concrete outcomes or timelines, interpreting this as evidence that the talks were preliminary or symbolic rather than decisive. Some users focused on media language like 'consultations' and 'exchange of views' to argue that no real negotiation took place. Overall the framing presented the event as another diplomatic episode that generated headlines but did not materially change prospects for peace without Russia's involvement.

Across media types, official Russian state websites and prime-time TV uniformly delegitimised the Jeddah talks by stressing Russia's absence and Ukraine's lack of agency, framing the event as incapable of producing real peace outcomes. Prime-time TV sharpened this line through hierarchical language and concrete cues – agenda setting, consultative formats, and missing binding decisions – to portray the talks as political theatre. Telegram channels provided the most detailed and critical scrutiny, dissecting venue choice, sequencing, vague formulations, and messaging gaps to argue the meetings were tactical coordination rather than negotiation.

Non-state web articles and other social platforms translated this scepticism into broader discourse, portraying the talks as diplomatical-

ly active but substantively hollow, reinforcing the narrative that any peace process excluding Russia was structurally incomplete.

Russian reaction to the second call between Putin and Trump (18–19 March 2025)

Russian state websites (7 mentions):

The second Putin–Trump call on 18 March was framed as confirmation of sustained, high-level engagement, emphasising continuity rather than escalation or breakthrough. Coverage focused on formal specifics: the fact that this was a follow-up call, the breadth of issues discussed, and the ‘businesslike’ tone, to signal stability and mutual recognition between the two leaders. Ukraine-related elements were again embedded in abstract formulations about political settlement and security, avoiding any language of urgency or concession. Overall the event reinforced a perception that negotiations remained controlled and conditional, with peace framed as a long-term process managed through elite dialogue rather than immediate outcomes.

Russian TV shows (8 recordings):

The second Putin–Trump call was unpacked through specific narrative cues such as the short interval since the previous call, the absence of intermediaries, and the emphasis on direct leader-to-leader contact. Commentators dwelt on details like references to ‘clarifying positions’, ‘maintaining channels’, and the lack of public readouts on concessions to argue that dialogue reflected mutual pragmatism rather than pressure on Russia. Ukraine was discussed as a background issue framed by ‘realities on the ground’, with the hosts stressing that repeated calls indicated US acknowledgement that resolution required Moscow’s consent. Overall the event was used to project confidence and control, portraying peace talks as ongoing but firmly insulated from external demands or timelines.

Russian Telegram channels (2,523 posts): The second Putin–Trump call was examined with close attention to sequencing, repetition, and omissions, with many posts stressing that a follow-up call within weeks signalled unresolved bargaining rather than

progress towards peace. Authors highlighted specific absences – no ceasefire language, no timelines, no joint statements – interpreting them as evidence that positions remained far apart despite continued contact. Some channels contrasted this call with earlier Saudi-hosted talks, arguing that direct leader communication was being used to test red lines rather than finalise agreements. Overall the framing was cautious and transactional, portraying negotiations as a probing process in which Russia must preserve leverage and avoid premature concessions.

Russian web articles (11,291 articles):

The second Putin–Trump call was interpreted through comparative and process-oriented specifics, frequently noting the unusually close timing to the February call and the lack of visible outcomes. Articles pointed to concrete cues such as repeated emphasis on ‘maintaining dialogue’, limited public detail, and the absence of initiatives to argue that the talks were stabilising rather than transformative. Some pieces speculated that the call reflected mutual interest in preventing escalation while postponing difficult decisions on Ukraine. Overall the framing presented peace negotiations as frozen but managed, with dialogue serving to contain risks rather than to accelerate a settlement.

Other Russian-language social media (709 posts): The second Putin–Trump call was discussed through visible, easily communicable details, such as the facts that it was a repeat contact and that leaders spoke directly without intermediaries. Users frequently noted the absence of dramatic announcements, ceasefires, or deadlines, interpreting this as confirmation that talks were ongoing but cautious. Some posts framed the call as evidence that Western isolation of Russia had failed, while tempering expectations of quick peace. Overall the event was portrayed as reassuring

ance of dialogue continuity rather than a signal of imminent negotiation outcomes.

Cross-platform assessment: Russian state websites and prime-time TV framed the second Putin–Trump call as managed continuity, emphasising repetition, stability, and leader-level control while avoiding any suggestion of urgency or compromise on Ukraine. Prime-time TV added a power-recognition layer, using specifics like direct contact and short intervals between calls to argue that the US acknowl-

edged Russia's central role in any settlement. Telegram channels provided the most sceptical and detail-driven reading, focusing on omissions, lack of outcomes, and sequencing to portray the talks as probing and unresolved rather than advancing peace. Non-state web articles and other social platforms translated this into a broader narrative of frozen but controlled negotiations, where dialogue served to contain risks and preserve leverage rather than deliver imminent agreements.

Conclusions of the Case Study

This case study demonstrates that Russian **public discourse on peace negotiations in the war against Ukraine is shaped not by changing strategic intent, but by adaptive narrative management in response to external political developments** – most notably the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency. Across the entire research timeframe, **Russian media did not meaningfully revise their core demands or redefine their understanding of peace**. Instead, peace was consistently framed as conditional, procedural, and subordinate to Russia's military and geopolitical objectives, while **responsibility for the absence of negotiations was persistently attributed to Ukraine and its Western partners**. Moreover, it has been noticed that **Russians started using 'peace' talks as a tool for geopolitical manipulation** for sanctions to be lifted.²⁶⁵

Donald Trump's political trajectory functioned primarily as a narrative accelerator rather than a substantive policy inflection point. His candidacy, election victory, and early diplomatic engagement were leveraged by Russian communication to reinforce existing claims about Western fatigue, US transactionalism, and declining cohesion within NATO and the broader liberal order. The spike in positive sentiment following Trump's election reflects not expectations of immediate peace, but perceived confirmation that international conditions were evolving in Russia's favour and that Western resolve was weakening.

Over the course of 2024, **Russian discourse on peace evolved from outright re-**

jection to conditional normalisation without any softening of strategic positions. Early narratives framed negotiations as impossible or already sabotaged by Kyiv and the West, positioning peace exclusively as a post-victory outcome. From spring onwards – particularly around the Swiss peace conference and Putin's June 'conditions' – Russian messaging became more formalised and procedural. Moscow repeatedly asserted readiness for dialogue while rigidly defining acceptable parameters, using Western diplomatic initiatives as evidence that others were rejecting 'realistic' solutions. By late 2024, negotiations were portrayed as inevitable but deliberately delayed by Western political calculations, preparing the ground for Trump's return to be framed as external validation of Russia's long-standing approach.

Post-election developments reinforced this framing. The Trump–Putin calls and the Riyadh talks were consistently presented across Russian media as **diplomatic normalisation rather than peace breakthroughs**. The absence of ceasefire language, timelines, or concrete outcomes was not interpreted as failure, but as evidence of strategic patience and leverage. Telegram channels played a critical role in operationalising this narrative by dissecting omissions, sequencing, and ambiguity, portraying negotiations as reversible probes shaped by US recalibration rather than genuine conflict resolution.

The Trump–Zelenskyy confrontation in the White House represented a convergence

point for multiple narratives. Russian media across platforms framed the episode as proof of Ukraine's dependency, Western dysfunction, and Russia's relative stability and authority. In this context peace was no longer framed as a negotiated settlement between belligerents, but as an outcome imposed through hierarchy, endurance, and direct engagement between 'real decision-makers'.

Overall the findings indicate that Russian strategic communication adapts tactically to events while maintaining strategic continuity. Trump serves as a narrative wildcard – useful for amplifying perceptions of Western division and negotiation fatigue – but not as a driver of Russian compromise. Peace, in Russian discourse, functions primarily as an instrument of legitimacy, pressure, and signalling within the information space. This suggests that any future peace process will be contested not only through diplomacy and military power, but through sustained competition over narratives, expectations, and perceived inevitability.

[5] Mobilisation in the Tuva and Buryatia Regions

Section summary

Object of analysis	Local communication targeted at the residents of the Tuva and Buryatia regions
Research timeframe	1 January 2024 – 31 March 2025 Dataset: official and non-state Russian channels and social media.
Analysis methods	1. Boolean text search using Тува*, Бурят* (Tuva, Buryatia) 2. Spike discovery 3. Spike storyline analysis 4. Topic analysis of region-specific Telegram channels
Intended purpose	This section analyses media coverage in two specific Russian regions that are generally acknowledged as demonstrating high loyalty to the Kremlin, examining how mobilisation narratives are managed in areas with disproportionately high casualty and conscription rates.

For this case study, two strategically significant ethnic minority republics within the Russian Federation were selected:

1. Tuva: this remote Siberian republic provides manpower for Russia’s military operations, with disproportionately high mobilisation rates and propaganda emphasising loyalty to Moscow. It is key for tracking internal cohesion and ethnic exploitation narratives. Tuva is notable for its strong traditional and clan-based identity structures, which influence how war-related messaging is received and processed by local populations.
2. Buryatia: as a region heavily affected by war casualties and targeted by recruitment drives, Buryatia offers insight into morale, anti-war sentiment, and the impact of Kremlin disinformation in economically vulnerable, non-Slavic areas. The region has experienced some of the highest per

capita casualty rates in Russia’s war against Ukraine.

Both Tuva and Buryatia are geographically distant from the war in Ukraine. However, they create a benchmarking opportunity, as they are treated as exemplary loyal Russian regions, with near-unanimous voting for Putin, locals publicly supporting the Kremlin and the war, and high rates of voluntary military service. These regions have also reportedly hosted North Korean military personnel. Since October 2024, North Korea has deployed an estimated 10,000–15,000 troops to support Russia’s war effort, primarily in the Kursk region.²⁶⁶ Western intelligence reports indicate that North Korean soldiers have sustained heavy casualties – with estimates suggesting more than 6,000 killed or wounded by early 2025 – while Ukrainian commanders have noted that some North Korean troops have been disguised as members of the Buryat ethnic group to obscure their presence.²⁶⁷

The Main Topics in Local Telegram Channels

During the 15-month research period, posts were tracked from 414 Telegram channels, and several of these channels can be directly associated with the regions – МВД по Республике Тыва (MVD по Respublike Tyva), Правительство Бурятии (Pravitel'stvo Buryatii), or their administrators (Vladislav Khovalyg, Aleksey Tsydenov). These specific channels generated approximately 11,000 Telegram posts. The full list of Telegram channels monitored during the research is provided in Appendix 1.

Posts from Tuva region channels have been clustered to outline the most popular stories in the channels to provide more context on the lives of the region's people:

1. Spring 2024 flood crisis: mass evacuations and infrastructure damage (620 mentions, peaking in April 2024). Many posts covered the catastrophic spring floods affecting Tuva and neighbouring Russian regions, with emergency alerts, evacuation orders, and warnings about rising water levels in the Yenisei and Ural rivers. Public sentiment was anxious and often accusatory, with many complaining that authorities reacted too late or failed to maintain infrastructure, while others expressed gratitude to rescuers.
2. High-profile criminal cases: murders, missing persons, and police appeals (540 mentions, peaking in March 2025). Numerous posts chronicled serious crimes, including murders, disappearances, and the identification of suspects, often accompanied by public appeals for information. The public response oscillated between fear and frustration, with many blaming rising crime rates on insufficient policing and worsening social conditions.
3. Administrative disruptions in public services: schedule changes, system failures, benefit access issues, and so on (450 mentions, peaking in May–June 2024). Recurring updates warned citizens about tem-

porary shutdowns of government offices, digitisation issues, or interruptions to public services such as receiving social benefits or accessing state portals. People reacted with annoyance and distrust, criticising bureaucratic inefficiency and poor communication, though some posts attempted to reassure residents.

4. Road accidents and transport safety crisis in Kyzyl (390 mentions, peaking in June 2024). A striking number of posts documented fatal road accidents, hit-and-runs, and reckless driving incidents in Kyzyl and the surrounding areas. The tone from the authorities was strictly preventive and instructional, whereas public reactions expressed fear, anger at poor enforcement, and calls for stricter penalties or improvements in road safety.
5. Crackdown on illegal alcohol in Tuva: mass raids and public health messaging (310 mentions, peaking in February 2025). Telegram channels repeatedly reported major police operations targeting illegal alcohol distribution, sometimes involving hundreds of litres seized in Kyzyl and rural districts. Posts framed alcohol as a major social problem; police emphasised crime reduction, while locals frequently blamed poverty and lack of economic opportunities for the thriving black market.

