



# Kremlin Communication Strategy for Russian Audiences Before and After the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

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Authors: Dr. Neville Bolt, Dr. Ofer Fridman, Dr. Charlie Winter, Dr. Vera Michlin-Shapir,  
Laima Venclauskienė, Karina Urbanavičiūtė, Viktoras Daukšas, Jakub Kubs,  
Dr. Aleksandra Michalowska and Max Levin

Project Manager: Raimundas Jareckas

Content Editor: Monika Hanley

Design: Inga Ropša

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NATO STRATCOM COE

11b Kalnciema iela,

Riga, LV1048, Latvia

[stratcomcoe.org](http://stratcomcoe.org)

@stratcomcoe

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# INTRODUCTION

Particularly since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent popularisation of what has frequently been mischaracterised as ‘the Gerasimov doctrine’,<sup>1</sup> Russia’s behaviour in the information space has often been viewed as part of its ‘grayzone’, ‘hybrid’, or ‘sub-threshold’ activities.<sup>2</sup> However, the events of late February 2022 and the ensuing months have amply demonstrated that Russia’s information activities should also be viewed in the context of the country as a conventional, above-threshold threat.<sup>3</sup>

February 2022 may have marked the point at which Russia’s actions left the ‘grayzone’ and entered the realm of full-scale conventional warfare, but the information environment nevertheless remains a key facet of this conflict. On the Russian side, the Kremlin’s stranglehold on television media and the proliferation of Kremlin-aligned (or, at the very least, anti-Ukrainian) Telegram accounts have ensured public support for the war, which (according to polling by the Levada Center), remains high, at 72%<sup>4</sup>—higher even than when the war first broke out, even as sanctions bite, military failures mount, and Russia’s manpower losses surpass those of all wars it has fought since the end of World War II combined.<sup>5</sup> On the Ukrainian side, tropes such as the ‘Russian warship go f\*ck yourself’ exchange at Snake Island have helped ensure public support among Ukraine’s allies for aiding the country’s war effort, casting Ukraine as a plucky underdog against a larger foe which is simultaneously deadly and incompetent.

This research framework was commissioned by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga to mark the one-year anniversary of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It examines the Kremlin-aligned information space in the period leading up to and

immediately after this key juncture to draw lessons for assessing Russia’s actions in the future (now that we are rid of any illusions that Russia is anything other than a malign actor willing to use its military might to achieve its geopolitical goals), and to inform our own responses to those actions.

The framework consists of three stand-alone reports that were researched independently of one another, but which nevertheless established several striking common findings (discussed below). These reports, produced by a range of experts in strategic communications and Russian information activity, mix qualitative and quantitative elements and collectively analyse hundreds of hours of television programming, thousands of government press statements and press releases, and millions of Telegram posts, with a focus on messaging aimed at domestic Russian audiences.

The first stand-alone report consists of five papers contributed by four authors. Following Dr Neville Bolt’s introduction, Dr Charlie Winter’s report focuses on the quantitative aspects of activity in the Kremlin-aligned Telegram ecosystem in the run-up to and aftermath of the invasion. Telegram saw huge growth in users in Russia—from an average of 25 million daily users in January 2022 to 41.5 million in July<sup>6</sup>—after many Western platforms were restricted by the government in the wake of the invasion. It is a popular source of news, and nine out of the ten most popular news-focused Telegram channels are Kremlin aligned.<sup>7</sup> Dr Winter’s analysis looks at 3 million posts published by 427 pro-war Telegram accounts between 1 April 2021 and 1 April 2022, and reveals a picture of dramatic growth in output starting in the days leading up to the invasion. Some of the surprising details of these findings are highlighted below.

Dr Vera Michlin-Shapir then takes a qualitative look at this surge in activity by focusing on textual analysis of ten leading Kremlin-aligned channels around three key junctures in the early stages of the war (namely, the Battle of Antonov Airport in Hostomel, the occupation of Kherson, and the discovery of atrocities in Bucha), seeking to establish the ways in which the pro-Kremlin Telegram ecosystem aligned with or differed from traditional Kremlin-controlled media. Dr Michlin-Shapir finds that these channels displayed a more agile and adaptive response to events than traditional media, in particular rapidly developing new narratives in response to events which challenged mainstream propaganda's party lines (for example, military setbacks in Hostomel challenging dominant narratives of Russia's military success, and popular protests against occupying forces in Kherson challenging narratives of liberation of grateful Russian speakers in south-east Ukraine). In some cases the narratives they developed were then subsequently adopted by government officials and mainstream media outlets. Dr Michlin-Shapir reminds us that this 'de-monopolisation' of information does not necessarily equate to greater pluralism, as many of the positions taken by these channels are even more hawkish than the Kremlin's. However, their increasing influence could pose a challenge for the power vertical in the future, particularly as Russia's losses mount.

Dr Ofer Fridman, in his paper, argues that this de-monopolisation of information is more evidence of Russia's 'strategy without design', a concept popularised by Robert Chia and Robin Holt in their 2009 book of the same name.<sup>8</sup> Under such a system, 'strategically favourable outcomes may emerge not as a result of well-planned and executed actions, but as a serendipitous consequence of other, even less powerful actors, who [...] shift the situation through the local pursuits of their own goals and interests'. Dr Fridman further explains how the Kremlin, realising the difficulty of establishing an absolute monopoly in the information environment in the internet age, instead sought to 'shape the character of actors who exercise power in it'. The progression of this

de-monopolisation of information from Kremlin propagandists on state-owned television to a plethora of Telegram mods is evident from the case studies given in Dr Michlin-Shapir's paper. The advantages of such a system from the Kremlin's perspective is that it is flexible and adaptive; the advantage from the perspective of the Kremlin's adversaries is that such a system is more susceptible to manipulation.

Dr Bolt, in his introductory and concluding remarks to the three reports discussed above, places their evidence and arguments in a higher-level theoretical context. He cautions against simplistic interpretations of top-down narrative flow, arguing instead that observed discourses are the result of a complex and iterative interplay of a multitude of actors and factors. Dr Bolt also reminds us that the Kremlin itself is one of the intended audiences for the output of Kremlin propaganda, as those responsible for its dissemination seek to demonstrate to their superiors that they are fulfilling the latter's perceived intent. As Dr Bolt points out, this raises the question: to what extent was the Kremlin's decision-making process warped by a worldview that was itself shaped by the Kremlin's own propaganda? Other observers have suggested that such a process may have contributed to Putin's hubristic approach to the invasion,<sup>9</sup> summarised by the Russian phrase 'Киев за три дня' ('Kiev in three days'), hubris which may have been further strengthened by overreliance on inaccurate intelligence that reinforced Putin's pre-existing biases.<sup>10</sup> In the parallel reality these factors gave rise to, a rapid, relatively bloodless assault against a 'fake' country with an acquiescent population—led by a craven and corrupt government and defended by outdated and poorly motivated armed forces—would have seemed like an entirely rational decision.

The second stand-alone report, led by Laima Venclauskienė of Debunk.org, quantitatively evaluates the information output of both Russian government agencies (i.e., press releases from the President's Office, the Defence Ministry, and other bodies) and selected programming from Kremlin-controlled television channels, comparing the four-month



period before the invasion with the one month following it. Its analysis, based on over 1400 content pieces, is divided into metrics of the volume, intensity, and relative prominence of Ukraine-related output across the Kremlin information ecosystem. It also comprehensively catalogues and ranks the strategic narratives that can be observed in the selected content during these two time periods, breaking them down into 'distractive', 'disruptive', and 'constructive' narratives. By evaluating content for the presence and intensity of certain keywords (e.g. 'provocation', 'genocide'), it also attempts to provide metrics for the relative degree of 'hard-line' messaging.

The introduction to Venclauskienė's report also provides a useful background to Russia's information environment, summarising how the Kremlin consolidated its control over the country's media landscape after the relative freedom of the 1990s by replicating and also innovating upon Soviet precedents, and weaponised these structures in the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent intervention in the Donbas, helping to lay the groundwork for 2022's full-scale invasion. Since then, this weaponisation of information has only intensified, backed by the full force of the state's repressive apparatus.

The report finds, perhaps unsurprisingly, that there was a marked increase in both the volume and prominence of Ukraine-related content following the launch of the 'special military operation'. For example, whereas Russia's Defence Ministry published a maximum of four Ukraine-related articles a week in the period before the war, after the invasion this increased to a maximum of 70 a week. In terms of prominence, while the average television viewer was presented with Ukraine-related issues as one of the top stories in 53% of television programmes analysed before the invasion, this increased to 100% afterwards. And whereas before the war there was a discrepancy between different government bodies and television in terms of emphasis and narrative focus on Ukraine, Venclauskienė observes a consolidation in the Kremlin information ecosystem after the invasion, for example with

television output drawing closely from daily briefings by Defence Ministry spokesman Igor' Konashenkov (Игорь Конашенков). In terms of narratives, Venclauskienė finds that before the war most of the Kremlin's output was focused on discrediting the West as an unreliable partner (for example, refusing to engage in meaningful dialogue while providing weaponry to Ukraine), whereas after the war the focus shifted significantly to portraying the Russian army as a benevolent actor, providing humanitarian aid to the newly 'liberated' areas of Ukraine, while accusing the Ukrainian armed forces of war crimes.

The final stand-alone report, from Max Levin, seeks to draw lessons from Russia's propaganda output in the lead-up to the invasion of Ukraine, in particular attempting to correlate Russia's activity in the physical domain (namely, its two force build-ups in the spring and autumn of 2021, followed by preparations for the full-scale invasion) with its behaviour in the information environment. The report looks primarily at messaging on state-owned television, due to its wide reach and clear attribution, and is primarily qualitative in nature. It finds that observed coverage fell far short of a hypothetical 'optimal' communications strategy, whereby the Kremlin, through its domestic propaganda, might have ensured popular support for its actions and prepared the Russian population for the negative consequences of its escalations in Ukraine. Instead, the output was primarily reactive in nature and seemed to fail to anticipate the biggest escalation of all—i.e., the invasion itself. For example, until mere days before the invasion, Kremlin propaganda devoted most of its resources to denying its intentions to invade and decrying any claims to the contrary as 'Russophobic hysteria', while none of its leading propagandists were advocating for the kind of full-scale, multi-domain operation that was unleashed shortly thereafter. Levin argues that these findings lend credence to evidence from other sources<sup>11</sup> that the decision to proceed with a full-scale invasion was taken comparatively close to 24 February, and was only shared within a small circle of people that did not extend even to some of the regime's most trusted mouthpieces.

Overall, although the three stand-alone parts of this research programme were conducted independently and focus on distinct data from different parts of the Kremlin-aligned media landscape, they nevertheless reveal three striking common findings:

Both the Debunk.org and Max Levin reports conclude that many parts of the Kremlin information machine were primarily reactive in nature, responding to external inputs such as events in global politics and foreign media reports, rather than proactively trying to shape the debate in concert with actions taken by the Kremlin. This is surprising insofar as communications from government agencies and government-controlled media should have been able to anticipate actions taken by that same government and the possible negative responses to them. Dr Vera Michlin-Shapir's report demonstrates how pro-war Telegram channels showed more initiative in developing new narratives in response to rapidly changing realities on the ground, if not displaying proactive behaviour then at least reacting with greater speed and creativity. Our interpretation of these findings can be further enhanced by Dr Ofer Fridman's application of the concept of 'strategy without design' to the Kremlin-aligned media environment which is discussed above.

The papers from Debunk.org, Dr Charlie Winter, and Max Levin all find a much lower than expected volume of Ukraine-related content across the Kremlin-aligned media ecosystem in the run-up to the invasion. Additionally, the latter two reports find that this pattern was dramatically reversed on 17 February, when there was a significant shift in focus on television to alleged Ukrainian aggression in the Donbas, and a 'marked, unprecedented, and demonstrably inauthentic surge in posting behaviour' on Telegram. Both reports correlate this to escalation by Russian forces on the ground, with Dr Winter citing a tenfold increase in ceasefire violations by Russian and pro-Russian forces in the Donbas on the same date. This date, merely four days before Russian troops were moved into the Donbas, may indicate the point at which the Kremlin's information resources were first fully mobilised in support of a drastic

escalation in the long-running conflict. Both reports also raise the possibility that many actors in the Kremlin-aligned information ecosystem may have been unaware of invasion plans before this date.

Both Dr Charlie Winter and Max Levin find that the question of 'denazification', stated by Putin as one of the principal goals of his 'special military operation', barely registered in either television coverage or in the Kremlin-aligned Telegram ecosystem in the period leading up to the war, even though it was to become a major theme in pro-war propaganda output thereafter. For example, Levin points out that the term 'denazification' appeared 69 times in articles published by the state-owned news agency TASS in the year to 23 February 2023, but 47,201 times in the six months following Putin's 24 February speech. This provides more evidence for findings (1) and (2) above, underlining the reactive nature of Kremlin messaging (in this case, to a speech made by Putin) and again suggesting that propagandists may not have been privy to Putin's intentions.

Both the Debunk.org and Max Levin reports identify that current affairs panel shows on television (e.g. *60 Minutes*) were outliers in terms of volume, prominence, and tone of Ukraine coverage. In the months leading up to the invasion, when other types of content such as government press releases and television news reports displayed lower than expected volumes of Ukraine coverage, Ukraine was an ongoing obsession of panel shows. Both reports attribute this discrepancy to long-standing editorial tendencies on the part of these programmes, which have been described as 'agitation'.<sup>12</sup>

We encourage readers to look at these findings in more detail by familiarising themselves with the content of the papers outlined above, and we hope that our research programme will constitute a useful and informative contribution to the conversation around Russia's strategic communications activity.

# Endnotes

- 1 Mark Galeotti, [‘The “Gerasimov Doctrine” and Russian Non-Linear War’](#), In *Moscow’s Shadows*, 6 July 2014.
- 2 For example, Christopher S. Chivvis, [‘Understanding Russian ‘Hybrid Warfare’, and What Can Be Done about It](#), *Rand Corporation* (testimony to the Committee on Armed Services, United States House of Representatives), 22 April 2016.
- 3 The argument that Russia’s hybrid tactics should be viewed in the context of its conventional capabilities is not a new one, but has also been made by many prescient analysts, for example Nicole Ng and Eugene Rumer, [‘The West Fears Russia’s Hybrid Warfare: They’re Missing the Bigger Picture’](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 July 2019.
- 4 [‘Conflict with Ukraine: Assessments for March 2023’](#), Yuri Levada Analytical Center, 7 April 2023.
- 5 [‘How Many Russians Have Been Killed in Ukraine?’](#), *The Economist*, 8 March 2023.
- 6 Eto Buziashvili, [‘What Russia Reads on Telegram’](#), *Medium*, 21 October 2022.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Robert C.H. Chia and Robin Holt, *Strategy without Design: The Silent Efficacy of Indirect Action* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 9 E.g. Peter Pomerantsev, [‘Putin Is “High off His Own Propaganda Supply”’](#), *New York Times* (podcast), 16 March 2022.
- 10 As argued by analysts, e.g. Huw Dylan, David V. Gioe and Elena Grossfeld, [‘The Autocrat’s Intelligence Paradox: Vladimir Putin’s \(Mis\)management of Russian Strategic Assessment in the Ukraine War’](#), *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 29 December 2022.
- 11 Detailed in the report.
- 12 A term coined by Vera Tolz and Yuri Teper in their paper [‘Broadcasting Agitainment: A New Media Strategy of Putin’s Third Presidency’](#), *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 9 April 2018.



# CONCEPTUAL REFLECTIONS ON DISCOURSE FORMATION AND DISSEMINATION

by Dr. Neville Bolt

## Introduction

There's a fallacy shared by most who practise strategic communications. The common mistake is to talk of messaging and the possible effectiveness that attaching such messages to grievances and those who hold them can achieve. Messages like narratives are an overused term, put through the wash once too often and bleached of the intellectual colour they once sported. It is as if by sending out a slogan, a cause-and-effect relationship can be brought to bear on a pre-identified audience. The danger inherent in this 'post-it' approach to communications is to place all hope on linear, one-way agency while ignoring the nature of the discursive context or what is frequently and unadvisedly called the information environment. As if communicators were caught in a call-and-response exchange or a dangerous thrust-and-parry. By this token, communications is forced into a zero-sum game, rather than the organic or fluid negotiation between contiguous discourses that it really is.<sup>1</sup>

Even the clearest, most targeted campaigns require an understanding of discursive context. War demands a more nuanced weighing of tropes and ideas that sit side by side in the public's awareness, mutually informing each other without necessarily becoming a single dominant story. Albeit the aim for all combatants remains to dominate via the hegemonic discourse.

A perhaps overused metaphor is the sport of football. Yet to assume that this game is best read through strikes and saves is to

ignore the runs and feints performed off the ball; these write the tactical flows in a series of 'conversations' on the pitch. Equally, to ignore these movements is to be heedless of the rhythms that pulse across the field of play, unexceptional in their particularity but felt cumulatively as the game progresses. The game is a set of processes and interrelationships, not simply goals. So too a tendency to focus on statements made by political leaders eliciting responses from their like is to ignore the many layers of communication that 'shadow' overt statements. Which is not the same as being covert. Beyond the 'hidden language' of semiotics where material objects and immaterial actions can be read as texts,<sup>2</sup> the context that surrounds events is a multi-tiered set of discourses that sometimes merge organically, sometimes remain contiguous but distinct.<sup>3</sup> Though the very image of tiering too is perhaps misleading, where thought bubbles gently merge into cloud formations as they move across the sky. Hence discursive interaction speaks to horizontally networked conversations more than vertical and hierarchically driven messaging.

Rather than view Russian discourses around the Ukraine war as hegemonic, better to place them in a setting of conversations that create not even secondary but tertiary effects.

Discourses are not static but fluid, moving between political, diplomatic, economic, and public intellectual spaces in unforeseen and unpredictable ways: they develop and morph before converging or diverging. Nonetheless,

this complex process shapes the discursive climate into which kinetic events play. They further determine how we read their patterns and connections to collective memories built up over time and fundamental to the praxis of politics and strategic communications.<sup>4</sup> Public statements by Moscow's leadership, supported by systematic disinformation campaigns carried out on an industrial scale, should not always be read as initiating an exchange of two-way conversations between Russia and Ukraine or Russia and NATO, but instead as contributing to a continuous set of reverberations, resonances, and ricochets. How these are framed determines the expectations placed on countering Moscow's information output.

This section of the publication also questions the role of agency on the part of the geopolitical communicator. Agency is a key concept in how we understand strategy. Below Ofer Fridman analyses strategy without design, with its understanding of the constraints that surround the intent of communicators, and their ability to turn planning into effect, in a world of incomplete information, unforeseen events, and unintended consequences.

Forward motion is granular and negotiated with every micro-action. Below Neville Bolt argues further that any intention to influence the direction and take-up of a discourse can be as serendipitous as it might be anticipated, regardless of expertise. In a world of complex adaptive systems conversations are organic and fluid.

Analysis of discourse here should be mindful of the following:

1. There is never just one conversation in play.
2. Contexts where ideas circulate are particular, depending on socio-political-cultural factors.
3. Discourses are organic, porous, and fungible. They may be tangential, they may overlap, or they may be distinct.

4. Discourses act not through direct or primary effect, but through secondary and tertiary effects.
5. Communications at best may be measured not through the lens of cause and effect but correlation.
6. Communications are non-linear. The environments in which they circulate are dynamic networks of networks within complex adaptive systems; these are characterised by unforeseen events and unintended consequences.
7. The closer one approaches the theatre of war, the more dynamic and complex become feedback loops of communication flows.
8. The more dynamic and complex the flows of ideas and information, the more difficult it is for state-centric power to exert an influence.

In the following sections specific conclusions will be drawn from empirical surveys by Vera Michlin-Shapir and Charlie Winter:

1. Telegram has become one of the most important informational vectors in the war.
2. Telegram channel administrators have formed an online subsystem within Russia's hybrid media system.
3. The Kremlin does not exert complete control over Russia's media system.
4. The Kremlin's de-monopolisation of power in the information space is best understood as a strategy without design.

# A background note on concepts and method

This section of the publication will consider Russian strategic thinking on the use of political communications at home and geopolitical communications directed at Ukraine and the wider world in what Moscow characterises as NATO's war of aggression. Putin's 2022 victory parade speech echoed the now established rhetoric: 'Russia called on the West to enter an honest dialogue, in search of reasonable compromise solutions, to take each other's interests into account. It was all in vain. NATO countries did not want to listen to us.'<sup>5</sup> Indeed 'what happens when a government is slowly warped by its own propaganda' is a question raised by one Russian diplomat who was later to resign from office, Boris Bondarev. It foregrounds his observation that

*'We were taught to embrace bombastic rhetoric and to uncritically parrot to other states what the Kremlin said to us. But eventually, the target audience was not just foreign countries; it was our own leadership. In cables and statements, we were made to tell the Kremlin that we had sold the world on Russian greatness and demolished the West's arguments.'*<sup>6</sup>

How and to what extent this process informed Moscow's approach to its communications domestically and abroad, before and during the Ukraine war, will emerge from future analysis. Conversation points (narratives<sup>7</sup>) that have proven successful and been considered to have taken hold will also be analysed. These develop some captured in the Debunk.org contribution to this publication. Alongside them their counterparts—the Russian government's conversations deemed to have failed—will form a further part of an emerging analytical picture. On a cautionary note, when treated in isolation, discourse-capture of a single conversation, nevertheless, runs the risk

of producing a blinkered if not self-fulfilling appraisal.

Theories of change are fundamental to today's more sophisticated strategic communications practices exemplified by the UK Government Communication Service's OASIS model.<sup>8</sup> We have adopted a three-layer methodology to question how change is brought about. We examine Russian generated discourses at the micro, meso, and macro levels. These move from the formative via testing through dissemination, to the operational among online populations, to the strategic as centralised government planning meets the limitations that constrain agency. Micro, meso, and macro architecture should not, however, be seen as vertically stacked modes of analysis. If anything, they are horizontal or multi-dimensional. Albeit this may sound counterintuitive. Rather each sits within a subsystem of influence. And in each, influence spreads out sideways not just downwards, and is constitutive of a number of simultaneous dialogues or multilogues.

What follows is a grounded theory approach to analysing discourses around the Ukraine war. It draws on three tiers as follows.

*Micro* is a careful quantitative reading of the appearance of Kremlin-aligned stories played out in the online media ecology and focuses on the Telegram platform. It is assessed as a coherent programme and against a pre-invasion timeline.

*Meso* analyses qualitatively the content of Telegram exchanges and their significance in the context of the emergence of a new group of Russian online influencers, the so-called 'pro-war bloggers'. These appear to occupy a new ecosystem with decentralised power to act with greater independence.

*Macro* attempts to interrogate Russian strategic theory, planning, and decision-making where communications originate. But set in the context of an inquiry into whether strategy can be the direct consequence of agency, as conventionally understood. And at the

grand *macro level*, we reflect on how competing and contingent conversations interact before temporarily settling into hegemonic discourses with longer-term durability. This is the contest for the new norm or common sense.

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## PART 2.

# Micro-perspective: The Rise of the New Commissars—An Assessment of Russian Influence Campaigns on the Eve of the War in Ukraine

by Dr. Charlie Winter

## Introduction

Shortly after 21.30 MST on 21 February 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin declared that Moscow was set to recognise the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) in eastern Ukraine as independent territories. Moments later he gave the order for Russian ‘peacekeepers’ to deploy across the border into eastern Ukraine. Putin’s statement came just four days after a sustained surge in ceasefire violations by Russian and pro-Russian forces, which was reported by the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence on 17 February, and amid widespread, months-long speculation regarding the prospect of a full-fledged war on Kyiv.<sup>9</sup>

Data collected at the same time from Kremlin-aligned networks on the social media platform Telegram show that these on-the-ground incursions—many of which Russian and separatist forces alike falsely framed as Ukrainian attacks on DPR/LPR civilians—were synchronised with a seemingly well-prepared and coordinated influence campaign that saw, across this pro-war, Kremlin-aligned ecosystem, a fifteenfold increase in activity. This report examines the parameters of that campaign. Focusing in particular on 2.9 million

posts collected in real time from 427 pro-war groups and channels on Telegram between August 2021 and April 2022, the analysis explores the scale of Russia’s pre-invasion influence efforts. Specifically, it sets out to track how media influencers directly and indirectly associated with the Russian state went about creating an amenable pro-war influence environment in the immediate run-up to the invasion.<sup>10</sup>

The discussion proceeds as follows: first, there is an overview of the data collection, processing, and analysis methodology. After that, the aggregate dynamics that characterised the unofficial Kremlin-aligned communications ecosystem in the six months running up to the war are analysed. As part of this, there is a brief discussion of the relative salience (or lack thereof) of Ukraine in the Kremlin-aligned communications space across late 2021 and early 2022. The report concludes by briefly touching on the way pro-war influence dynamics developed in the first few weeks of the war, thereby setting the scene for the second-stage qualitative assessment provided in the next part of this analytical series, ‘From Commissars to ‘Switchers’—Pro-Russian Influence on Telegram’.



# Methodology

The data and visuals on which this analysis is based were drawn from ExTrac, an artificial-intelligence-powered data processing and analytics system.<sup>11</sup> ExTrac operates by tracking, in real time and historically, posts and multimedia shared by conflict actors on social media. To ensure relevance, ExTrac’s analytics programmes are trained to process data solely from continually curated lists of domain-expert-selected feeds. The nodes on these lists comprise anything from

multipolar group discussions and monodirectional broadcast channels to static websites and image boards. In order to pass muster for analysis, each and every data source must be assessed to align explicitly and overtly with the conflict actor in question (in this case, the Russian state and armed forces).<sup>12</sup> Together, these measures mean that all data analysed by the system are quality-assured, are of high relevance, and have low noise.

## Data

ExTrac’s Russia-focused datasets comprise a living, representative sample of the Kremlin-aligned ecosystem on Telegram. While Telegram is one of many social media platforms popular in Russia today, it has been found to be one of the principal beneficiaries of a post-war information dynamic that saw use of the likes of Facebook and Twitter severely restricted, if not entirely cut off, for Russians in early 2022. Indeed, in the wake of the Kremlin’s efforts to block Western-owned platforms in March that year, Telegram’s daily audience in Russia grew from 25 million people in January to 41.5 million people in July, with an additional 13 million users joining between February and March alone.<sup>13</sup> This means that Telegram now ranks alongside the likes of long-dominant platforms like VKontakte in both popularity and daily usage.

From a functionality perspective, Telegram has been developed in such a way that it is in many ways ideal for information distribution and consumption. Via channels, media organisations and influencers can share large amounts of bandwidth-heavy content rapidly, at scale, monodirectionally (as on Facebook), and via groups and super-groups, both of which can be directly integrated as channel-specific ‘discussion boards’. Individual users are able to directly interact with each other (as if on WhatsApp).<sup>14</sup>

Considered together, Telegram’s media-distribution-focused features list, which allows for the emergence of siloed, self-selecting communities, makes it especially well-suited to the broadcasting of politically charged information, including misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information (MDM).<sup>15</sup> This is problematic given that Telegram is specifically popular in Russia as a platform for news and media consumption. A recent DFRLab study found that, from July to September 2022, Russia ranked first globally among all countries sending traffic to Telegram, with, in the month of August alone, two of the five most popular Russia-based search topics on Telegram being ‘news’ and its Russian-language equivalent, ‘новости’.<sup>16</sup>

The same DFRLab report showed that, among Russian speakers, nine of the ten most popular political Telegram channels are explicitly Kremlin aligned, and all of them have been found to amplify pro-war propaganda and MDM in recent months. Importantly, just three of these nine channels, which together have millions of subscribers, are official communications feeds for Russian politicians—specifically, the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, Kremlin propagandist Vladimir Solov’ëv, and former prime minister Dmitriy Medvedev. The other six channels are putatively supporter-run news aggregators and content distribution hubs

operated by Kremlin enthusiasts.

It is this latter grouping of alleged supporter-run and supporter-consumed media activism on which ExTrac’s data ingests are trained in the context of Ukraine—specifically,

a constellation of 427 groups and channels containing anything from separatist group discussion boards like Donbassr to OSINT-focused feeds like Rybar’ and paramilitary media hubs like the PMC Wagner-linked Reverse Side of the Medal.<sup>17</sup>

# Analysis

## Overarching dynamics

Figure 1 shows all posting activity on ExTrac’s DPR/LPR feeds since January 2019. It indicates that, between then and January 2022, the 33 groups and channels in question generally posted between 100 and 500 messages each day. Their posting activity gradually and seemingly organically increased across the first six weeks of 2022. This is perhaps logical given the mounting prospect of war during that period, and on 17 February there was a marked, unprecedented, and demonstrably inauthentic surge in posting behaviour that saw a fifteenfold increase in collective activity across these feeds over the days that followed.

Notably, this surge in activity commenced four days before Putin’s Security Council address on 21 February, when he announced that Russian troops were to engage in ‘peacekeeping operations’ in Donetsk and Luhansk, and a whole week before the full-scale invasion was declared.

Figure 2, which overlays this chatter with Ukrainian Ministry of Defence-released data on Russian ceasefire violations in the eastern territories, indicates that this surge occurred on the same day as there was a tenfold increase in ceasefire violations by Russian and pro-Russia forces.

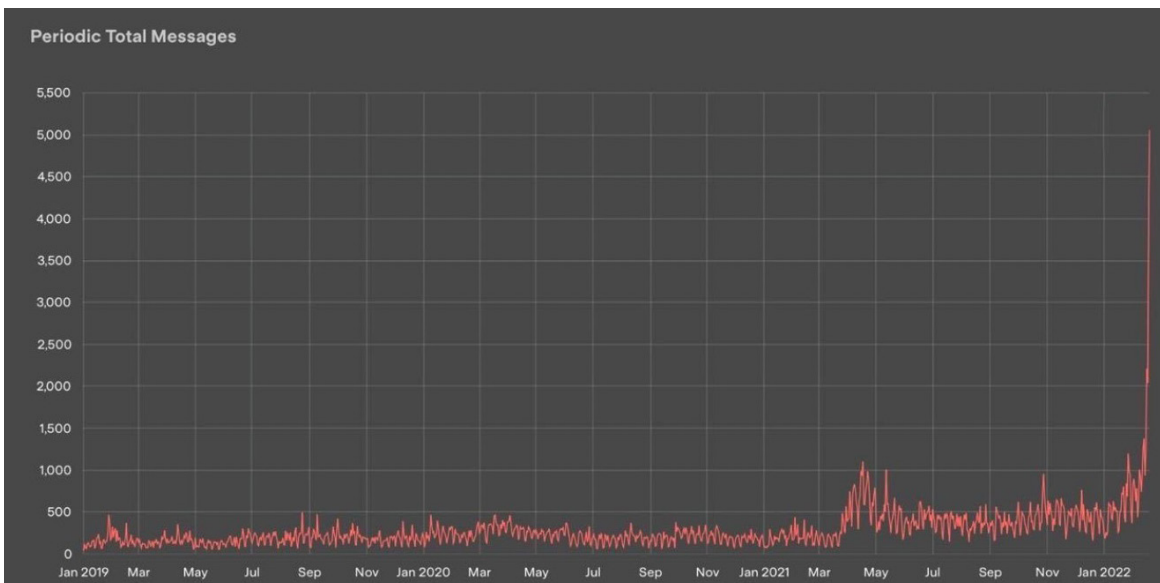


FIGURE 1. Posting activity of 33 pro-Kremlin LPR- and DPR-based groups on Telegram, January 2019 to February 2022

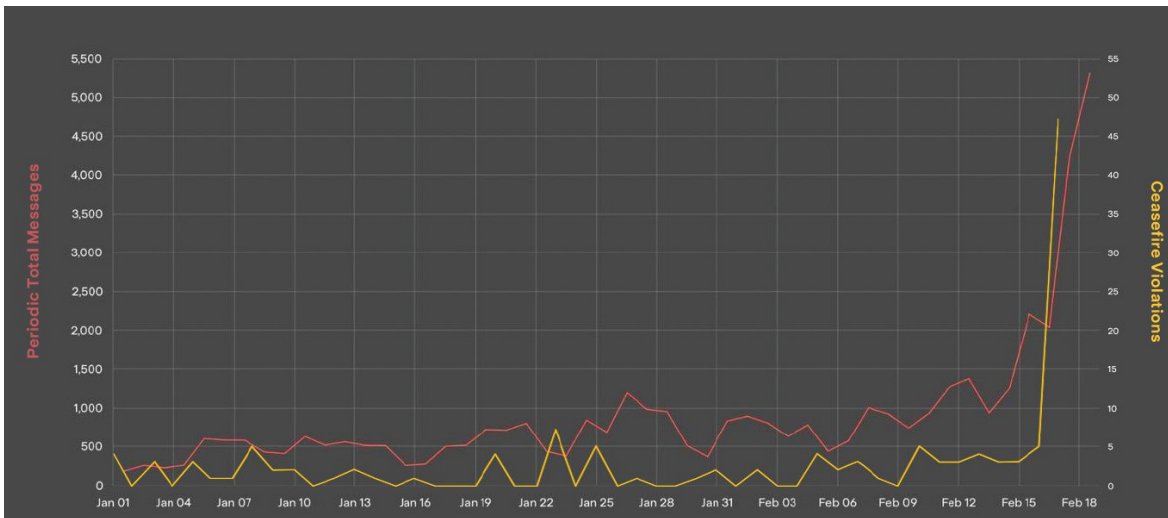


FIGURE 2. DPR/LPR comms activity (red) and Russian/pro-Russian ceasefire violations (yellow), 1 January 2022 to 18 February 2022

When the data parameters are expanded to include not only DPR/LPR-focused/-based feeds but other core elements of the Kremlin-aligned media space, as in Figure 3, this surge dynamic is even more pronounced. It shows that Kremlin-aligned groups and channels, which between January 2019 and January 2022 were typically sharing between them around 10,000 posts each day, suddenly became eight times more productive than previously—and all within the space of a few days.

This was communications hyperactivity of a scale never before seen in the context of this ecosystem. And, as it turns out, a dynamic that has not yet been repeated.

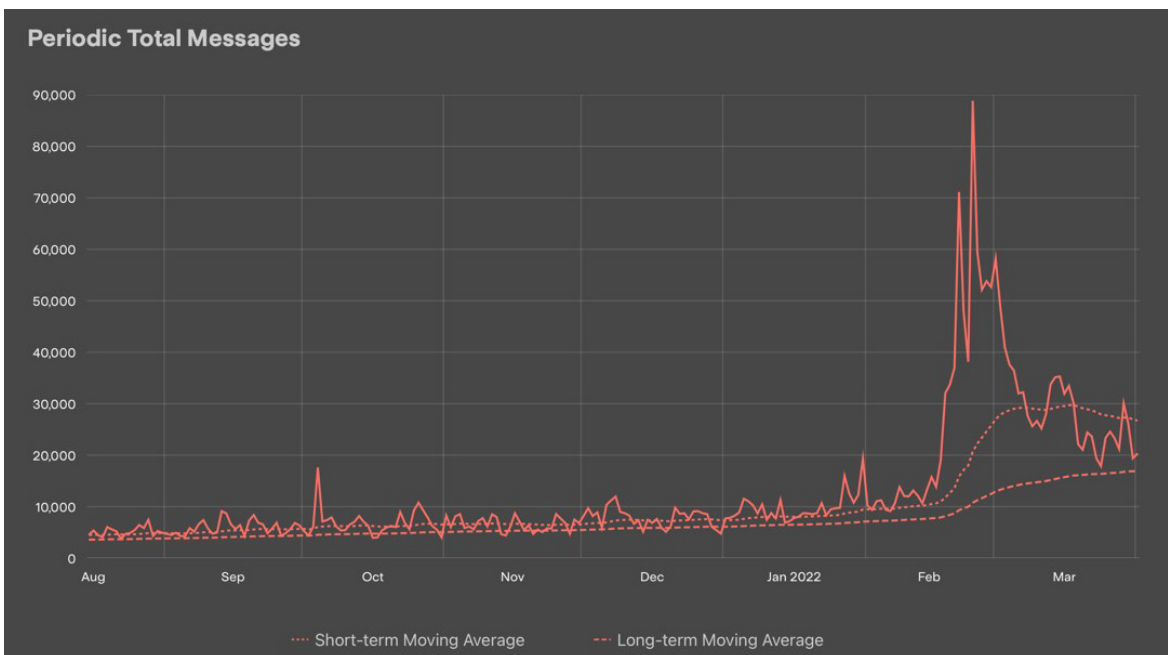


FIGURE 3. All posting activity on Kremlin-aligned ecosystem sample, August 2021 to April 2022

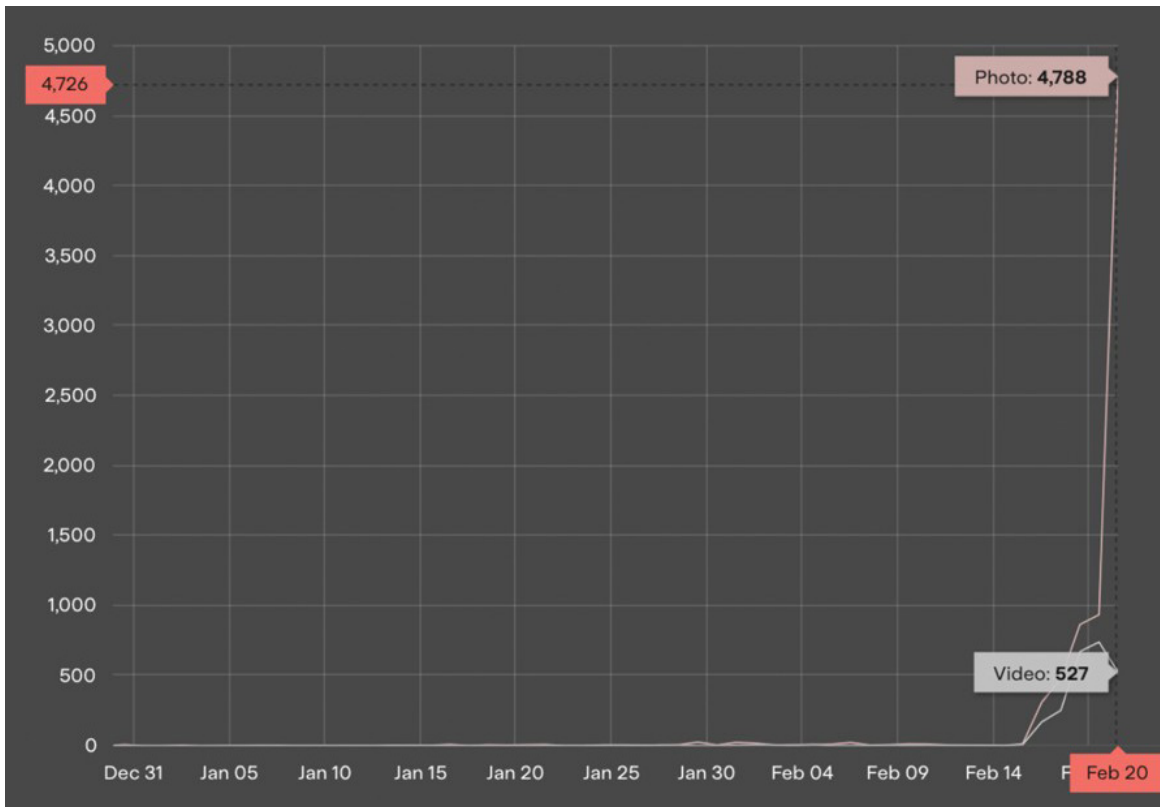


FIGURE 4. Posts containing image and video files shared across DPR-/LPR-based feeds since 1 January 2022

## Potential signs of coordination

On closer inspection, it emerges that this surge in activity was likely driven by a combination of organic and inorganic behaviours. The data speak to the fact that it came as a result of both an increase in pro-Russia chatter and a wave of new, pro-war multimedia content that was being shared across Telegram.

Figure 4, which breaks down the data ingests by content type, shows that there was a 470-fold increase in posts with image files (photographs and posters) on 20 February alone, with a 50-fold increase in video sharing across LPR- and DPR-based communities on the following day. The images that were being shared at the time typically comprised photographs or photo-sets purporting to show the plight of separatist communities in eastern Ukraine, along with prepared memes and posters supporting Russia’s claims about the ‘genocidal’ threat they now (and seemingly suddenly) faced in the east of Ukraine.<sup>18</sup> As

for the video content, which surged in particular on the day of Putin’s Security Council address, it mainly comprised clips of his speech and, shortly thereafter, footage shot on mobile phones tracking Russian troop deployments to eastern Ukraine.

Given its scale and timing—with the surge starting the same day as a tenfold increase in Russian ceasefire violations and peaking on the same day as Putin’s declaration that Russia was set to invade Ukraine—the 21 February spike in communications activity suggests, at least at some level, artificially augmented behaviour. Whether it was deployed at the hands of the Russian state or at the hands of Kremlin enthusiasts working to deliver the state a swift victory on the influence battlefield is difficult to determine with any certainty, but a combination of the two seems most likely.

## Discursive trends

Besides these aggregate dynamics, it is also worth exploring briefly the salience of the ‘Kyiv problem’ across Kremlin-aligned networks in the run-up to the war.

Figure 5 shows references to the word ‘Ukraine’ in the period between August 2021 and April 2022 across ExTrac’s pro-war data sample. It indicates that, although it doubled in salience between August and January, the change was fairly marginal (‘doubling’ in this instance was only from an average of 125 daily mentions from August to December to an average of 250 daily mentions in January). Moreover, besides one tenfold spike on 4 February, which was tied to the Russia–Ukraine semi-final match of the Futsal Euro 2022 tournament, there were no other significant spikes during the entirety of the six months up to late February—even in the wake of warnings from the United States and its allies that indicated war was looking increasingly imminent.

This lack of meaningful traction can be seen across the narrative board in relation to the war. While fears of NATO’s rising threat

to the Russian homeland were clearly being stoked in the months up to February 2022, there was no correlating dynamic in relation to words like Украина (‘Ukraine’), Киев (‘Kyiv’), Зеленский (‘Zelenskyy’). Indeed, in many ways, it seems that Ukraine was not an ‘issue’ for the ecosystem until the four days before Putin made it an issue with his ‘protective’ statement on 21 February. Further supporting this notion is the total lack of resonance for Putin’s war aims until the initiation of the campaign to propagandize them. When Putin declared that Russia’s ‘special operation’ was imminent, his principal justification at the time was that this would be a mission geared towards ‘denazification’, specifically ridding Kyiv of its purportedly NATO-backed fascist tyranny and installing a new, more ‘appropriate’ and ‘representative’ government in its stead.<sup>19</sup>

Figure 6 shows that, in the months up to February, this line of reasoning barely registered among communities that would soon be orientating their every conversation around the need to ‘denazify’ Ukraine, with the ‘Nazi issue’ barely factoring into the Kremlin-aligned

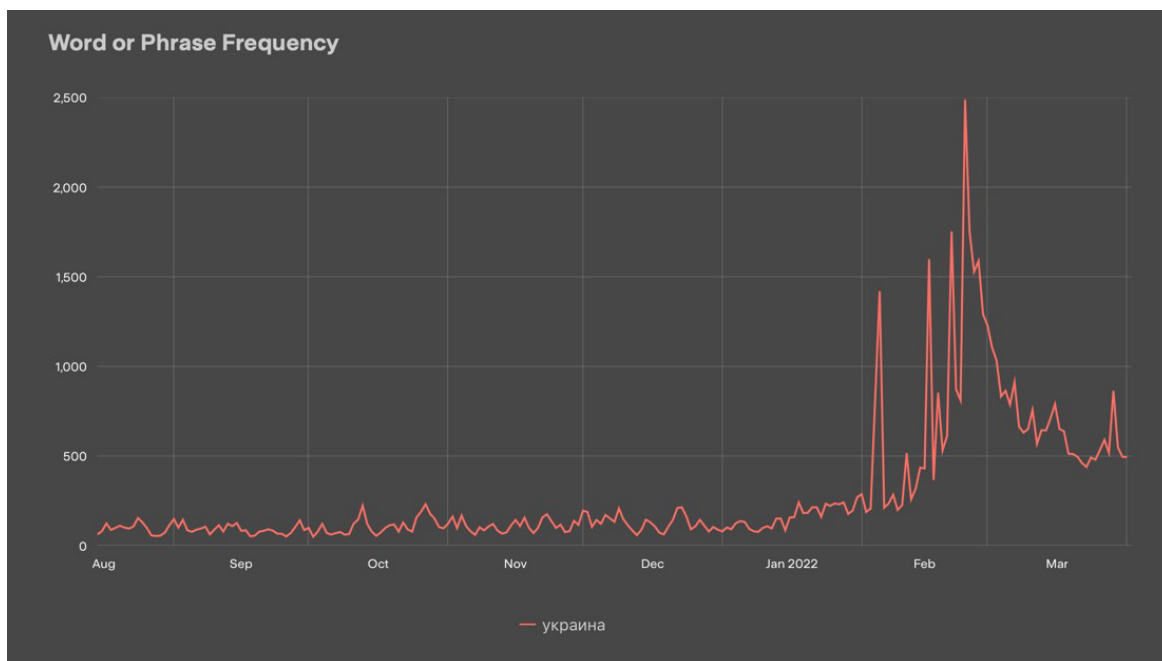


FIGURE 5. References to ‘Ukraine’ in Russian on Kremlin-aligned Telegram ecosystem sample, August 2021 to April 2022

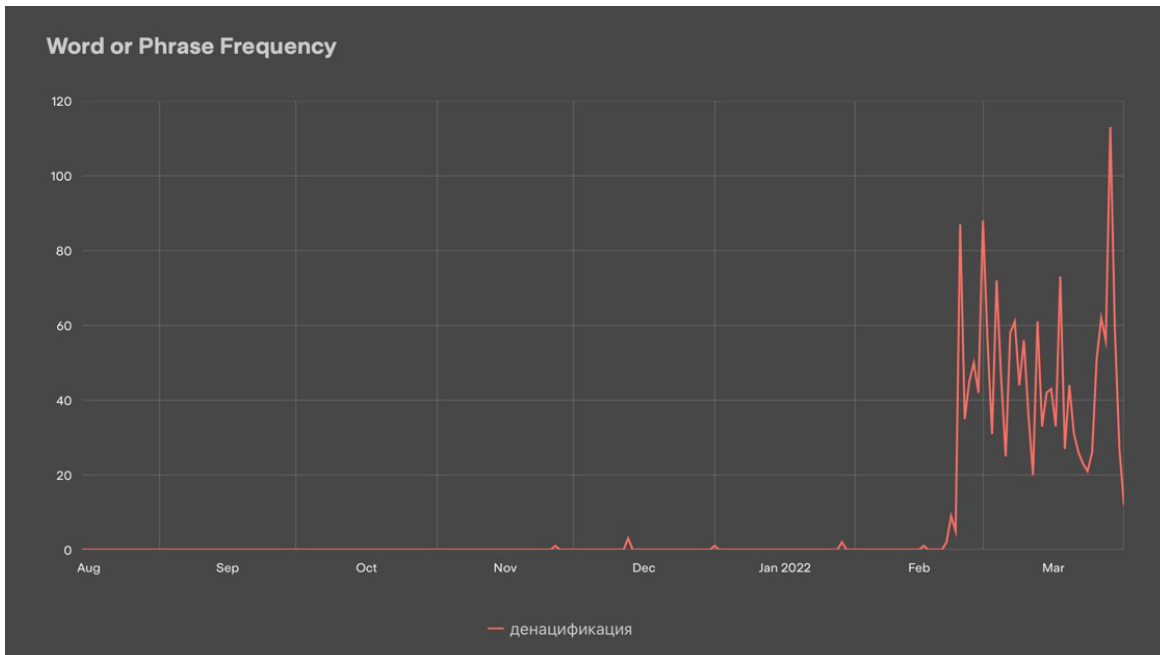


FIGURE 6. References to ‘denazification’ in Russian on Kremlin-aligned Telegram ecosystem sample, August 2021 to April 2022

communications space until just before its formal introduction by Putin in late February.

