

Narrative Warfare

How the Kremlin and Russian News Outlets Justified a War of Aggression against Ukraine

Research coordinated by Nika Aleksejeva; Edited by Andy Carvin



Atlantic Council



DFRLab



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Executive Summary

In the weeks and months leading up to Russia invading Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin media employed false and misleading narratives to *justify* military action against Ukraine, mask the Kremlin's operational planning, and *deny* any responsibility for the coming war. Collectively, these narratives served as Vladimir Putin's *casus belli* to engage in a war of aggression against Ukraine.

To research this report, the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) identified recurring pro-Kremlin narratives over two timeframes: the **2014–2021 interwar period** and the **seventy days leading up to the 2022 invasion**. For the interwar period, we reviewed **more than 350 fact-checks of pro-Kremlin disinformation**. We then collected more than ten thousand examples of false and misleading narratives published by fourteen pro-Kremlin outlets over the seventy-day pre-invasion period. To understand how these narratives evolved, we catalogued them by themes, sub-narratives, and relationships to pre-invasion escalatory events. This allowed us to produce a **timeline of false and misleading Kremlin narratives** encompassing the year leading to the invasion, showing how Russia weaponized these narratives as its actions on the ground escalated toward war.

Our timeline documents Russian deployments to the Ukrainian border disguised as training exercises, then tracks how the Kremlin and leaders of the breakaway republics wove together their justifications, denials, and attempts to mask their activities. Pro-Kremlin outlets emphasized these narratives during **key escalatory events**, including Russia demanding unrealistic security guarantees from Ukraine and the West; separatist officials accusing Ukraine of shelling a kindergarten and employing saboteurs against chemical facilities; separatist officials evacuating civilians and calling for Kremlin intervention; Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy discussing the 1994 Budapest Memorandum that surrendered Ukraine's nuclear stockpile for security guarantees; and Vladimir Putin announcing recognition of the breakaway republics.

We then dissect the text of Putin's February 24 invasion speech. **A DFRLab assessment of the speech identified more than two hundred references to hostile narratives that previously appeared in pro-Kremlin outlets over the prior seventy days.**

Following our review of Putin's speech, we break down our analysis of pre-war pro-Kremlin narratives in further detail. During the 2014–2021 interwar period, the

three most prominent recurring narratives included **the Ukrainian army and voluntary formations are brutal, Ukraine became a failed state after it followed Europe, and Ukrainians are Nazis.**

For the period representing the seventy days prior to the invasion (December 16, 2021–February 24, 2022) we analyzed and cataloged more than ten thousand articles by fourteen pro-Kremlin outlets. Among the primary narratives we investigated were

- **Russia is seeking peace** (2,201 articles);
- **Russia has a moral obligation to do something about security in the region** (2,086 articles);
- **Ukraine is aggressive** (1,888 articles);
- **the West is creating tensions in the region** (1,729 articles); and
- **Ukraine is a puppet of the West** (182 articles).

The 2,201 articles containing the narrative **Russia is seeking peace** ebbed and flowed in the news cycle, serving as a moral-high-ground argument masking Putin's belligerent intentions and denying any responsibility for military action. They were most commonly found in stories regarding Russia demanding security guarantees, which comprised 1,768 of the 2,201 articles (80.32 percent). The most common sources cited within this narrative were Russian officials (1,570 articles), followed by Vladimir Putin (160 articles), reinforcing the narrative as the Kremlin's position.

The narrative **Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security** appeared in 2,086 articles, reinforcing Kremlin justifications for war. The DFRLab identified spikes on February 19 (262 articles) and February 21 (401 articles) as Kremlin rhetoric intensified prior to recognition of the Donbas republics. As with the Russia-seeking-peace narrative, Russian officials were the most common source for the moral obligation narrative, cited in 1,620 articles. Articles cited Vladimir Putin on 133 occasions.

Ukraine is aggressive (1,888 articles) served as an additional rhetorical tool to justify war and deny Russian responsibility. It appeared in large numbers in the days following separatist and Kremlin claims that Ukraine attacked a kindergarten and targeted chlorine tanks in the Donbas, with 395 articles on February 19 and 418 articles on February 21. Notably, Donbas officials were the most common source for this narrative (1,250 articles).

The West is creating tensions in the region appeared consistently throughout the seventy-day pre-invasion time

period, though it never reached the same levels of other overarching narratives on any given day. Pro-Kremlin outlets attributed the narrative most often to Russian officials (796 articles) and Putin (223 articles).