Posts from Buryatia region channels were also clustered to outline the most popular stories in the channels to provide more context on the lives of the region's people:

1. Cultural and public events: festivals, exhibitions, religious rituals, and regional promotion (640 mentions, peaking in March 2025). The most voluminous thematic cluster covers cultural festivals, concerts, exhibitions (including some military-themed), sports events, Buddhist ceremonies, tourism promotion, and Buryatia's participation in major Russian forums and expos. These posts construct an image of a vibrant, ac-

tive region that honours its traditions and is integrated in the federal space, with culture and religion often subtly woven together with patriotic narratives but not always directly tied to the war.

2. Social and economic policy changes affecting everyday life: salaries, tariffs, social support (420 mentions, peaking in December 2024). A large block of posts deals with wage increases, minimum income, social benefits, housing and utilities tariffs, support for families with children, employment programmes, and other bread-and-butter issues. The messaging presents federal and regional authorities as actively improving living standards and ‘not leaving people alone with their problems’, with criticism or dissatisfaction appearing mostly indirectly, between the lines.
3. Material, patriotic, and spiritual support for ‘our fighters’ at the front (160 mentions, peaking in April 2024). Many posts describe how Buryatia sends equipment, humanitarian aid, drones, uniforms, and ‘everything necessary’ to its units in Russia’s war against Ukraine (referred to in Russian official terminology as the SMO), alongside stories about patriotic trains, military-technology exhibitions, проводы (*provody*, ‘send-off’) ceremonies, and Buddhist rituals or prayers for defenders. The framing is that society, government, youth, and reli-

gious institutions are all united behind ‘our guys’, normalising the war as a collective, almost routine undertaking that everyone must support in their own way.

4. Expanding benefits and education opportunities for participants in the SMO and their families (130 mentions, peaking in March 2025). Posts repeatedly announce new measures for participants of military operations in Ukraine and their relatives: free or subsidised education, retraining, housing support, certificates, regional top-ups to federal benefits, and various ‘social guarantees’. The framing is strongly affirmative: the state and republic are shown as caring and grateful, turning participation in the war into a path to social mobility and extra privileges.
5. Funerals and commemorations for mobilised soldiers from Buryatia killed in military operations in Ukraine (70 mentions, peaking in June 2024). A steady stream of posts tells the stories of specific mobilised men and volunteers killed in the war in Ukraine, with detailed biographies, school and work histories, and emphasis on their bravery and loyalty. These deaths are framed not as tragedy caused by the war itself, but as noble sacrifice; the tone is mournful yet proud, reinforcing the idea that dying at the front is an honourable destiny for Buryatia’s men.

Echoes of Mobilisation in Local Telegram Channels

Tuva: Soft framing and indirect messaging

Based on the dataset of Tuva-region Telegram posts, the volume of mobilisation-related content is noticeably low. When mobilisation or participation in the war is mentioned in Tuva channels, it is framed indirectly – usually through praise of ‘defenders’, commemoration of fallen soldiers, or reports about support measures for families – rather than explicit calls to mobilise or narratives justifying conscription. This soft-framing approach avoids

direct political messaging and instead embeds the war within culturally resonant themes: duty, community solidarity, and honouring ancestors, which aligns with Tuva’s strong traditional and clan-based identity structures. Compared with regions like Siberia, the Far East, or central Russia, where Telegram often hosts overt patriotic mobilisation rhetoric, Tuva’s framing is subtler, more ceremonial, and less directive, suggesting a strategy aimed at maintaining al-

ready existing high loyalty levels without provoking resistance in a region historically sensitive to federal pressure.

Buryatia: Explicit normalisation and heroisation

In the Buryatia dataset, mobilisation and participation in the war appear frequently and openly, in contrast to Tuva. The posts include a steady flow of obituaries for mobilised soldiers, reports about men killed in the so-called SMO, announcements of benefits for participants and their families, and descriptions of equipment and aid sent to Buryatia's units at the front. This creates a strong semantic en-

vironment where mobilisation is normalised: serving or dying in the war is framed as honourable, socially rewarded, and integrated into community identity. The framing is emotionally charged and multilayered – combining heroisation, collective duty, and state care – and is significantly more explicit than in many other Russian regions, where messaging is often more restrained or bureaucratic.

Conclusions of the Case Study

The Tuva and Buryatia case study highlights how Russia's domestic information ecosystem manages the uneven social costs of the war while preserving the appearance of national unity and voluntary participation. These regions, which have disproportionately high casualty and mobilisation rates, pose a structural narrative risk: they could undermine the Kremlin's claims of broad-based support and equal burden-sharing.

State media coverage systematically neutralises this risk through selective visibility and reframing. **Losses** from Tuva and Buryatia are rarely presented as cumulative or exceptional. Instead, they **are fragmented into localised, individualised stories centred on heroism, sacrifice, and community pride**. Deaths are framed as honourable fulfilment of duty rather than as evidence of disproportionate impact. Telegram content adds emotional intensity but remains aligned with the core framing. Regional channels amplify mourning rituals, funerals, and aid deliveries, reinforcing communal resilience rather than grievance. Crucially, **expressions of anger or inequality are redirected towards external enemies or abstract wartime necessity**, preventing the formation of region-specific protest narratives.

The result is a containment strategy: acknowledgement without aggregation, emotion without politicisation.

The case also reveals how ethnic and regional identity is instrumentalised. Cultural markers are used to portray Tuvan and Buryat soldiers as naturally resilient, martial, and loyal, reinforcing stereotypes that normalise higher casualty rates while shielding the centre from accountability. This framing simultaneously valorises the regions and marginalises their suffering.

The key finding is that Russian information control does not depend on silencing loss, but on distributing it narratively. By keeping costs local and symbolic, the system prevents regional grievances from scaling into national questions. For counter-information efforts, this suggests the importance of re-aggregating dispersed data, exposing regional disparities, and challenging heroic framing with structural analysis. The Tuva and Buryatia case demonstrates that inequality becomes politically dangerous only when it is made visible as a pattern rather than as a series of isolated sacrifices.

Comparative Analysis with Previous Research

This is the fourth in a series of NATO StratCom COE research projects begun in 2022 that focus on the workings of the Russian propaganda machine. Comparison with

the previous studies reveals how the Russian war justification system has evolved over time and under pressure.

Strategic Continuity of the Russian Internal Propaganda System

The research confirms strong continuity in the strategic logic underpinning Russian internal propaganda. Earlier NATO StratCom COE research showed that the Kremlin's communication apparatus is oriented less towards persuading audiences through factual debate and more towards structuring the interpretive environment in which acceptable political meanings are constrained and stabilised.²⁶⁸

Core narrative frameworks identified in previous studies – Russia as a besieged state, the West as hostile and hypocritical, the moral legitimacy of Russian state power – remain dominant across official communication, tele-

vision, and semi-official digital channels.²⁶⁹ As identified before, these narratives continue to function as 'structural frames' rather than event-specific messages, enabling the absorption of new developments without requiring consistency.

Continuity can also be observed in the Kremlin's reliance on ambiguity and contradiction as stabilising mechanisms. As documented in previous research, narrative incoherence does not weaken the system; on the contrary – it tries to limit the audience's ability to form causal or accountability-oriented interpretations.²⁷⁰

The Shift from Narrative Discipline to Narrative Adaptability

While the strategic logic remains consistent, the operational mode of Russian internal propaganda has evolved. Earlier NATO StratCom COE reports described a predominantly vertical system characterised by synchronised messaging cascades across state-controlled channels.²⁷¹ The present research demonstrates a shift towards adaptive narrative management which is particularly visible during the prolonged phase of the war.

Telegram channels, military bloggers, and regional media now play a structurally embedded role in the early framing of events. Rather than merely amplifying official narratives, these actors increasingly generate com-

peting explanations during the initial phase of unexpected events. Only later does partial narrative consolidation occur through official statements or state television.

This adaptive model allows the Kremlin to test narrative hypotheses, redirect blame, and recalibrate messaging without committing prematurely to a single explanatory frame. The result is a communication ecosystem that prioritises resilience over coherence.

Temporal Vulnerabilities and Crisis Response Gaps

The research identifies certain recurring temporal gaps in the Kremlin's communication response during unexpected or disruptive events. During these periods, narrative fragmentation increases, emotional volatility intensifies, and unofficial actors temporarily dominate agenda-setting functions.

Such response gaps were previously hypothesised in NATO StratCom COE research but could not be systematically measured due to methodological constraints. The current

large-scale dataset has enabled empirical confirmation: delays in narrative stabilisation are a consistent feature of crisis moments, including terrorist attacks, military setbacks, and politically sensitive negotiations.

These gaps represent both a vulnerability and a functional feature of the system. While they expose internal inconsistencies, they also enable the diffusion of responsibility and reduce the risk of immediate narrative collapse.

Declining Centralised Control and the Role of Semi-Autonomous Actors

The findings demonstrate a further decline in the Kremlin's ability to fully control its internal information environment. Earlier NATO StratCom COE studies noted that state dominance over official media did not equate to total narrative control.²⁷² This research shows that the influence of semi-autonomous Telegram channels has expanded significantly.

In multiple case studies, official messaging appears more reactive rather than directive, favouring or even legitimising framings already circulating among core audiences rather than imposing new ones. This dynamic increases the Kremlin's dependency on non-state or quasi-state actors while simultaneously reducing its capacity to enforce narrative discipline.

Regional Differentiation of Internal Propaganda

The research provides robust evidence that Russian internal propaganda is not uniform across the country. While earlier research acknowledged regional variation, the present findings demonstrate systematic differentiation in narrative emphasis, emotional tone, and mobilisation intensity across regions.

Those regions with direct exposure to military risk, economic strain, or symbolic geopolitical significance display distinct communication patterns. This suggests an increasingly tailored approach to internal messaging, calibrated to local sensitivities rather than relying only on centrally standardised narratives.

The Transition from Persuasion to Affective Management

An important topic is the system's gradual shift away from persuasion towards affective management. Rather than convincing audiences of specific claims, Russian internal propaganda focuses on emotional regulation: sustaining fear, resentment, resignation, or moral superiority without requiring factual resolution.²⁷³

This evolution builds on patterns identified in earlier NATO StratCom COE research but represents a qualitative intensification. Emotional saturation and moral relativism now function as primary stabilising mechanisms, enabling the system to endure prolonged stress and contradiction.

Overall Assessment

Taken together in the context of previous studies, the findings confirm that Russian internal propaganda has entered a mature phase. Its resilience derives not from message clarity or ideological discipline but from its ability to manage uncertainty, diffuse accountability, and maintain mobilisation under

prolonged pressure. The continuity observed across multiple years of NATO StratCom COE research underscores the durability of the Kremlin's strategic logic, while the changes documented here identify specific operational vulnerabilities relevant for future counter-strategy development.

Conclusions

This research documents the evolution of Russian domestic propaganda across 15 months (January 2024 to March 2025), analysing approximately 3.13 million media units across state websites, television broadcasts, and Telegram channels, and revealing the emergence of a structured communication cycle moving from crisis framing to narrative consolidation and ultimately ideological mobilisation. The scale and comprehensiveness of this analysis enable conclusions with unprecedented empirical confidence about how authoritarian communication functions under prolonged military conflict.

The findings reveal a propaganda apparatus that is neither monolithic nor omnipotent, but rather adaptive, segmented, and systematically vulnerable at predictable points. Through detailed examination of crisis response cycles, platform-specific messaging strategies, regional audience customisation, and narrative transformation mechanisms, this research identifies both the strengths that sustain Russian domestic support for the war and the structural weaknesses that create opportunities for democratic countermeasures.

Primary Conclusions

1. The Russian propaganda system follows a reproducible three-phase pattern that creates predictable intervention windows

Across the primary case studies – the Kursk offensive (6 August 2024) and the Crocus terrorist attack (22 March 2024) – Russian propaganda exhibits a consistent temporal sequence: **Crisis** → **Control** → **Crusade (3C)** (Figure 81). A complementary case study examining

the Nausēda–Kaliningrad diplomatic incident (January 2025) further validates this pattern in an international context, demonstrating that the same operational playbook extends beyond domestic crisis management into foreign-policy incidents.