On this basis, it would appear that, at least until the week immediately before the war, when there was the above-described fifteenfold spike in activity overall and a targeted surge in interest in Ukraine and the many ‘threats’ it posed to the Russian nation state, between August 2021 and February 2022 the Kremlin-aligned ecosystem was either

proactively suppressing rumours of impending war or simply unaware that it was going to happen. Both options are conceivable—that the discursive landscape was being proactively moderated with a view to suppressing rumours of the invasion for strategic ends, or that it was for the most part unaware, with certain aspects of it only being activated when it was considered strategically prudent on the part of the Russian war effort.

## Conclusion

Just days into Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin-backed ecosystem had started revising and reframing its initial stated logic for the war, even though that put distance between its version of events and Moscow’s version of events. Having first positioned it, in line with Putin’s 24 February declaration of war, as a necessary evil that was geared towards dislodging the purported regime in Kyiv, prominent voices in the pro-Russia communications space almost immediately began adapting to the realities of Moscow’s flagging war effort.

These voices began to speak of the ‘operation’ more in terms of pre-emptive resistance and strategic deterrence, with their framing of and justification for it altering course to accommodate the stagnation of Russia’s advances.

Importantly, this adapted positioning did not mean the Kremlin (let alone its supporters) was doubting whether or not it should continue the war, even though it and they had to concede that the Ukrainian resistance was stiffer than expected. Instead, it made a case—albeit a begrudging one—for escalation and the

deployment of potentially more indiscriminate tactics in order to get the war over and done with quickly, if not cleanly.

Having emerged early in the invasion, this position was wholeheartedly implemented by the Russian armed forces by early summer 2022, promoted and justified not just on Telegram but by some of the Kremlin's most reliable media personalities, including on state television. Its ubiquitous presence on both the

physical and information battlefield was confirmation that Putin's war was not going to plan and a sign that the campaign was imminently set to become less discriminating. It was also confirmation of the new-found salience of this invigorated yet diffuse community of Kremlin acolytes, a community which in some cases has come to play a more prominent role in Russia's campaign narrative than the very pillars of Moscow's information networks, up to and including its federal television apparatus.

\* \* \*

## PART 3. Meso-perspective: From Commissars to 'Switchers'—Pro-Russian Influence on Telegram

by Dr. Vera Michlin-Shapir

After February 2022 the social media platform Telegram became 'one of the most important informational vectors regarding the war'.<sup>20</sup> The unprecedented spike in communications on the platform, which has been recorded by ExTrac and discussed in the previous part, has given researchers a unique opportunity to examine Russia's online media environment. While the ExTrac analysis focused on the quantitative increase of Telegram's significance among Russian social media users, this part qualitatively analyses the content shared on the platform. It aims to shed light on the emergence of a new group of Russian online influencers—the so-called pro-war bloggers.<sup>21</sup> Propelled into the limelight by a surge in online media, the Kremlin's blocking of Western social media platforms, and increased demand from users for news about the war,<sup>22</sup> these Telegram channels' administrators formed an online ecosystem which became instrumental in spreading pro-Russian narratives at home and abroad.

This new situation poses several research questions about the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem. First, was this new ecosystem a mere extension of the Kremlin's official media apparatus, aimed at spreading official Russian narratives online? Or did this

ecosystem operate differently with possibly looser control, exhibiting more independent characteristics?

This section will show that, from the early days of the invasion of Ukraine, the newly energised pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem of online actors that support Russia in its war against Ukraine often operate in a quasi-independent manner. The textual and content analysis of posts generated and shared in the pro-Russia Telegram ecosystem reveals that the pro-Russian ecosystem prioritises the prompt response to competing online content (shared by Ukrainian channels or elsewhere) over spreading Kremlin-approved narratives.

The following section presents these findings in two parts. First, it outlines the methodology and sources used for the analysis. Second, it analyses content posted on the Telegram ecosystem during three important events in the war in Ukraine.

## Methodology and sources

Using textual and content analysis, the paper qualitatively examines content across ten prominent pro-Russian Telegram channels that form a representative sample of the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem. These channels include:

- leading Russian talk-show host Vladimir Solov'ëv (1.3 million subscribers)
- two channels run by Russian war correspondents Aleksandr Kots (681,000 subscribers) and Yevgeniy Poddubnyy (946,000 subscribers)
- a pro-Russian separatist official from the Donetsk People's Republic (DNP), Daniil Bezsonov (371,000 subscribers)
- pro-Russian 'bloggers' Semën Pegov, who runs WarGonzo channel (1.3 million subscribers), and Igor' Dimitriev (116,000 subscribers)—both working with the Russian authorities
- popular anonymous channels such as Starshe Eddy (632,000 subscribers), Reverse Side of the Medal (affiliated with the Wagner private military company, 260,000 subscribers), Rybar' (according to Russian investigative journalists, run by a former Russian Defence Ministry

employee with links to Wagner's owner, Yevgeniy Prigozhin,<sup>23</sup> 1.1 million subscribers), and Rosich (166,000 subscribers).

These channels form a diverse sample of online actors with various ties to Russian government organs.

Using Boolean searches of keywords enabled via ExTrac's analytical capabilities, the research analysed texts, photos, and audiovisual content generated and shared in the ecosystem by the sample of channels during three pivotal points in Russia's invasion of Ukraine:

5. The Battle of Antonov Airport, Hostomel/Gostomel, 24–25 February 2022
6. The occupation of the city of Kherson, 1–26 March 2022
7. The discovery of atrocities in Bucha, Kyiv region, 1–4 April 2022

These three events were turning points in the war which posed challenges and opportunities for the actors operating in the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem. The events are temporally situated at the start, middle, and end of the examined period, and provide a diverse sample of materials posted on Telegram. The research focuses on whether and how official narratives were promoted in relation to these events and how they were discussed by the actors analysed.



# Pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem content analysis

## The Battle of Antonov Airport (Hostomel/ Gostomel), 24–25 February 2022

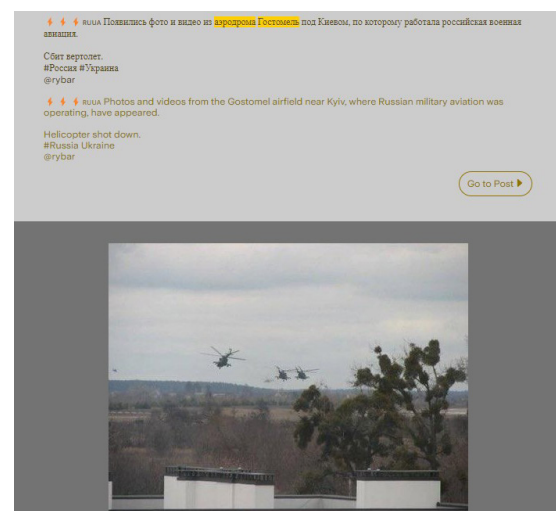
The fighting at Antonov Airport was one of the first incidents where Russia's early invasion plans were significantly disrupted.<sup>24</sup> According to America's CIA, the Kremlin planned to use Antonov Airport in the city of Hostomel (about 35 kilometres north of Kyiv) as a hub for an airbridge to support a swift occupation of Ukraine's capital.<sup>25</sup> The Ukrainian leadership's suspicion of US intelligence before the war meant that the airfield base was staffed by a small force when Russia launched an attack on the facility and tried to land its airborne forces (VDV) there.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, quick acknowledgement by Ukraine's military leadership of the significance of the airport for Russian plans meant that much attention was diverted to thwart Russian efforts. While the airfield eventually fell into Russian hands, the fierce Ukrainian response was seen as one of the first signs that Moscow's 'hopes of quick and easy gains [...] were terribly optimistic'.<sup>27</sup>

The response from the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem to the Battle of Antonov Airport is instructive, as it is one of the first incidents when its actors had to react to a possible setback in Moscow's plans. The pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem, as it transpires from the content generated and shared by the sample of prominent Telegram channels, responded to events in several phases. At first the channels followed official Russian narratives—that the Russian army was operating within the international legal framework, targeting primarily military infrastructure (such as Antonov Airport), while the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) were extensively fleeing their posts (being inept). To further amplify Russian official narratives, the channels were sharing Russian Ministry of Defence spokesman Igor' Konoshekov's

morning briefing, where he accused the Ukrainian authorities of preparing 'provocations' similar to 'the Syrian white helmets' with fabricated images of Russian atrocities against civilians (corresponding to the narrative about information war being waged against Russia).<sup>28</sup>

By late morning of 24 February, the situation began to shift as early losses were reported. As channels started to share audiovisual content of the Russian landing in Hostomel, they also revealed that a Russian helicopter was downed (Screenshot 1).<sup>29</sup>

For a short while the channels greatly amplified CNN video footage according to which the airfield had fallen into Russian hands. But by late afternoon multiple contradictory reports appeared on Telegram. On the one hand, Russia's most senior war correspondents, Poddubniy and Kots, boasted victorious news that 'the site captured by



SCREENSHOT 1. Rybar' shares the downing of a Russian helicopter in Hostomel

our special forces is the Antonov airfield in Gostomel,<sup>30</sup> a suburb of Kyiv. By morning, there will be thousands of people there'. On the other hand, a popular anonymous Telegram channel, Rybar', reported that 'parts of the National Guard of Ukraine are trying to recapture the air harbour before the arrival of [Russian] aircraft'. Amid conflicting reports from Hostomel, Igor' Dimitriev, a former pro-Russian Ukrainian politician who likes to present himself as an independent voice, weighed in on the drama, advising his audience to 'look for adequate information' about Hostomel. Dimitriev was alluding to the fact that the earlier self-congratulatory messages by his fellow bloggers might have been too optimistic. He added later that a 'fierce battle continues' at the airport.

Since the Kremlin did not offer any specific accounts to respond to the complications the Russians were facing in Hostomel, the channels' administrators had to seize the initiative when responding to user-generated content that circulated online. At this point they could not simply reproduce pre-approved messages. They had to somehow address the news (videos, images, and stories) coming from Hostomel. And they had to at least acknowledge that 'the situation is not yet clear'.<sup>31</sup>

The channels' administrators responded to these challenges in the early morning of 25 February when Russia's talk-show host Vladimir Solov'ev initiated on his Telegram channel a mythmaking narrative around the events that

had transpired in Hostomel. Solov'ev proposed a version according to which 200 troops of the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) had taken the airfield in the face of heavy resistance from the Ukrainian army. While it is unclear how many Russian VDV landed at Hostomel and the number of casualties they suffered, Solov'ev proposed the following account:

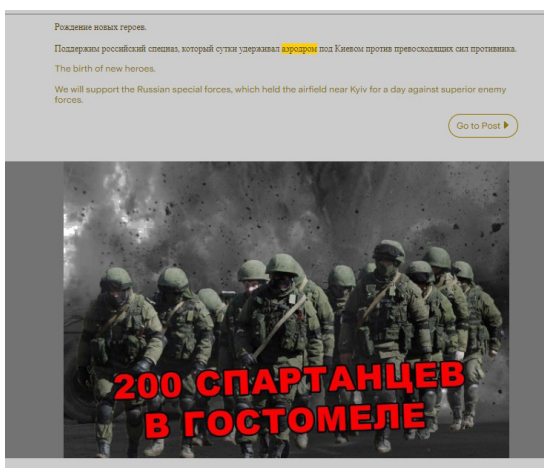
*'A total of 200 Russian paratroopers brought dismay to the whole world by landing in Gostomel.'*<sup>32</sup>

*'200!! Not 2000!! All the forces that were near Kyiv were thrown against our heroes! The enemy has declared their destruction three times, but they continue to fight!*

*'Gostomel is another place of Russian Military Glory!'*

Kots immediately picked up the mythmaking narrative, writing, 'a real-life action film. Someday there will be a movie about this story'.<sup>33</sup> A few hours later the myth was amplified across the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem with a photo that read: 'The birth of new heroes' and '200 Spartans in Hostomel' (Screenshot 2).<sup>34</sup>

This mythmaking was original to the Telegram ecosystem and was by no means dictated by the Kremlin. Nor was it part of pre-approved narratives. In fact, a popular anonymous channel, Starshe Eddy, complained that Russian official media were not reporting on 'the immortal feat of the Russian paratroopers from Gostomel'.<sup>35</sup> The channels' administrators had to respond to upcoming challenges, taking the opportunity to create and amplify their own narratives independently of pre-approved messages. This does not mean that they acted completely independently from the Kremlin. The person who initiated this myth, Solov'ev, is a senior media personality with strong ties to the Kremlin. Yet, his flexibility and ability to take the initiative allowed the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem to



SCREENSHOT 2. '200 Spartans in Hostomel'

thrive and to remain dynamic and interesting for its subscribers. These characteristics of the

ecosystem continued to develop in the following months.

## The occupation of Kherson, 2–14 March 2022

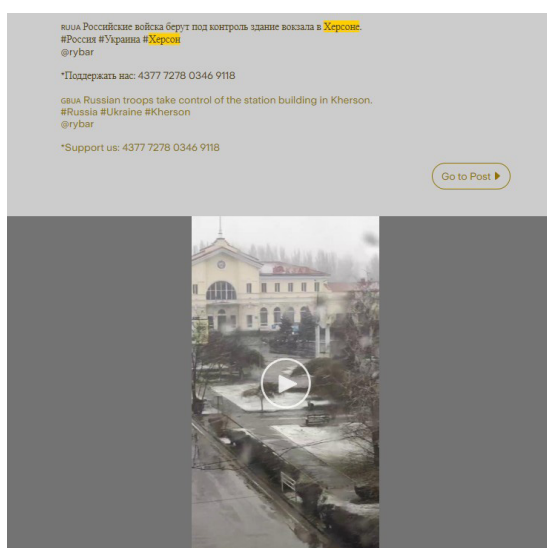
The fall of the city of Kherson under Russian occupation was one of the main Russian successes in the war. Following a week of resistance by the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF), the Russian army, which invaded southern Ukraine from Crimea, occupied the city of Kherson. This was the only Ukrainian regional capital to fall under Russian occupation. The announcement by the mayor of Kherson that the city had fallen on 2 March began a period of peaceful civilian resistance to which Russian forces responded with increasing hostility. By mid March, amid ongoing peaceful resistance, Russian occupying forces had started to lay the ground to replace the civilian Ukrainian administration in Kherson.

The first few weeks of the Russian occupation of Kherson posed both opportunities and challenges for actors in the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem. On the one hand, this was an opportunity to boast of the military success of taking over the city. On the other, they had to address the evident resistance orchestrated by Kherson's residents. Images

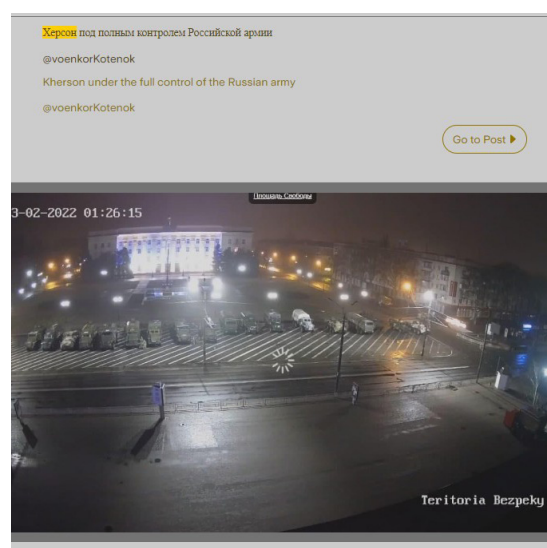
of peaceful demonstrations in Kherson circulating online challenged the Kremlin's official narratives that Russian soldiers were liberating an oppressed Russian-speaking population in south-east Ukraine.

Similar to content creation around the Battle of Antonov Airport that appeared early on Telegram, there followed pre-established Russian official narratives, highlighting that Russia was targeting only military sites.<sup>36</sup> By 1 March numerous audiovisual confirmations of Russian soldiers entering Kherson were posted and amplified in the ecosystem (Screenshots 3 and 4).

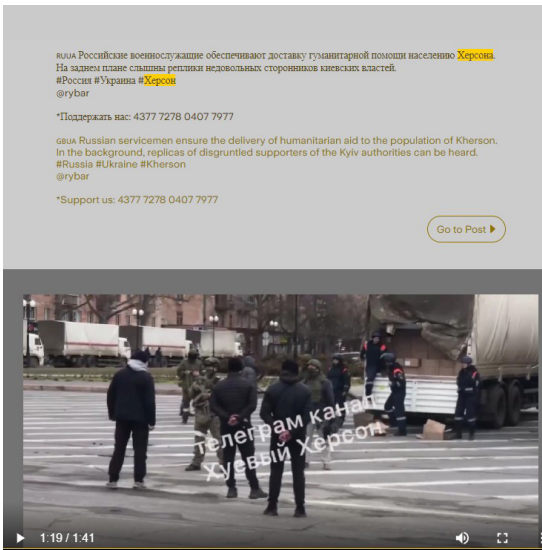
The triumphant mood around entering the city was accompanied by comments that resonated with the Kremlin's official output. Namely, that the military only targeted military infrastructure and was 'working [...] at reducing civilian casualties'.<sup>37</sup> Audiovisual materials of civilian life supposedly returning to normal were amplified across channels, with it being noted that this was 'another proof—that here is



SCREENSHOT 3. 'Russian troops take control of Kherson station'



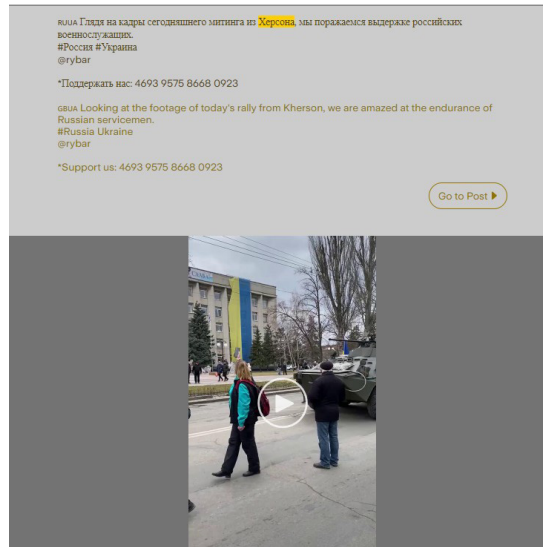
SCREENSHOT 4. 'Kherson under the full control of the Russian army'



SCREENSHOT 5. Russian soldiers delivering humanitarian aid in Kherson, 4 March 2022

war only where there are Nazis. Where [there is] Z [Russia], [there is] peace and order’,<sup>38</sup> corresponding to the Kremlin’s official statements that Ukraine was a failed state ruled by Nazis.

However, here too very quickly the utility of the Kremlin’s official narratives was severely curtailed. Audiovisual materials began to circulate online featuring deep disapproval from ordinary residents of Kherson about the Russian occupation. For instance, as Rybar’ was posting a video of Russian forces delivering humanitarian aid to civilians in Kherson, the commentary also had to address insults that

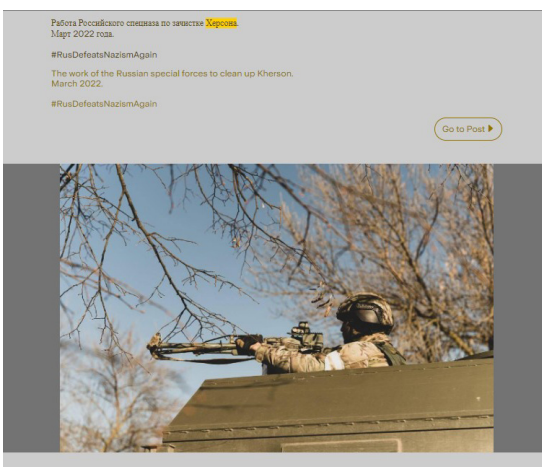


SCREENSHOT 6. Ukrainian protests in Kherson

were shouted at soldiers in the background, calling protesters ‘disgruntled supporters of the Kyiv regime’ and labelling reports on social media that Kherson residents had refused to receive humanitarian aid from Russia as ‘fakes’ (Screenshots 5 and 6).<sup>39</sup>

As Ukrainian peaceful resistance in Kherson was growing, the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem had to respond to user-generated content about civilian unrest and increasingly heavy-handed retaliation from the Russian army. In answer to these challenges, actors in the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem abandoned earlier official Russian narratives of the ‘liberation of Kherson’ in favour of allusions to a counter-insurgency (‘clean up’ Kherson).

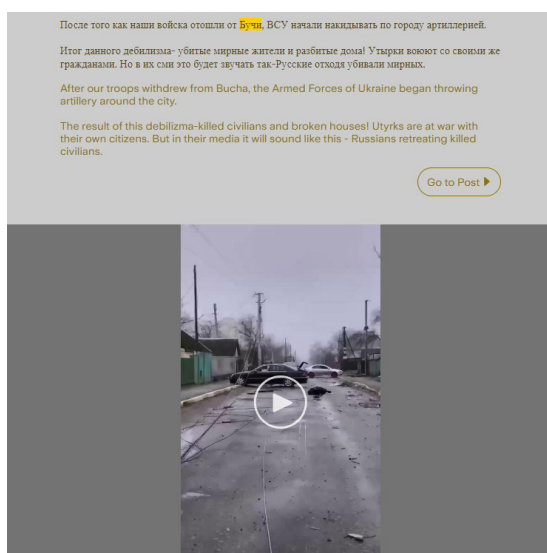
This was a nuanced move, since the counter-insurgency story could still fit within official Russian narratives calling for ‘denazification’ of Ukraine. Nevertheless, it showed that the channels’ administrators were unable to work with pre-approved output and gradually had to alter their content of their own accord and to operate in a highly flexible and contested online environment (Screenshot 7).



SCREENSHOT 7. ‘Russian forces clean up Kherson’

## Atrocities in Bucha, 1–4 April 2022

As witnessed in content posted during the Battle of Hostomel and the occupation of Kherson, by late March the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem had become an empowered network that responded to online challenges with limited adherence to official Russian narratives. At this point one of the biggest challenges to the Russian information effort took place. Having failed to occupy Kyiv, the Russian military began to withdraw from the occupied Kyiv region including the town of Bucha.



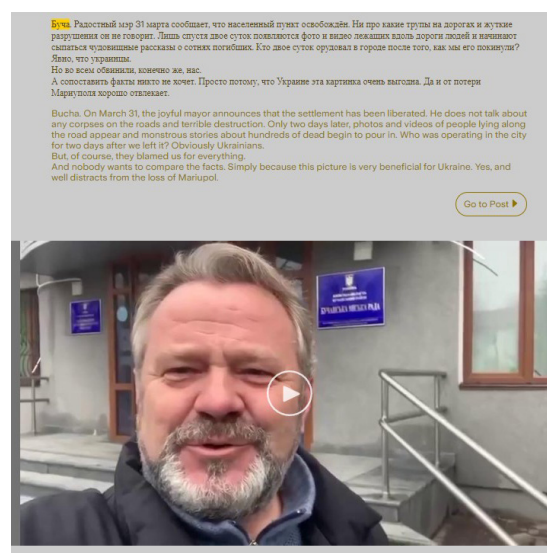
SCREENSHOT 8. 'After our forces withdrew from Bucha, the Armed Forces of Ukraine began throwing artillery around the city'

Shortly after the retreat, photographs of atrocities committed by Russian soldiers began to appear on international media outlets.<sup>40</sup> Although at this point the Kremlin did not issue any official commentary, actors in the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem almost immediately turned their resources to disparage Ukrainian and Western evidence that crimes had been committed by Russian forces in Bucha.

As early as 1 April—before reports of atrocities circulated in Western mainstream media—actors in the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem began to accuse the Ukrainian military of shelling Bucha with artillery and causing

civilian casualties (Screenshot 8). This corresponded to the Kremlin's official account that Ukraine, and not Russia, was targeting its own civilians.

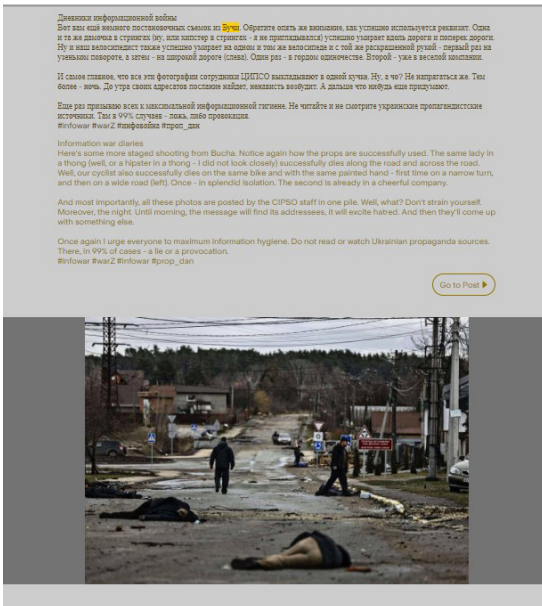
Nevertheless, as more images appeared, the plausibility of Ukrainian artillery fire causing casualties began to fade. This pushed the Telegram channels' administrators towards more independently competing explanations. Solov'ëv proposed that the event must have been staged by Ukrainians and their Western



SCREENSHOT 9. The mayor of Bucha celebrating the Russian retreat on 31 March 2022

allies. He pointed out that the mayor of Bucha had shared the happy news of the Russian retreat on social media on 31 March without mentioning atrocities in the town (Screenshot 9). While it was later reported that he had posted his video before entering the town for fear of mines, it was promoted within the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem as 'evidence' that the atrocities had been staged.

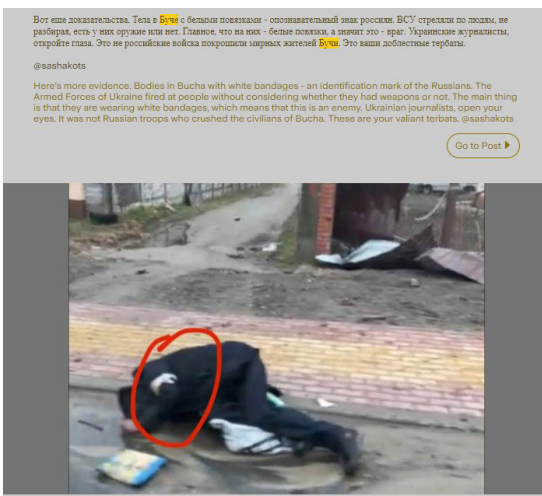
Soon after, Solov'ëv and others in the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem began to promote a narrative that this was 'a planned media campaign'<sup>41</sup> staged by Ukrainians and their Western allies (Screenshots 10 and 11).



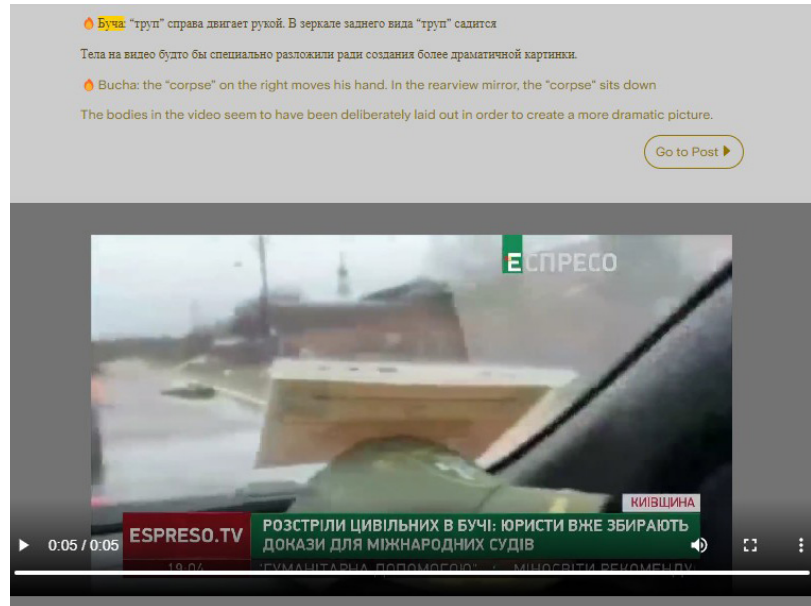
SCREENSHOT 10. Solov'ev points to 'staged shooting' from Bucha

They amplified videos of allegedly 'moving' (that is, live) corpses who had participated in the performance. However, as more and more evidence emerged, this theory had also to evolve.

At that point Aleksandr Kots, who was embedded with Russian forces in the Kyiv region and may have been aware of details unknown to others about evidence of crimes left behind in Bucha, proposed another version:



SCREENSHOT 12. Kots provides 'another piece of evidence' that Bucha was a Ukrainian false flag



SCREENSHOT 11. Neofitsial'nyy Bezsonov Z writes: 'Bucha: the "corpse" on the right moves his hand. In the rear view mirror, the "corpse" sits down'. This was not evident from the video.

that this was a 'false flag' by Ukrainian armed forces.

After the retreat of Russian forces, according to Kots's account, the AFU shelled the city with artillery and consequently entered the town. Kots wrote: 'as usual, they began a "witch hunt" in search of those who, in their opinion, collaborated with the "occupation forces"'.<sup>42</sup>

Kots's version was a plausible explanation for the images of 'bodies thrown into the wells with their hands tied', which he argued were victims of a vindictive Ukrainian sweep of the town.<sup>43</sup> Kots shared another post in which he wrote: '[This is] your staging in Bucha, for the sake of which you killed those whom you considered agents of the "occupiers"'.<sup>44</sup> Kots also shared images of corpses with white bandages around their arms, noting 'here's more evidence. Bodies in Bucha with white bandages—an identification mark of the Russians. The Armed Forces of Ukraine fired at people without consideration' (Screenshot 12).<sup>45</sup>

Kots's channel became the ground zero of Russian narratives about Bucha, online and offline. A day later his version of events was presented by Vasily Nebenzya, Russia's

ambassador to the UN, as the Kremlin's official explanation for the Bucha atrocities. In this case, Kots's initiative drove the Kremlin's official narrative, showing autonomy over production of content. On the one hand, he worked broadly within the Kremlin's pre-established, official storylines—which argued that Ukrainians

targeted their own civilians, and that information war was being waged against Russia. On the other, Kots operated independently in the context of a rapidly evolving, contested online environment, developing and adapting his narratives without Moscow's pre-authorisation.

## Conclusion

During the war in Ukraine, Telegram has become an 'information battlefield'.<sup>46</sup> A new arena for Russia to reach and influence audiences. The reinvigoration of this arena probably occurred with the help or at least consent of the Russian authorities. The surge in pro-Russian content on Telegram before the war began was probably 'a combination of organic and inorganic behaviour'.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, it may be argued that actors who benefited from the platform's rise in importance—pro-Russian war bloggers—received a certain level of support from the Russian authorities. Many had access to Russian forces or other materials, which rendered their channels more valuable in the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem.

These bloggers became what Manuel Castells calls 'switchers'—'actors, made of networks of actors engaging in dynamic interfaces that are specifically operated in each process of connection'.<sup>48</sup> They connected the power of the Russian authorities to the power of the online environment of Telegram. Yet, having to operate on a user-generated platform meant they could not simply follow the Kremlin's official narratives, as projected on Russian federal television. In fact, the latter's lack of dynamism during this war meant that fewer people were watching broadcasts<sup>49</sup> and more Russian-speaking audiences were turning to online platforms, and primarily to Telegram. These audiences expected more flexible, fast-paced,

and adaptable information about the war. And the new group of pro-Russian bloggers were providing that with increasing independence from official Russian storylines.

These findings, however, should not be interpreted as a demonstration of a more liberal or pluralistic character of Russia's online system. In many cases channels simply stylised and adapted official narratives to ongoing events or challenges posed by the user-generated, contested, online environment, where content is continuously posted and updated. In some cases they shared opinions and stories more hawkish than the Kremlin's. The most important characteristic of this ecosystem is its flexible and creative approach to reporting, which is dictated by its online 'habitus'.

Such findings significantly alter our understanding of the Kremlin's information efforts during this war. It means that a significant part of pro-Russian content that circulated online deviated in some ways from official Russian narratives, and that Russian officials were not in full control of that information. The rise of this flexible and adaptive online ecosystem served the Kremlin well on many occasions during this war. Yet, such a de-monopolisation of power among the new group of Telegram influencers/'switchers' and their increased independence may yet pose a challenge for the Kremlin in future.<sup>50</sup>

\* \* \*

## PART 4.

# Macro-perspective: Strategy without Design<sup>51</sup>

by Dr. Ofer Fridman

'Modern Westerners,' argues cultural psychologist Richard E. Nisbett, 'like the ancient Greeks, see the world in analytic, atomistic terms; they see objects as discrete and separate from their environments; they see events as moving in linear fashion when they move at all; and they feel themselves to be personally in control'.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that the Western approach to strategy is dominated by the notion of linear progression towards objectives defined in advance, as Western 'institutionalized habits focus only upon analytic and linear models'.<sup>53</sup> Strategy is commonly perceived as a combination of 'calculation and control to effect planned movement over a predictable but fast-moving environment in order to realize well-designed aims'.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, the application of this linear thinking to the Kremlin's behaviour has repeatedly led Western researchers to characterise President Putin as 'astrategic' or a 'tactical' player who is 'adept at short-term tactical responses to setbacks, but less talented at long-term strategy'.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, when applied to Russia's hybrid media environment, these linear models would understand it in terms of pre-thought plans which were then orchestrated and coordinated to achieve the desired control over the media or the narrative.<sup>56</sup>

The reality of strategy-making, however, is different, as strategy in practice is rarely an orderly movement to goals set in advance. As Lawrence Freedman puts it, strategy-making is

a process 'that is fluid and flexible, governed by the starting point and not the end point', as it evolves 'through a series of states, each one not quite what was anticipated or hoped for, requiring a reappraisal and modification of the original strategy, including ultimate objectives'.<sup>57</sup> In analysing this disparity between the dominant Western conceptual approach to strategy, as an act of navigation, and the reality of strategy-making, as a process of wayfinding, Robert Chia and Robin Holt coined the term 'strategy without design'. According to them, in complex environments 'strategy and consistency of actions can emerge non-deliberately through a profusion of local interventions directing towards dealing with immediate concerns', as 'attending to and dealing with the problems, obstacles and concerns confronted in the here and now may actually serve to clarify and shape the initially vague and inarticulate aspirations behind such coping actions with sufficient consistency that, in retrospect, they may appear to constitute a recognisable "strategy"'.<sup>58</sup>

In other words, echoing Freedman's emphasis on the importance of context for understanding strategy,<sup>59</sup> Chia and Holt suggest that strategy can manifest itself not through exercising control in an attempt to achieve explicit strategic goals and plans, but through a series of adaptive actions taken in the course of coping with exigencies in a manner congruent with past actions and experiences.<sup>60</sup>



# The Kremlin's 'Strategy without Design' in Russia's Hybrid Media System

In analysing Russia's traditional approaches to strategy, it is impossible to miss the fact that it has always inclined towards the approach of wayfinding, rather than well-planned navigation towards a predefined goal. For example, one of the most important characteristics of the Russian traditional school of strategic thinking is its emphasis on the importance of the prevailing situation in strategy-making.<sup>61</sup> According to Genrikh Leer (the nineteenth-century founder of Russia's strategic school),<sup>62</sup> the goal of strategy is 'to grasp the question of waging war at a given moment in all its aspects and solve it according to the prevailing situation, i.e., to define a reasonable goal and direct all forces and means towards its achievement in the shortest time and with the least sacrifices'.<sup>63</sup>

From imperial Russia, through the Soviet Union, to contemporary Russia, strategy has been understood as an art of finding the best way out of the specific context of a given situation.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, like any other 'strategy without design', it acknowledges that strategically favourable outcomes may emerge not as a result of well-planned and executed actions, but as a serendipitous consequence of other, even less powerful actors, who intentionally (or not) shift the situation through the local pursuits of their own goals and interests.<sup>65</sup> On the one hand, when this approach to strategy-making is applied to Russia's hybrid media system, it undermines the very idea of control, either over the media or discourse shaping due to the multiplicity of independent and semi-independent actors capable of influencing the situation (as demonstrated in the analysis of the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem by Vera Michlin-Shapir and Charlie Winter above). On the other, it does not necessarily deny the Kremlin the ability to find its way in its desired direction—especially if one takes into consideration two

decades of trial and error honing the skills and shaping the nature and character of the media actors involved in this system.

In interpreting its collapse, Russian political-military strategists of the late 1990s to early 2000s came to believe the Soviet Union had lost the Cold War due to its inability to meet the Western 'informational offensive [...] aimed at compromising and destabilising the Soviet political elite'.<sup>66</sup> According to Igor Panarin, a founder of Russia's contemporary conceptualisation of information confrontations, the main reason behind this lack of ability to operate in the information domain was that the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the KGB 'were acting formulaically', failing to acknowledge that full control (over media or narrative) was impossible in the fast-changing nature of the media environment in the late twentieth century.<sup>67</sup>

Consequently, one main lesson learnt by the Kremlin from the Cold War was that the only way to operate in the highly complex and flexible environment of the twenty-first century was not by trying to control it, but by shaping the character of actors who exercise power in it. In other words, the Kremlin understood that the only way to exercise strategy without design rests on removing formal censorship and pursuing a de-monopolisation of the information environment across 'right-thinking' actors, or, as Panarin put it, a new 'Russian political elite capable of an adequate response to the global challenges of the 21st century'.<sup>68</sup>

Contrary to popular assumptions, neither the *siloviki* (security services) nor Putin's friends nor state oligarchs serve today as the main pillar of the Kremlin's power. In fact, these are the political technocrats. The main trend over recent years has been 'the increase in

the number and influence of such figures in all important areas of the functioning of the state machine'.<sup>69</sup>

Over the last decade the Kremlin has invested significant efforts to develop a so-called 'technocratic elite'—a reserve of promising young managers from different state executive branches and state corporations.<sup>70</sup> Since in the Kremlin's eyes they are expendable, this allows them a great deal of latitude. Those who prove their efficiency and loyalty can be quickly propelled up the ladder, becoming the new 'dark horses' of Russia's politics; witness the sudden rise of prime minister Mikhail Mishustin, who joined the Presidential High-Potential Management Personnel Reserve in 2009.<sup>71</sup> Those who fail can be easily stripped of their power. This rise of the technocratic elite—'countless "little Putins" [who] try to guess how "big Putin" in the Kremlin would behave'<sup>72</sup>—has allowed the Kremlin to change the way it operates within Russia's political system. Instead of exercising extensive control, the Kremlin creates an environment in which 'little Putins' can flourish. This approach facilitates local initiatives, making Russia's strategy more flexible and adaptable.

The same applies in Russia's hybrid media system. By the late 2000s, researchers of Russia's media system argued that the Kremlin had replaced the Soviet-style control of the media due to a variety of societal, informational, and technological factors, developing a sort of 'remote control'.<sup>73</sup> Instead of trying to control the system through ownership, censorship, and propaganda, for the last two decades the Kremlin has de-monopolised its power among

a variety of actors who 'think right'. While these actors include many well-known figures, such as Vladimir Solov'ëv, Andrey Kondrashev, Nikita Mikhalkov, and others who shape both offline and online media systems (as the analysis of the pro-Russian Telegram ecosystem above shows), the online side of Russia's hybrid media system is populated by a variety of actors to whom the war in Ukraine has afforded great publicity. On the one hand, it is easy to label them the promoters of Kremlin narratives. On the other, a more careful analysis (presented above) shows they enjoy significant freedom of action, which allows them not only to create narratives on their own, but also occasionally to criticise the Kremlin.

This de-monopolisation of power does not necessarily imply that the Kremlin media strategy is entirely opportunistic. The opposite is true. For the last twenty years, the Kremlin has been shaping and shifting Russia's hybrid media system by facilitating a socio-political-economic environment in which 'right-thinking' media actors can flourish, while others are either sidelined or excluded. Indeed, the Kremlin might not have clearly predefined objectives or well-planned activities. Instead, it may seek to clarify its initially general aspirations through attending to and dealing with interventions from a variety of participating actors. This is what 'strategy without design' looks like. And when the nature and character of these actors have been shaped for more than two decades, the Kremlin's job of 'wayfinding' not only becomes much easier, but aggregates sufficient consistency that in retrospect it may appear recognisable as a pre-planned 'strategy'.

## Conclusion

This attempt to decode the Kremlin's media strategy suggests three main observations. The first is that an attempt to understand Russia's strategy through Western traditional linear models would ultimately lead to misinterpretation. Russian strategic thought has traditionally inclined towards *modi operandi*

driven by finding solutions to developing situations, rather than navigating towards clearly envisioned destinations. Analysed through linear cause and effect, Russian behaviour can be read retrospectively as a pre-thought and pre-planned series of actions. However, such a representation is misleading, an outcome of

mirror-imaging rather than a true interpretation of reality.

This leads to a second observation—on the Kremlin’s media strategy. While many Western experts explain the Kremlin’s media strategy as a top-down exercise of control through ownership, censorship, and propaganda, this does not seem to be the case. Instead, it seems a good case of strategy without design, where the Kremlin finds a way between a plethora of narratives independently created by power-seeking actors, the character of which has been shaped and curated for over two decades. On the one hand, due to its lack of clear destination and flexible nature, it is difficult to counteract such strategy. On the other, since this strategy is situational rather than goal-driven, the West may have more agency in Russia’s media system than it first assumes. In strategies without design, significant shifts may emerge because of actions conducted by any of the actors involved. Since the West is involved in shaping narratives in Russia’s media system (created in the context of actions conducted by the West), it should not deprive itself of the potential to influence this system. After all, strategy-making is an interactive dance between (at least) two political players, and each gets a say in how the adversary proceeds, including in its media environment.

Part 1 proposed that far from counter-narratives replying to narratives in a call and response, a much richer picture emerges suggesting that the agency of strategic communicators is constrained by organic dynamics in the so-called information environment. Part 2 showed the relationship between the volume of Telegram outputs in relation to the timing of political acts designed by Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin that took place in the lead-up to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Part 3 observed the emergence of a new group of online communicators granted a certain autonomy of action and narrative creation, nevertheless

The final observation concerns the trend towards the de-monopolisation of power orchestrated by the Kremlin in an attempt to operate in the highly complex and flexible environment of the twenty-first century. Starting with political technocrats, the Kremlin has applied the same strategy to its hybrid media system. Since the 2015 invasion of Syria, and especially after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the same trend may be observed in the field of armed forces with the rise of Yevgeniy Prigozhin’s Wagner Group and Ramzan Kadyrov’s forces. While these actors operate in a ‘habitus’ of media and politics regulated by the Kremlin, they act in pursuit of their own power. The Kremlin has facilitated their rise to power, assuming that power remains in restricted domains—technocrats in politics, media pundits in the media system, and private military forces in the security domain. However, contemporary hybrid media systems create simultaneous concentrations and diffusions of power across all these domains.

So far, the Kremlin’s strategy without design has been successful in preventing a significant concentration of cross-domain power in any hands, steering the overall system in the desired direction. However, as more power is de-monopolised, the Kremlin might yet run into dangerous waters when the direction of the ship is no longer controlled by its captain.

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working to promote the Kremlin’s broad set of storylines. Part 4 suggested the limitations of strategy as it is traditionally understood in the West. Here the concept of strategy without design highlights the unpredictability of granular or micro-actions which problematise the clearest intentions of strategic communicators. Part 5 now looks to invite further thinking around how discourses emerge or are formed if both strategy and agency are concepts now requiring deeper examination in the media and information environments of the early twenty-first century.

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## PART 5. Reflections on Discourse Formation and Influence

by Dr. Neville Bolt

At this point the discussion broadens to include a wider consideration of how discourses move in relation to one another in societies.

Discourse shaping seeks to create a new norm. As the philosopher Timothy Garton Ash observes: 'The deepest power is that of determining what people consider normal. If you can persuade others that your way of doing things is normal, you have won. At the moment many mature democracies are experiencing the normalisation of the anti-liberal far right.' And 'normalisation' as a term now widely employed, he reminds us, 'came to prominence after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. It meant the attempt to return a European society to Soviet communist norms.'<sup>74</sup>

Here we emphasise that any two-dimensional representation misses an important component in creating new norms. Communicators rarely seek to influence a single mainstream conversation but several aspects of the same conversation simultaneously.

And each of these is by no means making its first entrance into the public sphere. Moreover, a third dimension of conversations makes up any discursive environment—we might call it the *hinterland*. Here dissociated conversations from past and present colour the minds of participants since what they say and hear today form parts of other tangential as well as associated conversations derived from yesterday and carried into tomorrow. Consequently, ideas projected into a contested environment are not hermetically sealed but porous.

Meanwhile, 'messages'—commonly understood by communicators as outputs for their ambitions—come with heavy baggage. Nor do ideas simply go head-to-head where

one negates the other. Policies constructed around countering violent extremism (CVE) that accompanied Western states' involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s played into a pre-existing ecology of Islamist discourses. The notion of narratives and counter-narratives (consistent with dichotomies of insurgency and counter-insurgency, and terrorism and counterterrorism) proved wanting, only to fall short of an adequate response to the consequent blowback emanating from those conflict theatres.<sup>75</sup> To view political communications as dichotomous is to ignore deeply rooted value systems and cultural attitudes that shape people's daily lives, nuancing their understandings and beliefs. More broadly, this discussion is not framed around a pendulum of action and counter-action all too often pursued by strategic communicators, where incoming and outgoing communications attempt to be contained within a vertically organised system of evaluation.