The DFRLab also identified instances in which pro-Kremlin media referenced **weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)** and **Nazis**. WMDs featured in 495 articles, the majority of which appeared the final week prior to the invasion. In contrast, articles referenced Nazis on 141 occasions scattered throughout the seventy-day period, peaking with twenty-seven articles on January 1, after a rally in Kyiv memorialized the late far-right Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera.

The fourteen Pro-Kremlin outlets **routinely cited Putin, Kremlin officials, and separatist leaders**, but they also **cited each other**. A total of 1,875 articles—18.4 percent of the entire archive—cited one or more of the other outlets, sharing a total of 2,502 references among them. Outlets cited TASS the most—a total of 982 times—followed by RIA Novosti (808 citations) and RT (216 citations).

While the DFRLab did not detect any conclusive data-driven evidence of coordination between the fourteen Kremlin-approved media outlets, that does not mean that the outlets are independent. Our analysis suggests

that these outlets, having navigated Putin-era politics for many years, understood Kremlin priorities and presented pro-Kremlin narratives in alignment with official statements and events as they occurred. **It remains an open question, however, as to whether the Kremlin explicitly told the outlets to prepare their audiences for war.**

The report concludes with a discussion regarding **holding Russia and its proxies accountable for the war**. While Russia's pre-war propaganda and incitement to violence violate its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), it remains a question whether those narratives would constitute a crime under international law. While international law does not prohibit disinformation and other "ruses of war"—though some legal scholars now argue that this position should be re-evaluated—Kremlin disinformation published in the lead-up to the invasion may be **evidence of planning or preparing for an act of aggression**. Additionally, disinformation narratives that started prior to the invasion and continued afterward may be **evidence that Russian or Donbas officials knew the invasion was inconsistent with the United Nations (UN) Charter and constituted a "manifest violation" of it**. This necessitates further work by the global research community to identify and archive these narratives, given the Kremlin's vast propaganda ecosystem across traditional, digital, and social media.

Introduction

In the pre-dawn hours of February 24, 2022, residents of Ukraine awoke to the sounds of terror and destruction as explosions filled the night sky. After months of saber rattling, Russian President Vladimir Putin initiated a war of aggression against a sovereign nation, forever changing the post-Cold War world order that had prevailed in Europe for more than thirty years. For the first time since the end of World War II, entire divisions of tanks rolled across the heart of the European continent to conquer a country by force.

In the year since that fateful morning, the world has witnessed the extraordinary tenacity and courage of the Ukrainian people under the leadership of their president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Despite Russia pouring its conventional military might into its assault, Ukraine has not surrendered. Far from it: reconquering territory and devastating Russian forces, Ukraine shattered the illusion of Russian domination and Putin's carefully constructed image as an all-powerful military strategist. It has come at an enormous cost, though, with tens of thousands dead, including civilians massacred by Russian troops and Ukrainian cities shattered by months of bombardment.

While the world reacted in horror to Putin's invasion of Ukraine, it should not have come as a surprise. Since first becoming president of Russia in 2000, Putin has never hesitated to use force when he believed it was in the Kremlin's interest, from the Second Chechen War to his invasion of Georgia to Russia's intervention in Syria.

Ukraine, too, experienced Putin's wrath after the pro-democracy Euromaidan protests in late 2013 led to what Ukrainians refer to as the Revolution of Dignity (*Revoliutsiia hidnosti*) in February 2014, when the nation forced out its pro-Kremlin leader, Viktor Yanukovich. As Ukrainians celebrated their victory and prepared for new elections, Putin responded by annexing Crimea and supporting Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine—an area collectively known as the Donbas—who declared the Ukrainian territories of Donetsk and Luhansk to be “independent” republics.

Putin then feigned innocence by weaving a false narrative that Donbas freedom fighters had risen up on their own and successfully fought a David-versus-Goliath battle against a criminal regime in Kyiv to achieve their independence. It was all a lie. As the Atlantic Council published in

its groundbreaking October 2015 report, *Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin's War in Ukraine*, the Kremlin narrative was nothing but an illusion.¹ Using satellite imagery and evidence from Russian social media accounts, the report proved that Russian armed forces had entered the Donbas, engaging in combat and providing direct military support for local separatists.

From 2014 to 2021, Russia and Ukraine remained at loggerheads—an uneasy stalemate held together by a series of international agreements that became known as the Minsk Agreements. The first agreement, signed in September 2014, failed to end hostilities, leading to a second agreement in February 2015. For the next seven years, fighting between the sides simmered, but never fully boiled over, thanks in large part to civilian monitoring efforts led by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

While OSCE monitors worked to maintain the status quo, the Atlantic Council expanded its efforts to employ social media, satellite imagery, and other open-source data to monitor the Donbas, establishing an initiative called the Digital Forensic Research Lab. Using a range of open-source investigation techniques, the DFRLab developed new methodologies for remote monitoring of conflict zones and other closed information environments, eventually expanding its team to identify and expose Russian influence operations targeting elections in the United States, Latin America, and elsewhere.