Crisis – Control – Crusade

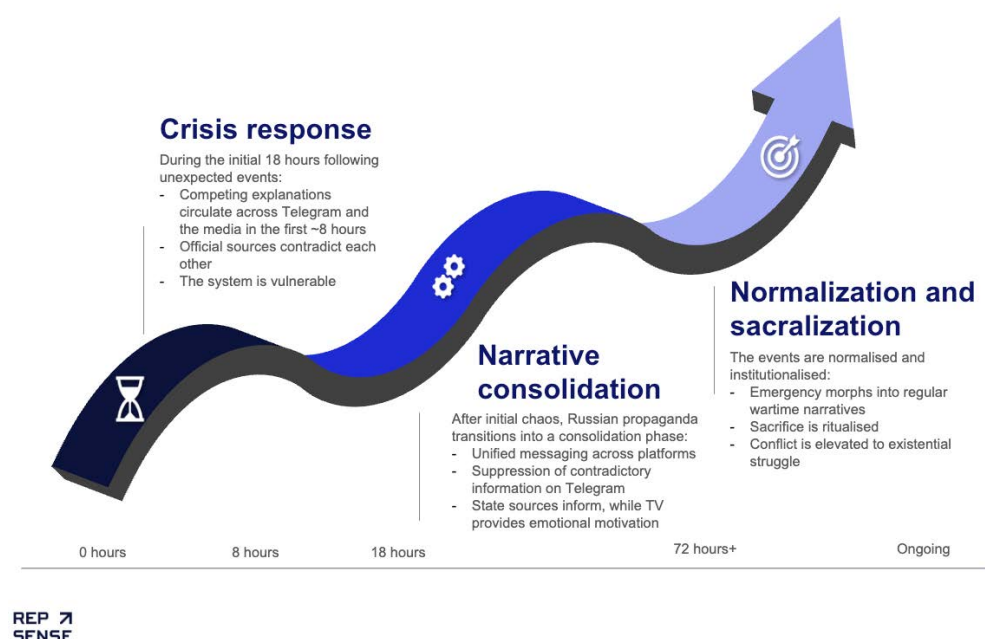


Figure 81. C-C-C model

Phase 1 (Crisis) is characterised by temporary informational disorganisation and heightened system vulnerability. State media demonstrated a 7-hour delay before acknowledging the Kursk incursion; Kremlin-level coordination required 18 hours. Within one hour of the Crocus attack, 16% of all coverage had already mentioned Ukraine despite ISIS-K claiming responsibility later on – indicating early narrative testing prior to centralised coordination. The complementary Nausëda–Kalininograd case study confirmed similar timing patterns: Telegram activity peaked two to four hours before official Duma statements, suggesting either decentralised agenda-setting or deliberate sequencing designed to prepare narrative ground.

Phase 2 (Control) marks the consolidation and stabilisation of competing narratives. Cross-platform coordination mechanisms activate systematically: state websites establish an authoritative baseline, television provides emotional interpretation, and Telegram amplifies through coordinated cross-posting. The Kursk case study illustrates consolidation in Telegram media: when the initial crisis response, framing the Ukrainian attack as a total failure, passed, many channels started building an emotional wall of anger against the Ukrainians, suggesting that they were supposedly slaughtering all civilians and were ready

to carry out nuclear terrorism and blackmail while using a local NPP.

Phase 3 (Crusade) transforms tactical or security incidents into civilisational narratives of moral struggle. Tactical conflicts are elevated to civilisational significance. Television framing shifts from defensive caution to a triumphant moral justification, with Russia's war portrayed as the defence of traditional values against Western moral decay. This elevation embeds short-term operational developments within a long-term historical narrative, legitimising prolonged sacrifice and reframing material costs as civilisational necessity. By the end of the first week of the Kursk offensive, many existing and new Telegram channels started providing constant institutionalised information about danger zones, frontline news, and formal procedures to support Russia by donating to or joining the local military troops.

Implication: The 18-hour crisis window constitutes the system's most exposed operational phase. During this period, initial frames can be established before centralised coordination consolidates and suppresses competing narratives. Effective counter-communication should therefore prioritise speed, clarity, and strategic framing over comprehensiveness, maximising early narrative disruption before system stabilisation occurs.

2. Russian media platforms exhibit distinct functional roles that create differentiated vulnerabilities

The Russian propaganda apparatus is not monolithic but rather constitutes a hierarchically organised communication ecosystem with measurably distinct functional roles across platforms.

State websites (kremlin.ru, council.gov.ru, scrf.gov.ru, government.ru, mil.ru, duma.gov.ru, mid.ru) provide institutional authority and policy baseline-setting. Their language is technical, legalistic, and carefully calibrated to project institutional competence. Their temporal behaviour is analytically revealing – state websites frequently delay publication relative to social media, indicating internal deliber-

ation and approval processes that prioritise message discipline over speed. These delays reflect coordination mechanisms – inter-agency review, leadership approval, and legal vetting – that ensure narrative consistency but generate systemic vulnerability during the initial phase of crisis response.

Television performs the function of emotional mobilisation and moral instruction. It remains the primary information source for older demographics and populations outside major metropolitan centres. Its influence should not be underestimated: for many Russians, television provides the interpretive

framework through which political events, military developments, and external information are cognitively processed, shaping not only opinion but also emotional orientation towards the conflict.

Telegram serves as the central nervous system, providing speed advantage, amplification infrastructure, and audience segmentation. The Telegram ecosystem exhibits a surface appearance of spontaneity and pluralism while operating as a highly coordinated dissemination architecture. Empirical analysis reveals that channels presenting themselves as independent frequently amplify near-iden-

tical narratives with minimal temporal lag, indicating central coordination despite claims of editorial autonomy. This operational paradox – decentralised appearance coupled with synchronised output – is a defining structural feature of the platform.

Implication: Monitoring and counter-messaging strategies must account for platform-specific roles and vulnerabilities. Telegram’s speed advantage renders it the primary target for early-stage intervention, while television’s emotional dominance makes it the central arena for long-term narrative competition and legitimacy contestation.

3. Peace discourse functions as an instrument of legitimacy, not a negotiation signal – external events accelerate existing narratives without changing them

Throughout 2024, Russian discourse on peace evolved from outright dismissal to conditional normalisation without any substantive softening of demands. Peace was consistently framed as conditional, abstract, and subordinate to Russia’s military and geopolitical objectives.

Donald Trump’s political trajectory functioned as a narrative accelerator rather than a substantive policy turning point. Russian media coverage selectively amplified those elements of Trump’s rhetoric that aligned with domestic narratives: criticism of Western allies, scepticism towards long-term support for Ukraine, and calls for negotiations framed as Western fatigue. At the same time, statements critical of Russia or conditional on Ukrainian sovereignty were marginalised or omitted. This pattern reflects a broader finding of the research: external voices are not engaged as independent actors but filtered to preserve

narrative coherence and regime legitimacy. In this sense, Trump functioned less as a harbinger of peace and more as a tool for amplifying perceptions of Western division, instability, and declining resolve.

Implication: Peace negotiations related discourse should be monitored primarily as a legitimacy-management mechanism rather than as an indicator of genuine negotiating intent. The Russian media did not prepare domestic audiences for compromise; instead, it cultivated interpretive flexibility, enabling any future development to be absorbed without necessitating policy change. This capacity to reframe and repurpose potentially disruptive narratives aligns with a broader systemic pattern identified in this report: under conditions of crisis or uncertainty, the communication system does not fragment into contradiction but reasserts coherence through narrative adaptation.

4. Russian information control distributes rather than silences loss, achieving ‘containment without aggregation’

The Tuva and Buryatia case study demonstrates how Russia’s information ecosystem manages the uneven social costs of war while preserving the appearance of national unity. These high-casualty, high-loyalty ethnic minority regions constitute a structural narrative risk, as they could undermine regime

claims of equal burden-sharing and collective sacrifice.

State media and affiliated social platforms neutralise this risk through selective visibility, narrative fragmentation, and symbolic reframing. Casualties are presented through

localised, individualised accounts centred on heroism, familial pride, and communal honour, rather than as cumulative or statistically exceptional losses.

The two regions exhibit distinct narrative management strategies. Tuva relies primarily on soft, indirect mobilisation, embedding war participation within cultural motifs of duty, ancestral honour, and stoic endurance. Explicit mobilisation content remains limited; dominant topics instead concern floods, crime, and infrastructure, indicating deliberate narrative displacement. Buryatia, by contrast, demonstrates explicit normalisation and heroisation, characterised by continuous obituary flows, benefit announcements, and religious ceremonies that integrate war participation directly into regional community identity.

Despite these stylistic differences, both approaches achieve the same strategic outcome: acknowledgement without aggregation, emotion without politicisation. Grief and anger are redirected towards external enemies, preventing regional grievances from scaling into national-level distributional questions or systemic critique.

Implication: Effective counter-information strategies should prioritise re-aggregation of dispersed casualty data, exposure of regional disproportionality, and deconstruction of heroic framing through structural analysis. Inequality becomes politically destabilising only when rendered visible as a systematic pattern rather than as isolated sacrifice.

5. Historical memory functions as active propaganda infrastructure, not passive commemoration

The analysis demonstrates that Victory Day remains a central symbolic instrument within the Kremlin's domestic communication strategy. The 9 May commemoration is framed not merely as an act of remembrance, but as a sacred foundation of Russian statehood and a core mechanism for legitimising the ongoing war against Ukraine.

Research demonstrates that commemoration and contemporary conflict messaging are deliberately synchronised. Official speeches, regional communications, and local commemorations reproduced identical thematic structures centred on unity, sacrifice, and loyalty, embedding state ideology within civic rituals, educational messaging, and family-centred narratives.

Real-time events were rapidly absorbed into this commemorative framework. Ukrainian drone and missile strikes on Russian regions on 9 May were framed not as military operations but as deliberate attacks on civilians during Russia's 'most sacred holiday'. The rapid absorption of real-time events into the commemorative narrative demonstrates that Victory Day functions as an active interpretive framework, shaping audience perceptions of unfolding events in advance rather than responding reactively.

Implication: This propaganda technique proves more resilient than easily identifiable falsehoods because it embeds manufactured justification within authentic commemorative sentiment. Counter-messaging must address the structural fusion of memory and mobilisation rather than individual claims.

Secondary Conclusions

6. Disinformation spread to foreign media had limited effectiveness

Despite Russia promoting three distinct Ukraine-blame narratives within 24 hours of the Crocus attack, these appeared in Western headlines primarily alongside counter-nar-

ratives rather than standing alone. The complementary Nausëda–Kaliningrad case study shows similar patterns: disinformation spread to 30 world regions but many outlets cited

Russian officials critically or included Lithuanian counter-framing. The primary goal of such campaigns appears domestic rather than international: mobilising Russian citizens for continued war effort rather than persuading foreign audiences. Although our data clearly demonstrate that a system for disseminating Russia's official communication abroad exists, its impact on Western media – at least regard-

ing the key events examined here – remains relatively limited. Numerous studies indicate that Russian government actors disseminate propaganda far more effectively through social media and comment sections, deploying bots, trolls, and sympathetic foreign online personalities; however, these messages and their intensity do not necessarily align with domestic narrative-control objectives.

7. The DTCA sequence (Delay → Test → Consolidate → Amplify) characterises crisis response mechanics

Empirical evidence from the primary case studies of the Kursk offensive and the Crocus terrorist attack confirms a four-phase operational sequence: initial **Delay** for internal coordination (7–18 hours, depending on event severity), **Testing** of alternative narratives on Telegram prior to official alignment, **Consolidation** through cross-platform synchronisation, and **Amplification** via repetition and emotional intensification.

The complementary Nausėda–Kalininograd case study provides additional validation:

Telegram activity peaked two to four hours before official Duma statements, confirming the systematic pattern of testing-before-consolidation observed in domestic crisis events.

This DTCA sequence represents the operational mechanics underlying the broader strategic 3C pattern (Crisis → Control → Crusade), translating high-level narrative objectives into predictable platform-level communication behaviour.

8. War has transitioned from crisis to bureaucratic routine

By March 2025, regional Telegram coverage of the Kursk frontline exhibited a structured, quasi-bureaucratic rhythm, with alerts, all-clear messages, and air defence reports following highly standardised formats. In parallel, war-justification language evolved from early emphasis on 'de-Nazification' and retaliation towards themes of defence, faith, and duty, signalling a shift from crisis mobilisation to moral normalisation. The conflict is

now framed less as an exceptional emergency and more as a permanent collective mission, embedded within routine administrative communication. This normalisation reduces propaganda system stress but creates sustainability vulnerabilities over extended timeframes, as prolonged normalisation risks fatigue, erosion of mobilisation capacity, and declining narrative effectiveness over extended time horizons.