Context is everything in strategic communications. Dean Hartley and Kenneth Jobson see the world we live in as 'made up of connected complex adaptive systems within complex adaptive systems. In our hyper-connected matrix, changes do not affect just one thing; their effects pervade the technium, the noosphere, and humanity. Some effects are predictable and some are emergent, known only upon their discovery.' But the authors offer a word of caution too, 'Much of human thought and communication is for affiliation and affirmation, not truth-seeking. We develop cognitive and technological artifacts such as AI, the internet, and extended reality (xR) and yet we still use stories, speeches, ceremonies, symbols, and collective learning.'<sup>76</sup>

The technium to which they refer is the totality of globally connected human

inventions, and the noosphere is the totality of human reasoning. Together they make up contexts in which ideas and influence are disseminated. Evolutionary economists—and economics and geoeconomics are prime dimensions of strategic communications—favour a systems approach to their analysis, drawing inspiration from the celebrated philosopher Karl Popper and the similarly influential economist Friedrich Hayek.<sup>77</sup>

Systems as metaphors come closer to practice than hierarchies. Popper condemned what he saw in political science as historicism—‘a faulty method that produces worthless results’. To read the future from the actions of Great Nations, Great Leaders, Great Classes, Great Ideas played out on what he critiqued as the Stage of History was, he felt, fallacious.<sup>78</sup> All these contained a single line of travel, a supreme agency at work. Hayek too abandoned linearity, observing the economy to be ‘a complex system subject to constant and uneven evolutionary change and, as such, it must have a history that is inherently unpredictable in any unconditional sense’.<sup>79</sup>

Dopfer, Foster, and Potts subsequently develop this thought:

*‘An economic system can be viewed as a massively complex structure of rules that have evolved over a long period of time [...] However, economic rules are, necessarily, embedded in a broader environment of rules—variously physical, biological, cognitive, behavioural, social, ecological, legal, political, and so forth. The economic rule-system is entangled in a broader context of rule-systems.’<sup>80</sup>*

*Target audience* may be the jargon marketers and advertisers, and latterly strategic communicators, like to attach to segmenting populations demographically. But the philosopher Michael Warner applies a more useful analytical lens when he speaks of publics and

By analogy, communications also connect to similar sources of influence which are, as formulated above, ‘variously physical, biological, cognitive, behavioural, social, ecological, legal, political’. Any theory of change should engage with what the international relations expert Richard Ned Lebow, after Aristotle, calls imperfect causation—a recognition that cause and effect is unverifiable between humans, such is the complexity of how humans think and act towards each other, particularly given the complex world they inhabit.<sup>81</sup> Correlation—a balance of available evidence—is the best that can be hoped for. At the same time, what is usually forgotten in political actors’ ambitions to project their normative policies is what Hayek also points to: namely, incomplete information. Communicating into an environment where no one can have absolute knowledge is a truism often forgotten in the heat of campaigning. Nevertheless, the notion has proven highly pertinent during the Ukraine war, with all sides communicating at different audiences with a less than clear reading of their target audiences. Aerial surveillance via satellite or drone, and intelligence gathering both covert and open source, offers a seductive sideshow to the dissemination of ideas—and even here talk of cyber distribution and algorithmic targeting of audiences gets in the way of larger problems: ideas and politics just don’t work like that. And we should not confuse information with ideas; they are different.

This concept has been apparent in the earlier sections of this report. But it is of paramount significance when assessing the success or failure of Russia’s current information outputs to set these in a balanced intellectual context. Measurement of effect goes well beyond measurement of output, as any practitioner will testify.

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counterpublics. Intriguingly he argues:

*‘To address a public or to think of oneself as belonging to a public is to be a certain kind of person, to inhabit a certain*

*kind of social world, to have at one's disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by a certain normative horizon, and to speak within a certain ideology. No single history sufficiently explains all the different ways these preconditions come together in practice.*<sup>82</sup>

Publics and counterpublics, here, are less a process of demographic categorisation than a self-identification and engagement with an idea where a public comes into being when it is actively addressed through media outlets. In short, a confluence between agency and engagement.

It is important to highlight here a number of tropes that surround any efforts by Russia or Ukraine to legitimise their respective positions. These are some:

On the one side, the existential struggle between advancing autocracy against democracy seen to be in retreat across the globe; a post-Westphalian discussion around the breach of international law and the borders of one sovereign state by another; consequently too the right to protect (R2P) and transgressing sovereign borders to achieve human security; a neocolonial independence struggle; even more existentially, the assertion of a people's organic subjectivity in the face of brutal war; the view that the Ukraine war represents a Russian colonial attempt to hold back the inevitable demise of its own empire; a sacrifice on the part of Western economies amid a global energy and food crisis giving rise to a new recession; calls for war crimes and retribution against the highest in the Kremlin; the threat of nuclear strikes and the return of MAD (mutually assured destruction), for so long considered a relic of Cold War discourse. Put simply, these are discourses promoted by Western communicators but are aimed variously at Russian audiences as well as those in the West and the Global South.

On the other side, discourses range across the promotion of a neo-imperial *Russkiy mir*; the questioning of Ukraine's national

identity and fundamental right to exist; associated accusations of criminality and Nazism gripping the country; an accusation of historic NATO *expansion* rather than *enlargement*; a perception in the Global South that this is Europe's war, and not theirs.

In either list different tropes have been seen to have waxed and waned during the course of the war. 'Democracy in retreat against an aggressive autocracy' played out for only so long before the effect on family spending with escalating energy and food bills assumed centre stage in Europe—particularly the further west one moved across the European continent and away from the immediate threat of tanks and missile attacks in once Soviet states bordering the Russian Federation.

Tropes are not reiterated 'messages' encapsulating a bumper-slogan or fridge-magnet approach to politics. Although, they can resonate as anchors of more complex arguments. Admittedly, they may be reduced to campaign slogans, but they remain rich metaphors that shorthand our conversations. Each of the preceding lists contains an argument which has consequences for the way the Ukraine war is interpreted and justified, or not.

Individually these may all be understood as conversations that are directed inwards to an internal logic, engaging an opposing proposition and inviting rebuttal. However, if viewed side by side, a more diffuse picture emerges which makes it more difficult—not less—for policymakers and practitioners of strategic communications to cohere their campaigns successfully around select and targeted propositions. Here conversations sometimes overlap, sometimes they are tangential, on other occasions they are disconnected. And often they act as distant referents. Such a systems view of discourse seeks to overturn the linear structure that narratologists offer where every story has a sequential beginning, middle, and end.<sup>83</sup>

ISAF/NATO's record of 'mission creep to message creep' in Afghanistan has been well documented by Brett Boudreau.<sup>84</sup> Yet a

progression that takes in the pursuit of al-Qaeda to Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11; attacking them in the bosom of their Taliban hosts; destroying the Taliban source of income, the poppy crop, during one harvest, only for the policy to be reversed at the next; development of economic infrastructure including roads, bridges, and clinics and hospital services; extension of schooling to girls and young women; promotion of democratic elections and human rights policies—all represent a serious ‘message creep’. How did an eventual modern state-building project in Afghanistan grow out of the clear policing act of hunting down a small number of terrorists or criminal outlaws responsible for the attack on the Twin Towers in New York?<sup>85</sup>

The Afghan experience might suggest a linear progression from one discourse to the next as each proved unsuccessful on the ground—since successive discourses emerged seemingly one after another in tandem with policy and military setbacks. However, one conversation rarely ceases as a new one gains fresh traction or popularity. They all trigger conversations from the past with sentiments that resonate differently for different audiences. Hence Afghan narratives conjured up the image of tribal fighters’ victories over invading British armies repeatedly in the nineteenth century and Soviet forces in the 1980s; all failed. Karl Schlögel makes this point when he writes: ‘layers of tradition live on in shared memory and social behaviour, and can be instrumentalised in times of crisis’.<sup>86</sup> Which echoes a central tenet of strategic communications. The construction of memory from fragments of an imagined past is moulded into repeated storytelling and in the process creates an identity around a person, group, or nation.<sup>87</sup> Such is the ‘archipelago of violence’ approach explored in *The Violent Image*, where the author observes that political actors ‘fight for control of the past in order to legitimise their role in the present, and stake their claim to the future’.<sup>88</sup>

Hence Islamist discourses—those directed at Western publics, at least, and homogenised through the same lens—that appear to conflate historical, ideological, and social

understandings between disparate conflict theatres of Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, and the Sahel serve only to undermine the aims of strategic communicators. They may be diverse and eclectic, but they are not dissociated or divorced in a broader system of referents. Still, that doesn’t mean they are uniform.

Early framing of the Russian invasion by Western states centred on a world existential struggle. On one side was a system of democratic governance within a rules-based order attempting to safeguard fundamental human freedoms—nevertheless, a system increasingly in retreat since the heyday of the 1990s. On the other were ranged the forces of autocracy and totalitarianism, skilled in a new-found accretion of power.<sup>89</sup> In the initial shock following 24 February, across Europe and North America, this dichotomy appeared to hold sway—until OPEC Plus intransigence on oil production affected energy prices and Russia’s naval blockade of Ukraine’s ports and subsequent grain shortage on world markets forced food prices to rise dramatically. Global inflationary pressures would soon come to dominate media coverage and consumer concerns. A belated attempt to appeal to the Global South saw India’s President Modi disdain approaches for anti-Russian support.<sup>90</sup> The African continent in its diversity chose not to respond unequivocally, despite the crisis being reframed in terms of Moscow’s damaging effects on the world economy that was leading to famine in African states. One existential crisis gave way to another in the rhetoric.

Entreaties at the United Nations in September, however, failed to win support from the continent’s representatives. Furthermore, nineteen African member states abstained from a vote in October to condemn Russia’s moves to stage a referendum in eastern Ukraine, although twenty-six voted for a resolution to condemn.<sup>91</sup> At the same time, Vladimir Putin agreed to diplomatic moves by Turkey’s President Erdogan to open up the Bosphorus to allow shipping carrying Ukrainian grain to reach international markets and alleviate pressure on developing economies—notionally snatching perceived victory from the jaws of defeat. The

point here is to show how discourses from all communicating parties are inextricably linked: they have the potential to impact one another. But not in a simple call-and-response fashion.

Discourses that appear in the West but outside daily conversations pursued on Russian or Ukrainian social media and television bear granular examination too. To see the discursive environment as a set of vertically nested discourses is misleading; these are not static conversations that speak upwards or downwards to one another. Such was Antonio Gramsci's insight a century ago into how 'common sense' or hegemonic normality is constructed within society where the grass roots press upwards and elites downwards in a constant process of negotiation towards a new common sense.<sup>92</sup> Better to see them as intersecting, lava-lamp motions that absorb an energy from what Oliver Wendell Holmes called the 'marketplace of ideas'. But nor are they necessarily black and white. A recent YES (Yalta European Strategy) conference heard the Yale academic Timothy Snyder elaborate on this theme, emphasising orthogonality over rebuttal. It bears quoting him at length:

*'this competition of stories, it's a competition as I see it of different kinds of stories, so it's not as though one is directly aligned against the other. There's a story, which is a kind of gray, pale story, about non-existence, you know, the story that all of the past points in one direction. And that one direction is that there can't be Ukraine, there can't be a state, there can't be a nation. And then there's another kind of story, which doesn't address that directly.'*

And this is his point:

*'there're plenty of Ukrainians who can address all these things directly, but what I'm struck by is that their story is just [...] orthogonal, it's somewhere else.'*

*Their story is about existence, It's about subjectivity. It's about being now, right, in this twenty-first century. So it's not exactly rebuttal, you know, to that story. It's a different mode of expression.'*<sup>93</sup>

Framing struggle and resistance not so much in the national interest or tied to statist concepts of sovereign integrity but as an organic expression of free will attempting to bring to light a subjective essence lifts the discussion to a moral and ontological plane.

Significantly, it is not a question of one side's assertion meets another's rebuttal. Clearly, for Snyder, these arguments pursue and arrive at different outcomes. Far removed from the simplistic notion of messages, narratives, and counter-narratives, there exist conversations which appear in different registers as different modes of expression. And they don't confront each other in any symmetric fashion. Meanwhile, they speak to different publics where publics are understood by strategic communicators as objects or targets of praxis: this is a key concept to embrace.

Stanford academic Niall Ferguson, a scholar of empire, has sought to frame the discussion differently, speaking to postcolonial and post-imperial discourses currently popular in the West. Russia, for him, is in the last throes of decline and is striking out to reassert its regional hegemony. End of empire is inevitable—as it has been for others throughout history. But that would not prevent Moscow from attempting to reassert its role in geopolitics. He highlights this different discourse:

*'Ukraine is fighting against a declining empire, that's really the critical point [...] the key here is not the scale of empire, but the extent of the rot [...] what we have seen since February 24th is just how rotten this Russian empire is [...] It's only a matter of time before this empire goes down as they all do.'*<sup>94</sup>



The slow response to early promises of support, particularly with military hardware from the German government, and subsequent criticism have encouraged one of the world's leading sociologists, German scholar Jürgen Habermas, to enter the fray. For him, however, the question is again different. Writing in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, his perspective attempts to nuance a position for which the German government has been publicly rebuked. He confesses,

*'At my age, I can't deny a bit of surprise: How deeply upturned must be the soil of our political culture and its taken-for-granted norms and value-orientations on which our children and grandchildren live if even the conservative press is calling for the prosecutors of an International Criminal Court which, however, has not yet been recognized by Russia and China, or even by the U.S.?''*

He continues,

*'Unfortunately, such realities also betray the hollow-sounding foundations of an impassioned identification with increasingly shrill moral indictments of German restraint. Not that the war criminal Putin doesn't deserve to be brought before such a court, but he still holds a veto in the United Nations Security Council and can continue to threaten his opponents with nuclear war. An end of the war, or at least a cease-fire, must still be negotiated with him. I see no convincing justification for demands for a policy which—despite the excruciating, increasingly unbearable suffering of the victims—would de facto put at risk the well-founded decision to avoid participation in this war.'*<sup>95</sup>

Such a line of thought has little patience with the simplistic dialectic 'you're with us or against us'. Geopolitics from this perspective is more than a zero-sum game. Yet it can also be seen as playing into and reinforcing Moscow's own communications campaigns.

Johns Hopkins scholar Mary Sarotte has ventured into equally contentious waters with her recent book *Not One Inch*.<sup>96</sup> An analysis of conversations between James Baker and Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s suggests that, according to Baker's account, NATO would not venture further east if the USSR gave way to far-reaching reforms. Gorbachev remembered it differently. The dispute hinges on two words: expansion and enlargement. And on the question did NATO, the US, and Germany take advantage of a weak Gorbachev and outmanoeuvre its Cold War enemy (expansion), or did former Soviet republics such as the newly independent Baltic states freely request NATO membership at the turn of the millennium (enlargement).

In recent months Vladimir Putin has made similar claims of expansion to justify his public position that NATO prompted what he presents as his defensive action in Ukraine. Further exposing this seemingly no-go conversation is seen by many to risk the unity of the Western alliance's case at a highly sensitive moment in waging the war. Consequently, a nuanced discussion from a highly respected researcher found less traction in political and military circles than it might otherwise have done, published at a time when Ukraine itself was trying to break away from the clutches of Moscow with support from democratic nation states.

Nevertheless, it serves to inform other debates that circulate in the public sphere.

What further complicates the way we read discourses today is the systematic and industrial use of disinformation—the circulation of deliberately falsified accounts intended to appeal to target audiences and to heighten tensions or rifts between communities in democratic societies. Disinformation has two

effects: it fuels tensions in public opinion-making through heightened disagreement, and more broadly and paradoxically it shakes a common-sense view of what is held to be truthful. It both creates a new truth and undermines old ones.

Ultimately, it is the system of truth-telling which suffers as veracity is sacrificed for a new credibility. Strategic communicators are swift to remind us how quickly perception becomes reality.

Furthermore, although met with an array of reactive and pre-emptive measures, the low cost of production and ease of dissemination

and take-up present a continuing problem. Discourses of all kinds, old and new, will always provide a means to pursue a policy of distortion, dissimulation, and disruption. Evidenced information and argument become the cornerstone of any response. But the contest of ideas does not always lend itself to fact checking. Attitudes that people carry within them often evade hard evidence. Equally, evidence alone does not necessarily persuade people to change their opinions. Denial around the veracity of electoral processes in the US election of 2020 continues to win support for former president Donald Trump: his constituency remains resolute in the face of evidential argument.

# Conclusion

What all these discourses demonstrate, as they interact or sometimes pass each other by, is that which of these will come to the fore and when is less than predictable, depending on the unforeseen nature of world events and their unintended consequences. We are reminded of one victim of the Ukraine war who confided that in war 'you don't get accidentally killed. You accidentally survive.'<sup>97</sup> Equally, the emergence of dominant themes in discourse depends on how various publics and counter-publics warm to particular ideas.

This report has shown how Moscow introduced tropes and discourses that might bear fruit among Russian audiences at home and among ethnic Russian audiences in Ukraine.

Hierarchically delivered communications approaches, whether there or in pluralist democracies, can, however, only be as effective as organic and fluid conversations among publics will allow them to travel. Hence attempts to muddy the waters, to confuse and destabilise public opinion-making through disinformation programmes, becomes a high-value proposition if not to win one's own arguments, then at least to undermine those of one's opponents.

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# RUSSIAN FEDERATION OFFICIAL STATEMENTS AND MEDIA MESSAGING ANALYSIS

by Laima Venclauskienė, Karina Urbanavičiūtė, Viktoras Daukšas

## Introduction

Strategic use of information is a long-term practice of the Kremlin. Concepts and methods which originated in the Soviet Union, though growing more sophisticated over time, became a blueprint for the current Russian government.

Past and present leaders residing in Moscow have never been shy in calling information what it is to them—a weapon. Lenin's Decree on the Press from 1917 warned that the press is one of the most powerful weapons, 'no less dangerous than bombs and machine-guns'.<sup>1</sup> In 2015 Russian minister of defence Sergey Shoigu repeated the same statement, saying that 'the day has come when all of us recognize that the word, the camera, the photograph, the internet and information in general have become yet another type of weaponry, another branch of the armed forces'.<sup>2</sup>

The strategy is even more apparent when we look at the situation of the press inside Russia (which, based on the level of restrictions and control, is not that far off from the Soviet past). As Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, through a series of not so subtle operations (such as the takeover of the NTV channel<sup>3</sup>) and well-thought-out legal traps (the case of TV Dozhd'), media outlets which had even a fraction of independence fell under the control of the state.<sup>4</sup> And since then the chokehold around the press has become tighter and tighter. After Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, almost all

independent media were declared to be 'foreign agents', blocked, banned, or restricted in some other way.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, television holds its position as the primary source of information in Russia, where the average person watches about 3.5 hours of TV per day. According to a survey carried out by the Levada Center in January 2020, television serves as a major news source for 73% of Russians, while the internet is a major source for 39%. At the same time, 52% of Russians say they trust television news.<sup>6</sup> Information, especially that being communicated through TV, is key to sustaining the spectacle of power, which has been labelled as everything from the 'TV-ocracy' to a 'postmodern dictatorship'.<sup>7</sup>

According to the intelligence data and statements by former employees of the state media, the content of information influence campaigns is largely determined by the presidential administration. There are also specialised administrative structures created to support Russian influence operations. People working there are directly responsible for generating ideas and determining the direction and content of Russia's information policy. Notably, information policy priorities are also established by the Russian special services—the GRU (Main [Intelligence] Directorate), the FSB (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation), and the SVR (Russian Foreign Intelligence Service).<sup>8</sup>

The groundwork regarding the information aspect of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was laid back in 2014, when Crimea was annexed after 'a fair referendum' and separatist movements in the Donbas decided to claim independence of the region with the help of the 'little green men'. The turmoil was caused without using significant military force, which once again proves the opening statement of this paper—that the Kremlin sees information as a weapon and does not shy away from using it.

Prior to the events of 2014, for audiences inside Russia and parts of eastern Ukraine where Russian television holds sway over other information sources, the Kremlin managed to create a parallel universe where ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine were facing genocide, planned by 'fascists' who had taken power in Kyiv with the help of the CIA. Reality was turned upside down and reinvented.<sup>9</sup>

The Kremlin's strategic communication is completely centralised. The President's Administration provides media managers with the so-called *temnik*,<sup>10</sup> a kind of guidance from Russian authorities on the main topics and stories. *Temnik* means 'theme' or 'agenda', with a connotation to another Russian word, *temnota*, which means 'darkness'. According to statements by media editors working in Russia, *temnik* is a verbal guide and is practised through meetings and phone calls.<sup>11</sup> A former employee of the VGRTK media holding (to which Rossiya 1 channel belongs) said that days after the annexation of Crimea, the hosts who appeared on-screen were given a list of names to call the Ukrainian government and/or army: 'junta', 'Banderovites', etc. The editors were also given lists of which experts to invite to the shows.<sup>12</sup> The top fifteen major Russian news outlets carried strikingly similar editorial positions and perspectives on the events which were unfolding at the time.<sup>13</sup>

The same approach was followed throughout the eight years leading up to the re-invasion of Ukraine. With slight tweaks, the set of narratives, actors, and sources stayed the same, to keep the information vacuum as tight as possible. Unsurprisingly so, the argument of 'ethnic Russians being persecuted by

the fascist Ukrainian government' was used by Putin in his now infamous speech given hours before missiles started targeting Kyiv and other major cities in Ukraine.

*'And for this we will pursue the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine, as well as bringing to justice those who committed numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including citizens of the Russian Federation.'*<sup>14</sup>

This was the strategic communications line amplified and kept up during the early stages of the war in Ukraine. To establish its 'truth', the Kremlin applied an array of tried-and-tested tactics from its arsenal. Its trusted propaganda mouthpieces boosted the use of malign rhetoric and false flag operations,<sup>15</sup> and manipulated statistics and historical facts.<sup>16</sup> Programmes on the state TV channels were rearranged swiftly, with most of the airtime now being given over to news and political/analytical talk shows.<sup>17</sup> Cyber-enabled operations,<sup>18</sup> such as hacking and bot attacks<sup>19</sup> on social media, were used to further spread the message both outside and inside Russia. In addition to silencing the last voices of opposition and the independent media, the Kremlin again resorted to exploiting the legal system to keep any opposition at bay—for calling the war something other than a 'special military operation', one could get up to fifteen years in jail.<sup>20</sup>

To create an aura of significance, the Z and V symbols became inseparable from any communication about the righteousness of Russia's actions. Those letters also often in combination with a St George's ribbon and the slogan 'We don't give up on our people' are displayed on billboards all over the Russian cities.<sup>21</sup> Through a cornerstone motif of the Soviet victory in World War II, Putin's regime frames its invasion of Ukraine as defending its people from neo-Nazis once again.<sup>22</sup> The sense of sanctity is also magnified through the Orthodox Church—an extremely valuable asset in the Kremlin's information influence toolkit and one of the central pillars of Putin's efforts to uphold his image of national identity.<sup>23</sup>

To summarise, the entirety of the Kremlin's information strategy with regard to Ukraine for the last eight years was built

on three pillars: heroise Russia, demonise Ukraine, and discredit the West.

## Methodology

The objective of this study was to test the hypothesis whether hostile information activities could be indicative of potential physical actions on the ground. By comparing the communications conducted by Russian government officials and state-controlled media during the pre-war (1 October 2021 to 23 February 2022) and wartime (24 February to 31 March 2022) periods, analysts with Debunk.org were looking for visible changes recorded in the communications coming out of the Kremlin before and after the invasion of Ukraine, i.e., shifts in the communications strategy, such as using different narratives, moving the focus to/away from the object of the analysis, or changing the language in which it was being addressed.

The methodology of the analysis blends quantitative (aiming to identify patterns, if any, of messaging) and qualitative approaches (such as narrative analysis to explain the mechanisms designed to build/maintain meaning constructions and/or repurpose them). The empirical research was carried out by identifying keywords ('Ukraine' and its aliases, such as toponyms and the most prominent personalities synonymous with the country's name), sources (six Russian official governmental/regulatory websites), and the time frame of the analysis (1 October 2021 to 31 March 2022), and then reviewing the collected data based on the selected criteria. Labels were applied to the data in order to track the changes in the number of mentions of Ukraine and its aliases, or the *regularity of messaging*. To measure the scope of TV coverage dedicated to Ukraine throughout the period and to be able to compare the changes in the dynamics we designed a unique parameter called Attention Time©, which maps out the *length of messaging*, i.e., mentions of 'Ukraine' in written articles and video texts transcribed. In addition to that, the research takes into

account a *hard-line messaging/offensive language indicator*—a predefined list of negative words or those with negative connotation targeting Ukraine and/or its relations with allies. The two criteria described above are meant to outline the vectors of the rhetoric used in the tracked sources to see if these may point to traceable patterns of decreasing/increasing toxicity towards and/or focus on Ukraine, simultaneously introducing a comparative element while collating the data from the official government communication domains and the Kremlin-controlled television shows. They are complemented by the *priority of messaging* parameter, which is meant to see if issues related to Ukraine are defined as the most important and introduced as/in the leading parts of content pieces. This quantitative indicator thus measures the importance assigned to the object of the analysis via counting the number of special mentions it received.

The research also deals with strategic narrative formation and strategic narrative projection:<sup>24</sup>

- actors' formation of strategic narratives, through tracing the use of narratives within official government communications and their textual analysis
- strategic narratives projection, which involves tracing the flow of narratives through the media ecology (investigating whether there were any thresholds for the strategic narratives entering the selected Kremlin-controlled TV media outlets and how well they travelled from one to another)
- reviewing the strategic narratives in the selected Kremlin-controlled

TV channel shows, mapping out the reach and penetration of official government communication into the television shows, and how (far) these overlap.

Here, strategic narratives are understood as a set of media discourses built to reinforce, subvert, undermine, overwhelm, or replace a pre-existing discourse on a subject significant to both the audience and the actor, as well as an interlocking framework of ‘truths’ that explain how a conflict came to be, where it is going, and how it should be argued and described.<sup>25</sup> Focusing on strategic narratives serves the purpose of unravelling the Kremlin’s communication efforts regarding the preparation of the general domestic Russian audience for moving on from escalation of military tension to an open armed confrontation with Ukraine. Within the analysis, we distinguish between three types of strategic narratives, tracing their dynamics and overlapping in between the government communication and TV coverage: constructive (designed to establish

coherent rhetoric within the matrix of existing narratives), disruptive (negating new and/or already existing narratives), and distractive (diverting attention from key issues).<sup>26</sup>

The content pieces of this analysis are both written texts (six official communication domains) and multimodal audiovisual content (TV coverage).

For the sake of analytical comparability and because of the research tools employed (Attention Time<sup>®</sup> and hard-line messaging), the research is foremost focused on verbal/written communication elements, and considers to a lesser extent the visuals that accompany and support them.

In order to see which actors were involved in conveying the messages regarding notifying/preparing/securing the support of Russian-speaking nationals/diaspora for the (upcoming) invasion, we tracked twenty-five officials from the organisations on the six monitored sources list.

No.	Media type	Source name	Content pieces
1.	Official communication	mid.ru RF Ministry of Foreign Affairs official website	533
2.	Official communication	function.mil.ru RF Ministry of Defence official website	332
3.	Official communication	duma.gov.ru RF State Duma official website	116
4.	Official communication	council.gov.ru Federation Council official website	82
5.	Official communication	kremlin.ru RF President official website	45
6.	Official communication	scrf.gov.ru RF Security Council official website	22
7.	TV	1tv.ru TV channel Pervyy Kanal’s daily news programme Vremya	156
8.	TV	smotrim.ru TV channel Rossiya 1’s weekly analytical show Vesti nedeli (24 episodes) and the daily talk show 60 minut (125 episodes)	149
TOTAL			1435

TABLE 1. Russian official government communication and television sources used for the analysis and the number of content pieces reviewed from each

# Regularity and length of messaging

In this research we used the quantitative parameter of regularity of messaging to measure the intensity of communication via counting the number of mentions of the subject analysed. With regard to the government communication, this was done by counting the number of articles we labelled in accordance with a set of requirements to mark a content piece as relevant and code the information inside it. As far as the TV coverage was concerned, we applied a different method of measurement, a parameter entitled Attention Time<sup>®</sup>, which is a conditional value showing how much attention was given to the object of the analysis. We predefined a list of aliases for the word ‘Ukraine’ and developed a list of buzzwords that are frequently used to relate to the events in Ukraine. We then mapped the net of words within the coded information to track the dynamics of the scope/length of the coverage on Ukraine, given the number of TV shows tracked and analysed remained the same, yet the time of the shows

and the attention towards Ukraine potentially fluctuated.

Within the government communication (see Figure 1), small fluctuations of the number of articles concerning Ukraine could be observed throughout the pre-war period (the drop from Week 52, 2021, to Week 1, 2022, was related to the week-long public holidays in Russia, celebrating the New Year and Christmas). For example, a wave from mid.ru in Week 48, 2021, stemmed from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacting to the high-level diplomatic talks on the sidelines of a ministerial-level meeting of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Similarly, an example of a reactive wave of information can be discerned in Week 3, 2022, as a result of Russia–US talks, meetings of the OSCE in Vienna, and other high-level diplomatic consultations. At the same time (continuing onto Week 4, 2022), the number of articles posted by

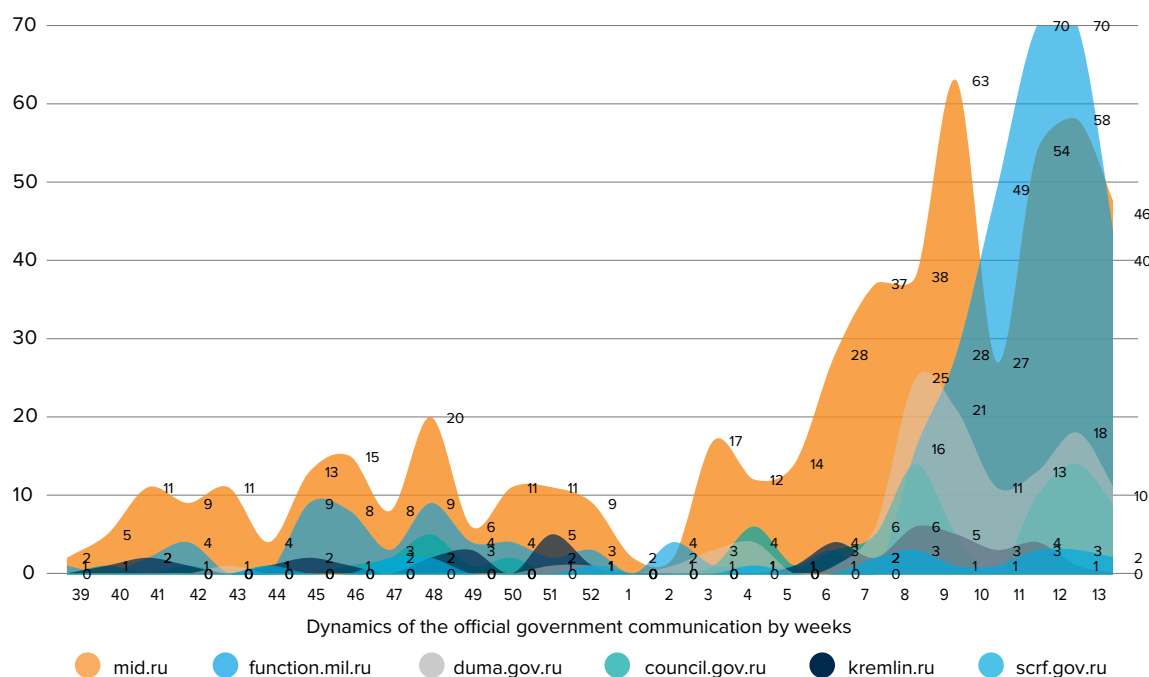


FIGURE 1. Weekly dynamics of the official government communication reviewed for the analysis, as measured by the number of content pieces

Duma.gov.ru and council.gov.ru grew. Via the former, Vyacheslav Volodin, the speaker of the State Duma, announced that Russia’s parliament would hold consultations on an idea to appeal to the country’s president to recognise the Luhansk and Donetsk regions (the so-called LNR and DNR) in eastern Ukraine as independent states.<sup>27</sup> Simultaneously, Volodin was calling for relations between Russia and Ukraine to be based on the principles of friendship and mutual respect<sup>28</sup> and claiming NATO intended to ‘occupy Ukraine’.<sup>29</sup> In Week

was recorded on the Defence Ministry’s website, function.mil.ru. The highest number of its messaging per week amounted to 4 hits pre-invasion, whereas with the launch of the war the number grew to 70 articles weekly. It also recorded the steepest growth of the daily average of articles (see Figure 2), up from the pre-war 0.5 to the wartime of 7.5 (with regards to this parameter, duma.gov.ru was second in terms of growth, up from 0.26 to 2.4 articles on average per day).

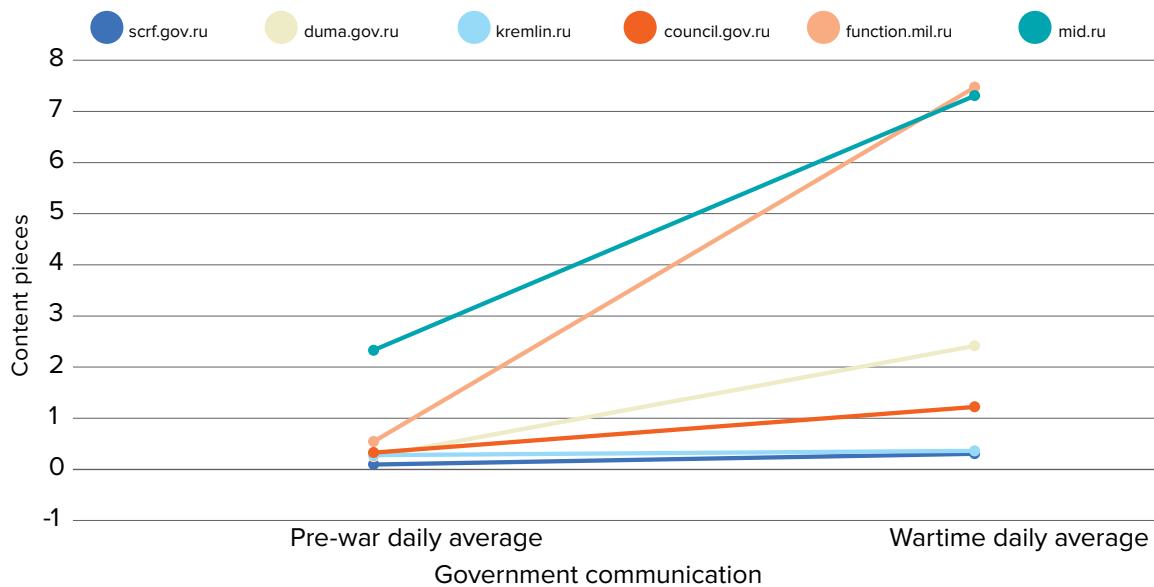


FIGURE 2. Comparison of the daily average of content pieces in the official government communication, pre-war and wartime

4, 2022, Duma members were quoted as saying that ‘Western forces’ were criminals ‘trying to pit Russians and Ukrainians against each other’,<sup>30</sup> as well as warning that there were ‘reasons to fear a repeat of Holocaust-like tragedies’, as in Ukraine, where ‘large groups of people are marching with torches and Nazi flags with slogans, with calls against other nationalities, other peoples’.<sup>31</sup> Thus, a spike of reactive government communication from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was followed by an influx of proactive strategic communication from the State Duma.

The chart of the weekly dynamics of the government messaging demonstrates that the steepest growth in the communication flow

Alongside the clearly low-level pre-war communications and the growth of the Russian Defence Ministry’s communications at the start of the invasion of Ukraine, it is important to note the specificity of messaging on the official site of the ministry: prior to the ‘special military operation’, the majority of articles were in no way related to the tensions on the borders with Ukraine/eastern Ukraine. Instead, more than half of the communications revolved around the topic ‘*Commemoration of historical events/special dates*’, marked in 30 hits vs 10 hits on the topic of the escalating tensions. Cases included the Amur Long-Range Aviation Group holding a ‘unified legal hour dedicated to the colour revolutions’, with Ukraine mentioned as one of the examples,<sup>32</sup>

as well as a number of articles mentioning Ukraine and its toponyms as the battlespace of World War II. Another 11 articles concerned/reminded readers of the missile destroyer *Vice-Admiral Kulakov* saving a cargo ship with Ukrainian crew from pirates in October 2021,<sup>33</sup> with 6 more mentioning Ukrainians among those evacuated from Afghanistan by Russian military planes. Hence judging by the topics of the Defence Ministry’s communications, it kept

Compared to the weekly dynamics by number of articles, the Attention Time<sup>®</sup> parameter was down in Week 12 in the communications by the Russian Defence Ministry’s website, while the number of articles stayed as high as during the previous week. The difference may be explained by a growing number of stories about allegedly grassroots initiatives to express support for the ‘special military operation’. They tended to focus more

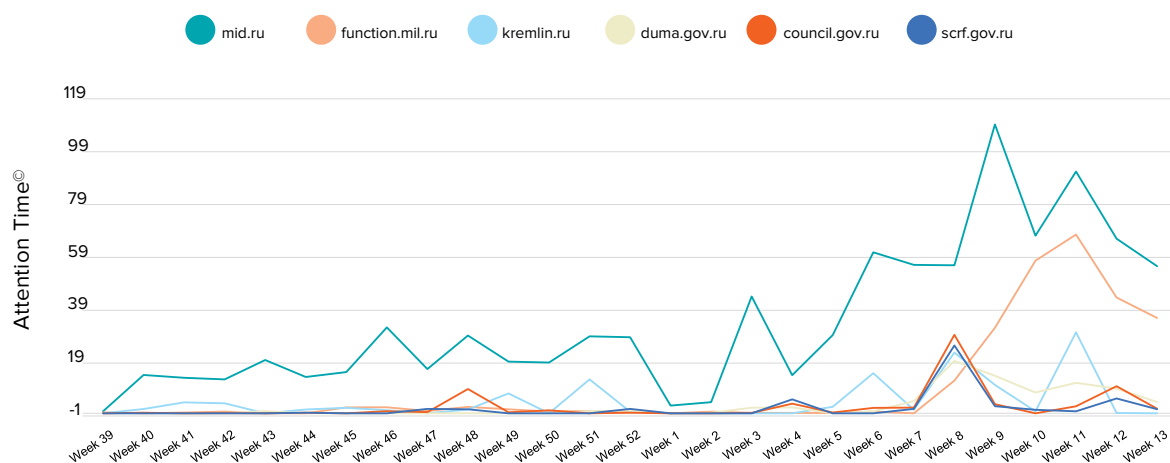


FIGURE 3. Weekly dynamics of Attention Time<sup>®</sup> in the official government communication

its profile low in terms of both the regularity of its messaging and the topicality of issues related to Ukraine, portraying the Russian army as involved in saving people (the rhetoric would ramp up during wartime, with claims of liberating Ukraine, bringing peace, and helping its people by providing humanitarian aid), along with using Ukrainian toponyms for places associated with the memory of World War II.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from the measurement of Attention Time<sup>®</sup> (see Figure 3): Ukraine was barely visible in the Russian Defence Ministry (function.mil.ru) communications prior to the war, but rapidly became more evident as Russian forces advanced into Ukraine. Communications by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (mid.ru) were more pronounced in terms of both volume and the Attention Time<sup>®</sup>, with bigger fluctuations presumably affected by the reactive nature of the reporting in response to ongoing events in the arena of international politics.

on ‘Russian society’ than on the events in Ukraine itself (see Figure 4, from an article entitled ‘Residents of a military town in Ulan-Ude held a patriotic event “ZVëzdnyy with you!”’<sup>34</sup>), as the Russian invasion by then was lasting

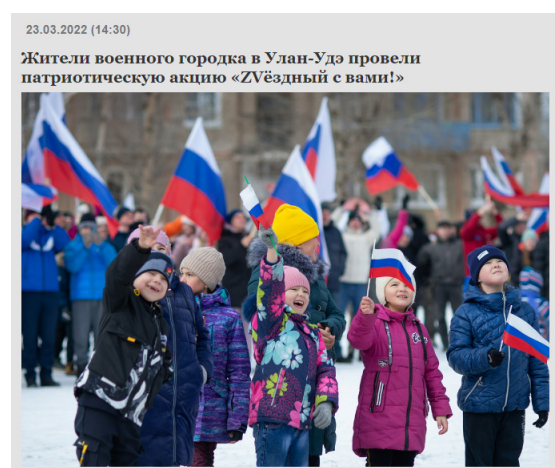


FIGURE 4. Screenshot from an article posted on the Russian Defence Ministry’s website, entitled ‘Residents of a military town in Ulan-Ude held a patriotic event “ZVëzdnyy with you!”’, 23 March 2022

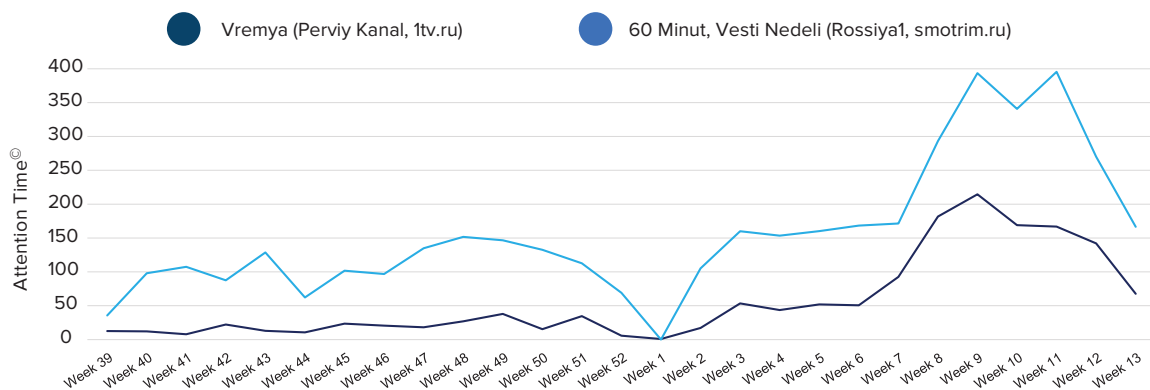


FIGURE 5. Weekly dynamics of Attention Time<sup>®</sup> in the televised content

longer than the Kremlin had planned, and the Ukrainian army was retaking ground near Kyiv. There was a growing need to give Russians the so-called ‘information reassurance treatment’—media campaigns designed to ‘spread positivity’<sup>35</sup>—making the official communicators paint a picture of a united, strong, and happy Russia through these support initiatives instead of a victorious military parade in Kyiv.

The waves of Attention Time<sup>®</sup> in other sources of government communication covered by this research echoed the rise in the number of articles. Thus, kremlin.ru, the official presidential website, both published more on Ukraine and gave it more attention (not just in passing) in Week 51, when Putin held

his annual press conference and spoke of the tensions with Ukraine as an existential threat to Russia, and Week 11, when Putin took part in the celebrations designed to mark Crimea ‘rejoining’ Russia, along with a meeting he held on socio-economic support for regions in response to the sanctions that hit the country after the launch of the war, which Putin thereby referred to as ‘self-defence, for ensuring Russia’s security’.<sup>36</sup>

Within the TV coverage, the attention paid to the issues related to Ukraine remained constant and ran on the weekly *Vesti nedeli* and the *60 minut* daily talk show, especially so with regard to the latter (as shown in Figure 5). When the invasion was launched,

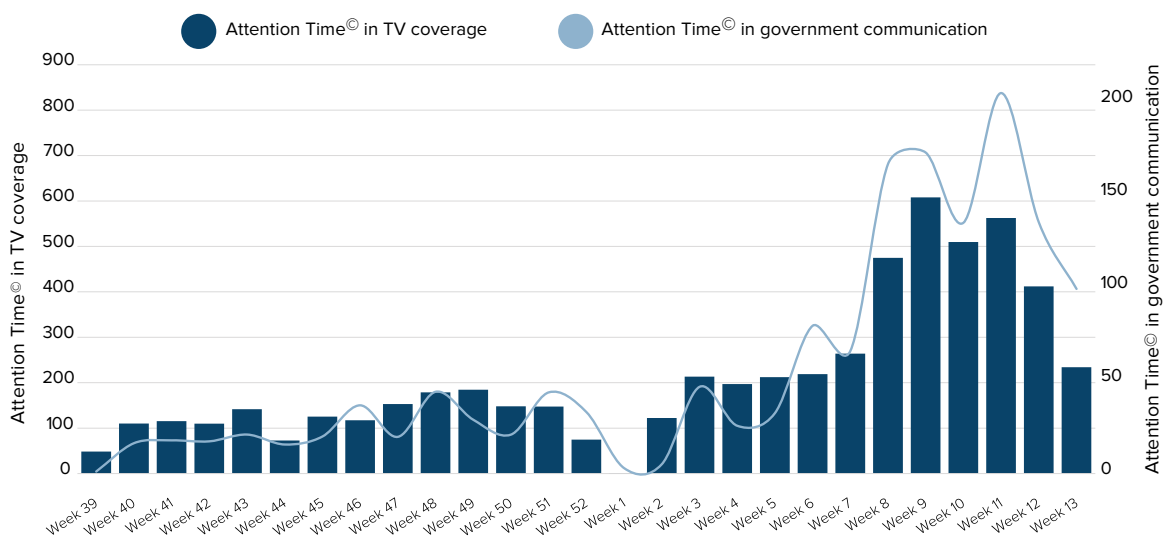


FIGURE 6. Comparison of weekly dynamics of Attention Time<sup>®</sup> in the official government communication and the televised content



the duration (watching time) of the TV programmes analysed within the research doubled, up from, for instance, roughly one hour of the talk show *60 minut* to two or almost three hours per episode. The duration of the TV news show *Vremya* grew from around 30 minutes on weekdays to an average of about an hour. The watching time of the episode of *Vesti nedeli* aired on 20 March 2022 amounted to 3h 38s; it was devoted to the 'special military operation', though supplemented by inserts drawing parallels between the events in Ukraine and the World War II. On the whole with regard to Kremlin-controlled TV in the wartime period, the same messaging regularity and length pattern was used as during the annexation of Crimea in 2014: it was all Ukraine, all the time.<sup>37</sup> The increased length of the programmes was complemented by the attention paid to the events in Ukraine, which, according to this study, was greatest in the full Week 9, 2022.

Overall, the Attention Time<sup>®</sup> dynamics show that the rate of mapping out mentions of Ukraine within the messaging of the governmental bodies grew speedier and more dramatically compared to the coverage on TV, and reaching a climax in Week 11, 2022 (as reflected in Figure 6). The level of Attention Time<sup>®</sup> to Ukraine on TV was slightly yet steadily higher since the start of 2022, compared to the government communication, where growth started gathering pace in Week 7, after a drop in Weeks 4 and 5. The peak of the TV coverage in terms of Attention Time<sup>®</sup> was

recorded in Week 9, with a preceding smaller wave of information by regulatory bodies in Week 8, 2022, when the invasion was launched. The noticeable drop in the Attention Time<sup>®</sup> to Ukraine by both the government resources and, to a smaller extent, TV shows in Week 10 was tied to a weekly decrease by half of the articles posted by mid.ru, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, which coincided with the end of the ten-day period by which Russia had planned to occupy Ukraine.<sup>38</sup>

In Week 11 the government communication wave was shaped by lengthy interviews with the foreign minister Sergey Lavrov<sup>39</sup> and his deputies<sup>40</sup> broadcast on Russian media outlets, such as RT, on issues related to Ukraine, as well as the publication of extensive speeches by Russian diplomats for international organisations.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, the Defence Ministry was bombarding the communications landscape with daily briefings brimful of the smallest details of the advances and victories by the Russian army, while the Inter-Agency Coordination Headquarters for the Humanitarian Response in Ukraine continuously put out information about the 'Ukrainian Nazis' using civilians as human shields, and did their best to divert attention away from any indication of Russian military aggression towards their provision of humanitarian aid to the liberated areas and refugees, such as giving out 'tonnes of medicines, basic necessities and food, including baby food'.<sup>42</sup> These briefings/reports were covered by TV, mostly on *Vremya*.