As the DFRLab grew its global presence, it maintained a continual watch on Russian activity in the Donbas, regularly publishing editions of its “Minsk Monitor” to hold Russia and its separatist allies accountable.² Beginning in the spring of 2021, we tracked suspicious Russian troop movements, often presented under the guise of training exercises in Russia and Belarus. That summer and fall, we continued to monitor these growing deployments involving Russian armed forces, some traveling thousands of kilometers from the Russian Far East and Siberia to within relative footsteps of Ukraine's northern, eastern, and southern borders. Governments including those of the United States and the United Kingdom publicly warned of Russia planning a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which the Kremlin repeatedly denied. Pro-Kremlin outlets, which Putin had weaponized for years to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty, used their

1 Maksymilian Czapurski, et al., *Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin's War in Ukraine*, Atlantic Council, October 15, 2015, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/hiding-in-plain-sight>.

2 “Minsk Monitor Archive, 2015–2021,” Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), last visited January 19, 2023, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/tagged/minskmonitor>.

collective digital and broadcast footprints to prime the Russian public with narratives painting Ukraine and the West as genocidal aggressors, while presenting Putin as a bulwark of Russian, Slavic, and Eurasian civilization.

Putin, too, did little to disguise his position on the matter. In July 2021, the Kremlin published an essay by him, entitled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”³ Topping out at nearly 6,900 words, the essay articulated Putin’s revisionist take on more than twelve centuries of Slavic history, from the Rurik dynasty of Ancient Rus and the tsars of imperial Russia through the rise and fall of the Soviet Union. In Putin’s telling, Ukraine was not a sovereign nation, but the historical Russian heartland that had simply become Russia’s western frontier as the nation expanded eastward. Because Ukraine and Russia grew out of a shared language and culture, Putin argued, they remained a unified people, and one that is fundamentally Russian in nature.

At the conclusion of his essay, Putin summarized his position:

I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. Our spiritual, human, and civilizational ties formed for centuries and have their origins in the same sources, they have been hardened by common trials, achievements, and victories. Our kinship has been transmitted from generation to generation. It is in the hearts and the memory of people living in modern Russia and Ukraine, in the blood ties that unite millions of our families. Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people.⁴

Seven months later, on February 24, 2022, Putin reasserted those “blood ties” by shedding Ukrainian blood, without mercy or regret, initiating conventional warfare not seen in Europe in nearly eighty years.

While the ultimate endgame of this war remains to be seen, its blurry opening moves come into greater focus. Just as Russian soldiers have left behind physical evidence of their crimes from Bucha to Kherson to Mariupol, so too has Putin, alongside his ministers and the vast Kremlin propaganda machine, in the form of informational evidence. Moscow deployed rhetorical sleight of hand to manufacture a false case for Russian aggression in the form of its “special military operation,” disguising it as a moral obligation to support patriots in the Donbas, fighting on behalf of

all Russians against a genocidal Ukraine and its decadent Western allies.

By employing information warfare, the Kremlin seeded false and misleading narratives to *justify* military action against Ukraine, mask its operational planning, and *deny* any responsibility for the coming war—a war that was ultimately one of Putin’s own choosing. These lies, deceptions, and exaggerations were not in support of the Kremlin’s *casus belli*; they were the Kremlin’s *casus belli*.

For years leading up to February 2022, the Kremlin deployed disinformation and propaganda through its media proxies, spinning yarns ranging from the misleading to the ludicrous, to weave together Putin’s false case for war. Strands of these threads have unwoven through the passage of time and the ephemerality of the global digital ecosystem, but they can still be found everywhere—in archives of pro-Kremlin media coverage, in social media databases, and even in transcripts of Putin’s own words. While it might not be possible to knit together a complete picture of every narrative, lie, and excuse employed by the Kremlin and its media proxies, there are more than enough of them preserved online to see how they first came together to help Putin initiate a war of aggression, and to continue it ever since.

This report is a culmination of seven years of daily monitoring, documentation, and analysis by the DFRLab to identify how the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin media weaponized narratives before and after Russia’s reinvasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In it, we create a timeline of key pre-invasion events and Kremlin rhetoric, exploring the patterns of pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation. With each escalatory event preceding the war, the Kremlin spun together its false justifications—and pro-Kremlin media dutifully reported them. Our timeline explores these excuses and how they were presented and reinforced as recurring narrative themes, packaged for public consumption and social media amplification.