9. Cross-platform coordination creates observable friction under pressure

The propaganda system's effectiveness relies on timing and cross-referencing. Under crisis pressure, exchanges between platforms produce observable friction: delays in official publication, television timing lag, and divergence between official channels and proxy voices. Regional messaging tailored for border

regions, ethnic republics, and metropolitan audiences can be internally incompatible when audiences compare across channels – creating vulnerability through contradiction.

10. Narrative displacement successfully replaced competing explanations in the Crocus case

Despite ISIS-K claiming responsibility within hours, Russian media rapidly converged on Ukraine-blame framing, displacing alternative explanations. The suspects' detention near the Ukrainian border provided sufficient narrative pretext, despite Belarus constituting an equally plausible geographic trajectory. This selective evidentiary emphasis illustrates narrative displacement rather than evidence-driven attribution.

Within the Kremlin's communication architecture, the Crocus attack functioned as a strategic narrative reset. It redirected attention away from election-related controversies, prematurely terminated opposition-driven narrative cycles, and consolidated national sentiment around mourning, unity, and externalised blame, thereby reinforcing regime legitimacy during a politically sensitive period.

Methodological Conclusions

11. Sentiment analysis as an indicator of propaganda system stress

The Crocus terrorist attack (23 March 2024) corresponded with the most negative average daily sentiment in the dataset (−40.9%), followed by the Kursk incursion (6 August 2024) at −40.1%. By contrast, Trump's election (6 November 2024) produced the highest positive sentiment. These sentiment extremes function as temporal markers that

align with major disruptive events, independent of specific narrative content. The sharp sentiment shifts appear to reflect moments in which the propaganda system is under increased communicative strain, suggesting that sentiment analysis can help flag crisis moments and provide opportunities for alternative narrative framing or counter-messaging.

12. Deep video analysis reveals content invisible to text-based monitoring

Short-form video platforms (TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts) often lack descriptions, rendering content invisible to traditional text-based monitoring. The deep video analysis model applied to 13,592 images and short videos during the first Kursk timeframe

identified 4,057 Kursk-related content units that would otherwise have escaped detection. This capability is essential for comprehensive monitoring of platforms where visual content dominates.

13. The metro map visualisation method demonstrates how narratives function as networked infrastructure

The Kursk and Crocus case studies, as well as the complementary Nausëda–Kalinin-grad case, demonstrate the analytical value of metro map visualisation: the same symbolic node moved between established narrative lines – Baltic hostility, NATO pressure, regional security, deterrence – rather than generating

isolated coverage. This confirms that narratives are not discrete messages but networked infrastructure that symbolic nodes like Kalinin-grad can activate repeatedly. Future analysis should map narrative interconnections rather than track individual claims in isolation.

Recommendations for Further Research

While this research identifies stable patterns in Russian domestic propaganda across multiple crisis types, several areas warrant further systematic investigation.

First, future research should analyse how the Crisis → Control → Crusade playbook adapts when the regime shifts from wartime mobilisation to negotiation discourse, examining how responsibility for the war is redistributed and how boundaries of ‘acceptable compromise’ are constructed for domestic audiences.

Second, the changing media format and platforms require new analytical methods leveraging AI-era technologies. Deep video analysis capabilities should be expanded and deployed in real time to provide reaction-win-

dow opportunities rather than retrospective analysis alone.

Third, anticipatory communication contexts – such as large-scale military exercises like Zapad or planned diplomatic initiatives – remain understudied. Unlike reactive crisis events, these allow the Kremlin to shape the information environment in advance, testing narratives and normalising escalation.

Finally, future work should extend longitudinal analysis to assess how repeated narrative adjustments, shifting definitions of success, and deferred promises accumulate over time – evaluating long-term sustainability of the propaganda system under prolonged pressure.

Appendix 1: Russian Telegram Channels Monitored

Group	Telegram channel	Posts analysed
Ukrainian/international channels	Новини Еспресо.TV	24,536
	NV nv.ua Радіо NV Новини України Аналітика Відео НВ	24,510
	Радіо Свобода / Radio Svoboda (ru)	22,196
	Оперативний ЗСУ	17,418
	Українська правда	13,744
	Pravda_Gerashchenko_en	6,452
	Полтавська ОВА Новини	4,739
	 Олексій ХАРЧЕНКО Луганська ОВА/OFFICIAL 	3,966
	СтратКом ЗСУ / AFU StratCom	3,499
	Африканская инициатива 	3,493
	Генеральний штаб ЗСУ	3,430
	Запрещённая Украина	2,884
	цибуля 	1,941
	 Владислав Гайваненко / Дніпропетровська ОДА (ОВА)	1,853
	Міністерство оборони України	1,816
	 Тернопільська ОДА (ОВА)	1,701
	 Віктор Микита	1,311
	Служба безпеки України	1,303
	UNITED24	1,210
	НЕРЫБАРЬ	1,167
	Свідетели Байрактара	1,118
	112	1,074
	 Олег Кіпер/Одеська ОДА (ОВА)	1,024
	КМДА – офіційний канал	917
	 Ігор Табурець Начальник Черкаської ОВА	826
	 Сергій Тюрін, голова Хмельницької ОДА (ОВА)	554
	 Іван Рудницький/ Волинська ОДА (ОВА)	452
	 Флеш Новини Україна 	105
	Хроніки війни в мемах	11
	Богдан Хмельницький 	4
	DeepState 	3

Russian war analysts and milbloggers	 ⚡ Сводки ополчения Новороссии Z.O.V. (ДНР, ЛНР, Украина, Война)	69,982
	СОЛОВЬЁВ	52,874
	Кирилл Фёдоров / Война История Оружие	34,100
	СИГНАЛ	31,232
	Топор Live	28,690
	Colonelcassad	25,927
	Милитарист	23,706
	Раньше всех. Ну почти.	21,991
	Два майора	17,044
	Операция Z: Военкоры Русской Весны	16,691
	Радар по всей России БПЛА, ракеты, самолёты	13,320
	Военный Осведомитель	13,043
	Рыбарь	8,992
	Мир Михаила Онуфриенко	7,880
	Повёрнутые на войне 	7,349
	Злой Пруф	7,177
	Foresight	7,074
	Голос Мордора	6,726
	Выпускайте КракенаZ!	6,197
	Мир сегодня с 'Юрий Подоляка'	6,023
	Военкор Котенок	5,759
	Kotsnews	5,006
	Репортёр Руденко V	4,968
	Оперативные сводки	4,413
	WarGonzo	4,389
	Военная хроника – voenhronika.ru	4,305
	Резидент	4,248
	Русский Легион Z	4,158
	Военкор I Z I Лисицын ZOV-TV	4,147
	REVERSE SIDE OF THE MEDAL	4,057
	Кровавая барыня	3,949
	АРХАНГЕЛ СПЕЦНАЗА	3,775
	Воин DV	3,726
	Елена Панина	3,695
	ЗАПИСКИ ВЕТЕРАНА 	3,558
	GRAY ZONE GREY ZONE	2,837
	 Тревога Приграничья	2,822
	НачШтабу	2,514
	#МОНТЯН!	2,354
	Неофициальный Безсонов	2,312

Russian war analysts and milbloggers	Легитимный	2,266
	Поддубный IZIO V edition	2,103
	Оркестр I W	1,884
	ТРОЙКА 🇷🇺	1,867
	Крупнокалиберный Переполюх	1,858
	Сладков+	1,762
	Русский Донбасс	1,486
	Ирина КуксенкоVa 🇷🇺	1,352
	Юрий Подоляка Сводки	1,253
	Темник	1,193
	Скриншот Правды Z	889
	Репортер Filatov	690
	БФ «Два майора»	669
	Военкор Ярем	496
	АДЕКВАТ Z	467
	Владлен Татарский	346
	Военкор Кулько	256
	Герои спецоперации Z	89
	АРХАНГЕЛ СПЕЦНАЗА Z 🇷🇺	66
	Кепка Пригожина	41
	Южный Плацдарм	10
	Murado	9
	АРХАНГЕЛ СПЕЦНАЗА Z 🇷🇺 АРХАНГЕЛ СПЕЦНАЗА Z 🇷🇺	5
	ДШРГ Русич 🇷🇺	3
	Оркестр Вагнера Wagner	1
	Воин DV	1
Russian state channels	Минобороны России	12,085
	V 🇷🇺 Рука Кремля 🇷🇺 Z	10,589
	Владимир Рогов	3,954
	Правительство России	3,380
	Russian MFA 🇷🇺	2,820
	РОДИОН_МИРОШНИК	2,378
	ГАСПАРЯН	2,365
	Движение Первых	2,252
	Владимир Сальдо	2,119
	Мария Захарова	1,867
	Народная милиция ДНР	1,214
	Kremlin. News	1,036
	Константин Затулин	971
	Kadyrov_95	933
	РСМД	928

Russian state channels	Embassy of Russia in the USA / Посольство России в США	863
	Государственная Дума	600
	Игорь Артамонов	555
	Марат Хуснуллин	481
	Адам Делимханов	468
	Russian Embassy to the UK	418
	Александр Ходаковский	224
	Социальный фонд России	182
	ПРЕДУПРЕЖДЕНИЕ РО	150
	Вячеслав Володин	134
	Дмитрий Медведев	114
	Госуслуги	88
	Апти Алаудинов «АХМАТ»	85
	Александр Хинштейн	68
	Мэр Москвы Сергей Собянин	29
	СЛУЦКИЙ	20
	Оркестр Вагнера Wagner	19
Russian news agencies and media outlets	TACC	57,207
	Ateo Breaking	21,907
	Медуза – LIVE	18,192
	РБК. Новости. Главное	17,739
	Ньюсач/Двач	17,418
	BBC News Русская служба	15,979
	Россия сейчас • Новости	15,484
	Readovka	14,159
	Коммерсантъ	13,449
	Москва 24	12,360
	Иван Утенков Новости	11,692
	Новая газета Европа	11,428
	The Moscow Times	11,149
	КОНТЕКСТ	10,650
	Go31 Новости Белгорода	10,472
	Forbes Russia	10,143
	Интерфакс	9,689
	Телеканал Дождь	8,919
	Москва Live	8,432
	SHOT	6,989
	Осторожно, новости	5,414
	Varlamov News	5,072
	Baza	4,566
	E1.RU Новости Екатеринбурга	4,398

	MediaKiller	4,052
	НОВОСТИ 	3,739
	Осторожно, Москва	3,522
	Новости Москвы	2,553
	Fox News Russia	2,319
	Короче	2,233
	Короче+	2,196
	Тыну40k Goblina (oper.ru)	1,988
	Meduza in English	1,884
	ТОПОР – Горячие новости	1,740
	Прямой Эфир • Новости	1,604
	25-й час • Бизнес и Финансы	1,036
	Слияние с поглощением	1,024
	Топор. Экономика.	949
	SHTOLL NEWS 	948
	Лентач	876
	Москва • Новости • Москвик	853
	Москвач+	836
	Голос Дагестана / новости Дагестана	592
	Маргарита Симоньян	431
	Кремль. Новости	354
	Скабеева	186
	Украина.ру	45
	BBC News Русская служба	4
	Москва 24	1
Zaporizhzhia region	Главное в Мелитополе	6,715
	Новости Мелитополя и не только	2,881
	Балицкий Евгений	881
Tuva region	МВД по Республике Тыва	2,045
	Подслушка ЧП ТЫВА КЫЗЫЛ	1,582
	Владислав Ховалыг	706
	Тува Кызыл Новости	288
	ЧП Тыва Кызыл	21
Luhansk region	Lpr 1	21,844
	МЛНР LIVE ЛУГАНСК НОВОСТИ	3,509
	Леонид Пасечник	545
Kursk region	Твой Курский край Новости Курского приграничья	19,444
	Отряд Ковпака	11,229
	Вести Курск	9,922
	Приграничный Радар	9,792
	Сейм: новости Курской области 	9,495