# Priority of messaging

For the purposes of this research, we tracked whether ‘Ukraine’ and/or the aliases of the word were assigned a special mention—a sign of prioritising the issues related to Ukraine over other matters—within the communications by the Russian official websites and the TV coverage. We coded the data to see if the country mention related to a domestic and/or foreign policy issue associated with Ukraine was one of the first stories on the TV evening news show *Vremya* (outlined by the host of the programme as ‘the main events of the day’ in the first few minutes of each episode), or was included in the first fifteen minutes (further passing mention excluded) of episodes of the weekly analytical TV show *Vesti nedeli* and the daily TV talk show *60 minut*. In terms of the government communication, a mention was considered special if a domestic or Ukrainian foreign policy issue served as the major reason for a public address.

The results show that the average viewer of the three TV shows monitored and reviewed by Debunk.org analysts was presented with Ukraine-related issues as top stories in no fewer than 53% of the content pieces pre-invasion and in 100% of the cases after the war started (see Figure 7). We should note,

however, that although special mention was found in all of the *60 minut* shows—in accordance with an almost obsessive coverage of what goes on outside Russia and especially in Ukraine<sup>43</sup> for years before the invasion—and in all but two of the *Vesti nedeli* episodes, the flow was more diversified as far as *Vremya* was concerned. There, the average percentage of content pieces containing a special mention of Ukraine amounted to 60.7%.

The share of articles matching the parameter of a special mention in the government communication was considerably lower than for television, with several noticeable peaks and a steady growth tendency as of Week 6, 2022, reaching a maximum in Week 10. With the onset of the war, as of Week 8, the difference between the share of articles with a special mention in the two types of communication declined, continuing at a lower than pre-war level until the end of the monitoring period.

Were the peaks of special mention cases within the government communication echoed in the TV coverage? Let’s consider two cases: in Week 43 there were two common Ukraine-related issues marked as a priority. The first concerned accusations that Kyiv was

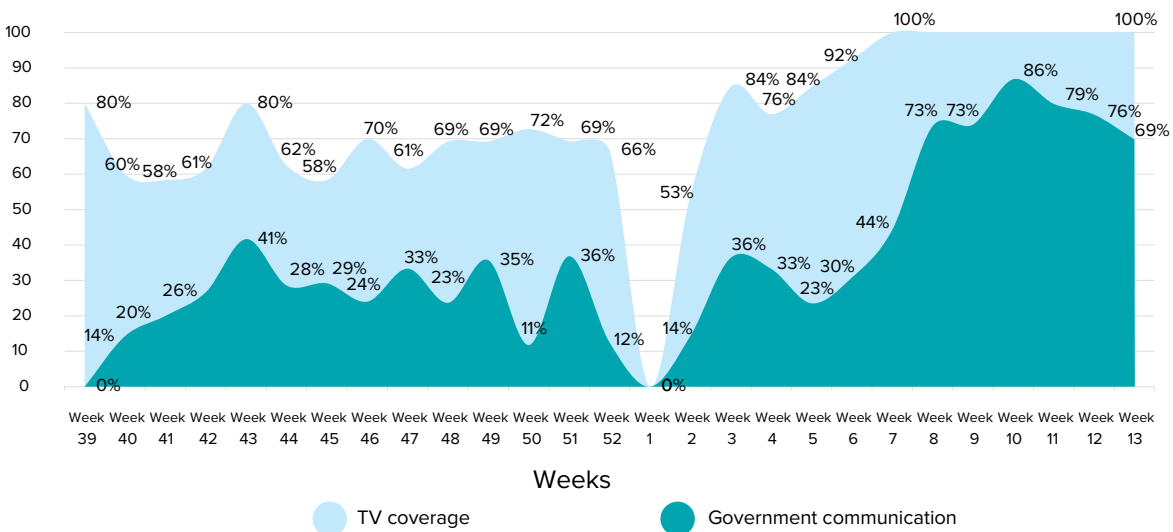


FIGURE 7. The share of special mentions in the official government communication and the televised content

violating the Minsk agreements by capturing the Staromariievka settlement in the Donbas and using a Bayraktar drone, as claimed in the official statement by Aleksandr Lukashevich, Russia's permanent representative to the OSCE<sup>44</sup> and via the comments by the head Russian diplomat, Sergey Lavrov.<sup>45</sup> *Vremya* reported on the issue and cited Lavrov as saying 'this must give pause to all those who encourage Ukraine in its capricious demands to become a NATO member and those who arm a regime in Kyiv that is under the control of neo-Nazis'.<sup>46</sup> At a time when Russia-backed militants continued to launch attacks on the Ukrainian Armed Forces' positions, ignoring the ceasefire, and Russian troops were massed on Ukrainian borders, a distractive disinformation campaign was fomented around the Bayraktar strike to repeatedly claim Ukraine was violating the Minsk agreements and the US was encouraging an alleged military escalation by Kyiv. The allegations were constructed to convey a vertical relationship between the two countries: 'another Odessa clown, Goncharenko, is on tour at the Pentagon today saying he is fighting Russian aggression. That is, begging the Americans for more weapons.'<sup>47</sup> It was also used to present stories of civilians in the contact zone being constantly targeted by Ukrainian 'nationalists' (see Figure 8). *Vesti nedeli* employed the concept of civilians used as a human shield,<sup>48</sup> a claim which would be used heavily after war broke out on 24 February 2022. Thirty-seven holders of Russian passports were under a threat, the host of *60 minut* said, in a warning that Russia would have to defend its citizens and repeating a leading narrative throughout the period of the analysis, claiming Russia was responding to the security situation and not being offensive. To mirror accusations of arms accumulation, claims were made about the Ukrainian side transporting echelons of heavy equipment to the Donbas aiming at military escalation.

The second event that was reflected in both types of media and added to the spike in Week 43 was the Amsterdam Court of Appeal decision for the Allard Pierson Museum to hand over the 'Crimean Treasures'

to the Ukrainian state.<sup>49</sup> In the government communication greater emphasis was put on how the decision was 'politicised and biased', whereas on television more time was devoted to reminding viewers about the people of Crimea 'voluntarily deciding to rejoin' Russia. Within both types of communication it was noted how short the existence of the modern Ukrainian state was.



FIGURE 8. (Top) 'Tensions on the line of contact in the Donbas are rising,' Dmitry Kiselëv, *Vesti nedeli*, 31 October 2021

(MIDDLE) 'The village of Yakovlevka near Donetsk has become unaccustomed to shelling over the years. And now, once again, shells are bursting in the yard,' *Vremya*, 27 October 2021

(BOTTOM) 'Right now, 37 citizens of the Russian Federation, 140 of their fellow villagers in Staromariievka are human shields for the AFU,' Ol'ga Skabeyeva, *60 minut*, 28 October 2021

In another case in Week 51 the increase in content pieces with special mention in the government communication was due to a number of events and reactions to them by the regulatory bodies. As a common denominator, both media types mentioned Ukraine as a special topic in reports on Putin’s speech during his annual press conference. The event was used to repeatedly paint the picture of Ukraine as that of an aggressor, as ‘anti-Russia of sorts on this territory [created] by constantly stockpiling the latest weapons there and brainwashing the local population’.<sup>50</sup>

The Russian president spoke of both ‘the Russians and the Russian-speaking population [...] being forced from their historical lands’. It was in line with what researchers who had studied the way Russian television covered the events in Crimea in 2014 called a ‘national irredentist’ framing of stories that defined people according to the language they spoke rather than their ethnicity (using the term ‘Russian speakers’), implying the territories in question rightfully belonged to Russia.<sup>51</sup> The usage by Putin included ‘Russians’ as well, which stemmed from earlier attempts to transform occupied eastern Ukraine into a ‘passport protectorate’ by distributing hundreds of thousands of Russian passports to Ukrainians living in the regions of eastern Ukraine under Kremlin control.<sup>52</sup>

In 2022 the share of special mentions in the coverage of both the government communication and on television gradually increased from Week 5 on television and Week 6 within the government communication, up until the invasion and beyond. In Week 6, the onset of the continuous growth of the special mention parameter, content pieces with such mentions of Ukraine were foremost generated by attempts of foreign diplomats to discuss/resolve the tensions on the Ukrainian borders. To present the visits and the situation around them, the TV coverage used a more emotional appeal by, for instance, focusing on the suffering of the residents of the Donbas, as in the 9 February episode of *Vremya*, which showcased a local from the settlement of Spartak, quoting him as saying he had been ‘five years living in the basement, do you understand? Not one day from bombing, not one month, but five years living in the basement’.<sup>53</sup>

Comparing the pre-war and wartime period in terms of how the different channels of communication, tracked for the research, treated and/or presented the issues related to Ukraine as priority ones—hence the ‘special mention’—we can see that function.mil.ru stood out with the lowest special mention score (as illustrated in Figure 9, at 15.9%). The reasons behind this have to do with the characteristic features of the Defence Ministry’s

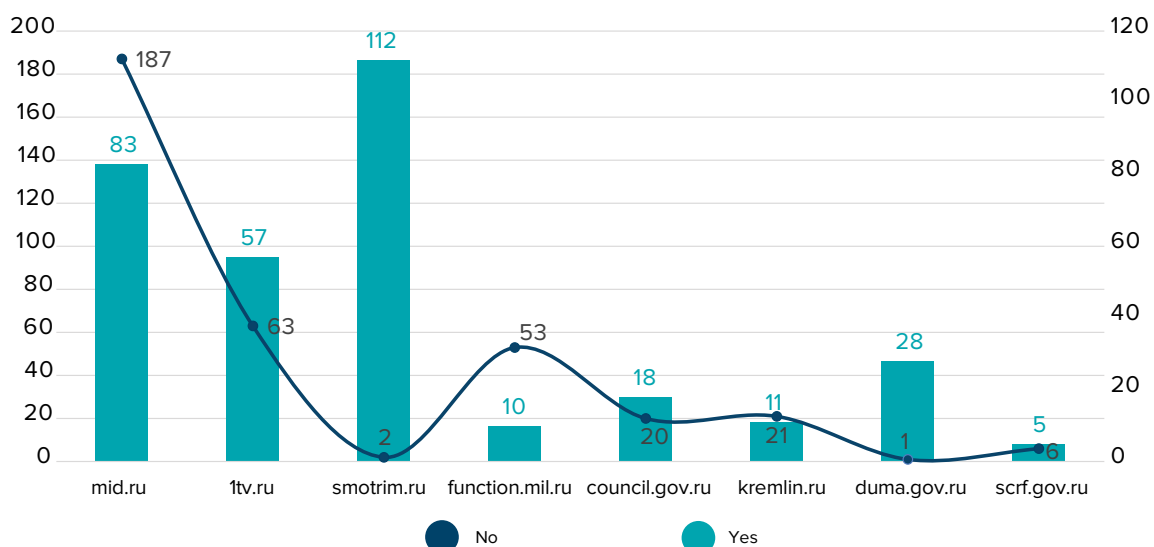


FIGURE 9. The number of content pieces with/without a special mention of Ukraine in the official government communication and the televised content, pre-war period

communications mentioning Ukraine in the pre-war period outlined in the previous chapter (in the majority of cases, Ukraine was mentioned in passing, with 10 articles of a total of 63 for the period focused on the escalating tensions concerning Ukraine). At the other extreme the Duma stood out as prioritising the issues related to Ukraine the most (96.6% of its articles were labelled with the special mention parameter). From mid February to the invasion on the 24th, 16 out of 29 articles focused on the proposals about the recognition of Luhansk and Donetsk as ‘independent states’. Thus, on 22 February 2022, Volodin hailed Putin for his ‘courage and responsible position’: “It is absolutely clear: those decisions that have been taken could not have taken place if not for the political will of the head of state. The President of our country made a decision and did everything in order to save people. Let us thank the President for his courage, for his responsible position,” said Vyacheslav Volodin at the plenary session.<sup>54</sup> The daily TV news show *Vremya* quoted Volodin hailing Putin’s decision, stressing its peacemaking nature: ‘With yesterday’s decision, our President stopped the war, the humanitarian disaster, the carnage. And this is

not a question of territories. It is a matter of the lives and health of millions of citizens.’<sup>55</sup>

When the war broke out, all mentions of Ukraine on TV were labelled as ‘special mention’ (see Figure 10). However, this was preceded by months (and years, not included in this analysis) of reporting strategically targeting Ukraine via such projects as *60 minut*. Meanwhile, on the official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*mid.ru*), a number of articles remained that were not labelled as ‘special mention’, as those concerned talks with representatives of different countries, where a line or two were included, modelled on the following: ‘special attention was paid to the situation in and around Ukraine. The Russian side explained the goals and tasks of Russia’s special military operation to protect the Donbas republics.’<sup>56</sup>

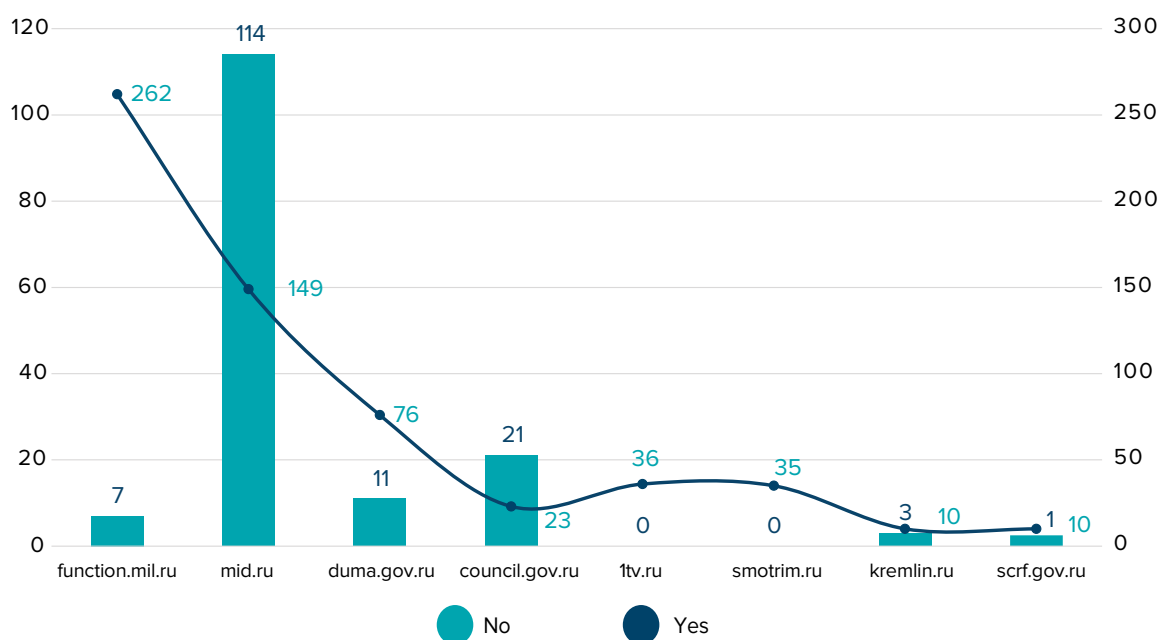


FIGURE 10. The number of content pieces with/without a special mention of Ukraine in the official government communication and the televised content, wartime period

# Replicability of messaging

The Russian state-controlled media creates a drumbeat of information based on a concrete set of narratives—compelling storytelling—which are maintained over the years. In addition to the narrative repetition and recycling, adaptation is also part of the basis of the propaganda and disinformation system under the Putin regime, ensuring new storylines, scripts, and messages resonate with the audience’s values, interests, and prejudices.

While researching Russia’s government communication and the Kremlin-controlled TV programmes through the selected media, we distinguished between three types of strategic narratives, tracing their dynamics and overlapping:

- constructive narratives (‘This is the truth!’) that try to establish a coherent rhetoric about a particular issue that fits into/complements existing strategic narratives
- disruptive narratives (‘This is a lie!’), which are an attempt to prevent the emergence of a coherent narrative, or to disprove those already in use, and
- distractive narratives (‘Look over here!’), diverting attention from key issues.<sup>57</sup>

In the case of Kremlin propaganda, constructive strategic narratives are meant to create a new parallel reality; disruptive ones are intended to challenge the reality of something that has happened; and distractive ones are designed to divert attention and offer interpretation, without giving the audience the chance to think for itself.<sup>58</sup>

According to current analysis we can assume that the messaging within the selected sources was intended foremost to distract the audience, as in both communication types distractive strategic narratives occupied

about half of the total number of content pieces (51.5% in the government communication and 46.9% in the TV coverage, pre-war, as shown in Figure 11). The Kremlin propaganda tunnelled the audience’s vision to a projected picture of ‘aggressive’ Ukraine that would not follow democratic standards, the rule of law, international agreements, and humanitarian laws, as well as the ‘morally corrupt’ West—an unreliable partner of Ukraine and a failed participant in the dialogue with Russia, against which it was waging an information war. The leading strategic distractive narratives, also reflective of mirrored accusations, whataboutism, and victim-blaming techniques, were meant to deny Russia’s intentions of invasion and/or the country’s aggressive imperialism,

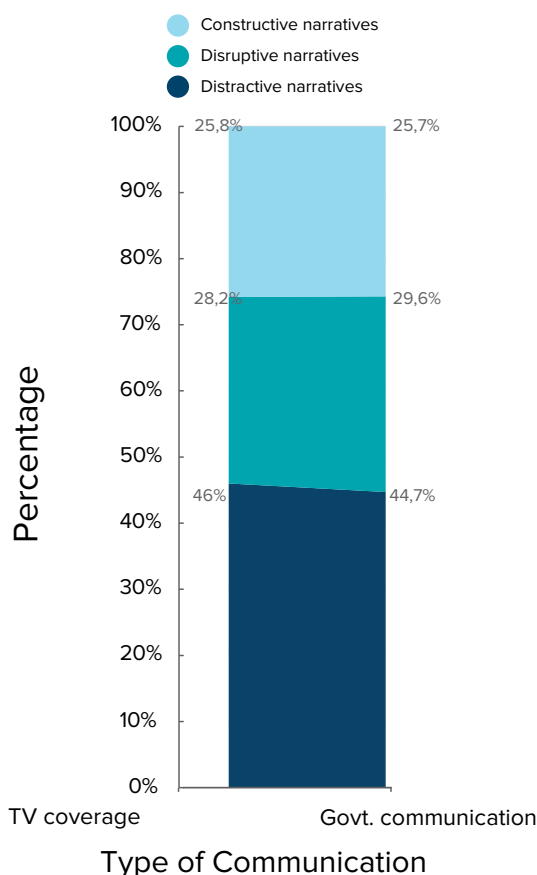


FIGURE 11. The share of different types of strategic narratives in the official government communication and the televised content

## Top 5 distractive narratives

October 1, 2021 – February 23, 2022

February 24 – March 31, 2022

Ukraine fails to follow international agreements	375	Ukrainian side is committing war crimes	437
The West is morally corrupt	285	Ukraine fails to uphold democratic standards and the rule of law	382
Ukraine is preparing for an armed confrontation against Russia	256	The West is morally corrupt	219
The West encourages the armed escalation in Ukraine	212	Information warfare is waged against Russia	167
Information warfare is waged against Russia	203	The West encourages the armed escalation in Ukraine	133

FIGURE 12. Comparison of the top 5 distractive narratives in the official government communication and the televised content in the pre-war and wartime periods

diverting attention to alleged misconduct by Ukraine and the West, i.e., exchanging the perpetrator's and victim's places, and rebuffing the Kremlin's instrumentalisation of an array of sectors, including that of energy (see Figure 12).

When the war started, there was a growing need to adhere to the 'information reassurance treatment' and get more engaged in the construction of a positive parallel reality, in which Russia was portrayed as a saviour providing humanitarian aid, a strong and self-sufficient state with soldiers committing heroic deeds, as opposed to the 'failed state' Ukraine, governed by the West. Hence, the share of constructive strategic narrative grew, especially so in the government communication (up from 21.6% pre-war to 28.1% in wartime, against 24.7% and 27.4%, respectively, on TV, as illustrated in Figure 13).

The share of disruptive rhetoric was also on the rise in the government communication (26.9% before 24 February 2022 and 31.2% afterwards), yet it slightly diminished in the TV coverage. This may have stemmed from the need for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to react (provide rebuttals) to the accusations and critique overall by their foreign counterparts, whereas television was more subdued in building the image of strong and righteous Russia, keeping the domestic audience calm and happy with the 'special military operation'; hence the proportion of these efforts was higher than of the attempts to deny the so-called 'Western fakes'. In general, it was the government communication that changed more in terms of the share of the types of strategic narratives, than the proportions on television.

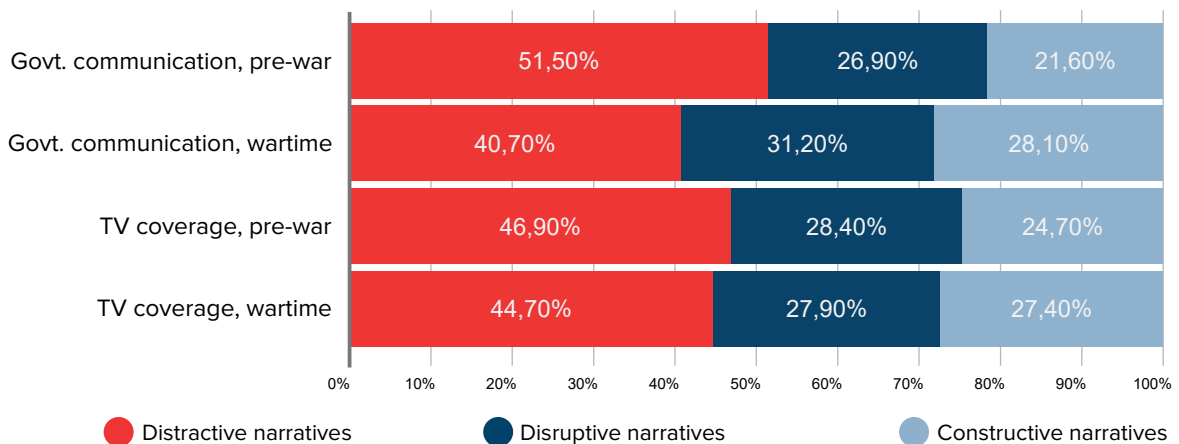


FIGURE 13. The share of different types of strategic narratives in the official government communication and the televised content in the pre-war and wartime periods

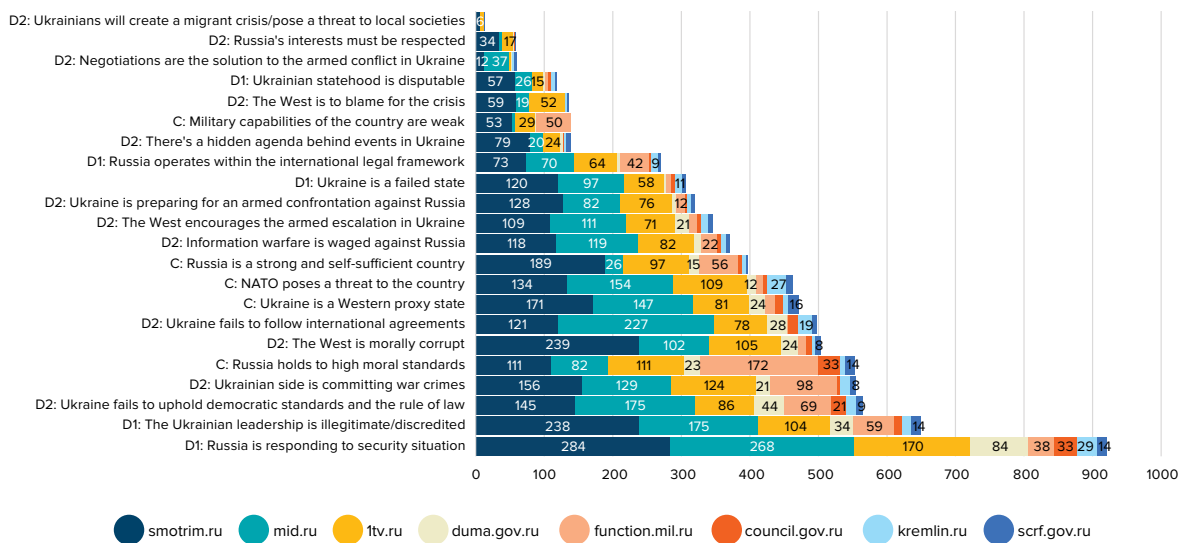


FIGURE 14. The ranking of narratives as measured by the number of content pieces per the media sources, 1 October 2021 – 31 March 2022

On the narrative level (see Figure 14), we found no messaging on TV that would not also be generated by the regulatory bodies in their communications, i.e., the messaging fully overlapped. The share of those differed, however, in the communications of the sources we tracked. Thus, for instance, the narrative ‘*The military capabilities of the country are weak*’ was for the most part promoted through TV coverage and the Defence Ministry. However, in the pre-war period, it was predominantly the daily talk show *60 minut* (smotrim.ru) that pushed this narrative by ridiculing the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) through claims of how unprofessional and inept they were. After the launch of the so-called special military operation, the narrative took on a different form, as the claims by the Defence Ministry about the Ukrainian army surrendering, panicking, and recklessly running away were repeated by the daily news programme *Vremya* (Pervyy Kanal, 1tv.ru).

The distractive strategic narratives ‘*The West is morally corrupt*’, ‘*There’s a hidden agenda behind the events in Ukraine*’, and ‘*The West is to blame for the crisis*’ can be described as television communication projects: the share of their coverage on the selected TV channels stood at 68.3%, 74.6%, and 83.5%, respectively.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs set the tone by claiming Kyiv was failing to comply with the Minsk agreements (the narrative ‘*Ukraine fails to follow international agreements*’), as its share in pursuing this rhetoric was the highest among the communication channels analysed in this research, at 45.9%.

Meanwhile, to negate the aggressive nature and the very essence of the Russian assault on Ukraine, the Russian Defence Ministry was the most engaged in trying to convince the domestic audience that ‘*Russia is holding to high moral standards*’ (31.1%), mainly through the sub-narratives ‘*The Russian army is providing humanitarian aid to liberated areas in Ukraine*’ and ‘*Russian society supports the military operation*’.

On the sub-narrative level (see Figure 15), the variation between the main carriers of different messaging was as pronounced: the biggest share in communicating that ‘*Russia is providing humanitarian aid*’ and ‘*Russia is fighting Nazis in Ukraine*’ belonged to the country’s Defence Ministry (78 and 57 mentions, respectively). The ministry’s official website, function.mil.ru, was also behind the biggest share of the storyline claiming Ukrainians were using civilians as human shields, which was echoed by the daily *60 minut* and *Vremya* and (43, 33, and 32 mentions, respectively).



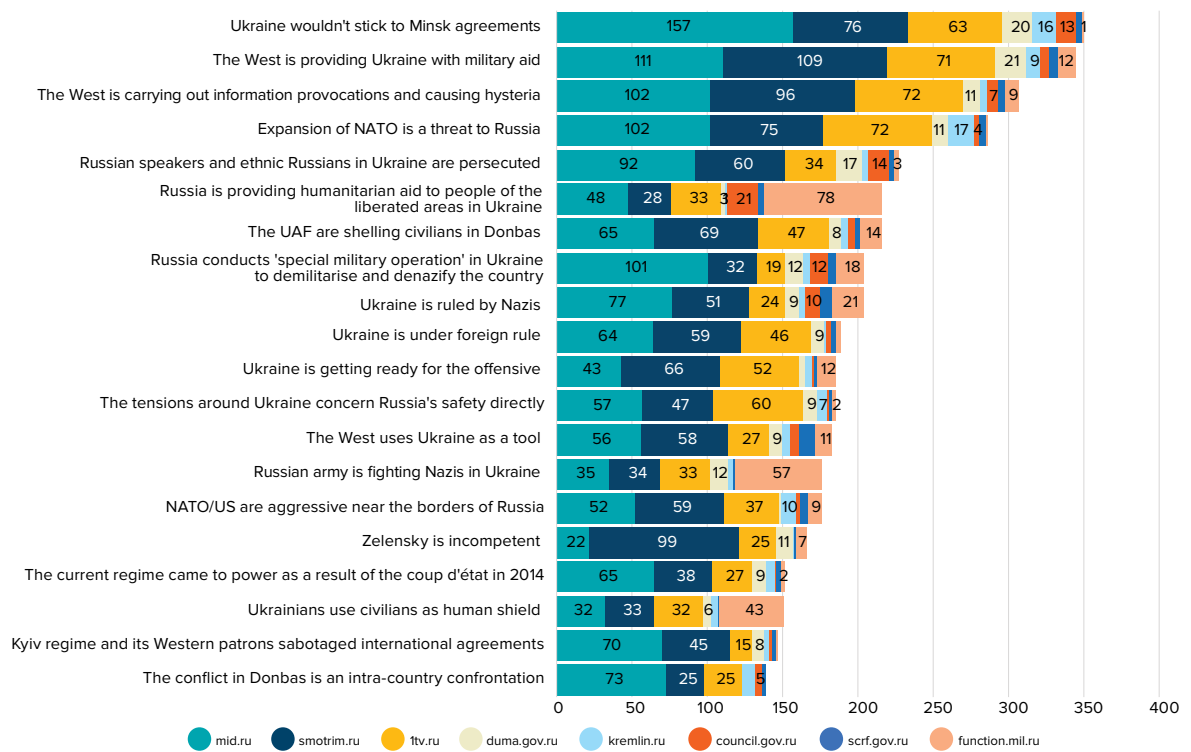


FIGURE 15. Top 20 sub-narratives as measured by the number of content pieces per the media sources, 1 October 2021 – 31 March 2022

The official presidential website kremlin.ru was foremost seen to be reiterating Putin's claims about the expansion of NATO being a threat to Russia (17 hits) and blaming Ukraine for violating the Minsk agreements, which mirrors his numerous claims that 'peacefully oriented' Russia had no choice but to react to the existential threats it faced from NATO and the threats the people in the Donbas endured from Ukraine.

It was again the task for *60 minut* to denigrate Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky: the share of mentions from smotrim.ru within the number of articles containing the sub-narrative 'Zelensky is incompetent' amounted to 59.6%. Overall, 74.7% of the coverage labelled under this category was amplified through television.

# Distractive strategic narratives

Our analysis of the government communication, along with the TV channels/shows monitored for this research, shows that distractive narratives, well mastered by the Kremlin via the techniques of whataboutism and mirrored accusations, were used somewhat differently in the two media types to draw the audience's attention from the preparations for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the official communication, foremost via the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (mid.ru, 121 content pieces), the rhetoric of *'Kyiv is violating the Minsk agreements'* was leading the way, followed by (complementary) accusations of persecuting the Russian-speaking/Russian population in the Donbas (see Figure 16).

The TV coverage, however, was first of all consistently focused on discrediting the West by claiming it was an unreliable partner of Ukraine that was making threats against Russia instead of peacefully approaching it for a mutually beneficial dialogue (as shown in Figure 17). Thus, although the sub-narrative *'Ukraine wouldn't stick to the Minsk agreements'* ranked second among those spread in the TV coverage, an umbrella of sub-narratives on the untrustworthy West led in terms of

content pieces including strategic distractive narratives. We may assume this stemmed from the need to suit the taste of the main audience of the TV coverage, those still remembering the Cold War confrontation and hence more easily manipulated in the framing of this West vs. Russia metanarrative. We may also blame it on the need to have more entertaining appeal on TV in terms of the West disregarding traditional values and thus playing with the fears and stereotypes of this particular generation (thus making it more susceptible to the claims), as well as the audience overall (bearing in mind the legislation concerning the tightening of the rules directed at 'LGBT propaganda').

Meanwhile, the official site of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was speaking its usual language as part of attempts to refute international criticism and accusations of plans to invade a sovereign state, Ukraine, mirroring the accusations of aggressiveness and failing to follow the rule of law within the international community. It seems that the official and TV rhetoric on the Minsk agreements happily conjoined with Putin's *khamstvo*, the bawdy underbelly of the Russian language,

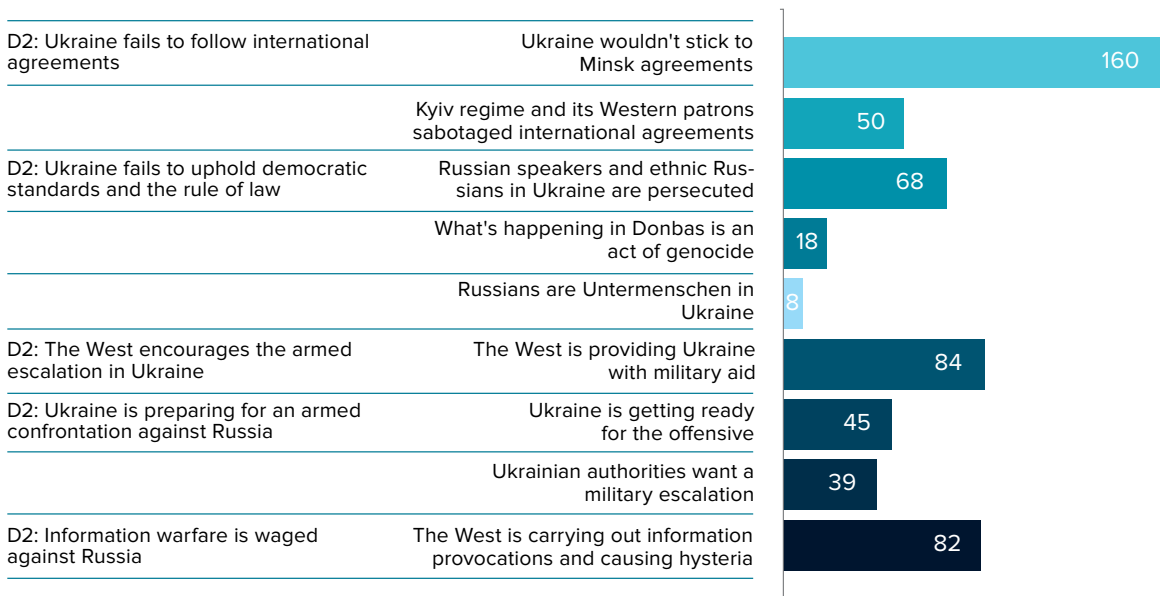


FIGURE 16. Top 5 distractive narratives in the official government communication as measured by the number of content pieces, pre-war

the use of which by the Russian president has almost always been intentional and strategic,<sup>59</sup> as in the case of the phrase ‘we’ll drench them in the outhouse’, which dates back to 1999 and the Chechen war. The hosts and guests of the talk shows analysed readily quoted<sup>60</sup> the Russian president as saying ‘Nravitsya, ne nravitsya—terpi moya krasavitsa’ (‘You may like it, you may not, but you’ll have to endure it, my beauty,’ referring to Zelensky’s stance towards the Minsk agreements).

Mirrored accusations were employed within the official communication, as it was claimed that it was Ukraine preparing for an offensive, with the aid of the West. The latter rhetoric was the most pronounced sub-narrative within the TV coverage of the period, as viewers were constantly reminded of how the West was ‘pumping Ukraine with weapons’ and sending its instructors there, and the rhetoric mixed well with an array of other narratives on Ukraine. As an example, in a late January 2022 TV news programme it

was claimed that, by providing military aid to Ukraine, the West used it as a ‘torpedo-state’, a ‘battering ram, whose main task is to hit the Russian gates to bring as much damage to the country as possible’. By the same token, Ukraine was presented as a beggarly state and Western countries as unreliable partners, seeking to get rid of their obsolete equipment: ‘experts, however, do not rule out that NATO countries are seizing the moment to get rid of old stockpiles. Estonia has asked Germany to send howitzers manufactured back in the GDR to Ukraine.’<sup>61</sup>

Overall, the main task of the distractive storytelling was not to prove wrong or right, to provide the audience with facts, but to flood the information space with an array of versions, ambiguities, and blurred boundaries, leaving it highly susceptible to conspiratorial beliefs and/or thinking in their framing. Judging by the top five distractive narratives in the pre-war period, the official communication sought to put the blame on Ukraine to a

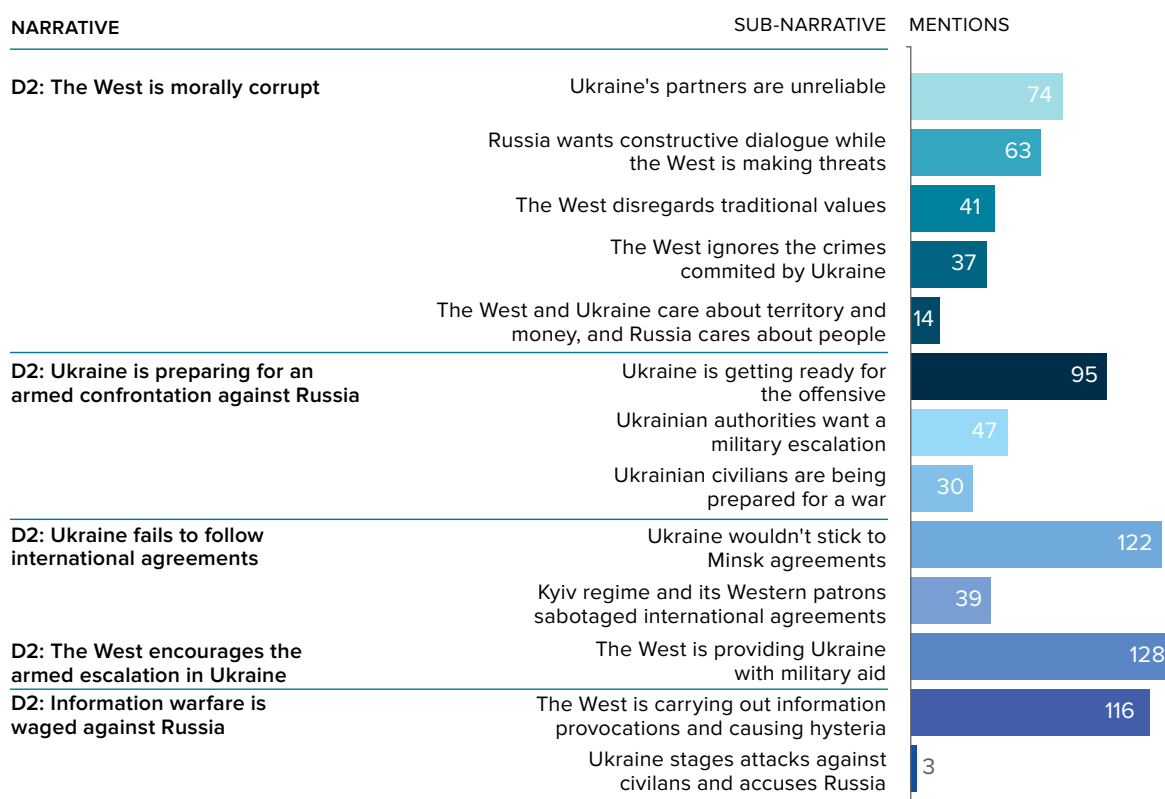


FIGURE 17. Top 5 distractive narratives and their sub-narratives in the TV coverage as measured by the number of content pieces, pre-war

greater extent, while on TV it was the West which was denounced more often. It was the task of *60 minut* to consistently convince the audience that the West was spreading lies and evoking hysteria, primarily targeting the US. The talk show used manipulated, decontextualised cuttings from Western media, as well as video clips by pro-Kremlin voices such as Fox News' Tucker Carlson, the all-time favourite of the show. Thus, the viewers were given a false sense of getting to know what the other side, the West, was saying, without actually reading and/or seeing it for themselves.

After the 'special military operation' was announced, the narratives '*The Ukrainian side is committing war crimes*' and '*Ukraine fails to uphold democratic standards and the rule of law*' led both in the government communication and the TV coverage (see Figures 18 and 19), as the Kremlin was looking for ways both to put the blame on Kyiv for the casualties of the war and to find a reason why the 'operation' was dragging on (one of the claims was the Russian army was moving slower to prevent any civilians dying). The sub-narrative '*The Russian army is fighting Nazis in Ukraine*' prevailed in both official (109 content pieces)

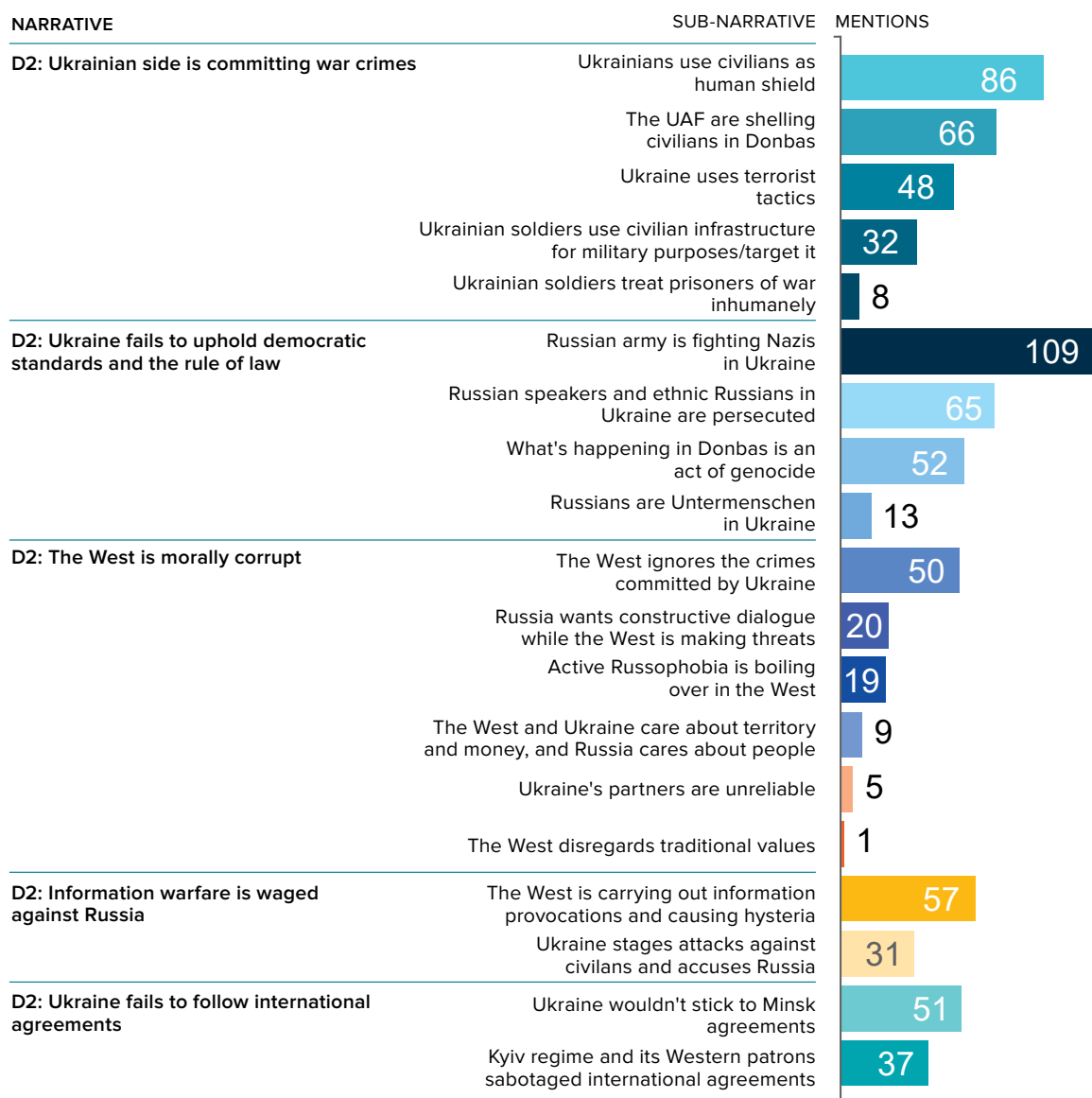


FIGURE 18. Top 5 distractive narratives and their sub-narratives in the official government communication as measured by the number of content pieces, wartime

and TV communication (67 content pieces). One day after the start of the invasion of Ukraine this line of rhetoric was amplified by Putin himself, who said that the Russian army was fighting nationalist battalions and not regular Ukrainian armed forces:

*'The main fighting by the Russian army, as expected, is taking place not with regular units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine but with nationalist formations, which are known to be directly responsible for the genocide in the Donbas and the blood of peaceful citizens of the people's republics. We can see that the Banderites and neo-Nazis are displaying heavy weaponry, including multiple-launch rocket systems right in the central districts of major*

*cities, including Kyiv and Kharkiv. They plan to provoke retaliatory fire from Russian strike systems on residential areas. In essence, they are acting in the same way as terrorists around the world cover up people in the hope, then blame Russia for civilian casualties.'*<sup>62</sup>

This statement echoed through all the analysed TV shows for days to come and was also adopted by other representatives of the Kremlin, notably by the chief spokesperson for the Ministry of Defence, Igor' Konashenkov, during his daily briefings on the progression of the 'special military operation'.