To develop this timeline, we collected thousands of articles from fourteen major pro-Kremlin outlets, which we analyze by identifying their narrative patterns over the seventy-day period leading up to the invasion on February 24—from the Kremlin’s December 2021 demands for renewed security guarantees to Putin’s pre-dawn invasion speech, in which he presented his final arguments for his “special military operation.” We will synthesize these findings, then consider what the future holds in terms of holding Russia accountable for its weaponization of information to engage in a war of aggression against Ukraine.

3 Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” Kremlin, July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

4 Ibid.

Russian Hybrid Warfare: Historical Context

The war in Ukraine is as much a military conflict as an ideological one, in which information operations are among the main tools of *hybrid warfare*. While there is no universal definition of the concept, *NATO Review* defined hybrid warfare as “an interplay or fusion of conventional as well as unconventional instruments of power and tools of subversion.”⁵ In the current context, hybrid warfare refers to Russia’s use of military force, false and misleading narratives, and other tactics to create the facade of supporting separatist groups in eastern Ukraine and undermine the Ukrainian government. This includes the use of regular Russian military forces alongside separatist fighters, the dissemination of misinformation and propaganda, and the use of cyberattacks, among other unconventional warfare tactics. Hybrid warfare is a complex and evolving strategy, and it has been a key factor in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The use of history as a propaganda tool is a major part of waging a hybrid war against Ukraine and legitimizing the invasion of February 2022. The dispute over the historical heritage of Ukraine and Russia is fundamental to understanding the current, ongoing war in Ukraine and why Moscow will attempt to destroy as much of Ukraine’s territory as possible.

In his July 2021 article entitled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” Vladimir Putin articulated the main arguments that Russia would use to justify its claims on Ukraine, including what he described as the common heritage of the Russian and Ukrainian people, going back hundreds of years. The article was written elegantly and manipulatively, using simple language that hinted at Putin’s ultimate plans for Ukraine. Each paragraph focused on specific claims or interpretations of Russian and Ukrainian history, helping articulate what would become propaganda narratives amplified by Russian officials and pro-Kremlin media.

Putin published his essay to set the narrative tone and gain the initiative as he began to implement his invasion plan. It is by no means the first time that Russia has used rhetoric or revisionist history to justify its actions. During the Soviet era, Ukraine was an economic golden goose in terms of agriculture and industry, with its huge arable lands and its coal and ore deposits in the east. From a strategic point of view, Ukraine served a buffer against European influence and the territorial claims first of Poland, and subsequently of Germany. In the early decades of the Soviet Union,

this exploitation of Ukraine led to the rise of Ukrainian nationalism in various forms, including controversial figures such as Stepan Bandera and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Bandera’s involvement in massacres of Poles, alongside his engagement with Nazi Germany, helped lay the rhetorical foundation for future Russian arguments that Ukrainians are fascists or Nazis.

Ukraine remained integrated with the Soviet Union until its disintegration in the early 1990s, when the former Soviet republics achieved independence. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia was too busy focusing on its own survival to effectively counteract the creation of an independent Ukraine and other former Soviet states. Ultimately, Moscow committed to Ukrainian sovereignty through a series of international treaties that respected and guaranteed its territorial integrity.

As Russia attempted to stabilize itself, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the war in Kosovo, and two wars in Chechnya became serious blows to modern Russia’s political interests. These failures had a huge impact on the future development of Russian foreign policy, including preventing the United States and the West from dictating regional policies in Russia’s backyard, and restoring the Soviet political space by maintaining former Soviet states within Russia’s orbit. Vladimir Putin came to the Russian presidency in 2000 with the promise of solid economic and foreign policy, zero tolerance for chaos at home, and the pursuit of Russia’s re-elevation to the status of global power.

Amid these plans, Ukraine found itself in Putin’s crosshairs, as he desired it as a buffer to the West and regarded it as the historical proto-Russian heartland. With Belarus firmly in Russia’s orbit and the pro-Kremlin Moldovan breakaway region of Transnistria serving as a buffer zone in its own right, Putin effectively had Ukraine surrounded. Yet the Orange Revolution of 2005, 2013’s Euromaidan protests, and the 2014 Revolution of Dignity made it clear that the majority of Ukrainians saw their futures as embracing Europe rather than Russia, guided by their own self-determination above all else. This Russia would not countenance, ultimately leading to its 2014 invasion of the Donbas and annexation of Crimea—and, later, the invasion into the whole of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

In the interim period, the Kremlin failed to recognize the extent to which the 2014 war mobilized the national spirit

5 Arsalan Bilal, “Hybrid Warfare—New Threats, Complexity, and ‘Trust’ as the Antidote,” *NATO Review*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/11/30/hybrid-warfare-new-threats-complexity-and-trust-as-the-antidote/index.html>.

of the Ukrainians. Putin also became complacent, underappreciating Ukraine's growing military readiness and placing overconfidence in his own armed forces. Meanwhile, political turbulence in Russia in 2018, the COVID-19 pandemic,

and Putin's attempt to silence the opposition in the country forced the governing elite and security apparatus to bet on aggression abroad to divert attention from Russia's domestic problems.