Kursk region	КУРСКИЙ БОМОНДЪ	8,158
	Тревожный Курск Суджа	8,140
	Жесть Курск	7,750
	Курская область	6,704
	⚡ 46 КАНАЛІ КУРСК И КУРСКАЯ ОБЛАСТЬ ⚡	6,524
	Курская Telega	5,804
	🇷🇺 Актуальный Курск	5,332
	Город Курск	5,238
	ПАТРИОТ КУРСК	5,053
	Громко, курское приграничье!	5,038
	Теткино / Курск / Суджа / Коренево / Рыльск / Льгов / Курчатов / Железнодорожск	5,029
	Курская аномалия	4,944
	Приграничный Дозор	4,808
	Курское приграничье 2.0	4,494
	Суджа в Telegram	4,113
	Новости Курска и Области	3,929
	СУДЖА РОДНАЯ 🇷🇺	3,923
	⚡ Курск сейчас	3,777
	Типичный Курск	3,766
	КУРСК НА СВЯЗИ 46	3,633
	Наш Курск ЧП ДТП	3,491
	НОВОСТИ КУРСКА 🌐 типичный подслушано	3,125
	Соловьиный край	3,057
	🚒 ЧП, Курское приграничье	2,770
	ПЕХОТА ЖЕСТЬ ВОЙНЫ КУРСК	2,732
	Курский Радар	2,548
	ГОРОД КУРСК	2,380
	Т-Воронеж Типичный Новости Воронежа	2,357
	Единая Россия Курская область	2,259
	Первый по Железнодорожску	2,236
	Курск на связи ©	2,103
	Курский пост	2,091
	МЧС Курской области	1,983
	Оперштаб Курской области 🇷🇺	1,856
	🚒 ЧП КУРСК ПРИГРАНИЧЬЕ	1,716
	ЧП Курск	1,225
	ЖЕСТЬ КУРСК	1,186
	ВОЗДУШНАЯ ТРЕВОГА 46 Курская область	925
	ФК «Авангард» Курск	553
	ЧП Курск. Новости Курска.	536
	Курск События Подслушано	375

Kursk region	Курск Новости Происшествия	361
	Курск №1	322
	Курск Новости сегодня	262
Kaliningrad region	ЯНТАРНЫЙ ДЛБ (Новости Калининграда)	3,141
	Калининград.Ru	2,725
	Нетипичный Калининград 	1,055
	Калининград Новости Происшествия	361
	Калининград События Подслушано	355
Donetsk region	«Лисичанск – колыбель Донбасса»	22,734
	ДОНЕЦК ДНР НОВОСТИ СВО	17,557
	Типичный Донецк	15,494
	Стрелков Игорь Иванович: новости #КРП	7,061
	ДНР Онлайн	5,218
	Я ❤️ Краматорск	4,817
	Донецк  Point of view	2,421
	Пушили Д.В.	1,235
	Славянск Z Артёмовск Краматорск	753
	Стрелков Игорь Иванович	94
	Типичный Донецк Типичный Донецк	75
Crimea region	ЧП / Крым	11,128
	ForPost. Новости Севастополя	3,538
	Типичный Краснодар	2,271
	Аксёнов Z 82	1,034
	КРИМСЬКИЙ БАНДЕРІВЕЦЬ	456
	Кача Орловка Севастополь Крым	337
	СВОдки – Крым и Севастополь	204
	ЧП / Севастополь	102
	PaZВожаев	48
Kherson region	Херсонский Вестник	9,315
	Херсон.ру	2,573
Buryatia region	Ариг Ус Бурятия Улан-Удэ	3,124
	Правительство Бурятии	1,966
	Новости Улан-Удэ Бурятия	941
	Алексей Цыденов	489
Belgorod region	Жесть Белгород	8,931
	Белгород С-400 	8,709
	Белгород №1	8,026
	Белгород – Молния	4,737
	Настоящий Гладков	1,936
	Go31 Новости Белгорода	4
	Белгород №1	2

Other popular Russian Telegram channels	Осташко! Важное	44,747
	ЕЖ	26,901
	Пул N3	20,883
	Дядя Слава	18,937
	BelVestnik	12,961
	UKR LEAKS	9,630
	Олег Царёв	8,736
	С МЕСТА СОБЫТИЯ	7,561
	Москва с огоньком	6,870
	МИГ России	6,830
	Nina VATT 🇷🇺	6,822
	Рифмы и Панчи 🤖	6,661
	Анатолий Шарий	6,625
	Капитал	6,519
	Фонтанка SPB Online	6,505
	ZERGULIO 🇷🇺	6,484
	ЧТД	6,322
	Политический обозреватель 🇷🇺	6,142
	Национальный Z Курс	5,752
	Вечерний Телеграмъ	5,652
	Москва 24/7	5,493
	КК	5,347
	Беспощадный Банкстер	5,266
	ЗеРада	5,254
	Типичная Одесса	5,226
	ВПШ	5,028
	КСТАТИ	4,954
	Рифмы и Морген 🦋	4,924
	НЕ МОРГЕНШТЕРН	4,540
	Москва сегодня	4,260
	ТелеДНО	3,938
	Дмитрий Никотин	3,853
	Москва сейчас	3,777
	Война с фейками	3,618
	Моя Москва	3,280
	Московская Хроника	3,015
	Образ будущего	2,945
	ПриЗрак Новороссии	2,838
	Москвач • Новости Москвы	2,702
	Гуляй, Москва	2,696
	Андрей Медведев	2,636

Other popular Russian Telegram channels	Крокодил	2,597
	Первый Московский	2,552
	СМИ Россия не Москва	2,514
	Русская Община ZOV	2,477
	Русская экономика	2,463
	KOSTI	2,462
	Жесть дня	2,416
	ЧП	2,261
	Win/Win	2,251
	Тайная канцелярия	2,239
	Дабл Ять	2,213
	Русский меч	2,187
	Москва – это интересно	2,135
	Старше Эдды	2,011
	Чёрный Квартал	1,942
	Можем объяснить	1,519
	ЗАРУБИН	1,488
	Русский тарантасъ	1,376
	Питер Live	1,374
	Картель	1,346
	Техномотель	1,241
	Питер сегодня	1,204
	Команда Навального	1,143
	Мюсли вслух	1,141
	Ватное болото	1,120
	Бэкдор	1,087
	ШЕЙНИН	1,080
	Медийка	1,016
	aavst2022	944
	Женщина с косой	939
	Орда	934
	Позывной Брюс	892
	ПолитСатирКа	792
	наглый	784
	НЕЗЫГАРЬ	691
	Кремлёвский мамковед	686
	Бульдоги под ковром	681
	Эксплойт	655
	Екатерина Шульман	620
	ЛОРД	604
	КД 18+	568

Other popular Russian Telegram channels	АРХИВ ФЁДОРОВОЙ	565
	МАРДАН	544
	Жизнь насекомых	532
	Анастасия Кашеварова 	525
	ДМИТРИЙ ЗИМЕНКИН	518
	Vladimir Pastukhov	504
	Максим Кац	491
	КАТРУСЯ	462
	Усы Пескова	461
	БЕСОГОН	393
	Юрий Слюсарь	388
	Яндекс Путешествия	377
	Сталингулаг	315
	Вован и Лексус	297
	АЭРОФЛОТ	295
	NN	285
	Тень на плетень	278
	Владимир Мединский	236
	ОЛЬГА ШАРИЙ	229
	MADS	220
	Хазин	208
	Авиакомпания «Победа»	206
	Настоящий полковник Z Виталий Киселев	168
	Илья Яшин	167
	Быть Или	153
	Сбер	152
	moskovsky!	140
	Политический аналитик	129
	Соловьиный Помёт	125
	Альфа-Банк	122
	Политджойстик / Politjoystic [™]	120
	Саня во Флориде	113
	Вестник Шевцова	106
	Нам пишут из Янины.	95
	Вагон скидок	85
	Профессор смотрит в миръ. Авторский Анонимный канал Дмитрия Евстафьева	65
	1337	54
	Михаил Ходорковский	45
	Навстречу Трансферу	44
	Александр Зубарев	41
	Сергей Михеев	39

Other popular Russian Telegram channels	Мейстер	32
	Бустер 🍄	29
	Книги на миллион бизнес блог	25
	НовоСТайм Федеральные новости	24
	Друзья Дональда	23
	Генерал СВР	16
	Дима Масленников	16
	Exile	15
	НАСТЕЖЬ	15
	ЛИТВИН	10
	Политический аналитик Политический аналитик	10
	Олег Царёв Олег Царёв	7
	Москоубизнес	6
	Дабл Ять	4
	ЕЖ	3
	Tiffany HIGH ODDS NHL 🏒	2
	Можем объяснить Можем объяснить	2
	От фундамента до конька	2
	Lucy HIGH ODDS NHL 🏒	1
	Икона Новостей	1

Appendix 2: Spike Analysis

Section summary

Object of analysis	The top 30 research timeframe days that amassed the most media units (recordings, articles, or posts)
Research timeframe	1 January 2024 – 31 March 2025 Dataset: official and non-state Russian channels and social media.
Analysis methods	1. Spike analysis 2. Storyline analysis of spikes
Intended purpose	Understand the context in which the analysis is being conducted, establish the main events within the timeframe, and identify dates of interest.

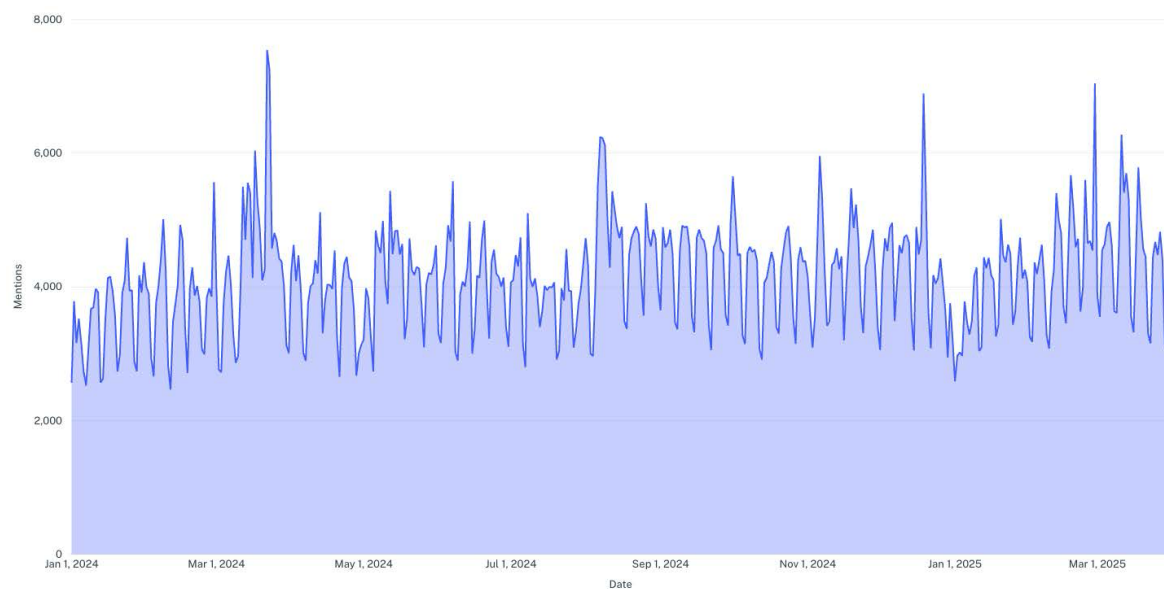


Figure 82. Spike analysis dynamic chart for the full research timeframe

Date	Total no. of mentions (rank out of 30)	Main topics
29 Feb. 2024	5,314 (15)	1. Putin's statements about the West and Russia's traditional values, alongside domestic policy and economic plans, dominate recent discussions 2. Putin's address to Federal Assembly highlights Eurasian security, economic growth, and traditional values 3. Developments in Russia under Putin focus on economic modernisation, social investment, and national service
12 Mar. 2024	5,515 (19)	1. Russian forces repel cross-border attacks in Belgorod and Kursk regions, inflicting significant losses on Ukrainian formations 2. 'Freedom of Russia' Legion and allies report border incursions into Belgorod and Kursk regions 3. The Belgorod region experiences continued attacks by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, leading to school closures and casualties
14 Mar. 2024	5,566 (18)	1. Growing military activity and political statements concerning Ukraine and NATO 2. Belgorod region experiences significant shelling with visible debris and damage reported 3. Developments in the Russia-Ukraine conflict highlight ongoing border clashes and significant Ukrainian losses
15 Mar. 2024	5,446 (24)	1. Escalation on the global stage: Ukraine conflict intensifies amid nuclear threats and shifting battlefield dynamics 2. Developments in Ukraine's defence, diplomacy, and agricultural trade amid ongoing conflict 3. Russia focuses on presidential election amid national unity and deaths of notable figures
17 Mar. 2024	6,052 (9)	1. Putin leads Russian presidential election with significant vote share across regions, including annexed territories 2. Putin discusses Russian border attacks, government formation, and volunteer corps activities 3. Developments in the 'Midday Against Putin' protests across multiple international cities
18 Mar. 2024	5,292 (30)	1. Putin's presidency and Russian domestic and international affairs 2. Russian presidential election results highlight record turnout and international congratulations amid Western scrutiny 3. Putin secures overwhelming victory in Russian presidential election with high vote share