Second place, again both in terms of statements from the government officials and in TV coverage, was the sub-narrative 'Ukrainians use civilians as human shields',

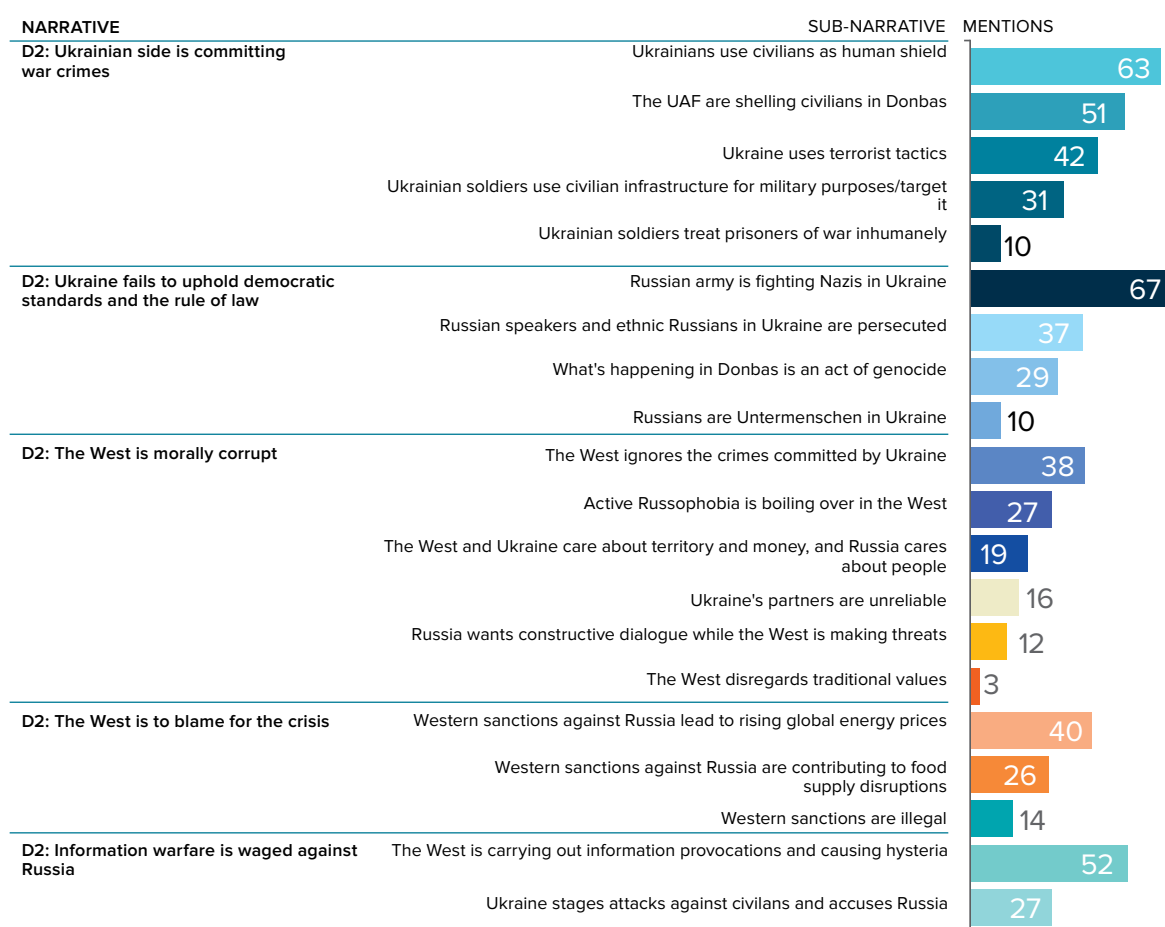


FIGURE 19. Top 5 distractive narratives and their sub-narratives in the TV coverage as measured by the number of content pieces, wartime



FIGURE 20. Footage from Donetsk region: claims of Ukraine knowingly using Tochka-U against civilians and killing a person, as well as causing ‘serious damage to the infrastructure of an entire city. They do not care that the damage has been done to civilians.’ The reporting is used by the co-host of the TV show, Ol’ga Skabeyeva, to conclude that ‘the Kiev regime is continuing its genocide of the population of the Donbas. The aim of the special operation is to prevent genocide and to ensure that people in the Donbas never suffer again.’ *60 Minut*, 28 March 2022.

which was commonly used alongside the first message, to prove that the UAF use ‘terrorist’, ‘fascist’ tactics. For example, on 25 March 2022 the head of the Security and Anti-Corruption Committee asserted that ‘neo-Nazis’ in Ukraine ‘beat people tied to poles in the street with clubs, steal children from their parents for blackmail, place military equipment in neighbourhoods, hide behind civilians as a human shield’.<sup>63</sup> The president’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov also compared the Ukrainian army forces to jihadists: ‘there were clashes with the movement of groups of nationalists and Banderovites, who used light vehicles and trucks, where they mounted jihad-mobile strikes’.<sup>64</sup>

As for the TV coverage, the strategic narratives were constructed not only through



FIGURE 21. A report from Mariupol claims ‘Ukrainian security forces deliberately use civilians as human shields. And those who try to escape from the city are shot at.’ It also suggests that local residents despise the Ukrainian army and those associated with it, as in the video capture here referring to alleged representatives of the Ukrainian secret services as ‘bastards’. *Vremya*, 27 February 2022.

quoting Kremlin officials. The shows often inserted testimonials from civilians in ‘liberated areas’, who shared their experience and expressed gratitude to their Russian ‘saviours’. For instance, at the end of March *60 minut* used footage from the Donetsk Oblast of local people describing the horror of the UAF shelling civilian areas, more than 30 buildings, and saying that ‘if you guys [the Russian army] did not down that missile we would be bombed’ (see Figure 20).<sup>65</sup> On 27 February *Vremya* showed videos of residents of Mariupol swearing in reaction to the Ukrainian army, and a video of Ukrainian soldiers allegedly kidnapping civilians straight out of their cars to use them as living shields and shoot those who were trying to escape (see Figure 21).<sup>66</sup>

# Disruptive strategic narratives

Within the official Kremlin communication and the coverage on state-owned television channels, disruptive narratives were employed to undermine existing messages and also prevent the emergence of coherent communication about certain topics. From the array of most common disruptive narratives used in the official statements (as can be seen from Figure 22) we can conclude that representatives of the Kremlin focused their communication efforts on discrediting Ukraine, portraying it as a failed state (mainly through the sub-narrative ‘*The conflict in the Donbas is*

*an intra-country confrontation*’), and its leadership, by referring to the Maidan revolution as a *coup d’état*, as a result of which the country was ruled by Nazis, radicals, and incompetent politicians. Meanwhile on television, the foremost method of disparaging the Ukrainian state was by attacking its economic model, whereas Russia’s involvement in the Donbas was not as fiercely denied. Attention was also more focused on showing how Russia was forced to ‘defend itself’ and respond to the escalating tensions involving Ukraine, as well as denigrating the leadership or the country.

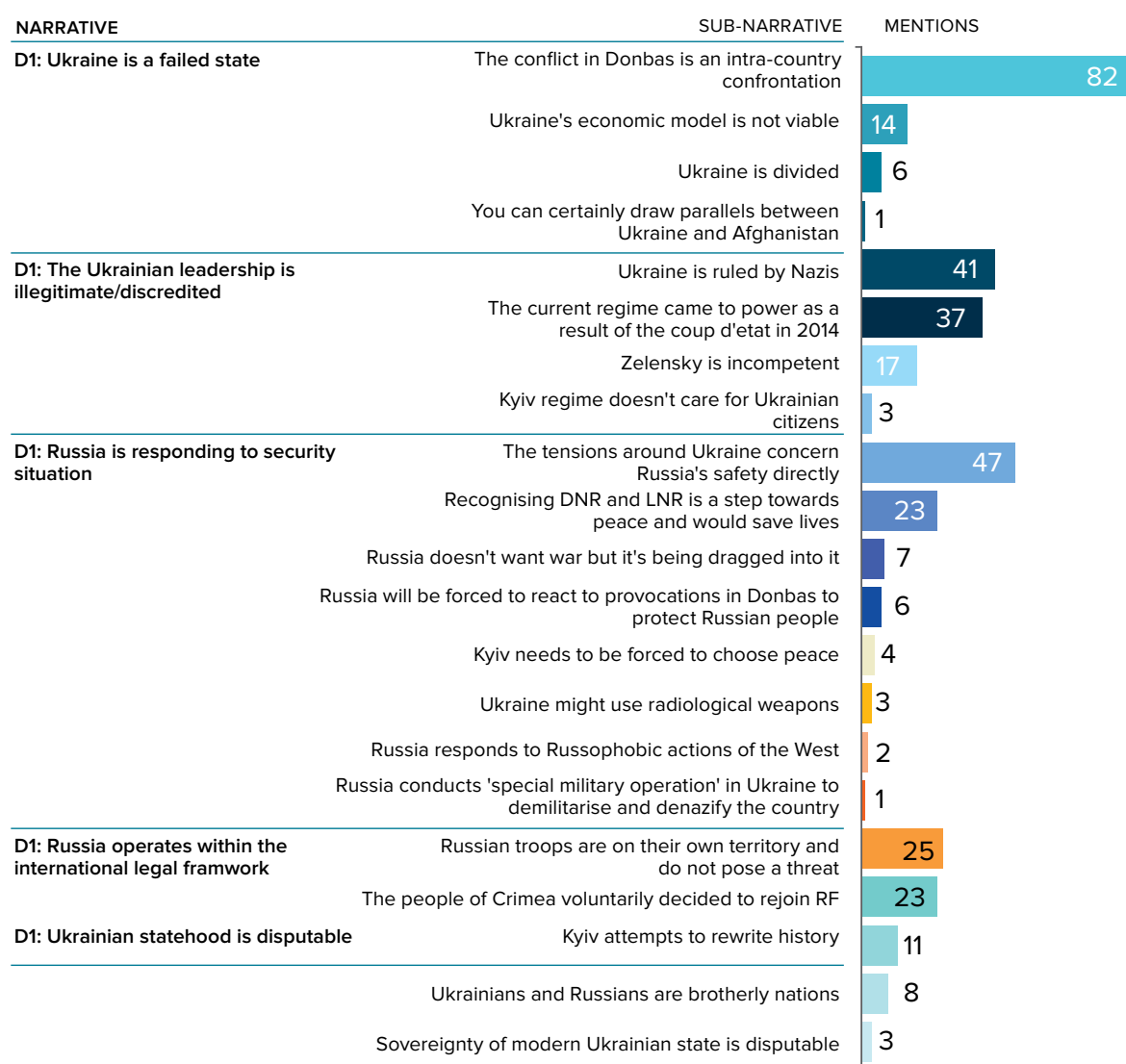


FIGURE 22. Top 5 disruptive narratives and their sub-narratives in the official government communication as measured by the number of content pieces, pre-war

Before the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, official statements from Moscow focused mostly on asserting that ‘*The conflict in the Donbas is an intra-country confrontation*’ (82 content pieces) and denying that the military conflict in the region was heavily influenced by Russia and asserting their own take—that it was a civil war between the Kyiv regime and eastern regions which ‘refused to worship nationalist leaders’. This line of rhetoric was also used in statements supporting recognition of the People’s Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk, for example: ‘for eight years Russia had been persistently convincing the Kiev authorities and European partners that it was necessary to resolve the issue and end the intra-Ukrainian conflict’.<sup>67</sup> It should also be noted, however, that in a series of instances the notion of the conflict in the Donbas being solely a domestic problem of the Ukrainian state was limited to simply labelling it as ‘intra-Ukrainian’, which was more an expression of an obligatory buzzword in Russian diplomatic language than actual intent to discuss the matter in detail.

Meanwhile, the TV coverage focused on different lines of communications (as detailed

in Figure 23), which can be interpreted as an attempt to sway public opinion against the current Ukrainian government and prevent any narratives legitimising Ukraine as a country. First and foremost, during the pre-war period, the TV shows denounced Zelensky at any given opportunity. The Ukrainian president was ridiculed and berated, with both hosts and guests of the shows calling him a clown: ‘Lavrov believes it was Zelensky’s reckless actions that could trigger a war. His Western curators now fear the evil clown in charge in Kyiv.’<sup>68</sup> Allegations of unbridled drug abuse on Bankova Street were repeated as well. For example, episodes of *60 minut* from late December asserted that Zelensky was a drug addict, that Western politicians from Washington and London were also drugged,<sup>69</sup> or that politicians in Ukraine were corrupt and addicted to cocaine, which they received as payment in white envelopes.<sup>70</sup>

Notably, TV programmes analysed in this paper also devoted a substantial amount of airtime to discussing the military build-up next to the Ukrainian border and how it was actually posing a direct threat to Russia. To divert attention from the Russian forces

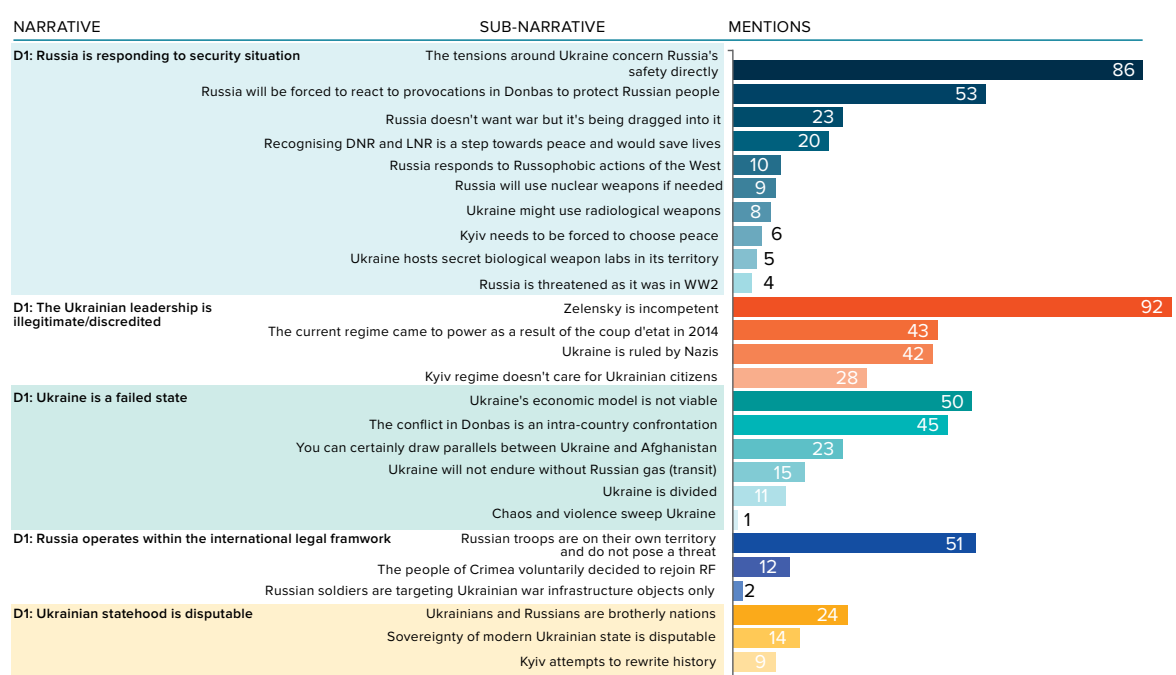


FIGURE 23. Top 5 disruptive narratives and their sub-narratives in the TV coverage as measured by the number of content pieces, pre-war



amassed next to the border with Ukraine, TV shows instead used claims that NATO and the US were deliberately pushing Ukraine towards war by providing heavy weaponry, which in turn was being placed in the eastern parts of the country. Within this sub-narrative, the TV coverage met the official communication, as discussions around the situation at the border were heavily supplemented with quotes from top Kremlin officials. For example, an episode of *60 minut* from the end of December started with a quote from Putin, saying that American weapons on Ukrainian soil were a direct threat to Russia and that Russia had run out of options to ‘stand back’.<sup>71</sup>

Lastly, it is worth mentioning the denials of Ukrainian statehood, which echoed through the TV screen—sometimes in a direct and sometimes in a more subtle way. For example, the host of *Vesti nedeli* Dmitriy Kiselëv often refers<sup>72</sup> to Ukraine not as ‘Ukraine’ but ‘territory called Ukraine’, as if to imply that it is not a country but just a territory.

After 24 February 2022 every means of both official and TV communication was

thrown at establishing the sub-narrative that ‘Russia is conducting a “special military operation” in Ukraine to demilitarise and denazify the country’ and ensuring that the invasion of Ukraine was perceived by the domestic audience in a way which the Kremlin needed. In the official communication, this sub-narrative appeared in 152 articles (as demonstrated in Figure 24), while on TV it was mentioned in 51 shows.

What is clear from the official communication after the beginning of the full-scale invasion is that the Kremlin put a lot of effort into showcasing its dialogue with international partners. A significant amount of space on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website was devoted to press releases about high-level diplomatic talks with representatives of various countries, as well as addresses to (members of) international organisations, and ‘providing information on the reasoning and progression of the special military operation’ or ‘provision of humanitarian help’.

The Kremlin also attempted to establish its own narrative through communicating

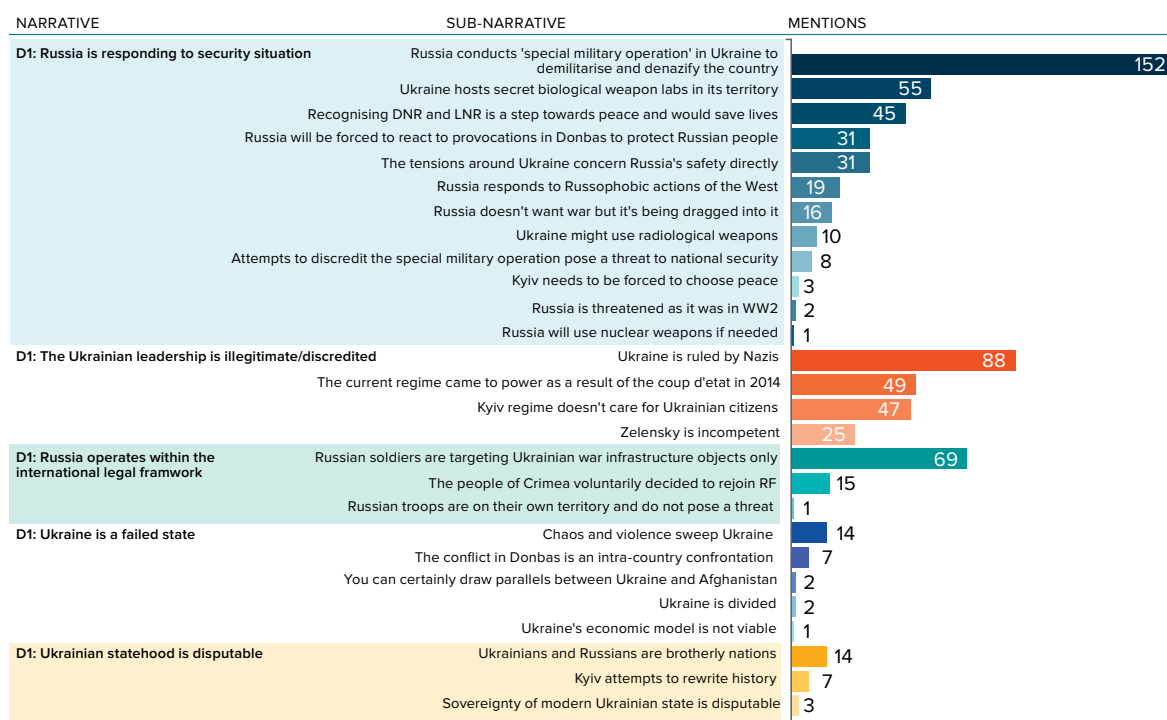


FIGURE 24. Top 5 disruptive narratives and their sub-narratives in the official government communication as measured by the number of content pieces, wartime

Russia's goals to the international community. For example, a statement from Lukashovich, the RF representative at the OSCE in Vienna, provided grounds for starting the 'special military operation' in which he reiterated that the Ukrainian government refused to negotiate with the republics in Luhansk and Donetsk; therefore, when they asked for military assistance from Russia, Moscow had no other option but to respond.<sup>73</sup>

Notably, the second-ranked sub-narrative in the chart is 'Ukraine is ruled by Nazis', which serves as an amplifier to the first sub-narrative in providing reasoning for the 'special military operation'. In his answers to the media at the end of February 2022, Sergey Lavrov distinguished the eastern part of Ukraine from the western:

*'The Russian President had already said what he had written about in his articles: how fragile the Ukrainian state is and how much care needs to be taken of it. But our NATO colleagues, without any euphemisms, "broke through" with*

*an unambiguous goal: to subject the Russian-speaking, Russian-cultured east of Ukraine to a pro-Western, Banderovite mentality. [...] We have suffered too much from Nazism. The Ukrainian people had also suffered from Nazism to be able to turn a blind eye and look at it all so lightly.'*

The last sentence also falls into line with the sub-narrative of Kyiv not caring for Ukrainian citizens and gives the Kremlin a tint of 'moral superiority', reiterating once again that its actions are justified.

The sub-narrative ranking third in the official communication and occupying first spot on television, 'Russian soldiers are targeting Ukrainian war infrastructure objects only', is also worth noting as a significant example of disruptive messaging. It does not leave room for developing a new narrative and pre-emptively disproves 'lies' about injured civilians in Ukrainian cities subjected to Russian missile attacks. Notably, the website of the Ministry of Defence provided numbers on a daily basis with data on 'objects of Ukrainian

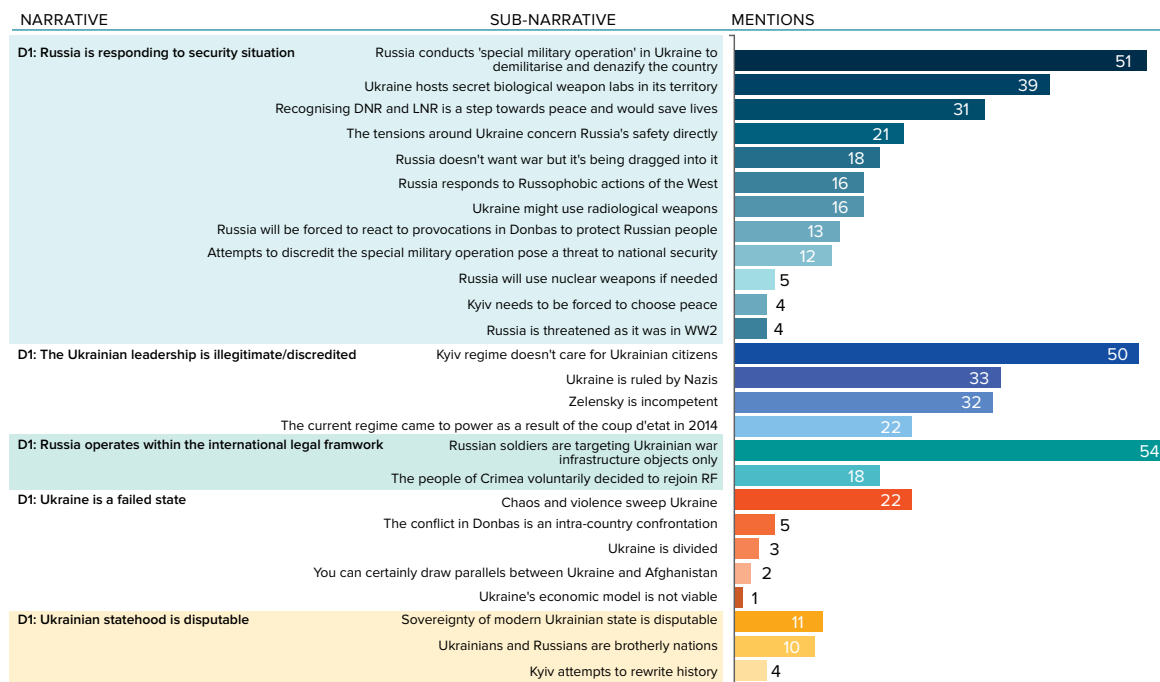


FIGURE 25. Top 5 disruptive narratives and their sub-narratives in the TV coverage as measured by the number of content pieces, wartime

military infrastructure destroyed'.<sup>74</sup> The same statements were repeated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, putting emphasis on the Russian army not targeting civilians and trying to provide humanitarian help instead.<sup>75</sup>

The fact that this sub-narrative prevailed in terms of the TV coverage (54 content pieces: see Figure 25) also showcases the significance of this line of messaging in the Kremlin's communication strategy. Statements by Konashenkov were repeatedly quoted during the TV shows, with guest experts providing their assessment and predicting how fast Ukraine would lose its military capacity. At the same time, information about wounded or killed civilians was dismissed as lies or blamed on the actions of the UAF.

The sub-narrative which ranked third in wartime TV coverage concentrated on the theme that *'The Ukrainian government does not care for its citizens'* and was employed to juxtapose Kyiv's 'immoral' actions with the 'righteous' cause of Russia. This rhetorical line also ties in with the first sub-narrative in the chart, asserting that Russia does not harm Ukrainians and instead wants to help them shake off the Kyiv regime that does not care for them. For example, at the beginning of March, studio guests of *60 minut* discussed the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, saying that was impossible to agree on a humanitarian corridor with the Nazis, and that 'Zelensky has a chance to save hundreds of thousands of lives of his citizens, but instead of organising humanitarian corridors, he has started a war together with NATO'.<sup>76</sup>

To further disrupt the image of the Ukrainian government and present it as illegitimate, allegations of drug abuse by Zelensky and his Western partners, which were prominent in the pre-war period, continued after the start of the invasion. On 2 March 2022, *60 minut* ridiculed Zelensky and 'a funny Englishman with a funny haircut' (British prime minister Boris Johnson): 'it is cool that people who share a hobby in feeling Russophobic and doing cocaine somehow support each other'.<sup>77</sup>

Lastly, when discussing disruptive narratives applied by the Kremlin in its strategic communication before and after the invasion of Ukraine, it is crucial to mention the *'Ukraine hosts biological weapon labs on its territory'* sub-narrative. In December 2021 especially, statements from the Ministry of Defence about 'plans to carry out diversions and provocations in the Donbas using a chemical weapon' were heavily amplified by the TV shows. During the episodes of 21 and 22 December, *60 minut* host Ol'ga Skabeyeva quoted Sergey Shoigu multiple times, saying that the US deployed 'mercenaries' in Ukraine: 'About 120 people. Right now, they are preparing a provocation using chemical weapons [...]. The towns of Avdiivka and Krasny Liman have been supplied with reserves of an unspecified chemical component' (Figure 26).<sup>78</sup>

The same message was repeated during the last days leading up to the Russian attack. On 18 February 2022 the host of *Vremya* claimed that 'saboteurs have become active on the territory of the republics. They attempted to attack, including a chemical plant'.<sup>79</sup>

A couple of weeks after the start of the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin officials intensified the sub-narrative even more; however, the focus shifted from provocations using a chemical weapon to a biological one. The issue of US-sponsored biolabs was brought up



FIGURE 26. 'NATO may revise the number of its contingent in Eastern Europe, i.e., send new soldiers to the Russian borders. The Americans have already deployed mercenaries to the Donbass, Minister [Sergey] Shoigu says. There are about 120 people. Right now, they are preparing a provocation using chemical weapons.' *60 Minut*, 22 December 2021

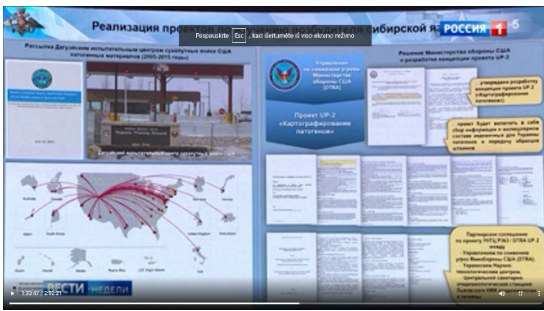


FIGURE 27. Charts entitled ‘The implementation of anthrax research projects’ (left) and ‘The scheme of movement of biological materials from Ukraine to other countries’ (right), presented by Igor Kirillov, the head of the Radiation, Chemical and Biological Defence Troops of the Russian Armed Forces to support claims about a ‘high-profile scandal surrounding the activities of US biolabs in Ukraine, as defined by Dmitry Kiselëv, the host of the TV show, *Vesti Nedeli*, 27 March 2022

in the UN, in an attempt to insert their own narrative into the international agenda, divert attention from events on the frontlines, and potentially undermine Ukraine’s image and decrease the support from the West. For example, Sergey Lavrov expressed his regret that diplomatic solutions did not seem to be working and that Russia’s concerns about the biolabs brought up in the UN were not taken seriously: ‘We simply presented documents to the UN Security Council [...]. In response to this, the United States representative, instead of explaining how such laboratories were formed and what they were doing there, said that this was all lies.’<sup>80</sup>

As for the TV coverage, it served as an amplifier of official communication to spread fear among the public. Keeping in mind that trust in the military in Russian society is extremely high (60%), it is not surprising that

data provided by the Ministry of Defence is used as one of the main ‘pieces of evidence’ to prove that the biolabs issue is serious.<sup>81</sup> For instance, on 7 March 2022 *Vremya* quoted the Ministry of Defence, saying that it had new evidence that ‘military biological programmes with a deadly infectious agent were conducted in Ukraine at the order of the Pentagon [...]’. The scale of the work is staggering, with more than \$200,000,000 invested in 30 laboratories. In Lviv, for example, plague and anthrax have been dealt with under the guise of protection and health work.’<sup>82</sup>

In addition to oral quotes from state officials, visual materials played an important role in convincing the public that the threat was real. For instance, during *Vesti nedeli* on 27 March complicated-looking charts and schemes were presented to the audience, to prove the seriousness of the situation (Figure 27).<sup>83</sup>



FIGURE 28. To give weight to the claims of Russian officials and Kremlin propaganda about biolabs in Ukraine (or ‘the colossal scale of the illegitimate activities of the US in spreading its military biological laboratories around the world’, as Russia’s foreign affairs minister Sergey Lavrov put it), the *Vremya* TV show used excerpts of videos/interviews on the issue from the Indian Republic TV (left) and the *US Fox News* (right). *Vremya*, 15 March, 2022

In addition to providing ‘official data’ from the Russian government, some shows also took TV coverage about the biolabs from other channels. On 15 March *Vremya* showed clips from an Indian TV channel and Fox News (see Figure 28).<sup>84</sup> Using coverage from other sources to strengthen their arguments is a common tactic applied by the Kremlin propagandists. By inserting information from more sources (including Western ones), they seek to create an image of representing many points of view and to legitimise their claims.

It should be noted that, like other Kremlin propaganda narratives, the whole line of communication about the ‘secret’ biolabs was constructed by using bits of information

from publicly available documents. Statements by Russian authorities regarding the Ukrainian facilities use already debunked claims of connections between US politicians’ relatives and Ukrainian research labs to suggest secret activities were ‘disclosed’ or ‘revealed’ thanks to exclusive documents that the Ministry of Defence got hold of. They fail to note, however, that the terms of said agreements are already publicly available on the websites of the relevant Ukrainian agencies.<sup>85</sup> However, using fragments of factual information to make the story just believable enough, and amplifying it through all channels available to the Kremlin, fulfils the aims of its disruptive strategic communication and compensates for the lack of concrete evidence.

## Constructive strategic narratives

From 1 October 2021 to 23 February 2022 both in the government communication and the TV coverage the leading constructive narrative was ‘*NATO poses a threat to the country*’ (refer to Figures 29 and 30). The

allegation that ‘*The expansion of NATO is a threat to Russia*’ was the leading sub-narrative in both of the media types and accounted for almost one third of the content pieces in the government communication (31.1%),

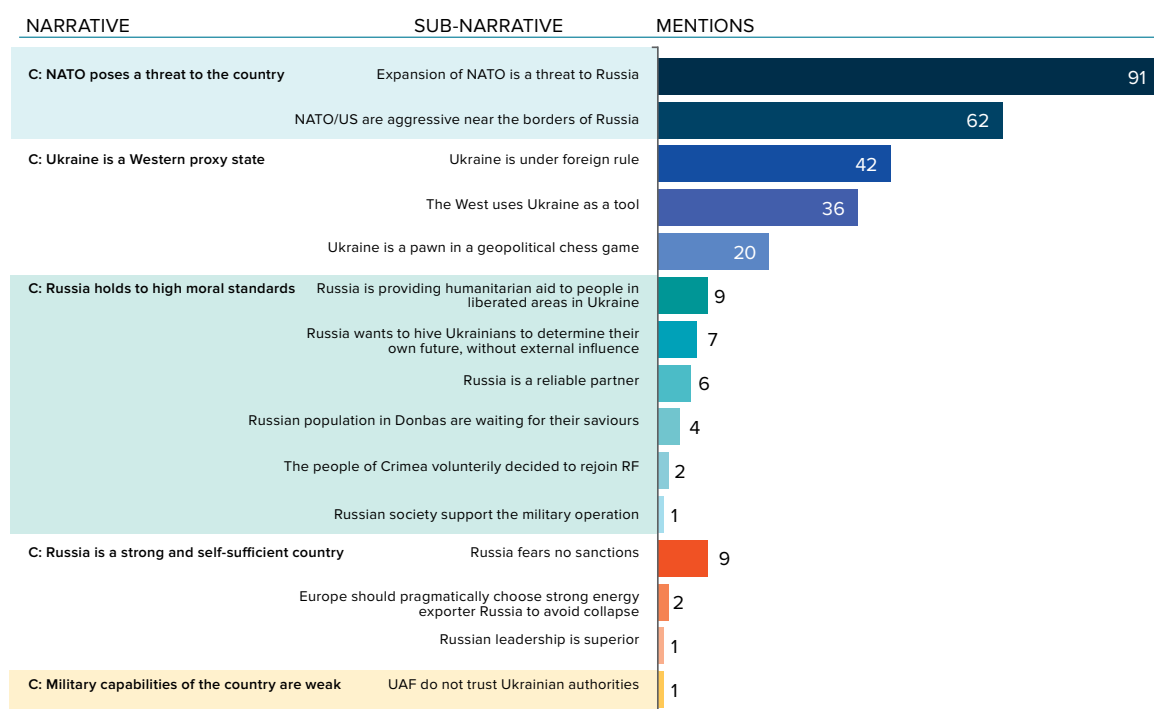


FIGURE 29. Top 5 constructive narratives and their sub-narratives in the official government communication as measured by the number of content pieces, pre-war

representing a fifth (20.1%) of the hits in the TV coverage. The narrative went along with another constructive narrative, that ‘Ukraine is a Western proxy state’, either of which suggested that the country was under foreign rule and/or that it was being used as a means to counter, deter, and hinder Russia from growth by the master puppeteer, the West (NATO, the US, and/or, to a lesser extent, the EU).

Claims that Ukraine was under foreign rule were explicit or implicit in alleging that the country, by becoming a bridgehead for Western anti-Russian policies, was already losing its sovereignty, hence it could not be taken by Russia:

*‘Whereas previously the West was happy with the thesis that Ukraine is not Russia, now they are moulding Ukraine into a function-country “anti-Russia.” Stop right there. There is no place for a sovereign Ukraine in the anti-Russia project. That is, the moment of the final loss of Ukraine’s*

*sovereignty will coincide with the arrival of NATO. If so, don’t say no one gave a warning. Putin did in his summer article on Ukraine.’<sup>86</sup>*

The TV coverage escalated the threat by NATO to the extreme, as in the case of deputy of the Russian State Duma Mikhail Delyagin, a frequent guest on the talk show *60 minut*, when he claimed that, in accordance with ‘other objective natural phenomena’, a ‘nuclear mushroom can go up over Ukraine, but the NATO flag cannot’.<sup>87</sup>

The government communication included speeches by Putin on the issue, which were reflected upon in the TV coverage as well, as were his words at the Valdai Club meeting in October 2021.<sup>88</sup> Then Putin claimed that ‘formal NATO membership may never happen, but military expansion on the territory is already under way, and this really poses a threat to the Russian Federation’, moreover as NATO training centres in Ukraine ‘can be anything at all, accounted for as a training centre’.<sup>89</sup> In

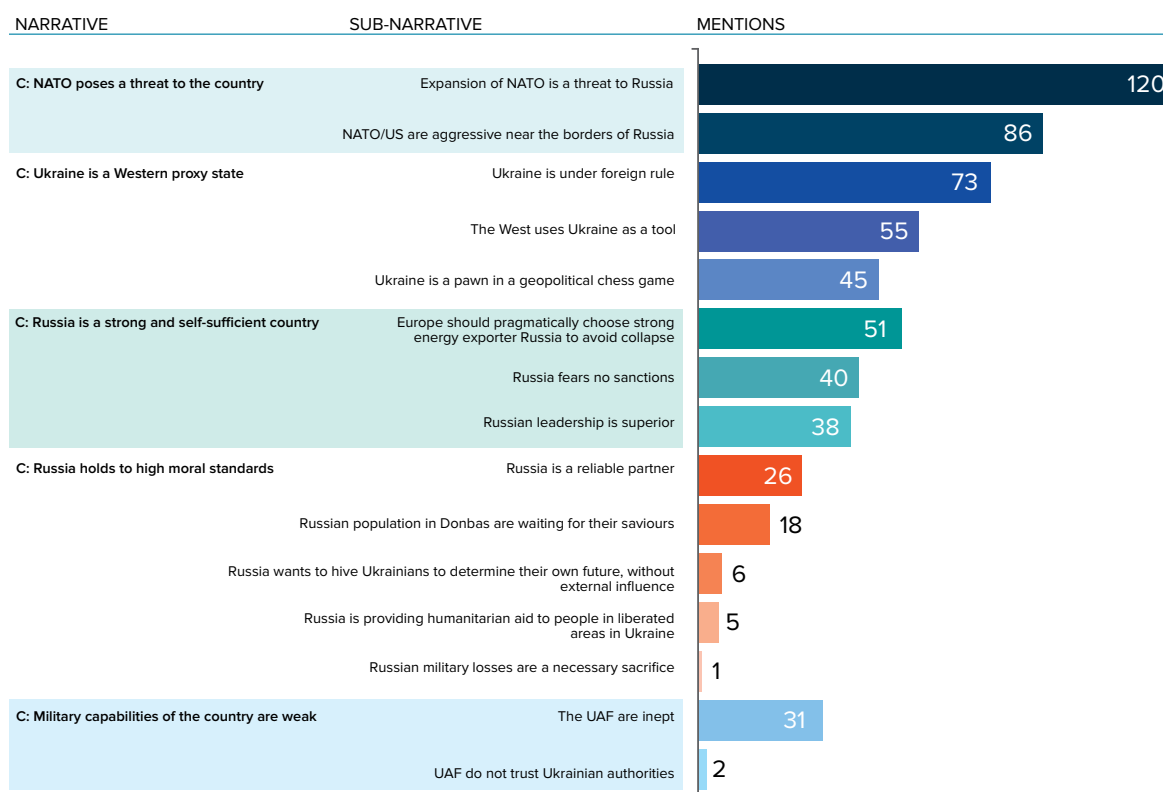


FIGURE 30. Top 5 constructive narratives and their sub-narratives in the TV coverage as measured by the number of content pieces, pre-war

either case, the Kremlin propaganda sought to blur the boundaries between perception and reality (NATO training centres serving as ‘anything’), cause and outcome (losing sovereignty), friend and foe (Russia vs NATO), as it has done before in order to make the population question who is the enemy and whether they are at war.<sup>90</sup>

Overall the vast majority of articles on NATO posing a threat to Russia were posted on mid.ru (103 out of 153 hits), whereas only 10 articles using that rhetoric could be found on the Defence Ministry’s official site (function.mil.ru).

The narrative ‘Russia is a strong and self-sufficient country’ was pushed more strongly on TV than by the official communication, mainly via the sub-narrative ‘Europe should pragmatically choose strong energy exporter Russia to avoid collapse’, at 51 hits. The official communication was nowhere close and amounted to two articles only, with both of them only subtly mentioning the topic in passing, more as a hint.

Guidelines and recommendations issued by European governments were often ridiculed by reporters, quoting officials, including Putin himself:

*‘In Putin’s view, it is only a matter of trying to please the overseas master: “Some kind of populism, populism inside out. People are being urged to eat less, to dress warmer to save on heating costs, to refuse to travel. And all this supposedly for the benefit of those people who are being asked to make these voluntary decisions for the sake of abstract North Atlantic solidarity.”’<sup>91</sup>*

Similarly, only one article in the government communication concerned the idea of how great Putin was a leader, compared to 37 in the TV shows monitored for this analysis. Throughout the whole period of the analysis, the sub-narrative was tracked in 44 hits in the TV coverage, and two in the government

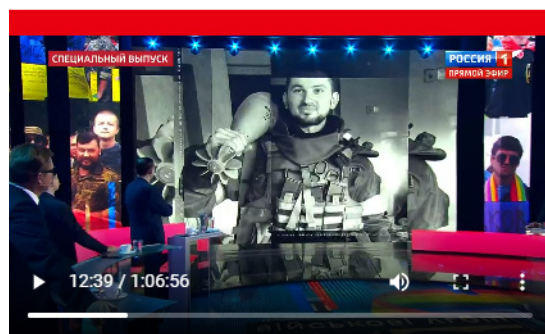


FIGURE 31. ‘Ukrainians have nothing to fear. [They are] now also [defended by] Ukrainian homosexuals, gay grenade launchers, and queer artillerymen. Whatever that means, it’s true,’ Ol’ga Skabeyeva, *60 minut*, 1 February 2022

communication. Both of the latter cited State Duma speaker Volodin praising the Russian president.

In the pre-war period the allegations that the Ukrainian Armed Forces were inferior to the Russian army were promoted and amplified in the TV coverage but not in the government communication (33 hits vs 1 hit). The sub-narrative ‘The UAF are inept’ was pushed predominantly by the talk show *60 minut*, yet it was also present in *Vremya* and *Vesti nedeli* coverage. *Vremya* took advantage of the stir in the country caused by the order of the Ukrainian Defence Ministry requiring women of certain professions to register for possible military service<sup>92</sup> to ridicule the UAF as using ‘female artists or masseurs’, while reminding viewers via a quoted social media user that Ukraine was a country not worth fighting for (‘What do I have to go and fight for now? For sitting hungry, for stuffing the windows with blankets because we were cold? We had no gas because we couldn’t pay for it. I do not have children because I have no possibility in this [swears] country to have children, because I am supporting a handicapped mother’).<sup>93</sup>

*Vesti nedeli* aired reportage from the Donbas that was meant to show how the current leadership of Ukraine was wrong in assuming the UAF might win over the ‘armies of the young republics’, showing examples of Ukrainian soldiers failing to fire from a Javelin on the training ground and citing two members of the ‘young armies’: ‘Is there going to be

yet another cauldron, as military men, what do you think?—We will try to organise it,’ answer the two laughing.<sup>94</sup> *60 minut* ridiculed the UAF throughout the pre-war period, with the highest density of such claims from 28 January to 8 February 2021. The talk show mocked the UAF for using bed sheets to camouflage their weaponry in the winter and laughed at ‘gay battalions’ (Figure 31: ‘Ukrainians have nothing to fear. [They are] now also [defended by] Ukrainian homosexuals, gay grenade launchers and queer artillerymen. [...] As the joke goes on the Internet now, the main thing is to avoid being caught by a gay tanker’).<sup>95</sup>

With the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the combination of constructive narratives changed, with allegations of NATO posing a threat dropping down the list. As the Kremlin propaganda no longer needed a combination of aggressive NATO/US puppeteering

Ukraine to paint the picture of a villain trying to sneak into the ‘besieged fortress’ Russia, it was the picture of Moscow holding to high moral standards it needed to push foremost (as evident from Figures 32 and 33), in order to encourage and sustain support for the invasion. Both the government communication and TV coverage put emphasis on how ‘*Russia is providing humanitarian aid to the people in the liberated areas*’, which was especially pronounced in the official communiqués (31.3% of the hits with constructive narratives followed the rhetoric of Russia giving out humanitarian aid, with 78 articles posted on *function.mil.ru* and 47 more on *mid.ru*). The second most pronounced sub-narrative in the government communication claimed ‘*Russian society supports the military operation*’, and it was amplified by the Russian Defence Ministry almost exclusively (as many as 70 hits out of the total 77 were posted by its official site, *function.mil.ru*).

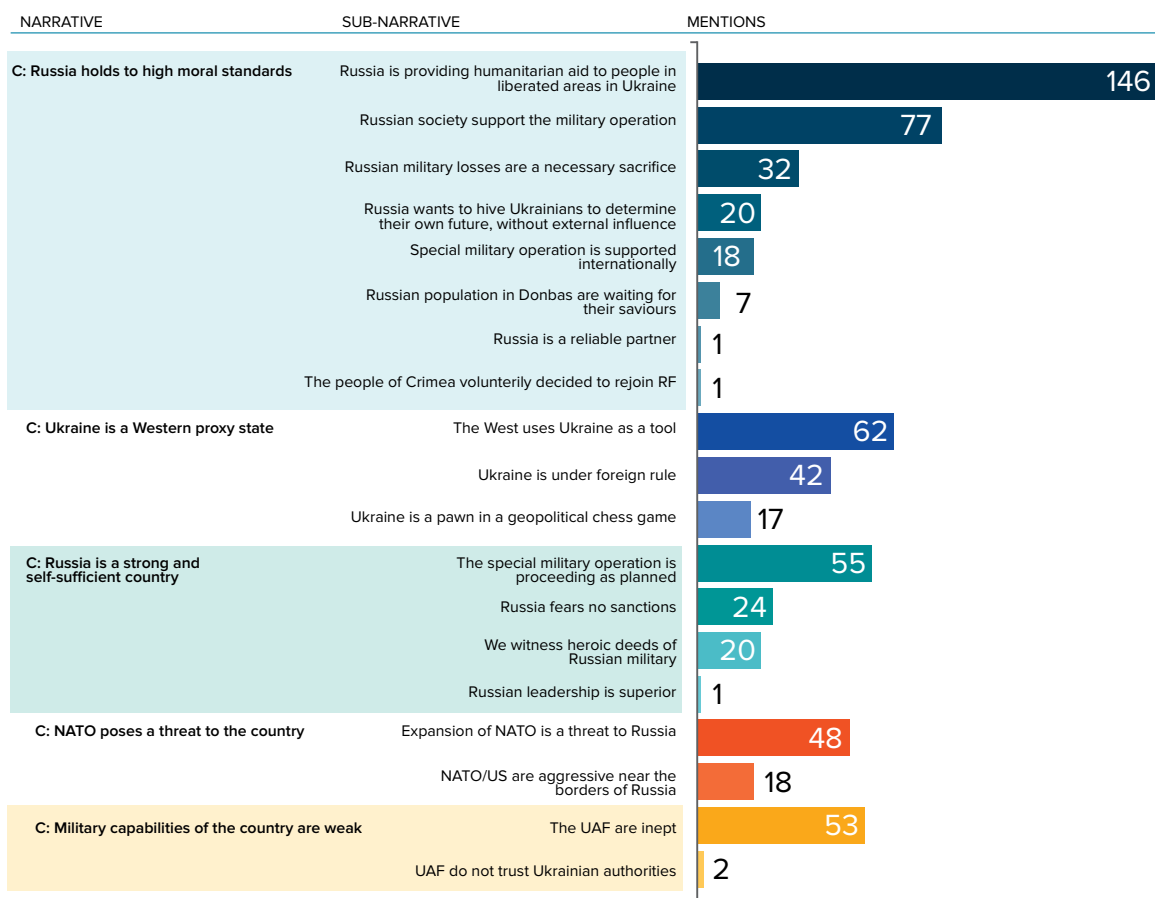


FIGURE 32. Top 5 constructive narratives and their sub-narratives in the TV coverage as measured by the number of content pieces, wartime



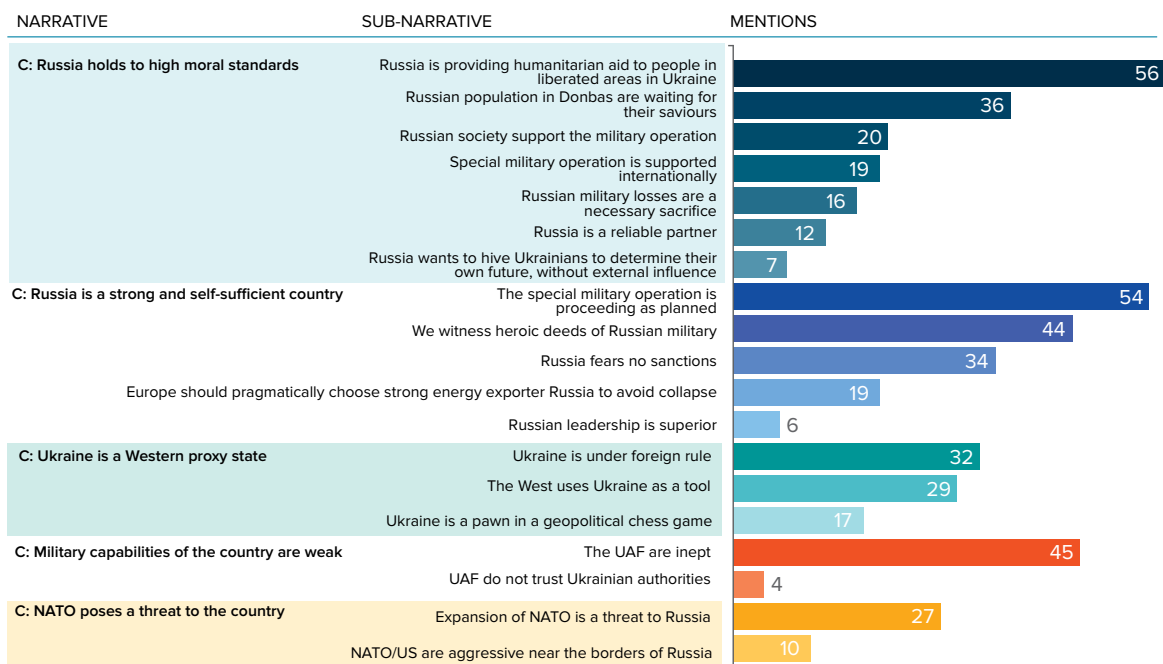


FIGURE 33. Top 5 constructive narratives and their sub-narratives in the official government communication as measured by the number of content pieces, wartime

ru). Most of the articles contained brief notes about various initiatives expressing support for the ‘special military operation’, such as ‘Khabarovsk residents and motorists line up in a V-shaped figure, which can be clearly seen from the city’s high-rise buildings.’<sup>96</sup>

In the TV coverage, however, this sub-narrative was eclipsed by the rhetoric on how the Donbas residents had been waiting for their saviours, as both the news programmes and the talk shows included numerous reports on how the residents of Luhansk, Donetsk, and other areas of Ukraine were happy to see the ‘liberators’ bringing them ‘freedom, food, and peace’.