How We Conducted Our Research

To better understand how the Kremlin employed information warfare prior to the February 2022 invasion, the DFRLab curated pro-Kremlin narratives over two timeframes. The first timeframe, ranging from March 2014 through December 2021, encompasses Russia's initial invasion, the interwar period, and the initial buildup prior to the 2022 invasion. The second timeframe focuses on a compressed time period of intensifying pro-Kremlin information warfare from December 16, 2021, until February 24, 2022—the seventy days preceding the invasion.

The war in Ukraine started in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and orchestrated the separation of the self-proclaimed Donbas republics of Donetsk and Luhansk from Ukraine.⁶ Throughout the eight-year period leading up to February 2022, pro-Kremlin media outlets and social media accounts produced and spread false stories targeting Ukraine, thousands of which were debunked by Ukrainian and European fact-checkers. Using these fact-checking efforts as a launching point for data collection, the DFRLab surveyed more than three thousand debunks produced by StopFake, a Ukrainian fact-checking website, as well as more than six thousand debunks published by EUvsDisinfo, a fact-checking project of the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force, all of which were published from March 2014 to the end of December 2021.⁷ Our goal was to identify the most noteworthy pro-Kremlin narratives targeting Ukraine and track their evolution over time.

Using the nine thousand debunks as a starting point, the DFRLab ultimately collected 367 instances representative of pro-Kremlin propaganda published during the period. From these, we identified five overarching narratives the Kremlin used from 2014 to 2021 to justify the invasion, deny responsibility, and mask its intentions, including

- Ukraine is aggressive;
- the West is creating tensions in the region;
- Ukraine is a puppet of the West;

- Russia has a moral obligation to do something about security in the region; and
- Russia is seeking peace.

These five narratives would help inform the next phase of our research: collecting pro-Kremlin narratives in the days and weeks leading up to the February 2022 invasion. Pro-Kremlin media serve as a strong indicator of Russian information operations and Kremlin intent, particularly when viewed in the aggregate. As the US State Department noted in a January 2022 report on state-run outlets RT and Sputnik, Kremlin outlets “play an important role within Russia’s disinformation and propaganda ecosystem,” adding, “[t]here is a well-documented relationship between Russian state-funded media outlets and other pillars in the ecosystem, such as the weaponization of social media, the cultivation of proxy sources, and cyber-enabled influence operations.”⁸

To better understand the goals of Kremlin information operations, the DFRLab archived more than ten thousand articles from fourteen major pro-Kremlin media outlets. These outlets were selected, in part, due to reporting by Meduza, an independent Russian media outlet in exile, suggesting that the Russian search engine Yandex had whitelisted the fourteen outlets under pressure from the Kremlin, prioritizing their reporting for Russian news consumers.⁹ These fourteen outlets included *Izvestiya* (Известия), RIA Novosti (РИА Новости), TASS (ТАСС), Interfax (Интерфакс), *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (Российскую газета), *Kommersant* (Коммерсант), *Vedomosti* (Ведомости), RBC (РБК), *Gazeta.ru* (Газета.ру), RT, *Lenta* (Лента), Regnum, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Независимая газета), and *Vzglyad* (Взгляд).

Using these fourteen outlets as representative of the broader Russian-language pro-Kremlin media ecosystem, the DFRLab then employed the media-monitoring tool Event Registry to collect a total of 312,374 articles published by the outlets between December 16, 2021, and February 24, 2022. The query results encompassed the

6 “OSCE Chair Says Crimean Referendum in Its Current Form Is Illegal and Calls for Alternative Ways to Address the Crimean Issue,” Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, March 11, 2014, <https://www.osce.org/cio/116313>; Віталій Уманець [Vitaly Umanets], “Росіяни-provokatori в Луганську встановлюють російські прапори [Russian Provocateurs Set up Russian Flags in Luhansk],” March 4, 2014, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLM7EWmoweU>.