22 Mar. 2024	7,558 (1)	1. Attack on Crocus City Hall 2. Developments in the ongoing war and geopolitical tensions 3. Developments in Russia's political landscape after presidential elections
23 Mar. 2024	7,287 (2)	1. Russian propaganda intensifies blame on Ukraine following terrorist attack in Moscow 2. Developments surrounding the Crocus City Hall attack, including international condemnation, interrogation of suspects, and geopolitical implications 3. FSB reports to Putin on detention of 11 suspects relating to the Crocus City Hall attack, including 4 terrorists
12 May 2024	5,444 (25)	1. Emergency unfolds in Belgorod: Ukrainian forces target residential areas; Russian defence responds swiftly 2. UN condemns attacks on civilian infrastructure following shelling of Belgorod 3. Clashes and strategic manoeuvres escalate between NATO and Russian forces in Eastern Europe
7 Jun. 2024	5,615 (17)	1. Putin's keynote speech at St Petersburg Forum sparks global tension and diplomatic challenges 2. Explosive technological growth transforming global landscape 3. Ukraine braces for counteroffensive amid US weapons approval and Russian warnings
6 Aug. 2024	5,503 (21)	1. Escalating tensions in Ukraine: Russian and Ukrainian forces clash in key border areas 2. Ongoing Ukrainian attacks prompt border defence measures 3. Russian Armed Forces make significant advances in the Kursk region; EMERCOM denounces fake evacuation alerts
7 Aug. 2024	6,278 (6)	1. Russian forces prevent enemy advance into territory amid heightened tensions with Ukraine 2. Developments in Ukraine: Russian Foreign Ministry's statements, media reports, and military actions 3. Crisis response in Kursk Oblast: president orders state of emergency as enemy forces enter region
8 Aug. 2024	6,256 (7)	1. Ukrainian Armed Forces face challenges on multiple fronts 2. International support for Ukraine following attack in the Kursk region 3. New federal laws in Russia bring significant changes to employment services, border security, and digital currency mining
9 Aug. 2024	6,140 (8)	1. Escalating tensions: Ukrainian Armed Forces' attack on the Kursk region prompts war reminder 2. Ukrainian forces repel Russian incursion in Sumy Oblast; significant losses reported 3. Ukrainian mercenaries from armed forces operating in Russian region in violation of international law

12 Aug. 2024	5,463 (22)	1. Russian PMC 'Wagner' veterans defend borders amid conflict escalation 2. Escalating conflict in the Kursk region heightens tensions between Russia and Ukraine 3. Escalating tensions: Ukrainian cyberattacks target 'Akhmat'; Russian military responses evolve
1 Oct. 2024	5,680 (14)	1. Iran attacks Israel; escalating tensions in the Middle East 2. Israeli police suspect terrorist act in recent incident 3. Tensions rise as Iran targets Israeli military sites in missile attacks
6 Nov. 2024	5,992 (10)	1. Trump secures decisive victory in US election, sparking global speculation and uncertainty 2. Political fallout: Trump's win triggers backlash on American TikTok 3. Trump's promise to end war in Ukraine within 24 hours sparks international attention
7 Nov. 2024	5,355 (28)	1. Global recognition of Russia's influence amid shifts in power dynamics 2. Intensifying geopolitical tensions surrounding Ukraine: Trump's promises, military operations, and international support 3. Trump's victory, Putin's influence, and global ramifications: tensions rise as Ukraine, Israel, and US navigate uncertain futures
19 Nov. 2024	5,514 (20)	1. Putin deploys 11,000 North Korean soldiers to Ukrainian border; potential increase to 100,000 sparks global concern 2. Unexpected changes in geopolitics triggered by Donald Trump's election victory 3. Russian Ministry of Defence operations in Ukrainian border regions
19 Dec. 2024	7,005 (4)	1. Putin's phone call sparks concern over American missile strikes on Russia 2. Putin's strategic moves and military operations unveiled in recent statements 3. Escalating tensions in the Kursk region: a closer look at military payments and strategic movements
20 Dec. 2024	5,379 (27)	1. Tensions rise as Ministry of Defence issues warning, hackers target national information system, and diplomatic efforts shift in Ukraine conflict 2. Latest developments in Ukraine conflict and terrorism investigations 3. Trump administration plans to require NATO members to increase defence spending to 5% of GDP

12 Feb. 2025	5,435 (26)	1. 'Putin holds talks with Mishustin at Kremlin; Trump discusses Ukraine conflict' 2. Developments in Ukraine conflict: Ukrainian forces to be expelled from Russian territory as SMO intensifies 3. Putin and Trump discuss Ukraine, Middle East, and prisoner exchange in 1½ hour call
18 Feb. 2025	5,701 (13)	1. Historic talks in Riyadh signal progress in US–Russia relations 2. Tensions rise as US and Russia navigate increasing spheres of influence 3. 'Zelenskyy's delayed visit, power struggles with the US and Russia, and economic colonisation threaten Ukraine's future'
24 Feb. 2025	5,628 (16)	1. International relations shifts in Europe and Russia: Zelenskyy's negotiations, Iran policy reversal, and escalating tensions 2. Russia proposes joint rare earth metals venture with US; France and UK plan troop deployment in Ukraine; leaders discuss economic projects for Ukrainian settlement; Zelenskyy warns of costly path outside NATO 3. International efforts and controversies surrounding peace talks in Ukraine
28 Feb. 2025	7,077 (3)	1. President Trump stands firm for peace amid international tensions 2. Tension mounts as Zelenskyy and Trump clash in high-stakes talks with implications for US–Ukraine–Russia relations 3. Trump and Zelenskyy discuss ending conflict in high-stakes negotiations
11 Mar. 2025	6,310 (5)	1. Notorious Kursk gang to face justice for double murder after 14 years 2. US and Ukraine agree to ceasefire in war with Russia after Jeddah negotiations 3. International developments: Zelenskyy's peace offer, Russian military operations, and oil export resumption
12 Mar. 2025	5,458 (23)	1. Trump's proposal for Russian ceasefire met with scepticism and strategic manoeuvring 2. Tension escalates as Russia–US negotiations challenge Ukraine's strategic position 3. Ukrainian Armed Forces' advance into the Kursk region raises concerns amid fragile truce
13 Mar. 2025	5,746 (12)	1. Russia and Ukraine make progress towards ceasefire agreement as Putin emphasises importance of long-term peace 2. Trump and Putin consider ceasefire talks amid Ukraine conflict and Russian sanctions 3. 'Ukraine peace talks progress: Putin's interest in long-term settlement signals hope amid ceasefire negotiations'

14 Mar. 2025	5,349 (29)	1. Volunteer soldier proposes to girlfriend at Barnaul railway platform amid SMO 2. Trump and Putin's talks spark optimism for possible end to Ukraine conflict 3. Leaked peace plan reveals Ukraine's EU accession delay, tensions with US and Russia, and internal struggles
18 Mar. 2025	5,824 (11)	1. Putin and Trump reach agreements on Black Sea safety and ceasefire terms in key Kremlin dialogue 2. 'Multiple countries directly involved in military conflict with Russia, prompting full response' 3. Trump–Putin negotiations raise concerns over Ukraine's future and Putin's tactics

Appendix 3: The Nausėda–Kaliningrad Story – Complementary Case Study

The Kaliningrad region, a Russian exclave located on the territory of the former East Prussia, is widely regarded as one of the most heavily militarised areas in Europe. It is strategically positioned on the Baltic Sea and bordered by two EU and NATO member states, Poland and Lithuania, making it a critical forward-deployed Russian military outpost. Given this strategic importance, monitoring developments in Kaliningrad is essential. This case study shows that even smaller region-

al crises in Russia are managed following a similar playbook to that observed in the case studies of the Kursk incursion and the Crocus terrorist attack.

The story began on 8 January 2025 when the president of Lithuania, Gitanas Nausėda, tweeted a critique of Russia renaming Lithuanian cultural objects in Kaliningrad (Figure 83).



Figure 83. Screenshot of a [post on X](#) by Gitanas Nausėda (source: Gitanas Nausėda, X, 8 January 2025)

After a couple of days, Russians reacted to this tweet with marked defensiveness. Russians reacted to this tweet quite sensitively. First they replied on X below Nausėda's original post (Figures 84 to 86).



Figure 84. Screenshot of a reply to a post on X by Gitanas Nausėda (source as Figure 83)

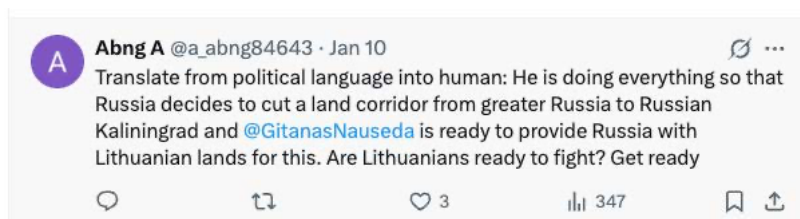


Figure 85. Screenshot of a reply to a post on X by Gitanas Nausėda (source as Figure 83)



Figure 86. Screenshot of a reply to a post on X by Gitanas Nausėda (source as Figure 83)

Most negative comments on Nausėda's post appeared on 10 January – two days after the original post – and predominantly echoed

the same narrative: that Nausėda was making territorial claims to reclaim Kaliningrad.

Backlash in News Articles

After the initial reaction on X, Russian state representatives such as Dimitry Peskov and Maria Zakharova started a campaign continuing the same narrative of Lithuania expressing territorial claims on Kaliningrad (Figure 87). They also mentioned secondary narratives, such as Lithuania being an aggressor and violator of human rights:

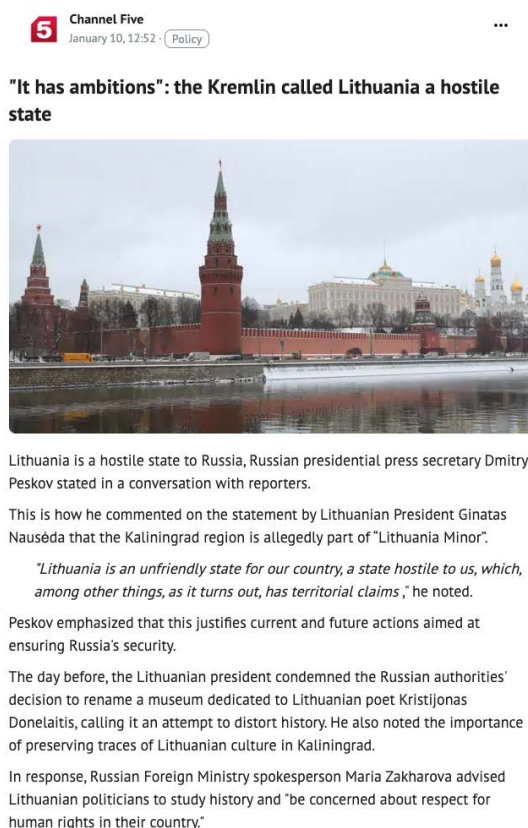


Figure 87. Web article from mirtesen.ru (source: "Imet prityzaniya": v Kremle nazvali Litvu vrazhdebnym gosudarstvom", Mirtesen, n.d.)

- One secondary narrative came from the deputy chairman of the State Duma Defence Committee, Viktor Zavarzin, who stated that Russia was prepared for possible provocations from Lithuania regarding the Kaliningrad Oblast.
- Russian State Duma deputy and Defence Committee member Andrei Kolesnik called

Nausėda's statement about the Kaliningrad Oblast provocative.

- In discussing Kaliningrad's Lithuanian status, State Duma deputy Anatoly Wasserman stated: 'Lithuanian politicians are making a serious mistake by relying on a period when the Lithuanian state did not exist and Russians ruled.' The article reporting his comments added: 'One can agree with him that if they insist on such claims, they must be prepared to restore the governance system characteristic of that time.' Lithuanian politicians' statements about the Russian city were characterised as manifestations of a 'chronic illness'.
- Non-official Russian websites followed the narrative of territorial claims, some even comparing it with Donald Trump's claims to Greenland.