The invasion gave rise to the war-time-specific sub-narrative of witnessing the heroic deeds of the Russian military, which can also be seen in traditional storytelling about the bravery of Russian soldiers in World War II.

The *Vremya* news show had a special section devoted to pictures of heroic soldiers and describing their heroic deeds. Along with this rhetoric, the claims that the UAF were inept multiplied, yet the nature of those was different from the pre-war period: the articles were mostly focused on telling the audience how the Ukrainian military disgracefully fled, leaving all their ammunition behind. The sub-narrative that the special military operation was going as planned was mostly presented as listing the number of trophies received by the Russian army as a result of successful military advances (for instance, within the daily updates by Konashenkov) and, to a lesser extent, as the precise wording: ‘according to Shoigu, everything is going according to plan. Every day there is a huge number of applications from different ages in different countries and in every republic to participate in what they consider to be liberation movements.’<sup>97</sup>

# Degree of hard-line messaging

For the purpose of analysing the government and TV communication, a predefined list of words that are negative towards Ukraine and/or have negative connotations was used, in accordance with dataset coding experience and institutional memory. Thus Debunk.org analysts built frames for a qualitative parameter that measures the density of unconditional communication by calculating the frequency of the most common predicates (verbs, adjectives and adverbs) accompanying the primary and secondary keywords of this analysis (e.g., Ukraine, Kyiv, Zelensky) and assigning sentiment to them.

Before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, both the official media and the Kremlin-controlled television were using language that can be referred to as ‘Putin’s Newspeak’, in an allusion to the Orwellian analogue in terms of the intention to impose restrictions on the audience’s vocabulary to ensure no thought goes against the official strategic narratives. The strategic language employed the ‘Great Patriotic War’ lexicon, carrying emotionally and historically loaded meanings and references, and hence providing illusory justification for the Russian aggression against Ukraine, i.e., laying emotional grounds to accept it. The words

‘nationalist’, ‘Nazi’, and ‘neo-Nazi’ were the most prominent both in the official communication and the TV coverage (refer to Figures 34 and 35). In the usage by Kremlin propaganda, and in accordance with the newspeak rules, these words, along with ‘fascists’, were largely stripped of their meanings according to their respective political ideologies and denoted something very negative or simply evil, an enemy; after the outbreak of the war the number of these words soared in support of the ‘special military operation’. Though before the invasion ‘nationalist’, ‘Nazi’, and ‘neo-Nazi’ were applied loosely enough, after 24 February 2022 the terms were increasingly used to define virtually anyone and anything that stood in the way of occupying (parts of) Ukraine (to see the dynamics of using the top 10 of the most frequent negative labels attached to Ukraine refer to Figures 37 and 39 below). The three words were then used interchangeably, with ‘nationalist’ being the most widespread and deriving its negative connotations from the Soviet tradition, when ‘nationalist’ meant opposing ‘friendship between nations’ and the construction of a new, one for all dystopian Soviet nation. The trio was added conversely when talking about the Ukrainian armed forces or the government: especially on TV, it was not ‘Ukrainian soldiers’, it was



FIGURE 34. Word cloud of most frequently used negative words to address Ukraine and issues related to it in the official government communication

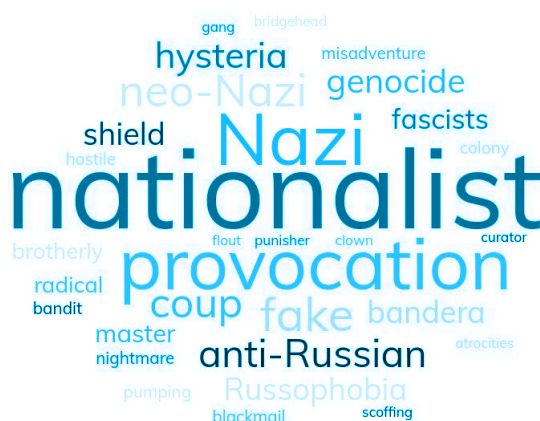


FIGURE 35. Word cloud of most frequently used negative words to address Ukraine and issues related to it in the TV coverage

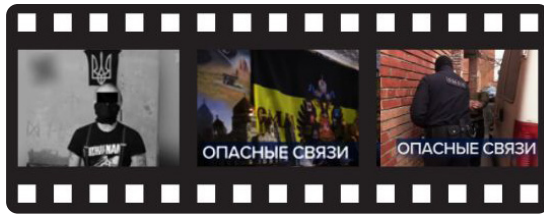


FIGURE 36. While reporting on Russia's intelligence service allegedly arresting supporters of a Ukrainian neo-Nazi group, claiming that they were planning attacks and mass murders across the country, it was noted that 'the FSB is confident that this gang could only have grown into a network of neo-Nazis under the patronage of the Ukrainian special services.' *Vremya*, 13 December 2021

'Kyiv nationalists' or 'neo-Nazi battalions', to dehumanise the perceived enemy in the eyes of the audience and establish that it was nothing short of pure evil.

In late November 2021 the co-host of *60 minut* implied that anyone referring to the Donbas as a 'cancerous tumour' was a Nazi.<sup>98</sup> Similar claims were accompanied by attempts to tie the term to some sort of ideology in Ukraine, as in the case of a disinformation campaign on 13 December 2021, when Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) was quoted on Pervyy Kanal's *Vremya* news show as claiming that 'hundreds of supporters of a Ukrainian neo-Nazi youth group have been detained in various Russian cities. The FSB is convinced they were preparing terrorist attacks on orders from Kiev' (Figure 36).<sup>99</sup> In January 2022 Sergey Naryshkin, the head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and the chairman of the Russian Historical Society,

was quoted on the TV talk show *60 minut* as claiming it felt like 'a time machine took us back to the worst years of Hitler's occupation, when civilians in the occupied Soviet territories, including Soviet Ukraine, were being annihilated in their hundreds and thousands. They also suffered from oppression by fascist punishers and their accomplices, the Banderites,' and that this was exactly what was happening in Ukraine, where state terror and Nazis reigned, at this time.<sup>100</sup> In his public address broadcast on 24 February 2022, the Russian president addressed Ukrainian 'comrade officers', calling on them to lay down their arms and speaking about neo-Nazis seizing power in Ukraine,<sup>101</sup> employing the binary of the authority (evil Nazi) and the people (brotherly Ukrainians). On 3 March 2022, still with no planned Kyiv occupation in sight, during a televised meeting with Security Council permanent members, Putin referred to 'some people in Ukraine' that had been 'intimidated, many have been duped by nationalist Nazi propaganda, and some have consciously decided to become followers of Bandera and other Nazi accomplices, who fought on Hitler's side during the Great Patriotic War',<sup>102</sup> thus expanding the ranks of the nationalists, Nazis, neo-Nazis, and Banderites in Ukraine.

The term 'provocation' was the second most popular word in the government communication (Figure 37), and it referred to actions of Ukraine alone, those of its Western allies, or their joint activities. Overall, in the Kremlin propaganda and disinformation ecosystem, the term, along with the words 'anti-Russian'

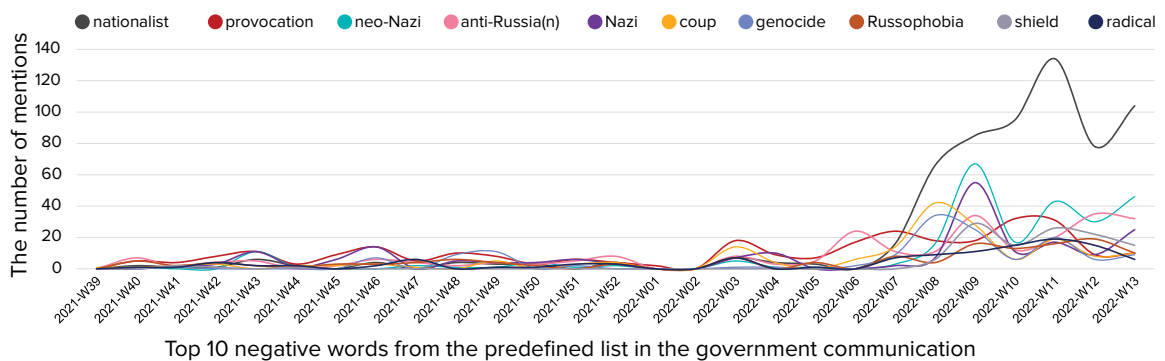


FIGURE 37. The dynamics of using the 10 most frequent negative words (from a predefined list) to address Ukraine and issues related to it in the official government communication

and ‘Russophobia’, has served as a magic wand that Russian officials and TV pundits have up their sleeve and use against any actions or words that do not align with their strategic communication and/or plans, and when there is a need to denigrate the critique directed at the Putin regime. ‘Provocation’ is also about the blame game: the term is used either to claim Russia was provoked into active measures (unwillingly) or to shift the blame for what has happened onto the other side, as opposed to the Russian-style *provokatsiya*, a concept referring to a set of tools intended for destabilising foreign countries.<sup>103</sup> In late January 2022 Maria Zakharova, spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, claimed:

*‘The Western and Ukrainian media and officials have now become even more active in replicating speculations about Russia’s imminent “invasion” of Ukraine. This is how they phrase it. We are convinced that the purpose of this campaign is to create information cover for the preparation of their own large-scale provocations, including those of a military nature, which could have the most tragic consequences for regional and global security.’<sup>104</sup>*

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the word ‘provocation’ was increasingly used by the Kremlin officials and TV pundits to deny Russia’s war crimes. Thus, the air strike on a maternity and children’s hospital in the south-eastern city of Mariupol, which left several killed and many more wounded, was dubbed a Ukrainian ‘staged provocation’. The Russian Defence Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov claimed that ‘The nature of the external and internal damage to the building may be misleading to a mass non-professional audience in Europe and the US, for whom the staging was done, but not to experts. An aerial munitions fuse, even of lower power, would simply leave nothing of the outer walls of the buildings.’<sup>105</sup> His words were echoed by several Russian experts, and it was also added that

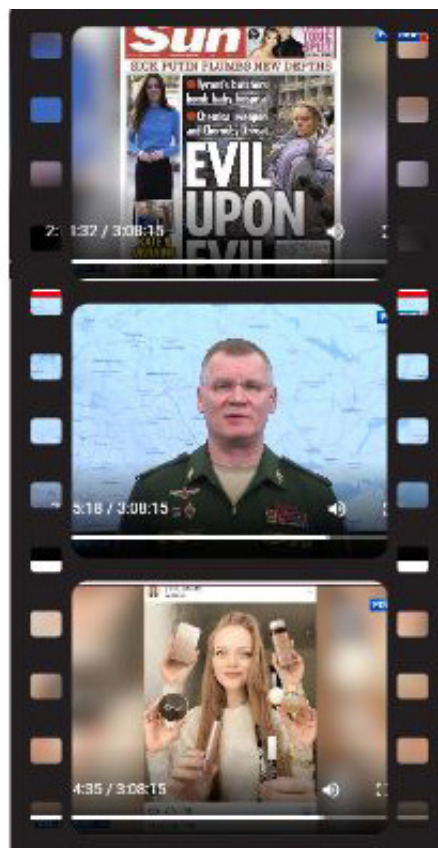
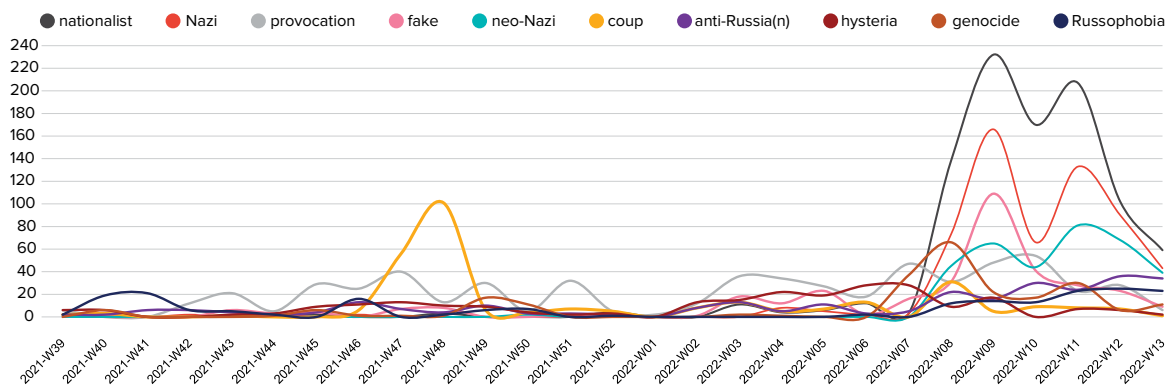


FIGURE 38. The reporting on an air strike on a maternity and children’s hospital in Mariupol by Western media was showcased as an example of ‘rude, cheap’ fakes, where ‘lies can be seen with the naked eye’ (Dmitriy Kiselëv). It was said to include staged footage with a beauty blogger, who either consciously took part or ‘was forced to participate in this provocation’. *Vesti nedeli*, 13 March 2022

the woman pictured in the ruins was a beauty blogger hired specifically to participate in this ‘provocation’ (Figure 38).

On television the term ‘provocation’ was often accompanied by another word from Putin’s Newspeak, ‘fake’. It had become the epitome of the Kremlin’s ability to blur the boundaries between truth and lie, good and bad, leaving the audience in a state of disbelief, doubt, and confusion. In mainstream language the word ‘fake’, which once meant false information, now means a fact that we don’t like and don’t want to believe; exclaiming ‘Come on, it’s a fake!’ does not call for fact checking, source verification, or proving a point,



Top 10 negative words from the predefined list in the government communication

FIGURE 39. The dynamics of using the 10 most frequent negative words (from a predefined list) to address Ukraine and issues related to it in the TV coverage

and aims at changing the subject, if anything at all.<sup>106</sup> Although the word was more widely used on the tracked TV shows, it was also part of the strategic language and communication by the authorities. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website has a section of articles entitled ‘Rebuttals / Examples of publications replicating misinformation about Russia’. For instance, in an article signed by Maria Zakharova dated 17 February 2022, attempts are made to denigrate the warnings from US officials about the upcoming invasion and false flag operations paving the way for it. Here, with the help of such false and misleading information techniques as association and malign rhetoric, Zakharova addressed, among others, Jane Psaki, the then White House press secretary: ‘Dear Jen, you may have said this out of ignorance. This is the only explanation I can find for your doubts regarding the suffering of the people of the

Donbas. [...] But do not speculate so blithely about these tragic topics that you have no understanding of whatsoever.’<sup>107</sup>

‘Hysteria’ was a term applied by TV hosts and its appearance gradually increased between the start of 2022 and the invasion (see Figure 39). This line of rhetoric was used to ridicule the ‘hysterical’ reaction of the Western media and politicians to the Russian military build-up next to the Ukrainian border. The TV shows sought to communicate to their audience that Russia had the right to keep its troops wherever it wanted and applied whataboutism techniques with regards to NATO ‘pushing closer and closer’. Any concerns and potential dates of the invasion expressed by Ukraine’s Western partners were written off as irrational, with guests in the studio even joking along the lines of ‘Look, they keep inviting us to come over, but we just don’t go there.’

# Key take-aways

The regularity and length of messaging within the government communication concerning Ukraine in the pre-war period analysed in this report (1 October 2021 to 23 February 2022) shows organic fluctuations comprising both reactive conveyance (mostly by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *mid.ru*) and proactive communication (like that by the State Duma in mid to late February 2022). After the invasion, from 24 February to 31 March 2022, the communication by the Russian Defence Ministry recorded the steepest growth, up from the pre-war daily average of 0.5 articles to the wartime 7.5 articles.

With regard to Kremlin-controlled TV in the wartime period, the same messaging regularity and length pattern were used as during the annexation of Crimea in 2014: it was all 'Ukraine' all the time after the invasion. Prior to that, *60 minut* distinguished as a special project designed to address the issues related to Ukraine through constant and continuous attention dedicated to it, preparing the audience with framing and strategic narratives to accept the invasion. Overall, the Attention Time© dynamics show that the rate of mapping out mentions of Ukraine within the messaging of the governmental bodies grew speedier and more dramatically compared to the coverage on TV, reaching a climax in Week 11, 2022 (Week 9 on television). A drop in the Attention Time© to Ukraine by both the government resources and, to a smaller extent, TV shows in Week 10 was connected to a weekly decrease by half of the articles posted by *mid.ru*, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, coinciding with the end of the ten-day period by when Russia had planned to occupy Ukraine.

The results show that the average viewer of the three TV shows monitored and reviewed by Debunk.org analysts was presented with Ukraine-related issues as top stories in no fewer than 53% of the content pieces pre-invasion and in 100% of the cases after the war started. Although all the *60 minut* content

pieces are categorised as having the 'special mention' parameter (indicating prioritisation of issues related to Ukraine), the range is more diverse as far as the *Vremya* TV news show is concerned. *Function.mil.ru*, the official website of the Russian Defence Ministry, stands out with the lowest special mention score (15.9%), along with low attention to topics related to the escalating tensions with Ukraine (10 articles of 63 in the pre-war period).

Our current analysis allows us to assume that the messaging within the selected sources was meant foremost to distract the audience, as in both communication types distractive strategic narratives occupied about half of the total number of content pieces (51.5% in the government communication and 46.9% in the TV coverage, pre-war). The leading strategic distractive narratives were meant to deny Russia's intentions of invasion and/or the country's aggressive imperialism, diverting attention to the alleged lawlessness of Ukraine and the West, i.e., changing the places of perpetrator and victim, as well as rebuffing the Kremlin's instrumentalisation of an array of sectors. In preparation for the aggression, the leading distractive rhetoric within the official communication claimed '*Kyiv is violating the Minsk agreements*', followed by (complementary) accusations of persecuting the Russian-speaking/Russian population in the Donbas. The TV coverage was primarily focused on discrediting the West by claiming it was an unreliable partner of Ukraine that was making threats against Russia instead of peacefully approaching it for a mutually beneficial dialogue, as well as encouraging the armed escalation by providing arms to Ukraine and causing 'invasion hysteria'.

When the war started there was a growing need to adhere to 'information reassurance treatment' and get more engaged in the construction of a positive parallel reality, in which Russia was portrayed as a saviour providing humanitarian aid, a strong and self-sufficient state with soldiers committing heroic deeds.

As a result, the share of constructive strategic narratives grew, especially so in the government communication (up from 21.6% pre-war to 28.1% in wartime, against 24.7% and 27.4%, respectively, on TV).

In the official Kremlin communication and the coverage on state-owned television channels, disruptive narratives were employed to undermine existing messages and prevent the emergence of coherent communication about certain topics. The Kremlin focused its communication efforts on discrediting Ukraine—portraying it as a failed state—and its leadership, through referring to the Maidan revolution as a *coup d'état*, as a result of which the country was ruled by Nazis, radicals, and incompetent politicians. Meanwhile, on television, attention was focused more on showing how Russia was forced to defend itself and its dignity and respond to the escalating tensions involving Ukraine, as well as denigrating the leadership or the country.

The analysis reveals no threshold for strategic narratives and language on the way to television: we found no messaging on TV that would not also be generated by the regulatory bodies in their communication, i.e., the messaging fully overlapped. However, the share of the message types in the sources we tracked differed. Some of these variations may have resulted from the rules of the agitainment genre, as the TV shows tended to focus more on messages such as Europe discrediting traditional values and thereby being morally corrupt, and they had a greater choice of tools for ad hominem attacks on the Ukrainian president, Zelensky, among other things. On the other hand, it was the Russian Defence Ministry's strategic communication to continuously promote the image of the successful 'special military operation' supported domestically: it was the lead communicator that Russia was providing humanitarian aid

and fighting Nazis in Ukraine (78 and 57 mentions, respectively).

Overall, the Russian Defence Ministry's communication was at a low level in the months before the war, but then quickly increased as the 'special military operation' started, adjusting the picture of the Russian army, and providing a detailed account of the successes and heroism of the Russian forces. The communication by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was predominantly reactive, as it responded by mentioning Ukraine in the most pressing matters in the international arena. The Duma, led by Vyacheslav Volodin, prioritised proactive communication in the days preceding the invasion, in line with the proposals to recognise the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics as 'independent'. The official presidential website, kremlin.ru, mostly reiterated Putin's claims about the expansion of NATO being a threat to Russia and blaming Ukraine for violating the Minsk agreements.

As far as the strategic language is concerned, before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, both the official media and the Kremlin-controlled television were using language that can be referred to as 'Putin's Newspeak', which aimed to enforce the official strategic narratives. The strategic language employed the 'Great Patriotic War' lexicon, carrying emotionally and historically loaded meanings and references, and hence provided illusionary justification for the Russian aggression against Ukraine, i.e., laying emotional grounds to accept it. The words 'nationalist', 'Nazi', and 'neo-Nazi' were the most prominent both in the official communication and the TV coverage. Although occasionally used pre-war, hard-line messaging (as defined by specific words) soared once the invasion started, both accompanying and justifying it.

# Appendix

## Strategic narratives, sub-narratives, and type of narratives

N	SN	Type	Narrative	Sub-narrative
1	1	C: Constructive	Military capabilities of the country are weak	The UAF are inept
1	2	C: Constructive	Military capabilities of the country are weak	The UAF do not trust the Ukrainian authorities
2	3	C: Constructive	NATO poses a threat to the country	Expansion of NATO is a threat to Russia
2	4	C: Constructive	NATO poses a threat to the country	NATO/US are aggressive near the Russian border
3	5	D2: Distractive	Negotiations are the solution to the armed conflict in Ukraine	A negotiated settlement is the only way out of the current crisis in Ukraine
4	6	C: Constructive	Russia holds to high moral standards	Russia wants to give Ukrainians the chance to determine their own future, without external influence
4	7	C: Constructive	Russia holds to high moral standards	The Russian army is providing humanitarian aid to liberated areas in Ukraine
4	8	C: Constructive	Russia holds to high moral standards	Russian military losses are a necessary sacrifice
4	9	C: Constructive	Russia holds to high moral standards	The Russian population in the Donbas are waiting for their saviours
4	10	C: Constructive	Russia holds to high moral standards	Russian society supports the military operation
4	11	C: Constructive	Russia holds to high moral standards	The special military operation is supported internationally
4	12	C: Constructive	Russia holds to high moral standards	Russia is a reliable partner
5	13	C: Constructive	Russia is a strong and self-sufficient country	Russia fears no sanctions
5	14	C: Constructive	Russia is a strong and self-sufficient country	The special military operation is proceeding as planned



5	15	C: Constructive	Russia is a strong and self-sufficient country	Russian leadership is superior
5	16	C: Constructive	Russia is a strong and self-sufficient country	We are witnessing heroic deeds by the Russian military
5	17	C: Constructive	Russia is a strong and self-sufficient country	Europe should pragmatically choose strong energy exporter Russia to avoid collapse
5	18	D1: Disruptive	Russia is responding to the security situation	Kyiv needs to be forced to choose peace
6	19	D1: Disruptive	Russia is responding to the security situation	Recognising the DNR and LNR is a step towards peace and it would save lives
6	20	D1: Disruptive	Russia is responding to the security situation	Russia conducts its 'special military operation' in Ukraine to demilitarise and denazify the country
6	21	D1: Disruptive	Russia is responding to the security situation	Russia doesn't want the war but is being dragged into it
6	22	D1: Disruptive	Russia is responding to the security situation	Russia is being threatened as it was in World War II
6	23	D1: Disruptive	Russia is responding to the security situation	Russia will be forced to react to provocations in the Donbas to protect Russian people
6	24	D1: Disruptive	Russia is responding to the security situation	Russia will use nuclear weapons if necessary
6	25	D1: Disruptive	Russia is responding to the security situation	The tensions around Ukraine concern Russia's safety directly
6	26	D1: Disruptive	Russia is responding to the security situation	Ukraine might use radiological weapons
6	27	D1: Disruptive	Russia is responding to the security situation	Attempts to discredit the special military operation pose a threat to national security
6	28	D1: Disruptive	Russia is responding to the security situation	Russia responds to Russophobic actions by the West
6	29	D1: Disruptive	Russia is responding to the security situation	Ukraine hosts secret biological weapon labs on its territory
7	30	D1: Disruptive	Russia operates within the international legal framework	Russian soldiers are targeting Ukrainian war infrastructure objects only

7	31	D1: Disruptive	Russia operates within the international legal framework	Russian troops are on their own territory and do not pose a threat
7	32	D1: Disruptive	Russia operates within the international legal framework	The people of Crimea voluntarily decided to rejoin the RF
8	33	D2: Distractive	Russia's interests must be respected	Germany is the last country to speak to Russia about genocide
8	34	D2: Distractive	Russia's interests must be respected	Western diplomats/politicians are incompetent
9	35	D1: Disruptive	The Ukrainian leadership is illegitimate/discredited	The current regime came to power as a result of the coup d'état in 2014
9	36	D1: Disruptive	The Ukrainian leadership is illegitimate/discredited	Ukraine is ruled by Nazis
9	37	D1: Disruptive	The Ukrainian leadership is illegitimate/discredited	Zelensky is incompetent
9	38	D1: Disruptive	The Ukrainian leadership is illegitimate/discredited	The Kyiv regime doesn't care about Ukrainian citizens
10	39	D2: Distractive	The West encourages the armed escalation in Ukraine	The West is providing Ukraine with military aid
11	40	D2: Distractive	The West is morally corrupt	Russia wants constructive dialogue while the West is making threats
11	41	D2: Distractive	The West is morally corrupt	The West and Ukraine care about territory and money, and Russia cares about people
11	42	D2: Distractive	The West is morally corrupt	Ukraine's partners are unreliable
11	43	D2: Distractive	The West is morally corrupt	The West disregards traditional values
11	44	D2: Distractive	The West is morally corrupt	Active Russophobia boils over in the West
11	45	D2: Distractive	The West is morally corrupt	The West ignores crimes committed by Ukraine
12	46	D2: Distractive	The West is to blame for the crisis	Ukraine is in economic downturn because of the military hysteria caused by the West
12	47	D2: Distractive	The West is to blame for the crisis	Western sanctions against Russia are contributing to food supply disruption
12	48	D2: Distractive	The West is to blame for the crisis	Western sanctions against Russia are leading to rising global energy prices

12	49	D2: Distractive	The West is to blame for the crisis	Western sanctions are illegal
13	50	D2: Distractive	Information warfare is waged against Russia	The West is carrying out information provocations and causing hysteria
13	51	D2: Distractive	Information warfare is waged against Russia	Ukraine stages attacks against civilians and accuses Russia
14	52	D2: Distractive	There's a hidden agenda behind events in Ukraine	Certain powers benefit from the escalation
14	53	D2: Distractive	There's a hidden agenda behind events in Ukraine	Poland has territorial claims over Ukraine
14	54	D2: Distractive	There's a hidden agenda behind events in Ukraine	The US wants to prevent the alliance between Russia and China
14	55	D2: Distractive	There's a hidden agenda behind events in Ukraine	The West wants to start a war in the Donbas so it has a pretext for sanctioning Russia
14	56	D2: Distractive	There's a hidden agenda behind events in Ukraine	Western politicians use the tensions around Ukraine to solve their own domestic problems
15	57	D2: Distractive	Ukraine fails to follow international agreements	The Kyiv regime and its Western patrons sabotaged international agreements
15	58	D2: Distractive	Ukraine fails to follow international agreements	Ukraine wouldn't stick to the Minsk agreements
16	59	D2: Distractive	Ukraine fails to uphold democratic standards and the rule of law	The Russian army is fighting Nazis in Ukraine
16	60	D2: Distractive	Ukraine fails to uphold democratic standards and the rule of law	Russian speakers and ethnic Russians in Ukraine are persecuted
16	61	D2: Distractive	Ukraine fails to uphold democratic standards and the rule of law	Russians are Untermenschen in Ukraine
16	62	D2: Distractive	Ukraine fails to uphold democratic standards and the rule of law	What's happening in the Donbas is an act of genocide
17	63	D1: Disruptive	Ukraine is a failed state	Ukraine is divided
17	64	D1: Disruptive	Ukraine is a failed state	You can certainly draw parallels between Ukraine and Afghanistan
17	65	D1: Disruptive	Ukraine is a failed state	The conflict in the Donbas is an intra-country confrontation
17	66	D1: Disruptive	Ukraine is a failed state	Ukraine's economic model is not viable

17	67	D1: Disruptive	Ukraine is a failed state	Chaos and violence sweep through Ukraine
17	68	D1: Disruptive	Ukraine is a failed state	Ukraine will not endure without Russian gas (transit)
18	69	C: Constructive	Ukraine is a Western proxy state	Ukraine is under foreign rule
18	70	C: Constructive	Ukraine is a Western proxy state	Ukraine is being used as a tool against Russia
18	71	C: Constructive	Ukraine is a Western proxy state	Ukraine is a pawn in a geopolitical chess game
19	72	D2: Distractive	Ukraine is preparing for an armed confrontation against Russia	Ukraine is getting ready for an offensive
19	73	D2: Distractive	Ukraine is preparing for an armed confrontation against Russia	The Ukrainian authorities want a military escalation
19	74	D2: Distractive	Ukraine is preparing for an armed confrontation against Russia	Ukrainian civilians are being prepared for war
20	75	D2: Distractive	The Ukrainian side is committing war crimes	The UAF are shelling civilians in the Donbas
20	76	D2: Distractive	The Ukrainian side is committing war crimes	Ukraine uses terrorist methods
20	77	D2: Distractive	The Ukrainian side is committing war crimes	Ukrainian soldiers use civilians as a human shield
20	78	D2: Distractive	The Ukrainian side is committing war crimes	Ukrainian soldiers use civilian infrastructure for military purposes/target it
20	79	D2: Distractive	The Ukrainian side is committing war crimes	Ukrainian soldiers treat prisoners of war inhumanely
21	80	D1: Disruptive	Ukrainian statehood is disputable	Sovereignty of the modern Ukrainian state is disputable
21	81	D1: Disruptive	Ukrainian statehood is disputable	Ukrainians and Russians are brotherly nations
21	82	D1: Disruptive	Ukrainian statehood is disputable	Kyiv attempts to rewrite history
22	83	D2: Distractive	Ukrainians will create a migrant crisis/pose a threat to local societies	Ukrainian refugees pose a risk to local populations in Europe

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# RUSSIA'S 2022 INVASION OF UKRAINE: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT ON KREMLIN-CONTROLLED DOMESTIC TELEVISION

by Max Levin

## Introduction

This report is focused on the relationship between Russia's actions in the physical environment and its behaviour in the information environment (with a particular focus on Kremlin-aligned television) in the period leading up to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In the months before the invasion, many reports appeared in the media of Western<sup>1</sup> countries claiming that Russia intended to invade Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> Such reports were typically based on briefings from government sources (which were in turn ostensibly based on assessments made by intelligence agencies) or on open-source intelligence analyses. In either case, assessments were primarily founded on Russia's behaviour in the physical domain<sup>3</sup>, such as movements of its troops and military equipment to areas adjacent to the Ukrainian border.

This report is based on a desire to better understand how the information domain ought to fit into this dynamic of intelligence interpretation. It attempts to answer the following two questions:

1. What is the nature of the relationship between Russia's actions in the physical domain (particularly those actions which contributed to escalation of the situation in Ukraine) and its messaging towards domestic audiences?
2. With the benefit of hindsight, could analysis of Russia's behaviour in the information space (more precisely, of the output of Kremlin-controlled domestic media) have contributed to an accurate assessment of its intentions towards Ukraine?

Whether the answer to the second question is yes or no, it will either way inform our analysis of the output of Kremlin-controlled media in the future, especially with regard to Russia's military posture. Furthermore, this answer may also supplement our understanding of the inner workings of the Russian state in the period leading up to its largest military operation since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

# Methodology

This report is primarily qualitative in nature and focuses on Kremlin messaging towards Russia's domestic population, the audience to which the most resources are directed and through the greatest number of channels.

The report focuses mainly on television media for the following three reasons:

1. Television has high penetration throughout Russia.<sup>4</sup>
2. It is a medium where the element of state control is transparent and long-established.
3. It is a medium whose output is clearly archived and easily accessible.

This report makes two basic assumptions:

- Kremlin-aligned television media, especially news and current affairs programming, are used by Russia's government as a channel for its strategic communications goals.
- The target audience for this output is Russia's domestic television viewers, i.e. its own population.

The report looks in detail at three key periods of between one and two months' duration:

1. The spring 2021 build-up of Russian forces near the Ukrainian border.
2. The autumn 2021 build-up of Russian forces near the Ukrainian border.

3. The prelude to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

During these periods, the sample programming (see below) was studied in detail in the original language, with analysis supplemented and contextualised by observation of other pro-Kremlin current affairs programming.

The analysis also examines statements made by government figures, including official spokespeople. These are primarily featured insofar as they are reported on Kremlin-controlled television, on the assumption that this is a measure of the relative importance of such statements to the Kremlin's communications strategy. This means that statements by external-facing figures (such as diplomats) are included in our analysis, as they also form part of domestic messaging.

Stated norms of pro-Kremlin messaging are based on the author's long-standing observations of the Russian media environment, as well as third-party analysis thereof.

Statements that aim to summarise tendencies based on limited subsets of data were sense-checked against wider monitoring and analysis by BBC Monitoring.

Characterisation of developments in the physical environment is based on publicly available reporting only. This paper does not attempt provide a detailed analysis of Russia's activities in the physical domain during the periods studied. A summary of such activities is only given insofar as it provides a relevant background for analysing Russia's activity in the information domain.

# Sample programming

Our in-depth analysis of the information environment in the three key periods studied will focus principally on three programmes which air on two state-owned television

channels, Russia-1 (Россия-1) and Channel One (Первый канал, also stylised as '1'). These channels are the most watched for news content.<sup>5</sup>

## 1. *Vremja* at 21:00 ('*Vremja*')

*Vremja at 21:00* (*Время в 21:00*, with 'Время' literally meaning 'time') is the flagship primetime news broadcast on state-owned Channel One. As the name implies, it airs every day at 21:00 (Moscow time). It follows the format of a standard news programme, but, in

common with other Russian news broadcasts, anchors and reporters often provide opinionated commentary on events. The Sunday edition, *Vremja on Sunday* (*Воскресное время*), usually focuses on the main news stories of the week.

## 2. *60 Minutes*

*60 Minutes* (*60 минут*) is a current affairs panel discussion show presented by Ol'ga Skabeeva (Ольга Скабеева) and her husband, Evgenij Popov (Евгений Попов), who is also a member of the State Duma from the ruling United Russia party. It is broadcast on the state-owned VGTRK's flagship channel Russia-1 twice a day every weekday,<sup>6</sup> for a total of ten distinct broadcasts per week. Each episode has a runtime of around 60–70 minutes, exclusive

of advertising breaks. The programme consists of news segments presented by the hosts, discussions from panellists, reports from correspondents, and occasional interviews via video link. Panellists, many of whom appear across multiple episodes, usually echo regime talking points; dissenting views are sometimes represented but usually greeted with hostility by the hosts and other panellists.

## 3. Evening with Vladimir Solov'ëv ('*EWVS*')

*EWVS* is another current affairs panel discussion show which also broadcasts on Russia-1, usually in a late-night slot per Moscow time. It is hosted by Vladimir Solov'ëv (Владимир Соловьев). *EWVS* broadcasts five times a week, from Sunday to Thursday, with each episode typically running for 150 to 165 minutes, exclusive of advertising breaks. The Sunday broadcast is called *Sunday Evening*

*with Vladimir Solov'ëv* but does not differ in terms of format or content. In contrast to *60 Minutes*, almost all of *EWVS*'s runtime is taken up solely by panel discussions, although video interviews are occasionally conducted by the host, usually with government spokespeople. As with *60 Minutes*, panellists seldom contradict the official narrative, and those that do are usually treated with contempt.

# Note on transliterations

This paper uses scholarly transliteration of Russian and Ukrainian names/toponyms etc., except when a commonly used form

(e.g. Zelensky rather than Zelenskij) or English equivalent (e.g. 'Moscow') is available.

# Note on terminology

The use of certain names, terms, or concepts when quoting, paraphrasing, or discussing material of a Russian origin should not be construed as approval of the same. This is to avoid unnecessary repetition of qualifiers

such as 'alleged' or 'so-called'.

Ukrainian forms of names/toponyms will be used, except when quoting or paraphrasing Russian sources.

# Period 1: Russia's spring 2021 force build-up

## Background

Our first analysis of Russia's domestic media environment focuses on the spring of 2021.

On 30 March 2021 Ruslan Khomchak, commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), made a statement to the Ukrainian parliament, claiming that 28 Russian battalion tactical groups had been amassed along Russia's frontier with Ukraine in the Bryansk, Rostov, and Voronezh oblasts, as well as occupied Crimea.<sup>7</sup> On 31 March, US European Command (EUCOM) raised its alert level to 'potential imminent crisis' in response to the build-up of Russian troops alongside an uptick of ceasefire violations in the Donbas.<sup>8</sup>

By the second half of April, observers such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) were speaking of 'the highest force mobilization since Russia's annexation of Crimea and military incursion into Eastern Ukraine in 2014', with an estimation of 100,000 Russian troops along the

Ukrainian border,<sup>9</sup> as well as a 'sharp escalation in fighting along the line of control' in the Donbas. This change in force posture was characterised in pro-Kremlin media as a 'snap readiness check' ('внезапная проверка боевой готовности') of the Western and Southern military districts, as officially announced by Russia's defence minister, Sergej Shoigu, on 6 April 2021.<sup>10</sup>

On 22 April, Shoigu announced that the spot readiness checks had been successfully completed, and that forces from the Southern and Western military districts would return to their 'permanent bases' ('места постоянной дислокации').<sup>11</sup> However, closer examination of the wording of his statement reveals that the order referred specifically to 'personnel' ('личный состав', as opposed to equipment). Shoigu also mentioned that some equipment belonging to the 41st Combined Arms Army (subordinated to the Central Military District), which was intended to be used in the *Zapad 2021* exercise scheduled to take place the

following September, would be stored at the Pogonovo (Погоново) training ground south of Voronezh (i.e., thousands of kilometres from the unit's garrison in Novosibirsk);<sup>12</sup> this part of his statement was given less emphasis in Russian state media coverage.

The significance of this to our analysis is that it suggests that Russian force movements in spring 2021 were not isolated manoeuvres, but part of a process of continuous force build-up which would eventually culminate in the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The continuity of this process was apparent to observers even before the invasion itself. Writing in December 2021 (during a subsequent force build-up discussed later in this report), Janes analysts observed that 'what at first sight appears to be a new Russian military build-up on the Ukrainian border should instead be viewed as a continuation of last spring's (March–April) build-up';<sup>13</sup> satellite imagery revealed that heavy equipment such as Iskander ballistic missile launchers from the 41st Combined Arms Army that were observed in Ел'ня (Ельня), Smolensk Oblast, in autumn 2021 had been transferred not from their home garrisons in Siberia, but from Pogonovo. These units would subsequently take part in the Kyiv offensive,<sup>14</sup> launched from the territory of Belarus, adjacent to the Smolensk Oblast.

In similar fashion the 58th Combined Arms Army subunits that had deployed to Novoozerne in Crimea from their garrisons in the North Caucasus in the spring of 2021 were still present on the peninsula in May and August, according to observations from Janes.<sup>15</sup> These units would later take part in Russia's southern offensive against Ukraine.<sup>16</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this report to assess whether this demonstrates that the spring build-up was an intentional preparatory step for an already greenlit invasion; regardless, it prompted a response from Western diplomats, with US secretary of state Anthony Blinken warning Russia that there would be 'costs' and 'consequences' for aggressive behaviour.<sup>17</sup>

Given that a diplomatic backlash might have been anticipated as a result of Russia's manoeuvres, our analysis of the information environment during this period will attempt to assess how and to what extent Kremlin-aligned television sought to prepare its audiences for this through its output. The other purpose of our analysis of programming in this period—a period which was characterised by force build-up but which did not result in an escalatory spiral of tensions or an immediate outbreak of violence—is to contextualise our analysis of the later analogous periods which did result in these outcomes.

## Information environment analysis (spring 2021 build-up)

During this period Russia-1's leading political talk shows *60 Minutes* and *EWVS* both focused heavily on (i) tensions in the Donbas and (ii) broader tensions between Russia and Western countries, chiefly the US. However, the peak of coverage on both of these programmes came after the force build-up, rather than in anticipating it. Coverage on news broadcasts was less intensive.

*60 Minutes'* Ukraine output reached its

peak between 5 and 13 April 2021, when every single broadcast (with the exception of the Friday special, which maintained its customary focus on domestic matters)—a total of thirteen hours of programming out of a possible fourteen—was devoted entirely to Ukraine. The majority of programming in the period before the 5th and after the 13th was also devoted to Ukraine or to the deteriorating relationship between Russia and the US (/NATO/EU/the West).

To give a sense of tone, the evening broadcast on 5 April was headlined: 'WAR IS INEVITABLE—Kyiv is preparing for a full-scale war in the Donbas', and the 7 April broadcast was headlined 'CHILD KILLERS', referring to civilian casualties in the Donbas allegedly caused by the AFU. Common themes in this period included:

- imagery of Ukrainian equipment ostensibly moving towards the frontline
- emphasis on the role of Ukraine's supposed Western backers, contextualised within wider Russia–West tensions and Western 'Russophobia'
- denials of Russia's intentions to escalate
- emotive focus on civilian casualties in the Donbas<sup>18</sup>
- mocking of Zelensky (and US President Biden), contrasted with Putin's virility
- highlighting use of Nazi imagery among Ukrainian forces and paramilitary groups.

This focus on Russia–Ukraine and Russia–US tensions remained for the rest of April, even after Russian troops were ostensibly withdrawn from their forward position on the 22nd; however, the intensity and histrionic tone of anti-Ukraine and anti-Western content lessened somewhat following a telephone call between Biden and Putin on 14 April.

*EWVS*'s Ukraine-related coverage was somewhat less intensive than that of *60 Minutes*, but in common with the latter programme it also peaked during the first half of April (particularly from the 4th to the 14th—i.e., up until the Putin–Biden telephone call), when it was the main or sole topic in four out of ten episodes. In other episodes, particularly at the end of March and in the second half of April, the programme followed a standard format of

discussing Ukraine as the secondary topic of the programme, occupying the latter 40–50 minutes of the 160-minute broadcast. The tone of such coverage was somewhat less alarmist than that of *60 Minutes*, typically characterised by general criticism of Ukraine's government rather than claims of an imminent outbreak of wider violence. The principal topic of most broadcasts throughout this latter period was tensions and ideological confrontation between Russia and the US (/NATO/the West). Even more so than *60 Minutes*, *EWVS* tended to contextualise the Ukraine situation within a wider, longer-term conflict playing out between Russia and the West, which seems to stem partly from Solov'ëv's own worldview.

A typical and revealing exchange took place on a 28 March edition of *EWVS*, when the discussion turned to ways to respond to Ukraine if it were (under the US's direction) to provoke a conflict with Russia in the Donbas or Crimea. Evgenij Bužinskij, an academic, proposes the 'Syrian Variant', which he defines as 'taking out the entirety of [Ukraine's] air force [...] all of its aerial defence systems, and its navy [...] exclusively from the air, with missiles, and from the sea—like the Americans do'. Solov'ëv suggests extending this to all 'tank units, everything—all positions that are firing on the Donbas'. At this point the discussion is interrupted by Vladimir Žirinovskij, the outspoken head of the ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic party (LDPR), now deceased, who argues instead for 'a land operation [...] all the way to the western border [of Ukraine]' and 'liquidation of the regime'. To this Solov'ëv responds: 'I think you're getting ahead of yourself.'

This exchange indicates that, at this point in time, even for a prominent hard-line commentator such as Solov'ëv, the expected response to a Ukrainian offensive against the Donbas or Crimea was a more limited Syria-style intervention, rather than a full-scale, multi-domain invasion (as came to pass less than a year later without any ostensible Ukrainian 'provocation'). Žirinovskij's contribution is not treated as serious by the other panellists, which is unsurprising in the context of his many outlandish statements over the years.<sup>19</sup>



Ukraine was a far less prominent topic on *Vremja* and other news coverage than in the panel shows discussed above. Between 20 March and 2 April, i.e., at the same time as Russia's force build-up along its border with Ukraine, Ukraine was mentioned just once, and then only as the fourth item in the broadcast rather than the lead story. The most common lead item during this time was instead COVID-19 vaccines, which opened four broadcasts, with Putin's governmental work leading on three occasions.

Donbas tensions made their first appearance on *Vremja* on 3 April, when they were the lead story. Thereafter the story made the broadcast on a further twelve occasions (out of nineteen) until the announced drawdown on the 22nd; however, on none of these occasions was it the top story and only on a handful of occasions was it one of the top three items. Wider tensions between Russia and the West (e.g. sanctions, incursions of US spy planes into Russian airspace, tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions, and an alleged Western-backed coup attempt in Belarus) also featured as major topics during this period. After 11 April, Ukraine-related reports primarily emphasised diplomatic efforts to lessen tensions, such as calls between members of the Normandy contact group. However, *Vremja* also devoted several

prominent reports to Russia's military capability, for example a feature on naval exercises in the Arctic headlined 'THE NORTH IS OURS', but these were typical of its general output.