7 “НОВОСТИ [NEWS],” Stop Fake, last visited December 14, 2022, <https://www.stopfake.org/ru/category/novosti/>; “Disinfo Database,” EUvsDisinfo, last visited December 14, 2022, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases>.

8 “Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik’s Role in Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem,” US Department of State, January 20, 2022, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media_January_update-19.pdf.

9 “Мы замучились бороться. Как российское вторжение в Украину раскололо «Яндекс». Расследование Светланы Рейтер [We Are Tired of Fighting. How the Russian Invasion of Ukraine Split Yandex. Investigation by Svetlana Reiter],” Медуза [Meduza], May 5, 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/05/05/my-zamuchilis-borotsya>.

outlets' entire publishing output during the seventy days leading up to the invasion, covering diverse topics from news to sports to entertainment.

To refine our collection of narratives, as well as focus on key moments prior to February 24, the DFRLab then identified seven escalatory events leading up to the invasion, the majority of which took place in the final week before the war commenced:

- December 17, 2021: Russia publishes demands for security guarantees from NATO and the United States.¹⁰
- February 17, 2022: Russia blames Ukraine for shelling a kindergarten in Luhansk.¹¹
- February 18, 2022: Donetsk separatist authorities claim they captured Polish-speaking saboteurs from Ukrainian armed forces who allegedly attempted to blow up chlorine tanks in Horlivka.¹²
- February 18, 2022: Donetsk and Luhansk separatist authorities announce the evacuation of civilians amid alleged Ukrainian aggression.¹³
- February 19, 2022: During a speech at the Munich Security Conference, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy discusses reconsidering the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, in which Ukraine renounced nuclear weapons and surrendered its stockpile in exchange for security guarantees.¹⁴
- February 21, 2022: Vladimir Putin signs decrees to recognize the sovereignty of Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.¹⁵
- February 23, 2022: Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics call on Putin to help repel alleged Ukraine's aggression.¹⁶

Our list of escalatory events begins with Russia publishing a list of security demands on December 17, as it was

effectively an ultimatum for Ukraine and NATO—an ultimatum that was unworkable given the demands involved. We then concentrated on escalations over the final week, each one ratcheting up tensions and increasing the likelihood of war.

The DFRLab then applied keyword searches to specific timeframes. For example, after the Kremlin demanded security guarantees from Ukraine and NATO on December 17, we searched for variants of гарант безопасн ("security guarantee") from that date through January 31. Similarly, when Russia accused Ukraine on February 18 of sending Polish-speaking saboteurs to the occupied city of Horlivka to detonate chlorine tanks, we searched a timeframe of February 18 to February 24 using variants of the keywords Емкост ("water tank"), Диверсанты ("saboteurs") Горловка ("Horlivka"), Аммиак ("Ammonia"), and Наемники ("mercenaries"). In other cases, we searched the entire seventy-day timespan for recurring narrative themes, particularly ones that were escalatory or emotionally charged. For narratives related to WMDs, we searched for variants of Химическ ("chemical"), Биологическ ("biological"), оружие массового поражения ("weapon of mass destruction"), ядерн оруж ("nuclear weapon"), and атомн оруж ("atomic weapon"). For accusations that Ukrainians were far-right nationalists, we searched for keywords such as нацистский ("Nazi").

By running these search queries, we ultimately curated a collection of 10,783 pro-Kremlin narratives published by the fourteen outlets over the seventy-day period. Over the course of several months, four DFRLab researchers fluent in Russian reviewed all 10,783 articles and manually assessed whether they fit into any of the five overarching narratives, and identified potential sub-narratives contained within them, such as allegations of Ukraine using WMDs, conducting genocide against Russian speakers, or being a nation of Nazis. Of the 10,783 narratives in our collection, we determined that 6,715 of them (62.27 percent) fit within at least one of the five narrative categories. The remaining 4,068 assets were then included in a miscellaneous "Other" category, which we then re-analyzed to identify additional recurring narrative themes.

10 "Russia Issues List of Demands It Says Must Be Met to Lower Tensions in Europe," *Guardian*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato>.

11 Народная милиция ЛНР [People's Militia of the LPR], "Срочное заявление официального представителя НМ ЛНР старшего лейтенанта Филиппенко И.М. [An Urgent Statement by the Official Representative of the NM of the LPR, Senior Lieutenant Filiponenko I.M.]," Telegram, February 17, 2022, <https://t.me/millnr/7122>.

12 Liveuamap (@liveuamap), "Next level of absurd propaganda. Occupation authorities in parts of Donetsk region claim that they've killed two members of saboteur group of Ukrainian army..." Twitter, February 18, 2022, <https://twitter.com/Liveuamap/status/1494648104850755594>.