Overall, the fact that most articles cited officials from Putin's office and appeared one to two days after Nausėda's post – sufficient time to reframe the narrative – suggests a top-down communication strategy within Russian media, with the delay reflecting the time required for centralised narrative coordination.

The story was mainly active for just a couple of days in Russian web articles (Figure 88).

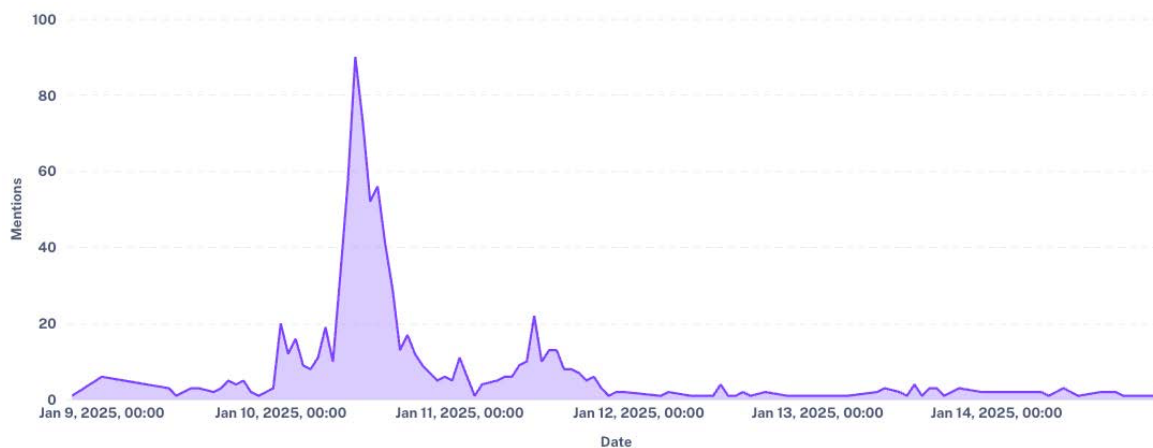


Figure 88. The hourly dynamics of mentions of Kaliningrad in Russian media

Russian Telegram did not erupt as much as the websites, but there were still at least 28 channels that covered the topic between 9 and 11 January 2025. Besides territorial claims, Telegram mentions contained more social media specific comments (captured on X as well) about parts of Lithuania belonging to Poles or Germans and then about the whole of Lithuania belonging to Russia (Figure 89).

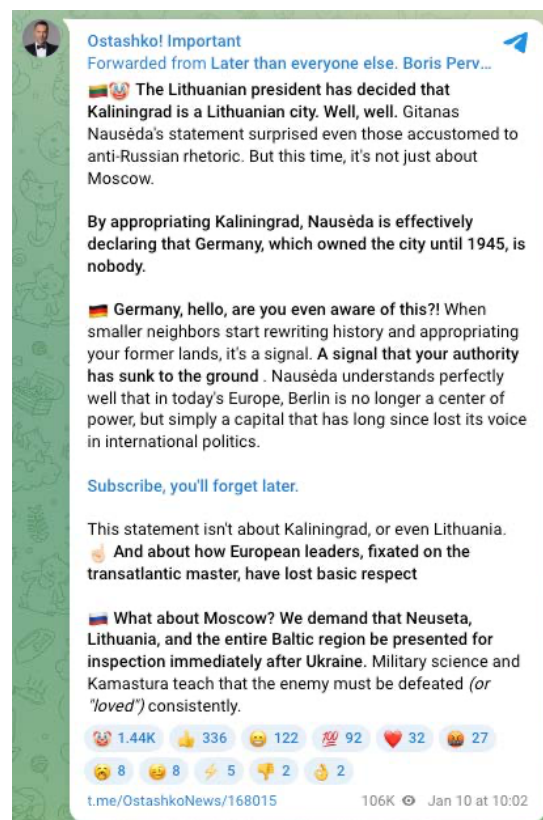


Figure 89. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the OstashkoNews account (source: OstashkoNews, Telegram, 10 January 2025)

Many Telegram mentions appeared a few hours earlier (peak hours were 06:00–08:00 GMT) than the official comments of Duma officers (peak hours were 08:00–10:00 GMT), from which it can be inferred that the Telegram activity either operated independently or was coordinated to stir the pot before the official reaction and official narrative (Figure 90).

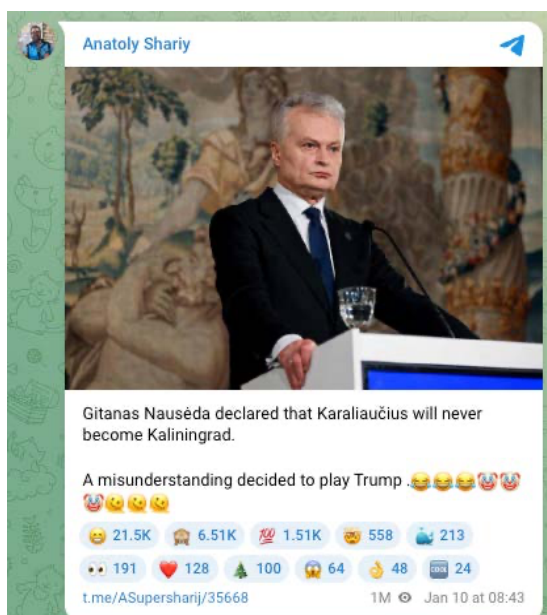


Figure 90. Screenshot of a Telegram post on the ASupersharirj account (source: ASupersharirj, Telegram, 10 January 2025)

Another visible sub-narrative concerned how Lithuanians should remember and be thankful that Stalin gave them Vilnius.

Although this topic was in the top five most prominent topics of the day in Russia (along with German elections, Biden’s sanctions, developments in Kursk, and Trump wanting to meet with Putin), the Kaliningrad story was not that prominent on prime-time TV.

International Disinformation Spread

Subsequently, Repsense tracked worldwide traces of a distorted narrative about Lithuania’s territorial claims were tracked (Figure 91). Primary foreign activity commenced immediately following the peak hours of this topic in

Russia (in foreign media, the peak hours were 10:00–12:00 GMT on 10 January 11:00–13:00 CET on 10 January and 04:00–05:00 GMT on 11 January 05:00–06:00 on 11 January).

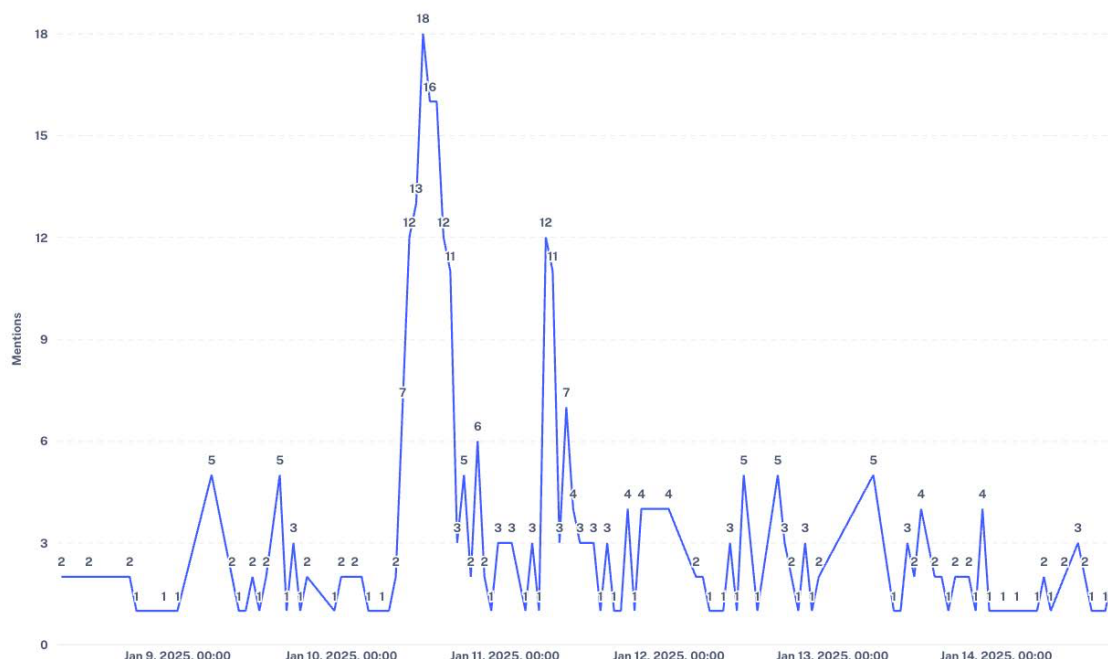


Figure 91. The hourly dynamics of mentions of the topic of Kaliningrad in foreign media

Over 300 mentions in foreign media following one of Russia’s false narratives were captured in 30 world regions (Figure 92), with two or more mentions captured in Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Can-

ada, Croatia, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Mexico, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland, Türkiye, Ukraine, the US, and Vietnam.

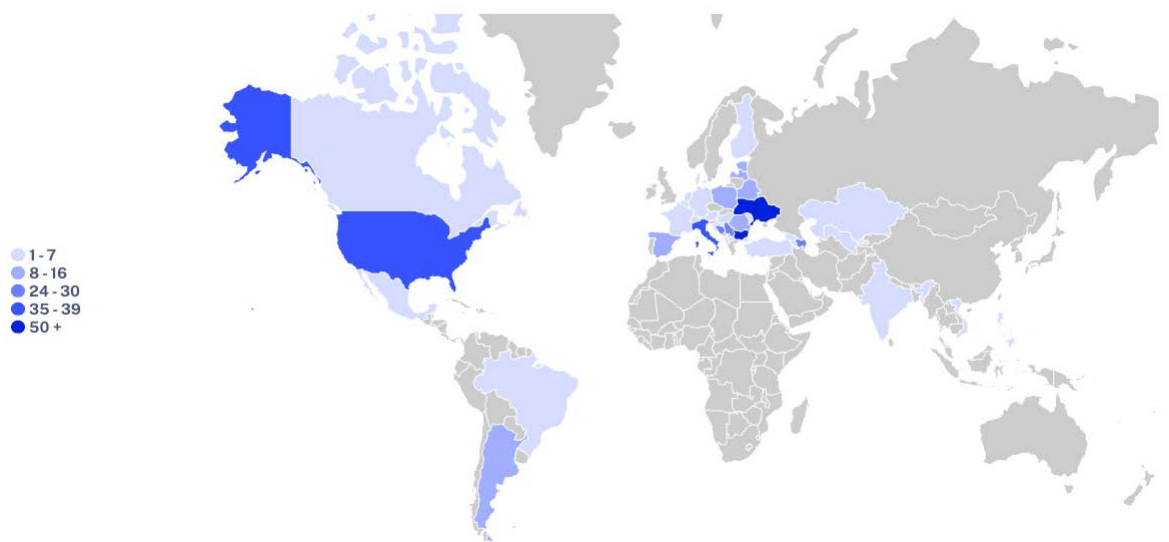


Figure 92. World map of mentions of the topic of Kaliningrad in foreign media

While the topic attracted great interest in Bulgaria (50 articles) and Ukraine (62 arti-

cles), Italy ranked third with a surprising number of mentions (35 articles).