In terms of tone, *Vremja* was less alarmist during this period than the current affairs discussion programmes outlined above. The commentary on Ukraine-related stories did not articulate any narratives that had not previously been observed in pro-Kremlin news coverage.

As indicated above, Russia's troop build-up had already been sufficient to be classified as a 'potential imminent crisis' by EUCOM by the end of March. It is notable, therefore, that the intense focus on Donbas tensions did not appear on any of the monitored programming until several days into April. Once Western criticism of Russia's troop build-up started to mount, the Kremlin's propagandists took their lead from government spokespeople such as Dmitriy Peskov, who claimed that Russia 'moving its own troops around its own territory' should not be a cause for concern.<sup>20</sup> This line soon became a trope of pro-Kremlin propaganda that was also repeated during the second troop build-up in winter 2021<sup>21</sup> and could even be found in some pro-Kremlin outlets as late as the eve of the invasion.<sup>22</sup>

## Summary and conclusions (spring 2021 build-up)

The monitored programming focused heavily on Ukraine during the escalation of tensions in the spring of 2021, reflecting the wider Kremlin-controlled media landscape during this period. This was particularly apparent in current affairs talk shows, which also approached the issue in a more sensationalist manner than news programmes, on occasions making claims of an imminent outbreak of a larger-scale conflict. Common to all programming was a contextualising of the Ukraine escalation against a backdrop of wider confrontation between Russia and the United States/the West.

In all three of the profiled programmes, Ukraine coverage peaked in the first three weeks of April, whereupon tensions began to dissipate somewhat following a telephone call between Biden and Putin and the ostensible withdrawal of Russian units which had been taking part in exercises in Crimea, one of the main factors contributing to tensions. In this way the coverage largely tracked global interest in the topic, as demonstrated by Google searches of the topic in Figure 1.

What is striking about this common pattern is that the escalation in information activity followed rather than pre-empted escalation

### “Donbas” – interest over time

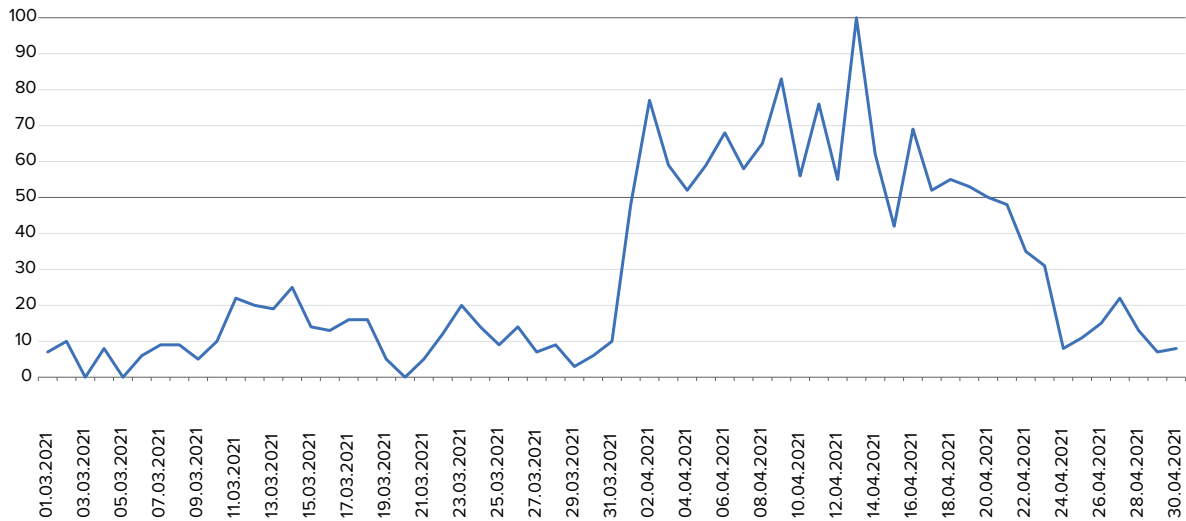


FIGURE 1. ‘Donbas’ interest over time. The Y-axis represents a relative scale where 100 represents the peak of interest in the topic over this period. SOURCE: Google Trends.

on the ground. While Russia’s troop build-up reached ‘crisis’ levels before the beginning of April, the country’s main primetime news broadcast did not mention Ukraine once during this time, but addressed the issue only after the build-up was largely complete. The principal drivers of Ukraine-related coverage observed were instead as follows:

1. increasing Western media and diplomatic scrutiny and criticism of Russia’s build-up<sup>23</sup> and associated Western diplomatic measures<sup>24</sup>

2. Shoigu’s announcement of ‘snap readiness checks’ on 6 April and associated military exercises
3. alleged Ukrainian actions in the Donbas.

Overall, the general picture that emerges from this period is not one of a propaganda machine attempting to anticipate Russia’s actions and their results and influence public opinion accordingly, but rather one that is reacting to events once they have already happened.

# Period 2: Russia's autumn 2021 force build-up

## Background

Towards the end of October 2021, footage once again started to appear on social media depicting Russian equipment on the move along Russia's western flank.<sup>25</sup> One tweet described the footage as being 'just like in April'.<sup>26</sup> This was followed by the first reports in the Western media about the build-up, for example a *Washington Post* article on 30 October citing statements of concern from Western officials and drawing parallels with the previous spring.<sup>27</sup>

These movements of course also added to the concentrations of Russian equipment that had been in place since the spring of 2021, which had in the meantime been further augmented in September for the *Zapad 2021* military exercises. Following these exercises, as had been the case for the 'snap readiness checks' of the spring, many units (for example, those of the 41st Combined Arms Army) did not return to their home bases but instead joined up with other forces near the Ukrainian border, according to military analyst Michael Kofman.<sup>28</sup>

This build-up continued throughout November; for example, satellite images revealed that Russia had transferred at least one battalion tactical group from the 6th Combined Arms Army's 138th Motorised Brigade from Leningrad Oblast to Kursk Oblast during this period (with similar movements observed among other units), and also established a new camp at Džankoj airbase in Crimea.<sup>29</sup> By the beginning of December, US intelligence assessments estimated that at least 70,000<sup>30</sup> Russian troops were amassed along Ukraine's border, while the chief of Ukraine's military intelligence put the figure at 94,000.<sup>31</sup> It was also during this period that US officials began to anonymously brief the press that a large-scale Russian offensive against Ukraine was likely,<sup>32</sup> and Russian officials in turn began to publicly

comment on such claims, with Putin dismissing them as 'alarmist' in a television interview on 13 November 2021.<sup>33</sup>

During this period, the relationship between Russia and NATO also reached new lows, with diplomatic ties effectively severed after Russia closed its mission to NATO in Brussels on 18 October in response to the expulsion of its diplomats on 6 October for espionage.<sup>34</sup> Shortly thereafter, and perhaps not unrelatedly, came a comment from US defense secretary Lloyd Austin that the path to NATO membership remained open to Ukraine.<sup>35</sup>

Our second examination of the information environment will therefore focus on the period from mid October to the beginning of December 2021, for the following reasons:

- Movements of forces to the Ukrainian border were not associated with any exercises, but instead seem to have served no purpose other than preparation for the invasion that was to take place several months later.
- From this point onwards there was no claimed or actual reduction in Russia's forward posture.
- During this time Russia's troop build-up and the possibility of an invasion became a regular feature of public discourse in both Russia and the West.
- Information environment assessment (autumn 2021 build-up)

Compared with the previous spring, the



FIGURE 2. 'If there is a war, Ukraine will be left [to fight] one on one with Russia'—Igor' Korotchenko, *60 Minutes*, 15 October 2021 (paraphrased)

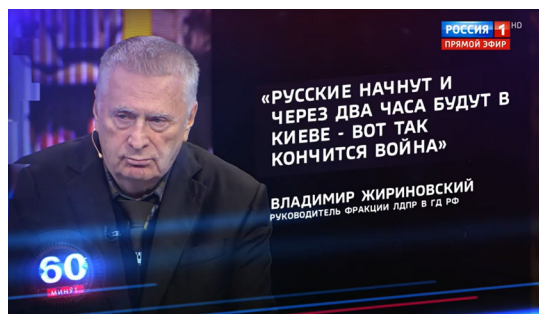


FIGURE 3. 'The Russians will start, and two hours later they'll be in Kyiv. That's how the war will end'—Vladimir Žirinovskij, *60 Minutes*, 3 November 2021

topic of Ukraine and wider confrontation between Russia and the West was given more prominence in pro-Kremlin news broadcasts during the autumn build-up, but was by no means the lead story in this period, which (in a plurality of broadcasts) instead remained the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's response to it. As in the spring, Ukraine was given relatively more emphasis on current affairs panel shows than on news coverage. On *60 Minutes*, for example, it was typically discussed at length in every episode, although usually as one of several topics rather than the sole focus (as was the case from 5 to 13 April 2021, for example).<sup>36</sup>

Although news programmes and current affairs shows differed in terms of their volume of Ukraine coverage, both tended to frame the topic in terms of wider tensions between the West and Russia, with Ukraine often characterised as the staging ground chosen by the US and NATO to confront Russia militarily. On the 15 October broadcast of *EWVS*, host Vladimir Solov'ëv addressed Ukraine directly, warning: 'We will not permit the existence of a hostile state that will be used as a Nato base for a possible attack on our country. You yourselves are nothing militarily, [but] the Nato bloc can pose a danger. To be pitied are the Ukrainian people, whom your president, [...] who dodged the draft on four occasions, is ready to throw to certain death.'

At the same time as sensationalising NATO's engagement with Ukraine and using it as a pretext for a potential intervention,

panellists and presenters on current affairs programmes also dismissed Ukraine's chances of NATO membership as an empty promise. Secretary Austin's statement on 20 October that the path to NATO membership remained open to Ukraine was dismissed by Skabeeva as being 'routine as can be'. Aleksej Naumov, head of broadsheet *Kommersant's* foreign affairs section, agreed: 'They come to Georgia, they come to Ukraine, they say that Nato is waiting for you, but in fact, as we see, no specific obligations, as usual, have been undertaken,' he said. This apparent inconsistency (i.e., blaming Ukraine's NATO integration for increased tensions at the same time as casting doubt on the possibility of eventual accession) typifies the tendency of pro-Kremlin propaganda to push multiple, often mutually contradictory narratives at the same time.

In a similar fashion, while NATO was usually presented as the guiding hand behind Ukraine's actions—the notion of the latter's sovereign agency being treated with contempt—*60 Minutes* hosts and participants also routinely disparaged the likelihood of NATO supporting Ukraine in the event of hostilities. For example, during the 15 October broadcast of *60 Minutes*, journalist Igor' Korotchenko, a regular panellist, said that 'if there is a war, Ukraine will be abandoned to face Russia alone, without any assistance' (Figure 2).

With characteristic hubris, panellists on current affairs programmes also routinely predicted that a war between Russia and Ukraine would be a very brief affair (Figure 3). 'If—God

forbid—war breaks out, then it will be over very quickly, literally within a few hours,’ claimed Skabeeva on the 29 October edition of *60 Minutes*, with similar sentiments echoed by multiple guests on her programme.

On all observed programmes there was a reversion to the ongoing conflict in the Donbas after the first reported use of a Bayraktar TB2 drone by Ukraine and the liberation by Ukrainian forces of the village of Staromarjivka on 26 and 27 October respectively. This was more akin to coverage observed in the spring, but of shorter duration. Otherwise, Ukraine-related coverage was mainly driven by (a) Western media coverage and diplomatic manoeuvres, and (b) statements made by Putin (as is often the case with current affairs output on state television).

This period took in several high-profile events in which addresses by and Q & As with Putin were the highlight and Russia’s security and foreign relationships were focal themes (namely the Valdai Discussion Club on 21 October, the biannual conference with senior military leaders on 1–3 November, a meeting with Russia’s top diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 21 November, and the Russia Calling investment forum on 30 November), and there was correspondingly a large volume of reporting which featured and developed Putin’s statements on the subjects of the West’s confrontational stance towards Russia and the role of Ukraine within this dynamic. Much of this focused on Russia’s ‘red lines’: for example, at Russia Calling, Putin said, ‘You asked about Ukraine, where these “red lines” are; first and foremost, they lie in the creation of threats against us that could arise from that territory,’ while earlier, at the Valdai forum, Putin had said, ‘Formal NATO membership may not happen, but territorial expansion by military means is already taking place. And this creates a real threat for the Russian Federation.’ This was an evolution of Putin’s earlier position that the ‘red line’ was to be found at the point of Ukraine’s actual accession to NATO. Another key evolution in Putin’s philosophy had come earlier, in July, with his publication of the now notorious essay ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and

Ukrainians’,<sup>37</sup> in which he questioned Ukraine’s legitimacy as a sovereign state.

Following a spate of pronouncements on Ukraine in the autumn of 2021, Putin did not comment publicly on the topic between late December 2021 and late January 2022. During his biannual conference with senior military figures, he did not specifically address the fact that Russia was amassing troops on its western frontier, preferring to focus on US naval manoeuvres in the Black Sea and Russia’s new capabilities such as hypersonic missiles. On pro-Kremlin news programmes there was also relatively little focus on Ukraine during the period of force build-up, with no Ukraine-related stories at all in fourteen out of the twenty-two broadcasts of *Vremja at 21:00* between 15 October and 5 November. Thereafter until the end of November there was a significant increase in coverage, with only five broadcasts that did not feature Ukraine-related reports. Therefore, as was also the case in the spring, the peak in Ukraine-related coverage came only after the Russian force movements that attracted attention in late October had largely been completed. While stories about Ukrainian ‘aggression’ were broadcast during the second half of October as Russian forces were being augmented on the country’s western flank, the first time the conflict was characterised as ‘escalating’ was on 26 October,<sup>38</sup> when such an escalation had in fact already begun on the Russian side.

There was no mention of any change in Russia’s own stance on its western flank until 24 November, when Shoigu announced that missile systems in the Kaluga and Orenburg oblasts (both in the Western Military District) had been enhanced allegedly in response to NATO activity. The first acknowledgement that new concentrations of Russian forces had been observed came only when the issue began to be reported in the Western press, in particular on 1 November, following the publication of the aforementioned *Washington Post* article on 30 October. This is yet another indicator that, as during the spring, coverage related to Russia’s actions in the physical domain on its western flank seems largely to have been driven by

responding to external inputs rather than any discernible proactive narrative strategy.

As also observed in the spring, Western criticism of force movements was at first largely dismissed in terms of Russia's right to move its own troops around its own territory as it saw fit; once again, Western media and diplomats were accused of hysteria over 'alleged' Russian invasion plans: 'Apparently the invasion is about to begin—for the eighth year already,' said Skabeeva on the 1 November edition of *60 Minutes*, for example. On this date, US outlet Politico published satellite images of concentrations of Russian equipment in El'nja, Smolensk Oblast, which were then widely carried across the international media. While earlier reports of Russian force concentrations could have easily been dismissed as fake news, the use of satellite images here forced an evolution of the narrative. For example, on the 2 November and ensuing broadcasts of *60 Minutes*, the programme's hosts pointed out (with the aid of map graphics) that El'nja is located 250 kilometres from the Ukrainian border, in an oblast which does not border Ukraine, but only 120 kilometres from Belarus (Figure 4): 'What, is Russia planning to invade Belarus? Or did American intelligence mix up the two republics?' said Skabeeva. 'Whether it's Belarus or Russia, it's all the same for the Americans: somewhere over there near Ukraine. And so they can scare the world with Putin's new invasion.' On the 8 November broadcast of *60 Minutes*, Skabeeva also mocked the suggestion of a Ukrainian panellist that those troops might be used to attack Ukraine through

Belarus (as indeed eventually happened).

*60 Minutes* also took advantage of inconsistencies in Ukrainian government messaging on the topic, claiming that the Ukrainian Defence Ministry's statement on 2 November that over 90,000 Russian troops were amassed on its border<sup>39</sup>—which came only two days after it denied that there was any build-up at all<sup>40</sup>—was proof that Ukraine was changing its tune under US/NATO instructions: 'These troops, these tanks of the Russian Federation have been located in Russian territory in the vicinity of El'nja for many, many, many years,' said Skabeeva to the same Ukrainian panellist on 3 November, continuing: 'The big question is why the Americans are only now drawing attention to them. The answer is simple. They are pushing you towards war.'

Talk of a 'war' became more commonplace on pro-Kremlin panel shows during this period than it had been earlier in October, but mostly only after Russia's build-up had started to attract the attention of the Western media, and such language overall was perhaps somewhat less prevalent and less alarmist than in the spring build-up. Analysing the treatment of the prospect of a war between Russia and Ukraine is informative insofar as it may contain indications for the ways in which, if at all, pro-Kremlin media attempted to prepare its audience for such an eventuality in the near future. The word 'war' ('война') in relation to the situation in Ukraine could be heard on both news reports and on talk shows—although it was far more common on the latter—from



FIGURE 4. *60 Minutes* on 9 November 2021 demonstrates that Russian equipment identified by Politico was located 250 kilometres from the Ukrainian border

roughly 26 October (the date of the first recorded TB2 strike) onwards. Throughout the day on 27 October on Russia-1's news coverage (as well as that of its rolling-news sister channel Russia-24), the network's Donbas correspondent Andrej Rudenko (Андрей Руденко) warned of a possible 'new cycle of bloodshed' and possibly the start of a 'war'. Rudenko also made appearances on *60 Minutes* where he pushed similar narratives. On *EWVS* there were plentiful examples of both the show's host and its panellists treating a larger-scale conflict in Ukraine as an imminent likelihood (although, again, it is difficult to quantify whether this was more marked than in the spring build-up). Due to the long running-time of *EWVS* (between 120 and 160 minutes per broadcast, exclusive of advertising breaks), almost all of which consists of panellists speaking, and the inclusion of guests representing a range of professional backgrounds and political leanings (although usually with a heavy nationalist bias), a plethora of opinions are expressed, various subsets of which can always be extracted to support different narratives. Looking at overall tendencies across all monitored programming, however, it was hard to observe any dramatic evolution in narratives, particularly in terms of advocating for war.

In his opening comments to the Ukraine portion of the 28 October broadcast, Solov'ëv said that 'Kyiv is playing an exceedingly dangerous game, provoking the republics [i.e., the DPR and LPR] to launch counterattacks, and therefore a full-scale war'. On 31 October,

in response to Ukraine's use of a TB2 in the Donbas, Solov'ëv said that Ukraine needed to be 'shown what was shown in Syria', meaning the force of Russia's military. In response, panellist Ihor Markov (Ігор Марков), a pro-Russia former member of the Ukrainian parliament, said that he hoped 'our President' (meaning Putin rather than Zelensky) would soon take such a decision. However, in this instance Solov'ëv said it would be sufficient for Russia 'to stop holding back the republics [i.e., the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics]' and to cut off supplies to Ukraine, although Markov disagreed and said that a 'combat operation' would also be needed. Elsewhere, for example on 24 October, Solov'ëv called for a 'coordinated economic blockade' of Ukraine by Russia and Belarus. These examples demonstrate that, while comments to that effect may have been made by more hawkish panellists such as Markov or Žirinovskij, Solov'ëv himself—by no means a dove—did not explicitly call for a Russian military intervention in Ukraine, still less a full-scale invasion. Instead, he mostly advocated for a mixture of economic and military levers to be used against Ukraine, with a consensus across most observed coverage that diplomatic options had been exhausted. This consensus took its cue from senior figures in the Russian government, such as Dmitrij Medvedev (Дмитрий Медведев, former president and deputy chairman of the Security Council), who on 11 October published an article in *Kommersant* entitled 'Why Further Contact with the Current Ukrainian Leadership Is Pointless'.<sup>41</sup>

## Summary and conclusions (autumn 2021 build-up)

During the monitored period, Ukraine was an ever-present topic on current affairs talk shows, but somewhat less prevalent on news coverage, where it was seldom the lead story.

The main drivers of Ukraine-related coverage were as follows:

1. Western media reports about Russia's build-up and associated diplomatic statements
2. statements made by Putin
3. actions in the physical domain on the part of Russia's adversaries, chiefly Ukrainian military action (alleged or otherwise) in the Donbas (particularly the first reported use of a TB2 drone<sup>42</sup>) and US naval manoeuvres in the Black Sea.<sup>43</sup>

Russian force concentrations near Ukraine were only addressed once they had drawn attention in the West, and such concerns were dismissed.

The main theme of this period was confrontation between Russia and the West, and Ukraine's role within that dynamic. A larger-scale conflict involving Ukraine and Russia was often treated as a possibility, but this tendency was not necessarily more marked than in the spring, and propagandists did not specifically advocate for an invasion of Ukraine.

Bearing in mind the above, based on the coverage during this period, it was difficult (i) to identify a distinct pattern in Ukraine-related coverage which could be correlated in any fashion to Russia's actions in the physical domain over the same period, or (ii) to detect any dramatic evolution in Ukraine narratives that might point to a shift in the Kremlin's propaganda goals aimed at putting the country on a war footing.

## Period 3: prelude to the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine

### Background

Our final analysis will look at pro-Kremlin programming in the month leading up to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, i.e., the period when Russia's intensive preparations for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine reached fruition. Our analysis in this section will focus on the question of to what extent this is reflected in domestic messaging. It seeks to answer the question: how, if at all, did Kremlin propagandists prepare the Russian populace for an imminent war with their neighbour?

In mid January, Russia had already begun to evacuate staff from its embassy in Kyiv,<sup>44</sup> suggesting that a significant escalation in the conflict was foreseen. By the middle of the following month, a dozen mainly NATO-aligned countries told their citizens to leave Ukraine, indicating that a consensus had arisen in Western intelligence circles of Russia's intentions to invade (although within Ukraine itself this remained a matter of debate<sup>45</sup>); indeed, on 6 February, US officials estimated that Russian



forces massed on Ukraine's borders had reached around 70% of the level required for a full-scale invasion.<sup>46</sup>

These forces continued to be actively enhanced throughout February, mainly under the pretext of the joint Russia–Belarus military exercise *Union Resolve* (*Союзная Решимость*), which took place from 10 to 20 February, involving the transfer of heavy equipment such as two S-400 SAM battalions and 12 Su-35 multi-role fighter jets to the territory of Belarus. As individual exercises drew to a close, Shoigu announced (as was the case for April's 'snap readiness checks' and September's *Zapad 2021* exercises) that forces were returning to their home bases.<sup>47</sup> Shortly thereafter, however, on 20 February, Belarus's Defence Ministry announced an extension to *Union Resolve* in response to heightened military activity on the

part of Ukraine,<sup>48</sup> directly contradicting a statement by the country's own foreign minister merely days before that 'not a single Russian soldier' would remain in the country following the conclusion of exercises.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, these forces contributed Russia's northern offensive against Ukraine launched from Belarus on 24 February.

The full-scale invasion of Ukrainian territory administered (de facto) by the government in Kyiv had been preceded by Russia's recognition of the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR on 21 February, accompanied by the movement of Russian troops into the territory controlled by them. This was characterised as an 'invasion' by a White House official for the first time on the following day. Therefore, our analysis will largely focus on the period up to the 21st, as this marks the start point of the invasion.

## Information environment assessment (prelude to the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine)

Between November 2021 and January 2022, Ukraine-related coverage on news bulletins of the main Kremlin-controlled channels remained largely steady, with prominence varying from day to day and between channels. In contrast, current affairs talk shows remained fixated on the topic, devoting endless hours of airtime to Ukraine.<sup>50</sup>

By the month leading up to the invasion, the discrepancy between news programmes and talk shows narrowed, with Ukraine featured as one of the top stories on news programming on an almost daily basis. Reports approached the topic from a variety of angles:

- NATO weapons deliveries to Ukraine and claims that NATO was 'pushing Ukraine towards war'
- claims by the authorities in the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR that Kyiv was moving heavy weaponry into the Donbas and preparing

some form of (largely unspecified) 'provocation'

- Russia's diplomatic manoeuvres, particularly surrounding its proposals for 'security guarantees' issued to the US in December 2021 (which demanded, among other things, that it rule out the possibility of Ukraine's accession to NATO, and remove NATO's enhanced forward presence from Poland and the Baltic States<sup>51</sup>).

However, by far the most common theme in Ukraine-related news reports during this period was accusations against the West of 'hysteria', due to claims made by politicians, diplomats, and media outlets about Russia's 'mythical' invasion plans. This pervaded all Kremlin current affairs broadcasting, and also featured heavily in messaging by government spokespeople.

For example, the top story on *Vremja*

at 21:00 on 24 January was headlined ‘NATO countries incite hysteria about made-up Russian invasion’, and on 1 February a report was entitled ‘In Ukraine there is no end to hysteria about a mythical Russian invasion’. On the 18 February broadcast of *EWVS*, Solov’ëv joked that sanctions would soon be introduced against Russia for failing to attack Ukraine, saying ‘Biden considers Putin an unreliable partner, because he told Putin so many times when to attack, but Putin simply fails to do so’.

That dismissing Western claims about Russia’s invasion plans so dominated Russian state-controlled media coverage about Ukraine is perhaps somewhat puzzling when most of the target audience of such output would not otherwise be exposed to such claims; once again, it illustrates the extent to which Kremlin propaganda strategy is driven by reacting to external inputs and indeed entering into a discourse with them. Such discourse targeted both reports by foreign media and statements made by foreign government spokespeople. For example, a report on *Vremja at 21:00* on 4 February argued that US government claims that Russia might use staged video footage as a pretext to invade Ukraine<sup>52</sup> were based on the US’s own experience in creating supposedly fake footage of the Syrian government’s chemical weapon attack on Ghouta in August 2013 to provide a pretext to carry out air strikes. Propagandists also drew parallels with US intelligence assessments about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction programme in the run-up to the 2003 invasion.

Western news publications also came in for criticism. Some outlets cited 15 (and 16) February as a possible date for the Russian invasion, based on briefings from US government sources.<sup>53</sup> Once these dates had passed without the invasion materialising, Kremlin propagandists responded with indignant glee and cited this as yet more evidence that any allegations of Russian plans to invade were merely lies. *Vremja at 21:00* on 16 February quoted Maria Zakharova, spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who called Bloomberg (one of the publications to make such claims) ‘a mass disinformation outlet’. In a

Telegram post on 15 February, Zakharova said that the date ‘will go down in history as the day when Western war propaganda failed—put to shame and destroyed without a single shot being fired’,<sup>54</sup> while on *60 Minutes* Skabajeva sarcastically remarked that ‘at exactly four in the morning, Russian troops treacherously slept through an invasion of Ukraine’, and referred to the Western media as ‘nothing but a bunch of insolent liars’. In another Telegram post, Zakharova wrote: ‘I have a request to US and UK media outlets—Bloomberg, *The New York Times*, *The Sun*, etc.—to publish the schedule of our ‘invasions’ for the year ahead. I would like to plan my holidays.’<sup>55</sup>

Criticism of Western ‘hysteria’ was usually accompanied by strenuous denials that Russia was planning on launching an invasion. On the 13 February edition of *EWVS*, Margarita Simon’jan (*Маргарита Симоньян*), editor-in-chief of RT and one of the Kremlin’s most senior propagandists, said that she was ‘absolutely sure that Russia does not intend to start a war in Ukraine and would not do it under any circumstances’, although she did qualify this by saying that Russia would intervene for the sake of ‘stopping a war’. Denials came not just from propagandists and spokespeople, but also from diplomats and government officials. In an interview with foreign media on 1 February, Russia’s ambassador to the UN, Vasilij Nebenzja (*Василий Небензя*), categorically ruled out a Russian invasion of Ukraine regardless of the outcome of negotiations over Russia’s security guarantees,<sup>56</sup> saying, ‘Do you seriously think that if the negotiations fail that we will move troops into Ukraine?’ When a reporter asked if Nebenzja would rule out such a possibility, he responded simply: ‘I can rule that out.’<sup>57</sup> Similar pronouncements had been made by other Kremlin officials, such as deputy foreign minister Sergej Rjabkov (*Сергей Рябков*), who on 11 January had said that ‘There is no single reason to fear some kind of escalatory scenario [in Ukraine]’, adding in even balder terms that: ‘There is no intention to attack Ukraine from Russia. None.’

On 17 February, however, the focus of pro-Kremlin coverage shifted markedly from

Western hysteria to escalation in the Donbas that was attributed to Ukrainian ‘provocations’ (a large spike in Donbas-related content was also observed in the Kremlin-aligned Telegram ecosystem by Dr Charlie Winter in his report which accompanies this one<sup>58</sup>). *Vremja at 21:00* led with the story and accused Ukraine of a ‘monstrous provocation’, claiming its armed forces had staged the shelling of a nursery in the village of Stanytsia Luhanska (Станиця Луганська), Luhansk Oblast, in order to attribute it to Russia as a pretext to launch a larger offensive.<sup>59</sup> On *60 Minutes*, Skabeeva told viewers that ‘yesterday’s shelling of the kindergarten in the village of Stanytsia Luhanska was deliberately staged by the Ukrainian side in order to get into the news and announce that Putin has attacked’. In his daily press briefing on 17 February, Peskov accused Ukrainian forces of ‘provocative actions which have only increased over the past day or several days’, saying ‘this is a very, very dangerous situation’;<sup>60</sup> however, on the same date, Peskov also dismissed claims by Politico that a full-scale invasion would take place after 20 February as ‘yet another fake’.<sup>61</sup> *Vesti at 21:00* also carried a report quoting Peskov on Russia’s ‘imaginary aggression’ and the West’s ‘information insanity’.

On 20 February *EWVS* devoted a special episode to the anniversary of Ukraine’s Euromaidan protests. During the broadcast Simon’jan said: ‘These peaceful citizens [i.e., the inhabitants of the Donbas] have been destroyed for eight years. And now Russia has both the grounds and the possibility of stopping this war. I very much hope that this is what will be done, quickly and as painlessly as possible.’ However, even the usually pugnacious

Solov’ëv balked at the notion of a full-scale war with Ukraine or of territorial annexation by Russia: ‘Russia has never said that we want to seize Ukraine and incorporate it into Russia,’ he claimed, continuing: ‘What kind of war are all these people raving about? It’s a terrifying idea—why would Russian people bomb the mother of Russian cities [i.e., Kyiv]?’ he asked.

In the last few days leading up to the full-scale invasion, pro-Kremlin channels maintained a heavy focus on alleged Ukrainian artillery and drone strikes in the Donbas, sometimes characterising this as part of Ukraine’s alleged ongoing ‘genocide’ against the Donbas’s inhabitants. Some new alarmist narratives also emerged, such as claims that Ukraine was seeking to restore its nuclear arsenal.<sup>62</sup>

By now, of course, the rapid series of developments related to Ukraine—the evacuation of civilians from the Donbas, the recognition by Moscow of the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, the subsequent deployment of troops into territory controlled by them, and so on—ensured that TV coverage and the pronouncements of propagandists increasingly struggled to keep pace with events on the ground.

Ukraine coverage therefore reached an unprecedented frenzy during this period, before Putin’s announcement of the start of Russia’s ‘Special Operation for the Defence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics’ on 23 February marked the beginning of a new, altogether darker era for Russian broadcast media.

# Summary and conclusions (prelude to the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine)

In the month leading up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, topics related to Ukraine dominated the pro-Kremlin media to an extent not observed in either of the other periods analysed.

This month-long period can be divided into two phases:

1. From the last week of January until 17 February, pro-Kremlin television primarily focused on Western claims about Russia's imminent invasion, decrying them as anti-Russian hysteria and denying that Russia had any such intentions. At the same time, programming built a secondary picture of a gathering storm of threats to the Donbas and to Russia itself.
2. From 17 February until movements of Russian forces into separatist-controlled areas of Ukraine on the 21st, coverage of this 'gathering storm' reached a hitherto unparalleled crescendo,

with Ukraine accused of various provocations in the Donbas. However, many propagandists and even government spokespeople continued to deny that Russia was planning moving ground troops into Ukraine, even as events on the ground rapidly belied their narratives.

Notably, the themes and intensity of coverage observed between 17 and 21 February are precisely what one might have expected to see over a much longer period as part of a fully coordinated communications strategy aimed at preparing the Russian populace for a dramatic escalation in the long-running conflict with Ukraine, an escalation which (judging by Russia's activities in the physical domain) had been in the making for months. The fact that this coverage only appeared several days before the invasion began, and the fact that so much airtime in the run-up to the invasion was devoted to denying it, is worthy of further consideration. This will be addressed in the following section where we will consider this question in the context of the evidence presented in this report as a whole.

## Conclusions

Our analysis of Russia's domestic messaging in the first two periods monitored, the spring and autumn 2021 build-ups, reveals two important patterns.

1. There was no apparent attempt to presage negative reactions to Russia's increasing force concentrations near the Ukrainian border with related activity in the information space.
2. However, there was an increase

in Ukraine-related coverage after these concentrations had begun to attract attention outside of Russia.

In other words, pro-Kremlin messaging appeared to simply react to developments (or, more precisely, reacted to the reactions to Russia's actions), as opposed to pre-emptively anticipating them.<sup>63</sup>

In narrative terms, much programming on state-controlled television in the spring

build-up made claims of an imminent war (variously either concentrated on the Donbas or a wider conflict involving Russia and NATO). However, the spring build-up did not result in such a war, even if it did contribute to Russia's eventual invasion in February 2022.

Therefore, when looking at output in the third period (the month leading up to the invasion), we should not readily conclude that the observed increase in Ukraine-related coverage is statistically significant in terms of

hypothesising a coordinated and pre-emptive relationship between Russia's behaviour in the information domain on the one hand and its actions in the physical domain on the other. We should also be hesitant to conclude that the observed narrative of an imminent outbreak of hostilities necessarily equates to either stated intent or some form of privileged insight into policy/strategy on the part of those responsible for designing and disseminating the Kremlin's propaganda.

## Implications

What is so striking about the third period, that of the month leading up to the invasion, is how much effort and airtime Kremlin propagandists devoted to denying Russia's plans to invade and accusing the West of hysteria for making claims to that effect.

Given Russia's subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine, an optimal communications strategy would presumably have been for its domestic-facing media to maximally focus on potential *casus belli* such as arms deliveries to Ukraine by NATO countries, AFU actions in the Donbas, Ukrainian 'Nazism', and so on in order to maximise support for the imminent invasion. However, in news broadcasting (where such comparisons are easier to quantify), reports dealing with 'the Russian invasion myth' far outweighed those dealing with any *casus belli* until only several days before the invasion. Again, this invites the question of why so much effort was put into denying something for which substantial preparations had already been made.

One tempting but ultimately implausible explanation is that denials were part of a strategy to obscure Russia's intentions in order to prevent its adversaries from responding accordingly. However, this was not accompanied by any concerted effort in the physical domain to obscure Russia's force build-up, which was apparent not only to intelligence agencies but also to observers using only publicly available

information.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, such denials dominated not only Russia's external messaging but also its domestic-facing propaganda.

Another appealing but unsatisfactory explanation is that support of the Russian populace for a future invasion of Ukraine was taken as a given, and therefore those responsible for orchestrating and disseminating the Kremlin's propaganda simply did not see any need to take steps to bolster that support. However, this seems to be readily contradicted by the draconian steps taken by the Russian government in the immediate aftermath of the invasion to control the narrative, such as introducing fifteen-year prison sentences for spreading 'fake' information about the armed forces and the progress of the 'special military operation' a little over a week after it was launched.<sup>65</sup>

Instead, it is possible that the pattern in Russia's communications strategy during this period can be attributed to two factors:

1. **The decision to invade was only taken shortly before the invasion itself: while it is beyond the scope of this report to evaluate such claims, there is evidence from publicly available reporting (which is in turn based on intelligence assessments<sup>66</sup>) suggesting that—while extensive preparations had already been made**

to prepare for such a course of action—Putin may not have made a final decision to launch his ‘special military operation’ until February 2022. If this is indeed the case, then a comprehensive communications strategy to support the invasion could not have been developed or implemented in time.

- 2. Those responsible for designing and implementing the Kremlin’s communications strategy were not aware of plans for an invasion:** this is consistent with other reports claiming that senior members of Russia’s government and other members of Putin’s ostensible inner circle were not informed of the invasion until either shortly before or even after it had taken place.<sup>67</sup> If true, then such a level of secrecy may have also prevented the relevant government organs from developing a communications strategy which was fully aligned with the intentions of the executive branch.

Accounts of former employees of state-controlled media outlets and information leaks indicate that the Kremlin’s domestic messaging priorities are generally communicated from the power vertical to television channels via regular memos known variously as *temniks* (темники) or *metodičkas* (методички). According to Meduza (a Russian-language media outlet based in Latvia), these originate from the Office of Public Projects of the President’s Administration (Управление Президента Российской Федерации по общественным проектам<sup>68</sup>), most likely from its deputy director, an official named Aleksej Žarič (Алексей Жарич).<sup>69</sup> Regardless of the precise identity of this official, it is plausible that someone of his equivalent stature in the Office of Public Projects (or any analogous body responsible for propaganda strategy) may not have been apprised of Putin’s intentions given that more senior officials were also kept in the dark.

Nor were propagandists able to take clear cues from pronouncements made by Putin on the subject, which had not significantly evolved since the publication of ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians’ the previous July, or from those of other government officials, who may have not themselves been fully informed of Putin’s intentions (insofar as such intentions may have even been resolved by the president himself). Therefore, in the absence of instructions to the contrary, when faced with growing Western claims of an imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine, propagandists would most likely have followed the long-standing practice of criticising the Russia-related output of Western media to generate material while cleaving to tried-and-tested narratives of Western ‘Russophobia’.

The dramatic change in tone observed on 17 February may indicate the point at which clearer directives were issued to support an escalation, although it is still not evident that propagandists and spokespeople were fully apprised of the exact nature of Russia’s ‘special military operation’, which may be why some continued to deride the idea of a full-scale, multi-domain invasion. And in any case, by this point in time the Kremlin’s communication campaign was rapidly overtaken by events on the ground.

The misalignment in messaging becomes more apparent when one also takes into account changes in narratives that followed the invasion. In his speech on 24 February announcing the start of the full-scale phase of the invasion, Putin stated its principal goals to be the ‘demilitarization and **denazification** of Ukraine’ (emphasis added). While the presence of neo-Nazi or far-right groups and their associated imagery in Ukraine had long been a recurrent theme in Kremlin propaganda, the notion of ‘denazifying’ Ukraine was not a major focus of pro-Kremlin media in the run-up to the invasion. For example, the term ‘denazification’<sup>70</sup> appeared 69 times in articles published by TASS in the year to 23 February 2022, but 47,201 times in the six months following Putin’s 24 February speech.<sup>71</sup> This lack of denazification-related messaging was also observed in

the Kremlin-aligned Telegram ecosystem by Dr Charlie Winter in his report that accompanies this one.<sup>72</sup>

In conclusion, therefore, our analysis indicates that the relationship between the executive branch and the information channels that are ultimately controlled by it does not necessarily conform to a hypothesised optimal system in which the latter is used to massage public opinion towards supporting decisions made by the former ahead of their announcement or implementation, even when those decisions might reasonably be anticipated to produce negative consequences for Russia and, by

extension, its people. This should be borne in mind when trying to divine Russia's future actions according to the output of its state-controlled media.

Additionally, our analysis may facilitate the appraisal of other reporting concerning how and when decisions relating to the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine were taken. Specifically, it lends credence to those reports which claim that the decision to invade was made (a) relatively late, (b) within a very small circle of people, and (c) with little coordination between Putin and the wider government apparatus.

## Glossary of acronyms/initialisms

AFU	Armed Forces of Ukraine
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies (a US-based thinktank)
DPR	Donetsk People's Republic
EUCOM	US European Command
<i>EWVS</i>	<i>Evening with Vladimir Solov'ev (Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым)</i>
LPR	Luhansk People's Republic
SAM	Surface to Air Missile
TASS	Russia's state news agency (Телеграфное агентство Советского Союза)
TB2	Bayraktar TB2, an unmanned combat air vehicle used by the AFU

## Glossary of names

Austin	Lloyd Austin, United States secretary of defense
Markov	Ihor Markov (Игор Олегович Марков / Игорь Олегович Марков), a former member of the Ukrainian parliament and frequent panellist on current affairs talk shows
Peskov	Dmitrij Peskov (Дмитрий Сергеевич Песков), Vladimir Putin's press secretary
Popov	Evgenij Popov (Евгений Георгиевич Попов), co-presenter of <i>60 Minutes</i> and State Duma member, United Russia
Shoigu	Sergej Shoigu (Сергей Кужугетович Шойгу), minister of defence of the Russian Federation
Simon'jan	Margarita Simon'jan (Маргарита Симоновна Симоныян), editor-in-chief of RT and frequent panellist on current affairs talk shows
Skabeeva	Ol'ga Skabeeva (Ольга Владимировна Скабеева), co-presenter of <i>60 Minutes</i>
Žirinovskij	Vladimir Žirinovskij (Владимир Вольфович Жириновский), former leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and frequent panellist on current affairs talk shows; died April 2022

# Endnotes

- 1 In this report this term is used as it is employed in a Russian context to signify countries broadly aligned with the US and/or NATO.
- 2 Examples of articles making such claims are given in the relevant sections throughout this report.
- 3 Signals intelligence also presumably played a part in assessments made by intelligence agencies, although the relative contribution of such intelligence is harder to determine as it is not typically made public.
- 4 [Media consumption in Russia 2021, by type](#), *Statista*, 11 October 2022
- 5 [Share of average monthly viewers in the total TV audience aged four years and older in large cities of Russia from January to November 2022, by channel](#), *Statista*, 31 January 2023
- 6 The earlier broadcast is aimed at viewers in central and eastern regions of Russia; the content of each broadcast differs, but usually with substantial overlap.
- 7 [Хомчак: РФ наращивает войска близи границы Украины](#), *Interfax Ukraine [Интерфакс Україна]*, 30 March 2021
- 8 [EUCOM raises threat level for Ukraine as Russia builds up forces](#), *Stars and Stripes*, 31 March 2021
- 9 Matthe Funiaole, Joseph Bermudez, Heather Conley & Cyrus Newlin, [Unpacking the Russian Troop Buildup along Ukraine's Border](#), *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 22 April 2021
- 10 [Шойгу объявил проверку боевой готовности российских войск](#) *RIA Novosti [РИА Новости]*, 6 April 2021
- 11 [Войска Южного и Западного округов возвращаются в места постоянной дислокации после крупных учений в Крыму](#), *Channel One [Первый Канал]*, 22 April 2021
- 12 [Шойгу решил завершить внезапную проверку в Южном и Западном военных округах](#), *TASS [ТАСС]*, 22 April 2021
- 13 [Russia builds up forces on Ukrainian border](#), *Janes*, 9 December 2021
- 14 For example, the 74<sup>th</sup> Motor Rifle Brigade (source: [Ukraine claims 800 Russian casualties, 1 surrendered Russian platoon, in Day 1 of invasion](#), *The Week*, 25 February 2022), the 6<sup>th</sup> Tank Regiment (source: [Ukrainian military defeat tank regiment of Russian troops, eliminate commander Zakharov in Brovarsky district - Defense Intelligence](#), *Interfax Ukraine*, 10 March 2022)
- 15 [Russia builds up forces on Ukrainian border](#), *Janes*, 9 December 2021
- 16 For example, the 19<sup>th</sup> Motorised Division (source: [Operational update regarding the #russian\\_invasion as of 06:00 on April 23, 2022](#), Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 23 April 2022)
- 17 [An Alternate Reality: How Russia's State TV Spins the Ukraine War](#), *The New York Times*, 15 December 2022
- 18 Particularly the case of a four- or five-year-old boy who was allegedly killed by a Ukrainian while playing outside his house. This story had been carried by separatist outlets in the previous week before being picked up by mainstream channels focusing on the domestic Russian audience.
- 19 For example, suggesting drowning Istanbul with a tsunami by detonating a nuclear bomb in the Bosphorus, following the downing of a Russian Su-24M jet by the Turkish air force in November 2015 (source: [Rusya'nın Liberal Demokrat Partisi lideri: Boğaz'ı bombalayalım](#), *NTV*, 28 November 2015)
- 20 [Путин ответил на призыв не усиливать присутствие войск на границе с Украиной](#), *Lenta.ru*, 9 April 2021



- 21 For example, [‘РФ напомнила США о суверенном праве перемещать свои войска по своей территории’](#), *Izvestija [Известия]*, 5 December 2021
- 22 [‘Буря рискует выплеснуться из стакана: для чего Франции нужен саммит по Украине’](#), *Baltnews*, 23 February 2022
- 23 For example, expressions of concern by the Pentagon and NATO (e.g., [‘NATO condemns Russian military build-up as Moscow warns escalation could ‘destroy’ Ukraine’](#), *France 24*, 2 March 2021), and associated coverage from media outlets (e.g., [‘Could Ukraine-Russia border tension escalate into a fresh conflict?’](#), *Euronews*, 2 April 2021) and thinktanks (e.g., Peter Dickinson, [‘Is Putin about to launch a new offensive in Ukraine?’](#), *Atlantic Council*, 4 April 2021)
- 24 For example, Biden’s first call to Zelensky (source: [‘Russia’s Buildup Near Ukraine Puts Team Biden on Edge’](#), *Foreign Policy*, 2 April 2021)
- 25 For example, T-80U tanks and BTR-80 armoured personnel carriers near Kursk (source: Status-6 [[@Archer83Able](#)], [‘Kursk \(video uploaded October 27\): - 1st part: T-80U tanks, possibly belonging to the 4th Guards Kantemirovskaya Tank Division \(located in Naro-Fominsk, Moscow Oblast\). - 2nd part: BTR-80 APCs, trucks \(including fuel ones\) & military ambulances’](#) [tweet with video], *Twitter*, 28 October 2021); Iskander tactical missile systems in Bryansk (source: Status-6 [[@Archer83Able](#)], [‘A video, said to be filmed on October 27 in the Bryansk Oblast, of Iskander tactical missile systems on the move \(presumably 442th Missile Brigade from Kursk’](#) [tweet with video], *Twitter*, 29 October 2021); Buk systems and other heavy equipment in Smolensk (source: Alex Kochkarov [[@AlexKochkarov](#)], [‘This was reportedly filmed in #Smolensk region, western #Russia, with the Russian army weaponry being moved on a train:’](#) [tweet with video], *Twitter*, 30 October 2021)
- 26 Status-6 [[@Archer83Able](#)], [‘Kursk \(video uploaded October 27\): - 1st part: T-80U tanks, possibly belonging to the 4th Guards Kantemirovskaya Tank Division \(located in Naro-Fominsk, Moscow Oblast\). - 2nd part: BTR-80 APCs, trucks \(including fuel ones\) & military ambulances’](#) [tweet with video], *Twitter*,
- 28 October 2021
- 27 [‘Russian troop movements near Ukraine border prompt concern in U.S., Europe’](#), *The Washington Post*, 30 October 2021
- 28 [‘Russian troop movements near Ukraine border prompt concern in U.S., Europe’](#), *The Washington Post*, 30 October 2021
- 29 [‘Russia builds up forces on Ukrainian border’](#), *Janes*, 9 December 2021
- 30 [‘Russia planning massive military offensive against Ukraine involving 175,000 troops, U.S. intelligence warns’](#), *The Washington Post*, 3 December 2021 [archived 30 December 2021]
- 31 [‘Russia could attack Ukraine on 10 fronts with 100,000 soldiers officials warn’](#), *news.com.au*, 23 November 2021.
- 32 [‘U.S. Warns Europe That Russia May Be Planning Ukraine Invasion’](#), *Bloomberg*, 11 November 2021
- 33 [‘Interview with Rossiya TV channel’](#), *President of Russia [kremlin.ru]*, 13 November 2021
- 34 [‘Russia shuts mission to NATO in spy row retaliation’](#), *Reuters*, 18 October 2021
- 35 [‘Russia is obstacle to peace in east Ukraine - U.S. Defence Secretary’](#), *Reuters*, 19 October 2021.
- 36 The discrepancy in emphasis between news programming and panel shows can probably be attributed to editorial factors rather than Russia’s overarching propaganda strategy: in contrast to the rather more factual tone (if not always factual content) of news broadcasts, *60 Minutes*, *EWVS*, and other programmes tend to follow a more sensationalist approach. As it is inadvisable in a Russian media context to report on domestic topics in a sensationalist manner (as this could be taken as criticism of government policy), focusing on tried-and-tested stories such as NATO encroachment and Ukrainian intransigency naturally gives the presenters and panellists of talk shows like *60 Minutes* more scope to sensationalise and excoriate.