13 "Экстренное обращение Главы ДНР Дениса Пушилина в связи с резким обострением военной ситуации [Emergency Appeal by the Head of the DPR Denis Pushilin about the Sharp Aggravation of the Military Situation]," Глава Донецкой народной республики Денис Пушилин [Head of the Donetsk People's Republic Denis Pushilin], February 18, 2022, <https://denis-pushilin.ru/news/ekstrennoe-obrashhenie-glavy-dnr-denis-a-pushilina-v-svyazi-s-rezkim-obostreniem-voennoj-situatsii>.

14 "Zelensky's Full Speech at Munich Security Conference," *Kyiv Independent*, February 19, 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/national/zelenskys-full-speech-at-munich-security-conference>.

15 "Russia Calls on Other Countries to Recognize DPR and LPR Independence—Ministry," TASS, February 22, 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1408385>.

16 "LPR, DPR Heads Call on Putin to Help Repel Kiev's Aggression—Kremlin," TASS, February 23, 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1409091>.

Investigating Pro-Kremlin Narratives on Western Social Media Platforms

The DFRLab also analyzed social media engagement with the 10,783 articles on Facebook and Twitter. Russia banned Facebook and Twitter after the invasion, in March 2022; prior to the invasion, Kremlin-approved media outlets routinely used Facebook and Twitter to amplify their stories.¹⁷ For Facebook engagement, the DFRLab employed Facebook's Application Programming Interface (API) to query the number of reactions, comments, and shares garnered by each article. For Twitter engagement, we used the API of the social media listening tool Meltwater Explore to tabulate the total number of favorites and retweets of tweets linking to each article.

We should note certain limitations in this approach, as we could not automatically query two platforms that are widespread in Russia: Telegram and VKontakte. Telegram is among the most popular tools used by pro-Kremlin media outlets to amplify its articles. Despite the Kremlin's unsuccessful attempt to ban the platform in April 2018, Telegram ultimately evolved into a central hub for both pro-Kremlin and anti-Kremlin information.¹⁸ In November 2018, Proekt, an independent Russian investigative journalism collective, revealed how the Kremlin took over some of the most popular Telegram channels.¹⁹ Similarly, in July 2022, the Ukrainian Security Service published a list of one hundred seemingly Ukrainian Telegram channels it alleged are

controlled by the Kremlin.²⁰ Unfortunately, Telegram's API does not provide access to engagement data for content published on public Telegram channels.

We also sought to include engagement data from VKontakte, the Russian analog of Facebook, but API limitations and other restrictions prevented us from this task. We hope that robust methods for analyzing VKontakte and Telegram data at scale develop over time, some of which are currently in development, including the open-source Social Media Analysis Toolkit (SMAT).²¹

Post-Invasion Analysis

For the section of this report dealing with post-invasion narratives and tactics, the DFRLab focused on the techniques and approaches utilized by pro-Kremlin assets around the world. Our main objective was to develop case studies documenting the evolution of Russian propaganda and disinformation as the country fell under sanctions, boycotts, and other pressures from the global community.

Given our goal of documenting case studies of narratives and tactics, the DFRLab took a qualitative approach with our post-invasion research, compiled over the course of ten months as we published more than sixty editions of our monitoring report, *The Russian War Report*.²²

17 "Russia Blocks Access to Facebook and Twitter," *Guardian*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/04/russia-completely-blocks-access-to-facebook-and-twitter>; Nika Aleksejeva, "Cracks Emerge in Russia's 'Digital Iron Curtain,'" Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), July 7, 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/cracks-emerge-in-russias-digital-iron-curtain-8d5bd791815a>.

18 Nika Aleksejeva, "The Kremlin Takes on Telegram," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), April 21, 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/the-kremlin-takes-on-telegram-358a7927bad5>.

19 Мичаил Рубин [Mihail Rubin], "Телега из Кремля. Рассказ о том, как власти превратили Telegram в телевизор ['Telega' from the Kremlin. The Story of How the Authorities Turned Telegram into a TV]," Проект [Proekt], November 28, 2018, <https://www.proekt.media/narrative/telegram-kanaly/>.

20 Александр Кульбачный [Alexander Kulbachny], "Российская пропаганда: СБУ обнародовала список из 100 Telegram-каналов, курируемых Кремлем [Russian Propaganda: SBU Published a List of 100 Telegram Channels Supervised by the Kremlin]," Page, July 15, 2022, <https://thepage.ua/news/100-telegram-kanalov-propaganda-kremlya>.

21 For more information on SMAT, see: "Analyze Hate and Disinformation Online," SMAT, last visited January 19, 2023, <https://www.smat-app.com>.