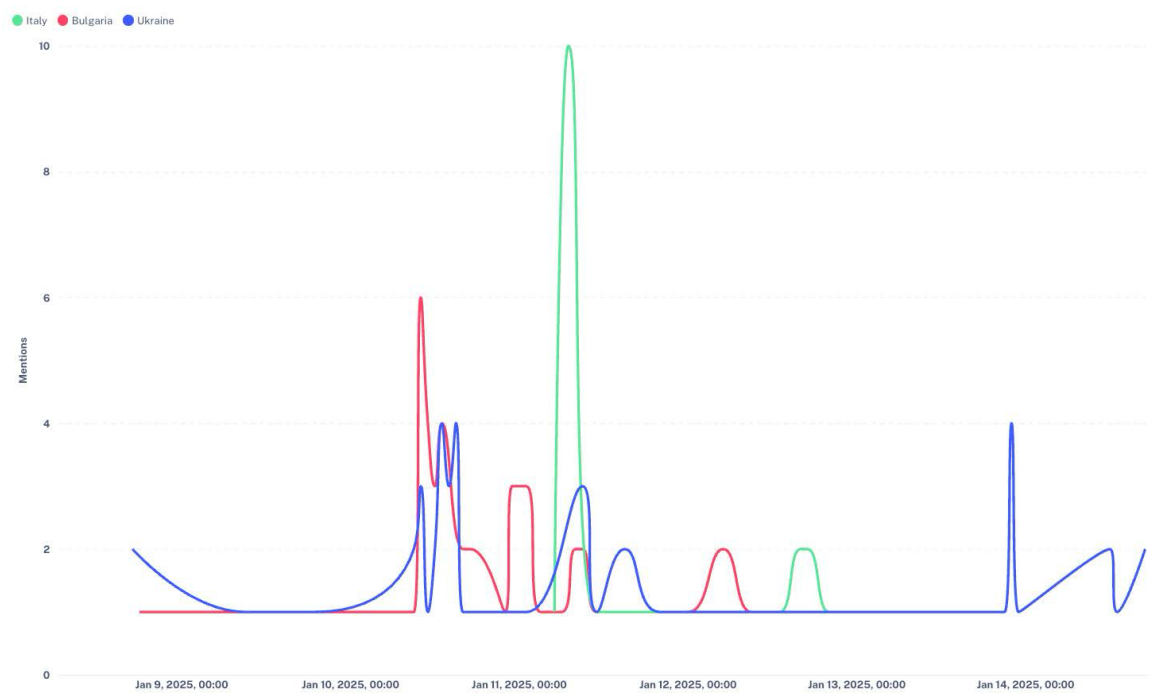


Figure 93. The hourly dynamics of mentions of the topic of Kaliningrad in three selected countries: Italy – green; Bulgaria – red; Ukraine – blue

In the Italian case we see a sharp activity peak on the morning of 11 January (Figure 93). At this point there was a huge wave of ar-

ticles citing Dmitry Peskov and Maria Zakharova, the source of which was the Italian news agency Adnkronos (Figure 94).

Lithuania wants Kaliningrad back, Russia's anger against Vilnius

RED / JANUARY 11, 2025



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(Adnkronos) - Russia, attacking Lithuania after Vilnius's claims, 'dusts off' Josef Stalin and the Red Army to respond to the words of Baltic President Gitanas Nausėda.

The Kremlin, in fact, through the

Spokesman Dmitry Peskov accused the Lithuanian president of maintaining a "hostile" attitude towards Moscow and of advancing "territorial claims" to the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, which the president called "originally Lithuanian," raising the possibility that Russia might "return" it.

At a press conference in Moscow, Peskov called Vilnius "unfriendly and hostile," an attitude that "justifies" Russia's measures to "ensure its security." Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova also attacked Nausėda, calling him a "cardboard doll" who "indulges in his historical fantasies," and urging him to "study a little history," after assuring him that the Russian exclave is part of the historical region that was part of Prussia and then East Prussia, where Prussian Lithuanians lived.

Figure 94. *Quotidiano di Bari* web article (source: 'Lituania riuole Kaliningrad: ira Russia contro Vilnius', quotidianodibari.it, 11 January 2025)

Later articles focused more on Russian threats to Lithuania (Figure 95).

Russia threatens the Baltic states and Lithuania: "Vilnius belongs to us; they wouldn't resist for a day."

Tensions are rising between Russia and the Baltics: after the Lithuanian president's remarks come threats of an invasion.

Published January 12, 2025, 8:56 PM

SHARE



Gabriele Silvestri
JOURNALIST



Russia has raised new threats to the **Baltic countries** and **Lithuania**, which Alexei Zhuravlev, deputy chairman of the State Duma's Defense Committee, claims as Moscow territory. In the escalating tension, Vilnius has been accused of "hostility" toward the Kremlin, and Zhuravlev has claimed that the Lithuanian army "would not resist a single day" against the Russian one.

Figure 95. Web article from virgilio.it (source: 'La Russia minaccia i Paesi baltici e la Lituania: "Vilnius appartiene a noi, non resisterebbero un giorno"', virgilio.it, 12 January 2025)

Although Italy stands out as the most surprising region, Repsense captured media mentions of the topic were captured elsewhere as well, and there were quite a few articles citing Duma authorities or even Russian sources while also mentioning the disinformation narrative proposed by Russia. A few instances are provided in the following list:

- The Romanian site pescurt.ro warned that *'Russia threatens Lithuania with invasion'* and how *'Lithuania would not last even a day'*. This was repeated across several other Romanian sites.
- The Italian site liberoquotidiano.it published an article *'Lithuania vs. Russia, insult to Putin: "Kaliningrad is ours"'*. The article says that Lithuania wants Kaliningrad back, and it mentions the storyline about Stalin giving Vilnius to the Lithuanians.
- The Serbian site webtribune.rs wrote negatively about NATO soldiers being near Kaliningrad and said that Nausėda added even more pressure with his provocations.
- The Estonian site rus.postimees.ee bent the narrative even further, saying that now Russia was threatening the whole of Europe because of Nausėda's remarks.
- The Ukrainian site focus.ua said that Nausėda called Kaliningrad a part of *'Lithuania Minor'*.
- The Turkish site ensonharber.com compared European *'far-right'* leaders' (mentioning how Nausėda wanted Kaliningrad and how the Bulgarian Kostadin Kostadinov wanted a piece of Macedonia) with Trump's initiative to control Mexico.
- The Vietnamese site giaoducthoidai.vn stated that *'Poles are sending tanks to Kaliningrad on a massive scale'*.
- The site Albanian sot.com.al wrote that Lithuanians *'demands Kaliningrad's return'*.
- The Belarusian site mediabrest.bytaunted: *'A territorial conflict has erupted between Russia and Lithuania. So far, it's only in name.'*
- The Polish site prawy.pl warned: *'A world on the brink of war? "The Baltic States should belong to Russia".'*
- The Ukrainian site news.online.ua called out Russian lies straight away, saying that Lithuania was making no territorial claims.

Metro Map Analysis

All the articles used here as examples were identified by searching for media texts with the closest vector value compared to

content published by Kremlin-affiliated outlets (Figure 96).<FIGURE 96 NEAR HERE>

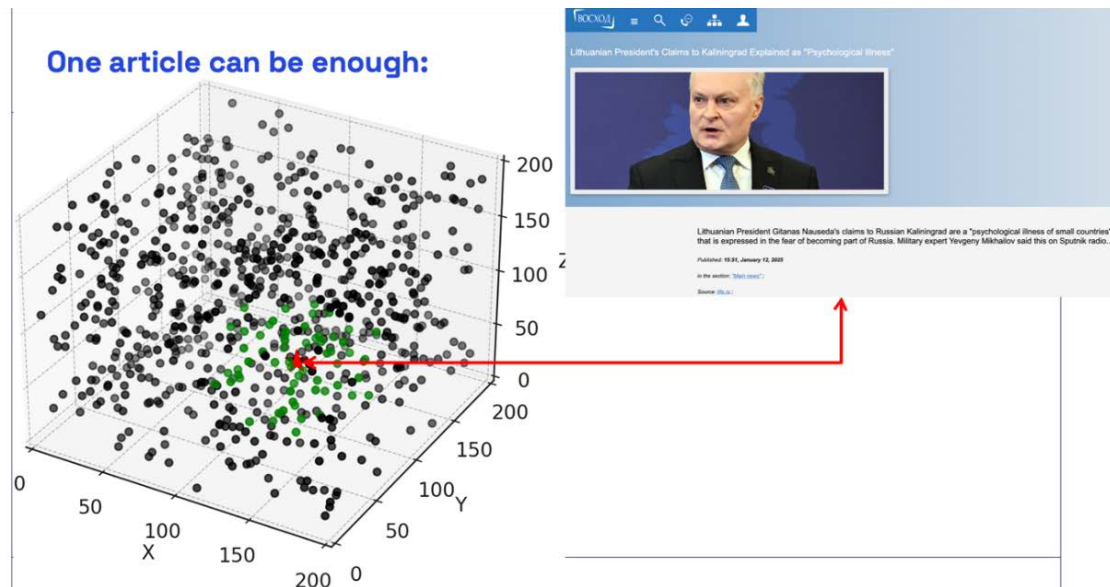


Figure 96. A Russian state article located in the vector space among other texts

The Adler model thus enabled the detection of articles in non-official Russian media and in foreign media that followed one of the false narratives associated with this story:

1. Lithuania has territorial claims on Kaliningrad (main narrative)
2. Lithuania itself historically belonged to other countries (Stalin gave Vilnius to the Lithuanians, etc.)
3. Nausėda is trying to provoke a military conflict
4. Nausėda is trying to act like Trump
5. Russians are ready to take the Baltics back

6. Lithuania is producing an informational attack against Russians.
7. Kaliningrad has a Russian history – this narrative is mainly used to justify the current war and call it a defensive position.

After collecting all the mentions semantically closest to the Kremlin's disinformation position, the Adler model examined each instance's metadata: region, publication time, sub-narratives, authors, and so on. This enabled researchers to construct a schema illustrating how disinformation had penetrated foreign media and the mechanisms driving it. This schema, also called a metro map, allows users to examine a single station and observe all information transfer lines converging there (Figure 97).

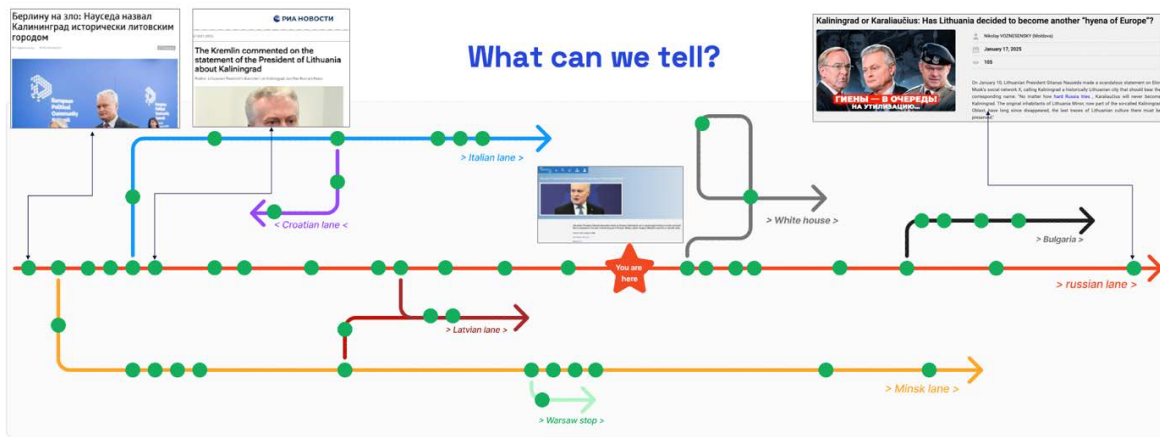


Figure 97. Metro map analysis of the Nausėda–Kaliningrad story development over time

The case studies of the Kursk incursion and the Crocus terrorist attack in the main body of this report found that Russia used a

very similar communication playbook in reacting to unexpected crises.

Conclusions of the Case Study

The Nausėda–Kaliningrad case study explored how the Russian domestic information ecosystem converted a relatively low-impact foreign political statement into a vehicle for escalation-oriented narratives. Using a focused dataset covering Russian state websites, state television, and Telegram channels, the analysis traced both the timing and framing of coverage, as well as the interaction between platforms.

The response was rapid and internally coherent. Nausėda's remarks were framed not as an isolated diplomatic comment but as confirmation of broader Western hostility towards Russia. Lithuania was consistently portrayed as a proxy acting on behalf of NATO or the US, while Kaliningrad functioned as a symbolic focal point representing vulnerability, strategic importance, and alleged encirclement. The factual substance of the original statement was quickly subordinated to its narrative utility.

Telegram channels played an important role in early amplification, introducing emotionally charged interpretations and speculative escalation of language. State media and television later adopted a more controlled tone while retaining the core storyline, reinforcing deterrence and readiness without making ex-

plicit threats. This division of labour allowed for rhetorical escalation while preserving plausible deniability.

The metro map visualisation was used as a supporting analytical tool to examine how Kaliningrad-related narratives appeared across multiple thematic clusters rather than as a single bounded topic. It helped illustrate how the same trigger moved between established narrative lines (Baltic hostility, NATO pressure, regional security, and deterrence), highlighting Kaliningrad's role as a reusable narrative reference point.

The key takeaway from this case is that Russian information tactics do not depend on major crises. Routine statements can be weaponised when they align with pre-existing narrative templates. For counter-information efforts, this underscores the importance of early contextualisation and of monitoring regional symbolic nodes like Kaliningrad, where even minor external signals can be rapidly inflated into evidence of systemic threat.

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