- 37 Vladimir Putin, 'Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев', *President of Russia* [kremlin.ru], 12 July 2021
- 38 In this instance, in relation to the Donbas, for example on both of that day's broadcasts of *60 Minutes*.
- 39 'Ukraine now says 90,000 Russian troops not far from border', *Associated Press*, 3 November 2021
- 40 'Ukraine denies report of Russian troop buildup near its borders', *Reuters*, 1 November 2021
- 41 Dmitrii Medvedev, 'Почему бессмысленны контакты с нынешним украинским руководством', *Kommersant*, 11 October 2021
- 42 'Ukraine uses Bayraktar TB2 drone in combat for first time', *UK Defence Journal*, 28 October 2021
- 43 'Putin Says U.S., NATO Moves In Black Sea 'Serious Challenge' For Russia', *Radio Free Europe*, 13 November 2021
- 44 'Russia Thins Out Its Embassy in Ukraine, a Possible Clue to Putin's Next Move', *New York Times*, 17 January 2022
- 45 'Ukraine plays down Russian invasion despite US sounding alarm', *France 24*, 6 February 2022
- 46 'Russian forces at 70% of level needed for full Ukraine invasion, U.S. officials say', *Reuters*, 6 February 2022
- 47 'Подразделения Западного и Южного военных округов начали возвращение на базы после учений', *Interfax* [Интерфакс], 15 February 2022
- 48 'Россия и Белоруссия продолжают проверку сил реагирования Союзного государства', *TASS* [ТАСС], 20 February 2022
- 49 'NATO chief: Russia continues military buildup at Ukraine border', *Politico*, 16 February 2022
- 50 Based largely on observations and reporting by BBC Monitoring.
- 51 'Договор между Российской Федерацией и Соединенными Штатами Америки о гарантиях безопасности', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation* [press release], 17 December 2021
- 52 For example, statements made by national security advisor Jake Sullivan (e.g., as quoted in 'First on CNN: US intelligence indicates Russia preparing operation to justify invasion of Ukraine', *CNN*, 14 January 2022), and White House press secretary Jen Psaki (e.g., as quoted in 'U.S. Accuses Russia Of Preparing 'False-Flag' Operation In Ukraine', *Radio Free Europe*, 14 January 2022)
- 53 'Putin could attack Ukraine on Feb. 16, Biden told allies', *Politico*, 11 February 2022
- 54 Maria Zakharova [@MariaVladimirovnaZakharova], '15 февраля 2022 войдёт в историю как день провала западной пропаганды войны. Посрамлены и уничтожены без единого выстрела.' [post], *Telegram*, 15 February 2022
- 55 Maria Zakharova [@MariaVladimirovnaZakharova], 'Просьба к средствам массовой дезинформации США и Британии Bloomberg, The New York Times, The Sun и т.д. - огласите график наших «вторжений» на предстоящий год. Хотелось бы спланировать отпуск.' [post], *Telegram*, 16 February 2022
- 56 'Russia's UN envoy rules out invasion of Ukraine', *TASS*, 31 January 2022
- 57 Although these comments were directed at the foreign media, they were also reported in Russia's domestic media (for example, on the 1 February edition of *Vremja at 21:00*). Nebenzia did not, however, rule out the possibility of a Ukrainian 'provocation', linking this explicitly to the situation in Georgia in 2008.
- 58 Charlie Winter, 'The Rise of the New Commissars—An Assessment of Russian Influence Campaigns on the Eve of the War in Ukraine', *Kremlin Communication Strategy for Russian Audiences Before and After the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2 March

2023]

**59** In western media reports, the attack was treated as genuine and attributed to Russian-backed separatists (e.g., ‘[Shelling by Russian-backed separatists raises tensions in east Ukraine](#)’, *The Guardian*, 17 February 2022)

**60** ‘[В Кремле заявили об усилении провокаций Киева у линии разграничения в Донбассе](#)’, TASS [TACC], 17 February 2022

**61** ‘[Песков назвал очередным фейком данные о "нападении" России на Украину после 20 февраля](#)’, TASS [TACC], 17 February 2022

**62** Based on comments by Zelensky that any violation by Russia of the Budapest Memorandum, whereby Ukraine voluntarily surrendered nuclear weapons stored in exchange for guarantees of its security and territorial integrity, may lead Ukraine to reconsider its commitments made under the memorandum (<https://uawire.org/zelensky-ukraine-may-reconsider-its-nuclear-status>). This was not an entirely new narrative in Kremlin messaging but it reappeared with greater prominence during this period.

**63** Similar observations were made of official communications of Russian government ministries by Laima Venclauskienė in her report that accompanies this one (Laima Venclauskienė, ‘Russian Federation Official Statements and Media Messaging Analysis’, *Kremlin Communication Strategy for Russian Audiences Before and After the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2 March 2023)

**64** For example, ‘[Russia’s military buildup enters a more dangerous phase](#)’, *The Economist*, 11 February 2022

**65** ‘[Федеральный закон от 04.03.2022 № 32-ФЗ "О внесении изменений в Уголовный кодекс Российской Федерации и статьи 31 и 151 Уголовно-процессуального кодекса Российской Федерации"](#)’, *Official publication of legislative acts [Официальное опубликование правовых актов]*, 4 March 2022

**66** For example, ‘[U.S. INTELLIGENCE](#)

[SAYS PUTIN MADE A LAST-MINUTE DECISION TO INVADE UKRAINE](#)’, *The Intercept*, 11 March 2022; and (based on briefings from unnamed Russian government officials) ‘[How Putin blundered into Ukraine — then doubled down](#)’, *The Financial Times*, 23 February 2023

**67** ‘[How Putin blundered into Ukraine — then doubled down](#)’, *The Financial Times*, 23 February 2023; and ‘[How Putin’s technocrats saved the economy to fight a war they opposed](#)’, *The Financial Times*, 16 December 2022

**68** ‘[Подразделения Администрации Президента](#)’, *President of Russia [kremlin.ru]*, archived 31 January 2023

**69** ‘[“You don’t cover up disfigured corpses by saying something positive” The Kremlin’s written instructions to propagandists tell a story of desperation, failure, and frictions with the media](#)’, *Meduza*, 12 October 2022

**70** Russian: ‘денацификация’ and associated inflected forms

**71** Source: Google Trends.

**72** Charlie Winter, ‘The Rise of the New Commissars—An Assessment of Russian Influence Campaigns on the Eve of the War in Ukraine’, *Kremlin Communication Strategy for Russian Audiences Before and After the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2 March 2023



# PHANTOM PILLARS OF PRO-KREMLIN DISINFORMATION: A CASE STUDY OF RUSSIAN JOURNALISTS COVERING THE TOPIC OF WAR IN UKRAINE

by Jakub Kubs, Dr. Aleksandra Michalowska, Viktoras Daukšas

## Executive summary

An analysis of the profiles of 27 Russian journalists who have published the largest number of articles about the war in Ukraine reveals serious doubts if those people even exist in real life. In the case of the *Lenta.ru* outlet, the investigation revealed the use of generative adversarial network (GAN) generated images as profile pictures of the journalists. Most of the authors could not be identified due to the lack of confirmed information about them, both on the agency's websites and on the web in general. In the case of most of the journalists analysed, serious doubts about their credibility were raised, prompted by an unusually high number of daily publications and timestamps, i.e., very short intervals between consecutive content pieces. In some instances performance

outpaced the human capabilities of the writer, suggesting that the journalistic profile is a sock puppet for a group of writers or an automated bot. It is also interesting to note the common practice in Russian outlets to remove names from visible parts of the article, but still leave the author in 'front-end source' code. One of the possible explanations for this is that real people prefer not to be identified with the content they spread.

# The big picture

When talking about inauthentic behaviour, there is usually a lot of focus on the spread of manipulated content, and less on the question of the authorship of the material. In this analysis we reviewed **27 authors** related to five major media outlets in Russia: *Gazeta.ru*, *Izvestia*, *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, *Lenta.ru*, and *Vzglyad* (Figure 1). The main reason for choosing specific authors was that in the period **from 1 October 2021 to 1 April 2022** they published the highest number of news articles about the war in Ukraine—in total nearly **15,000 articles**. Initial research revealed that some of the investigated journalists supposedly wrote thousands of articles about the so-called Russian 'special military operation'. Even taking into account the modern principle of 'publish or perish', the sheer amount of content raised serious suspicions in regard to the authenticity of the behaviour of these journalists.

The first step of the research was to search for information on selected problematic authors. Usually, finding basic data about

employees of well-known media outlets is not a problem—it is easy to find their biographies, contact details, or social media channels. However, in the case of all the examined authors, finding proof, such as their links to specific media and sometimes even signs of their existence outside the platform, was a very challenging process. In most cases obtaining reliable information required in-depth research, as a result of which analysts found **11** out of **27** authors to be likely real and linked to the media source. Nevertheless, the behaviour of some of them was still questionable due to the number of articles written daily that exceeded the physical capacity of one person. As for the next **12** authors, it was impossible to confirm their identity, while the research on **4** authors of *Lenta.ru* led to the conclusion that most probably they are fake personas. It was the last group under whose disguise large quantities of propaganda articles were produced, flooding infospace with the desired presentation of the military events in Ukraine.

## The most prolific Russian journalist that does not exist

We researched a group of authors from *Lenta.ru*. According to Similarweb,<sup>1</sup> the online

newspaper is one of the most popular Russian-language online resources, with **149.8 million**



FIGURE 1. Analysed data

**visits** per month. *Lenta.ru* is owned by the holding company Rambler Media Group (which since 2020 has been solely owned by the biggest Russian bank, Sberbank<sup>2</sup>) and has served as a propaganda outlet since 2014.

One of the employees of *Lenta.ru* can aspire to the title of the most prolific Russian journalist. **‘Marina Sovina’**<sup>3</sup> (Марина Совина) supposedly started to work with the outlet in May 2021 and since then has authored nearly **38,000** articles. The author publishes an average of **81 articles per day** (Figure 2). Two days before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, on 22 February 2022, ‘Sovina’ wrote over **150 articles in a single day**.<sup>4</sup> It is notable that *Lenta.ru* journalists whose identity can be easily verified write a significantly smaller amount of content, e.g. 150 articles per two years. In the case of ‘Sovina’, outstanding ‘productivity’ was enough to question the authenticity of the individual’s behaviour and an incentive to find out more information about the person.

The author’s page on *Lenta.ru* contains additional information. An email address, photo, and short description of ‘Sovina’ are provided. When reading the profile, one learns that

she is the ‘Editor of Operational Information’ (Редактор отдела оперативной информации) and has special hobbies: ‘She has jumped by parachute, knows how to handle a sniper rifle.’ Sympathy towards the author can also be evoked by the profile photo of a smiling woman—the one that we used to determine that the individual is inauthentic.

It is worth noting that there are two profiles of ‘Sovina’ on *Lenta.ru*. Both have the same description, photo, and contact details. However, the first one states that the journalist’s name is ‘Mariya’,<sup>5</sup> while the other has ‘Marina’.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the account of ‘Mariya Sovina’ has not authored any content pieces, unlike its doppelgänger. The multiplication of the same personas is probably a mistake on their creator’s part and indicates that the proactive ‘author’ is also inauthentic. ‘Marina Sovina’ appeared on *Lenta.ru* for the first time on 17 May 2021 and immediately started to write extensively about Ramzan Kadyrov as Putin’s henchman,<sup>7</sup> European sanctions imposed on Russian citizens,<sup>8</sup> the Ukrainian ‘arm-chair army’,<sup>9</sup> or fights between NATO soldiers and local Estonians.<sup>10</sup>

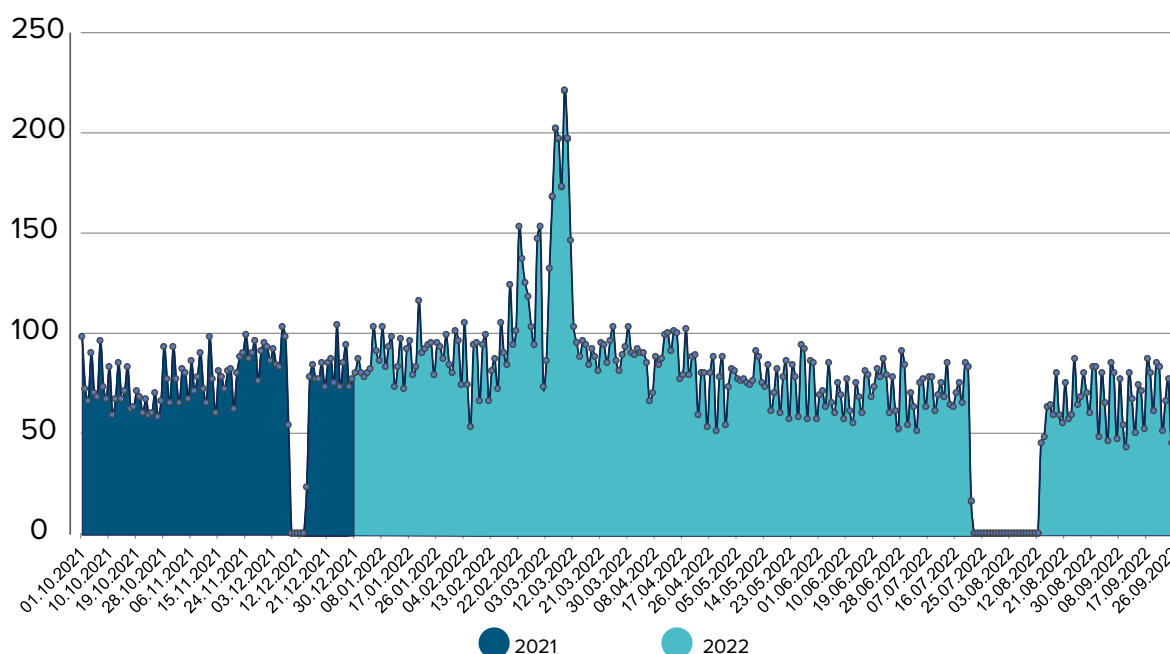


FIGURE 2. Daily dynamics of articles by ‘Sovina’ (*Lenta.ru*)







(1) (2) (3) (4)  
 FIGURE 5. Reverse image search results for ‘Sovina’

Among the websites that republished the materials of the analysed authors, the news.rambler.ru platform stands out (Figure 4). However, it belongs to the Rambler Media Group (controlled by Sberbank), which also owns, among others, the *Lenta.ru* platform, as mentioned earlier. It is notable that more than a quarter of the republished articles appeared on the Latvian portal Baltijas Balss (bb.lv), one of the pro-Kremlin media outlets in the Baltics. To a lesser extent, articles were republished on other pro-Kremlin channels (e.g., ukraine.ru, technovar.ru), blogging platforms (cont.ws), or forums with questions (qna.center).

The question of how to generate massive amounts of content remains. A possible explanation might be crowdsourcing news written by anonymous journalists using the disguise of ‘Sovina’. However, this solution seems to be logistically complicated, considering the fact that the fake author seems to be publishing up to ten articles per minute. A more likely explanation would be employing artificial intelligence to aggregate news from other sources and republishing them under the name ‘Sovina’. Similar automation could be used in the case of other *Lenta.ru* authors whose pattern of behaviour seems inauthentic. Automatic content creation<sup>11</sup> is becoming very popular and is already having a large impact on journalism.<sup>12</sup>

Another indicator of ‘Sovina’s’ inauthenticity is a photo purportedly depicting the supposed *Lenta.ru* journalist. An image search using Google and Yandex search engines failed to find other photos of the author. Most of the results redirect to the author’s profile page on *Lenta.ru*. However, in some cases very similar photos were found (Figure 5). It appears that

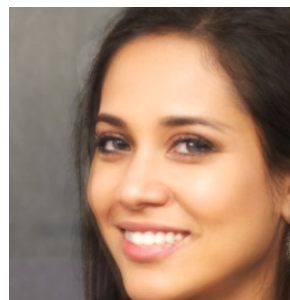


FIGURE 6. The result of superimposing photos found by reverse image searching ‘Sovina’s’ profile picture

they were also used for creating fake personas, i.e., the same photo was used to set up several accounts on a Russian workplace platform. Search results for the ‘Sovina’ photo using the TinEye platform indicated that the photo of the *Lenta.ru* author was most likely generated via the Generated Photos website.<sup>13</sup> The application allows the user to set the appearance of the generated face (such as beautification, left profile, and skin, hair, or eye colour). Superimposing the photos on top of one another leaves no illusion that ‘Sovina’s’ photo is fake (Figure 6).

Results of the reverse image search for ‘Sovina’s’ profile picture are presented in Figure 5. From the left: (1) the profile picture of ‘Sovina’ on the *Lenta.ru* website;<sup>14</sup> (2) the profile picture of the author of the article about phishing posted on Definir Tech (all photos of the authors on the website were generated using thispersondoesnotexist.com);<sup>15</sup> (3) the photo used for creating at least two different profiles on a Russian workplace platform;<sup>16</sup> (4) the result of the TinEye search for ‘Sovina’s’ photo.<sup>17</sup>

The practice of using GAN-generated photos is common for creating fake social media accounts. However, it is surprising in the context of a profile of the alleged author of one of Russia’s most popular news outlets.

A reverse image search also had another unexpected result. Apparently the profile picture of ‘Sovina’ was used in an article of the Ukrainian news outlet *Delovaya Stolitsa* (Деловая столица) as a photo of Marina Fenina,<sup>18</sup> a member of the OSCE Special

Monitoring Mission to Ukraine,<sup>19</sup> who died in the shelling of Kharkiv on 2 March 2022. The tragic death of the OSCE member was also described in *Lenta.ru* in an article authored by who else but ‘Sovina’.<sup>20</sup>

## Smiling faces of Lenta.ru

The credibility of other *Lenta.ru* authors was also questionable. In the case of ‘Varvara Koshechkina’ (Варвара Кошечкина), the second most prolific *Lenta.ru* author, we could not find any social media profile of a person with this name who worked for the portal. A reverse image search did not yield results, which may be due to the fact that on the profile page the photo is only available at a very low resolution. However, searches for the name in the URL address did identify a network of blogs that republished ‘Koshechkina’s’ articles.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly those blogs are supposedly dedicated to different topics like lifestyle, electricity, mobile phones, and so on; however, they reshare politics and military themed articles authored by ‘Koshechkina’. The sites follow exactly the same pattern.<sup>22</sup> Most probably the only reason for the existence of the blogs is to provide backlinks for the original article, thus contributing to its better positioning in the search engines. Some of them also share articles authored by other journalists analysed in this study.

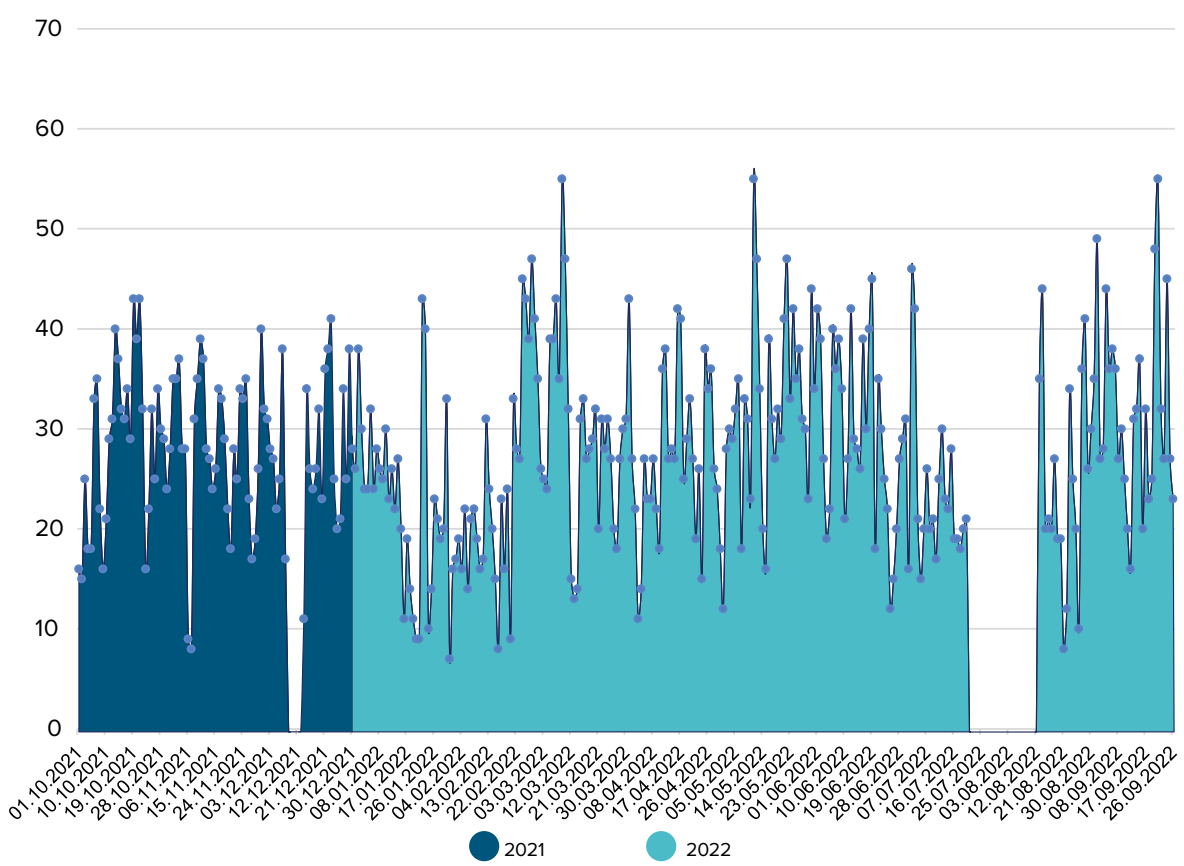


FIGURE 7. Daily dynamics of articles by ‘Koshechkina’ (*Lenta.ru*)



FIGURE 8. Reverse image search results for 'Kondrat'yeva'

From the beginning of their career at *Lenta.ru*, 'Koshechkina' would author around 30 articles per day, on some days reaching more than 50 pieces in a row (Figure 7). In total, the individual authored more than **14,800 news articles**, usually with an interval of 10 minutes between them, in some cases publishing two content pieces in a minute.<sup>23</sup>



FIGURE 9. The result of superimposition of pictures

The third most 'productive' *Lenta.ru* journalist writing about the war in Ukraine was 'Viktoriya Kondrat'yeva' (Виктория Кондратьева).<sup>24</sup> The results of a reverse search of the newspaper's profile picture found other very similar photos, which were used to set up what were most likely fake online social media accounts (Figure 8). They all share common characteristics, such as minor facial distortions, elements that don't match the rest of the image, or blurred backgrounds. By superimposing the photos on top of one another, it can be

determined that the 'Kondrat'yeva' photo was most likely generated using the same algorithm (Figure 9).

Figure 8 shows examples of reverse image search results for the 'Kondrat'yeva' profile picture. From the left: (1) the profile picture of 'Kondrat'yeva' on *Lenta.ru*;<sup>25</sup> (2) the photo

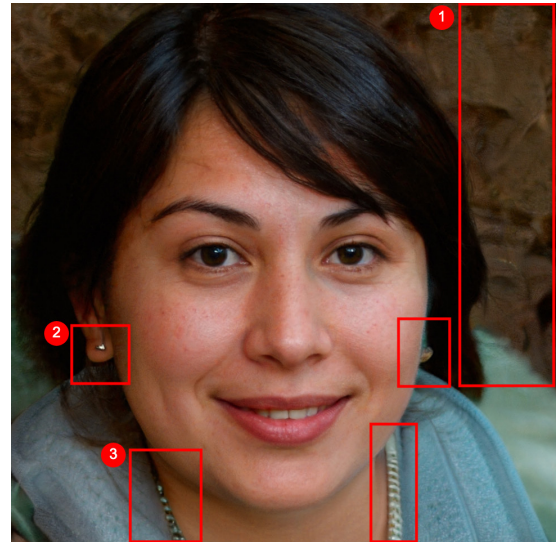


FIGURE 10. GAN-generated photo of the *Lenta.ru* author 'Zapol'skaya'

used for creating at least two different profiles on the French mirror of Wikipedia;<sup>26</sup> (3) the profile picture of an account on a Russian review platform;<sup>27</sup> (4) the photo used for creating different accounts on Facebook<sup>28</sup> and a Russian Web developers' platform<sup>29</sup> (notably the latter account is suspended).

The analysis of the other most prolific authors of *Lenta.ru* revealed their profiles to be similarly suspicious. In the case of 'Alevtina Zapol'skaya'<sup>30</sup> (Алевтина Запольская)—the

fourth most prolific author—some typical features of a GAN-generated photo could be spotted (Figure 10), like (1) an unnatural background, (2) unmatched earrings, or (3) a different necklace in the two parts of the photo, suggesting that the photo was artificially generated.<sup>31</sup>

The number of articles allegedly written by ‘Zapol’skaya’ varies significantly from year to year (Figure 11). In 2019 and 2020 this *Lenta.ru* author published only six articles. The number of publications began to increase in 2021 and reached its peak in early 2022—on 5 March 2022 ‘Zapol’skaya’ published 42 pieces. From the end of May the individual started to produce articles in batches of around 40 every couple of days. The subject matter of the publications is consistently propagandistic coverage of the events of the war in Ukraine. According to the profile page on *Lenta.ru*, ‘Zapol’skaya’ so far has authored over 5000

content pieces.<sup>32</sup>

The vast majority of content pieces are news and usually do not exceed a thousand characters. Only a few articles authored by ‘Zapol’skaya’ are more sophisticated. For example, in ‘The Denazification Project: How Did the USSR and the West Arrange the Denazification of Germany after World War II?’ the author praises the USSR for the ‘denazification’ of East Germany after the war and contrasts it to the West, which supposedly allowed former Nazis into the newly formed NATO structures.<sup>33</sup> The author refers to Ukraine, claiming that ‘the Americans and the British did not carry out denazification of Ukrainian nationalists and Nazis who ended up in Western Europe, but, on the contrary, supported them’. According to ‘Zapol’skaya’, Russia should draw lessons from the USSR and remove Ukrainians ‘from the political, economic, and cultural spheres’ of life.

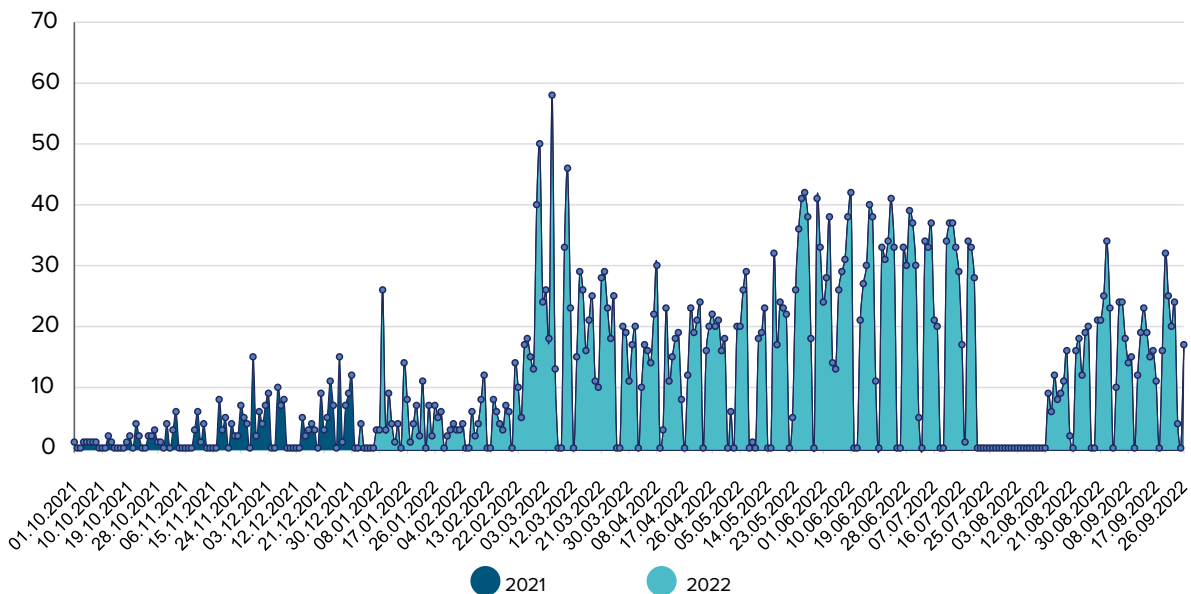


FIGURE 11. Daily dynamics of articles by ‘Zapol’skaya’ (*Lenta.ru*)

# Hiding in the code

Another group of authors that caught the attention of the analysts is from *Izvestia*. The news outlet is owned by the National Media Group, which is owned by the Gazprom-Media holding—an important shareholder in Russia’s most influential media outlets (e.g. Channel One).

Regarding problematic *Izvestia* journalists, two issues should be highlighted: (1) the questionable authenticity of the analysed authors in six cases out of seven, and (2) the puzzling practice of hiding the author’s name in the displayed version of the article (names of the authors can be found, however, in the page’s HTML source). In total the investigated authors published more than **18,000 content pieces** from 1 October 2021 till 30 September 2022, many of which presented the events of the Russia–Ukraine war in a propagandistic way.

The profile of an *Izvestia* journalist named ‘Polina G.’ (Полина Г.) is an example of such behaviour. In this case the inauthenticity of the person could not be established, so we do not give the full name of the author. A Google search for ‘Polina’ on the site ‘iz.ru’ (Figure 12) produced only 19 hits in total, at any time, and in the case of the Yandex search engine the number was even smaller—9 hits.<sup>34</sup> For the period analysed (November 2021 to September 2022) the

search engines found no hits at all. However, during that time the author in fact published more than 2000 articles.

As shown in Figure 13, there is a noticeable regularity in the number of articles published by the author. Periods of inactivity are interrupted by a sudden increase in the number of pieces, which persists for several days, after which it drops to zero. This pattern persisted until the beginning of March 2022, thus shortly after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. After a long period of inactivity (interrupted by one spike in mid April), ‘Polina’ appears to be returning to her usual pattern of publishing a large number of pieces over several days.

However, despite such a large number of articles, the authorship is hidden on the article page and visible only in the HTML source code.<sup>35</sup> The reason for such practice is disputable—concealing the authorship of such a large number of articles is definitely questionable and could be explained by efforts to hide one’s contribution to disseminating propaganda.

Further analysis of the author’s activity provides even more suspicious findings. Investigation of ‘Polina’s’ profile page<sup>36</sup> indicates that the individual publishes content pieces often at night and at short intervals,

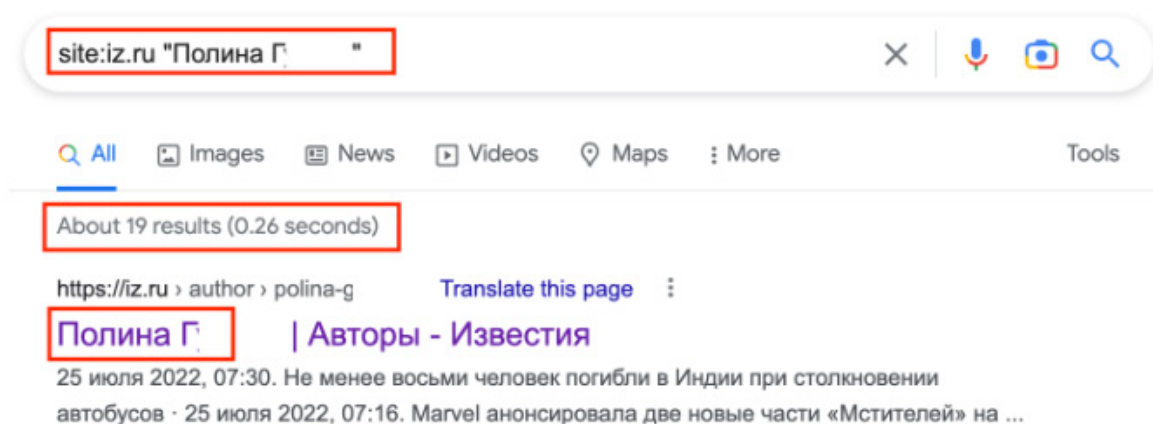


FIGURE 12. Google search for ‘Polina G.’ on the *Izvestia* website. Google and the Google logo are trademarks of Google LLC.

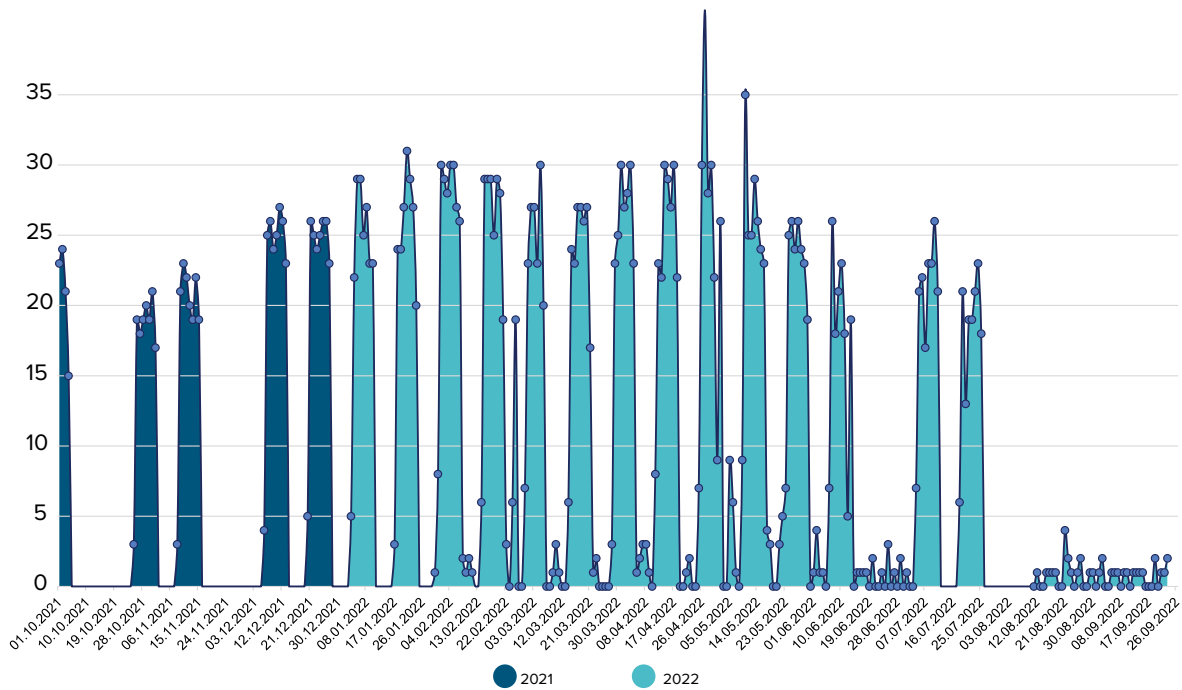


FIGURE 13. Daily dynamics of the author ‘Polina G.’ (*Izvestia*)

sometimes of one minute (Table 2).

The author published their first article in *Izvestia* in April 2019, and then went dormant for 20 months (from May 2019 to February 2021 ‘Polina’ published only one article—describing the celebration of the holiday dedicated to the Soviet ‘Immortal Regiment’ in Latin

America). The author’s (in)authenticity was also assessed on the basis that no information about the person, connections with other outlets, or traces of the author’s existence outside *Izvestia* could be found. Similar problems were encountered with almost all the investigated authors from the outlet.

Mon	24	23	29	30	26	35	30	44	3	1											18	33		
Tue	23	18	26	19	29	26	27	29	9												1	27	24	
Wed	24	24	22	31	22	30	23	33	7	2											1	19	34	
Thu	26	17	23	24	30	24	29	36	7												2	23	40	
Fri	31	20	23	33	38	35	30	46	5	1												17	34	
Sat	38	27	29	26	27	24	24	39	13		1											20	37	
Sun	35	27	33	30	24	36	28	43	8													24	30	
d/h	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23

TABLE 2. Frequency (days/hours) of publication by the author ‘Polina G.’, 1 October 2021 to 30 September 2022

# The Stakhanovites

In the case of three media outlets—*Gazeta.ru*, *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, and *Vzglyad*—it was easier to find information and confirm the identities of the authors. However,

even in this case the number of articles written by journalists exceeded the capabilities of the average human.

## Gazeta.ru

Like *Izvestia*, *Gazeta.ru* is also owned by the Rambler Media Group. It is an influential source of information in Russia—according to Similarweb,<sup>37</sup> there are around 60 million visitors per month. According to Alexa,<sup>38</sup> on 1 May 2022 it was ranked 40th in Russian internet traffic and engagement. Since 2013 the source has become a pro-Kremlin propaganda tool, engaging in disinformation campaigns targeting political opponents.<sup>39</sup>

As Table 3 shows, ‘Samer’ publishes frequently in the early morning hours and late at the night, which seems unusual even for the most dedicated journalists.

Such an unusual workflow is, however, more typical for *Gazeta.ru* authors. Another journalist of this outlet, ‘Anton D.’ (‘Антон Д.’) works almost the same hours and with similar ‘enthusiasm’ (Table 4).

Several of the news outlet’s investigated authors are characterised by a very high number of publications per day. For example, ‘Samer M.’ (‘Самер М.’) published in total nearly 4800 articles, working frequently every second day and on some days reaching 50 content pieces per day (Figure 14).

The (out)performance of other *Gazeta.ru* journalists is also significant. ‘Violetta Kh.’ (‘Виолетта Х.’) published more than 4000 content pieces during the period analysed, also reaching up to 50 articles per day. Not far behind her was ‘Sakina N.’ (‘Сакина Н.’), who authored around 5000 articles, with up to 39 publications per day.

The individual’s workflow also raises doubts about the authenticity of the behaviour.

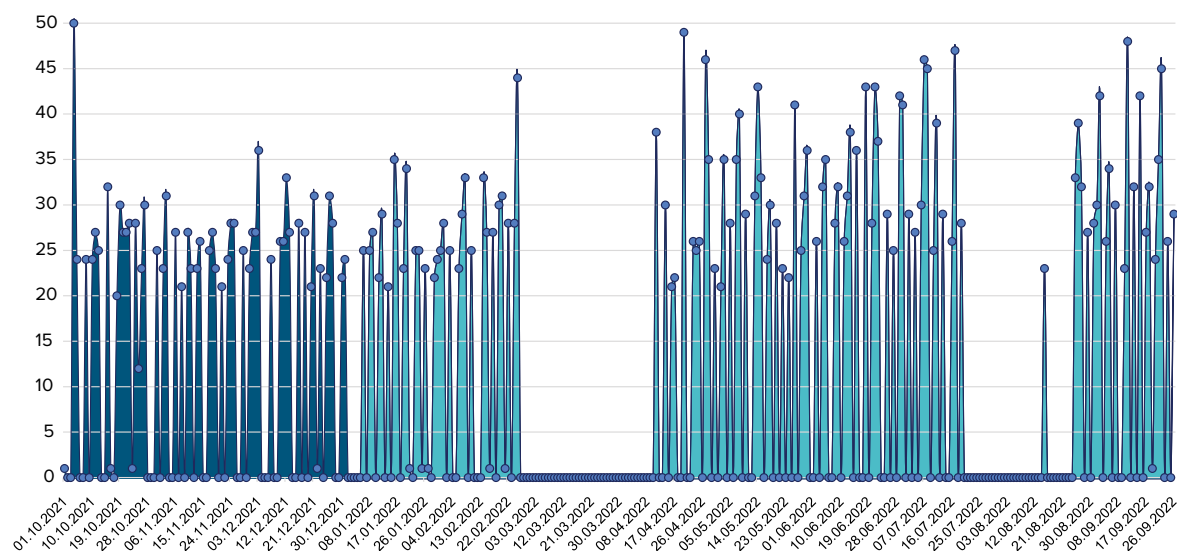


FIGURE 14. Daily dynamics of articles by ‘Samer M.’ (*Gazeta.ru*)

Mon	39	37	37	43	29	33	40	36							9	10	56	57	61	59	46	49	50	46
Tue	40	42	39	42	35	35	37	33	1		4	4	4	4	5	3	36	39	34	30	33	27	36	39
Wed	33	29	28	31	25	25	27	30							3	4	64	63	57	60	45	51	60	56
Thu	43	39	34	37	36	30	36	40			5	7	8	7	9		58	71	69	55	55	55	53	49
Fri	19	13	16	12	10	12	14	10	1		4	3	3	3	11		47	46	46	45	38	45	37	34
Sat	65	70	54	63	55	50	56	58	1								31	24	24	24	21	22	29	23
Sun	28	35	28	28	34	28	27	32	5	5	4	18	12	15	16	15	72	64	66	55	48	57	48	56
d/h	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23

TABLE 3. Frequency (days/hours) of publication by the author ‘Samer M.’, 1 October 2021 to 30 September 2022

Mon	36	28	26	30	27	29	28	30	5								21	23	24	23	19	23	20	20
Tue	37	38	32	31	35	35	33	31	11								37	37	42	41	44	42	41	39
Wed	38	28	27	29	29	26	29	24	9					2	3		26	34	32	31	30	30	30	28
Thu	35	29	28	31	30	24	27	22	10					2	3		36	38	46	43	36	41	38	37
Fri	32	22	22	23	20	25	20	23	6					3	3		30	30	36	35	37	34	35	34
Sat	41	35	35	39	36	36	37	34	11								24	26	23	29	25	26	27	26
Sun	24	16	19	16	19	16	16	15	5								34	37	39	38	38	35	38	36
d/h	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23

TABLE 4. Frequency (days/hours) of publication by the author ‘Anton D.’, 1 October 2021 to 30 September 2022

## Connections with RIA Novosti

One of the investigated authors, ‘Yekaterina Z.’ (‘Екатерина Z.’), appears to be contributing to three media outlets: *Gazeta.ru*, *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, and first and foremost *RIA Novosti*. The latter is one of the most influential news agencies in Russia. Like Sputnik or inoSMI, *RIA Novosti* is managed by Rossiya Segodnya (Россия сегодня)—a news agency owned by the Russian government and a well-known propaganda tool.

It seems that ‘Yekaterina’ publishes around 70% of the articles on *RIA Novosti*. Assuming that it is the same individual, the author has published in total 6300 articles. Limited data on the authors’ profile pages (only first and last name) did not allow us to determine with absolute certainty whether it is the same person that published also on the two other media outlets. However, the activity on

*RIA Novosti* alone is suspicious, as the author occasionally publishes **more than 80 articles** per day on the portal.

As in the case of *Izvestia* authors, the authorship of ‘Yekaterina’ is usually hidden. Although the individual’s publications are visible on the author’s profile,<sup>40</sup> the name is not displayed in the article; however, it is visible in the HTML code.<sup>41</sup> It is difficult to explain why the author’s name is hidden in the articles published by the state-owned news agency. As some articles published by the author have nearly 100,000 views, a possible explanation is that displaying the name might arouse the suspicions of readers, who would notice that ‘Yekaterina’ usually publishes articles at intervals of less than 10 minutes, with few occasions of publishing in the same time.



## Vzglyad and Komsomol'skaya pravda

The last two investigated news outlets were *Vzglyad* (owned by the 'Expert Institute for Social Research' and dubbed the Kremlin's new 'thought factory'<sup>42</sup>) and the tabloid *Komsomol'skaya pravda* (owned by Grigory Beriozkin's ESN Group, an energy holding with

close ties to Gazprom<sup>43</sup>). The authors analysed were assessed as rather authentic, although the number of published articles—ranging from 2500 to more than 5300 in the analysed period—and daily number of around 40 content pieces raise doubts about their authenticity.

## Conclusions

The behaviour of the analysed authors raises serious doubts regarding journalists that publish the highest number of articles in the most important news outlets in Russia. In most cases the publication numbers seem beyond human capacity, which may mean either that journalists in Russia are under enormous pressure which requires them to work beyond their strength, or that their behaviour is inauthentic and individual figures are only facades behind which hide collective authors or lines of code that automatically compile and publish articles. However, even if one had doubts about some individuals, especially those whose existence was confirmed, the research showed serious indications as to the inauthenticity of the most prolific 'journalists'.

In some cases, especially *Lenta.ru*, there were visible efforts to make authors' profiles more credible, although it is relatively easy to establish that the opposite was the case—the

authors were fake personas hiding the identity of the true contributors. Authors in the other news outlets could be real; however, it is unlikely that they were the only users of their profile. It is important to remember that those 'journalists' were individuals supposedly publishing the highest amount of content dedicated to describing events of the war in Ukraine to ordinary Russians. Considering that the whole information sphere is filtered through the prism of pro-Kremlin propaganda, it should be less surprising that the main contributors are as false as the news.

# Endnotes

- 1 [‘Lenta.ru Traffic and Engagement Analysis’](#), *Similarweb* [accessed 20 October 2022].
- 2 Sberbank is subject to the sixth package of EU sanctions and has been removed from SWIFT: European Commission, [‘Russia’s War on Ukraine: EU Adopts Sixth Package of Sanctions against Russia’](#), 3 June 2022.
- 3 [‘Avtory: Marina Sovina’](#), *Lenta.ru* [accessed 21 October 2022].
- 4 Marina Sovina’s articles on *Lenta.ru*: [Nimbus screenshot](#), 22 February 2022 [in Russian].
- 5 Mariya Sovina author tab on *Lenta.ru*: [Nimbus screenshot](#) [in Russian].
- 6 Marina Sovina author tab on *Lenta.ru*: [Nimbus screenshot](#) [in Russian].
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