22 An archive of the DFRLab's Russian War Report can be found at: *Russian War Report*, Atlantic Council, last visited January 19, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/category/content-series/russian-hybrid-threats-report/>.

Timeline: How the Kremlin and Donbas Officials Weaponized Narratives Prior to the Invasion

The Initial Buildup

Shifting away from the relative status quo of the frozen conflict, the months leading up to Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine represent an escalation of increasingly belligerent Kremlin rhetoric that Putin and his proxies employed to make the case for war. During this period, Russia would falsely name Ukraine, NATO, and the West as aggressors to justify military action, all while making unrealistic demands based on those accusations to deny any responsibility for such action. Throughout this period of rhetorical posturing, the Kremlin deployed an unprecedented number of troops to its borders with Ukraine, denying they represented anything more than an exercise.²³

Signs of this massive deployment preceded this period, however, as did Kremlin excuses to justify it. On February 21, 2021, a little more than one year prior to the invasion, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced plans for "two large-scale exercises" to be conducted by Russian airborne forces in mid-March. One of the two exercises would commence at the Opuk training ground in Russian-occupied Crimea. "During the exercise, the paratroopers will work out the issues of landing personnel and equipment on an unfamiliar landing site, followed by the capture of objects of a mock enemy and their retention until the main forces of the formation approach," a ministry statement noted. A simultaneous exercise, to be conducted in Ryazan Oblast southeast of Moscow, would focus on "performing the tasks of capturing elements of the airfield of a mock enemy and holding it."²⁴

Though exercises had been expected to end before the end of March, forces in Crimea remained in place.²⁵ In April 2021, the DFRLab analyzed and geolocated video footage showing Russian deployments in Crimea, and noted additional deployments to Voronezh, approximately three hundred kilometers northeast of Kharkiv, Ukraine. "The scale of this move is highly significant, with such a concentration of troops near Ukraine not seen since 2014–2015," we noted on April 9, 2021.²⁶ Subsequent DFRLab analysis of satellite footage confirmed Russian troops were still in place at the Opuk training ground in Crimea on April 15.²⁷

Kremlin officials were quick to blame Ukraine for the escalation, justifying it by claiming that Ukraine was preparing an assault on the Donbas; the Kremlin also asserted that a Ukrainian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) had killed a child in the occupied village of Oleksandrivske, though the OSCE could make no determination of who had been responsible for the incident.²⁸

At the end of April, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced a partial withdrawal from Crimea, but noted that heavy weapons would remain near Voronezh to participate in ZAPAD21, a series of military exercises scheduled with Belarus in September 2021.²⁹ Notably, Shoigu denied the importance of the troop movements, dismissively putting the scale of troops involved at "more than 10,000," despite open-source evidence suggesting that approximately one hundred thousand troops had deployed that spring.³⁰

23 "Satellite Images Show New Russian Military Buildup Near Ukraine," *Politico*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/11/01/satellite-russia-ukraine-military-518337>.

24 "Два масштабных учения проведут Воздушно-десантные войска в марте текущего года," Russian Defense Ministry, February 21, 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12345413@egNews.

25 Andrew E. Kramer, "Fighting Escalates in Eastern Ukraine, Signaling the End to Another Cease-Fire," *New York Times*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/world/europe/ukraine-russia-fighting.html>.

26 Michael Sheldon, "Tracking the Russian Military Buildup Near Ukraine," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), April 9, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/tracking-the-russian-military-buildup-near-ukraine-d8ab03e853ff>.

27 Michael Sheldon, "A Closer Look at the Recent Russian Build-Up in Crimea," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), April 28, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/a-closer-look-at-the-recent-russian-build-up-in-crimea-75c3095a8122>.

28 Roman Osadchuk, "Pro-Kremlin Actors Amplify Misleading Narratives to Fuel Escalation in Eastern Ukraine," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), April 22, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-kremlin-actors-amplify-misleading-narratives-to-fuel-escalation-in-eastern-ukraine-684052683de1>.

29 Sheldon, "A Closer Look at the Recent Russian Build-Up in Crimea."

30 Rob Lee (@RALee85), "One thing to keep in mind is that the Russian MoD said that 10k servicemen took part in the exercise in Crimea, but Russia moved tens of thousands of troops near Ukraine's borders for a total of "100k. What did those other troops do, and will they all be returning?" Twitter, April 23, 2021, <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1385523732937068546>.



Synthetic-aperture radar imagery of the Opuk training area, Russian occupied Crimea, April 15, 2021. (Source: Capella Space, with annotations by the DFRLab.)

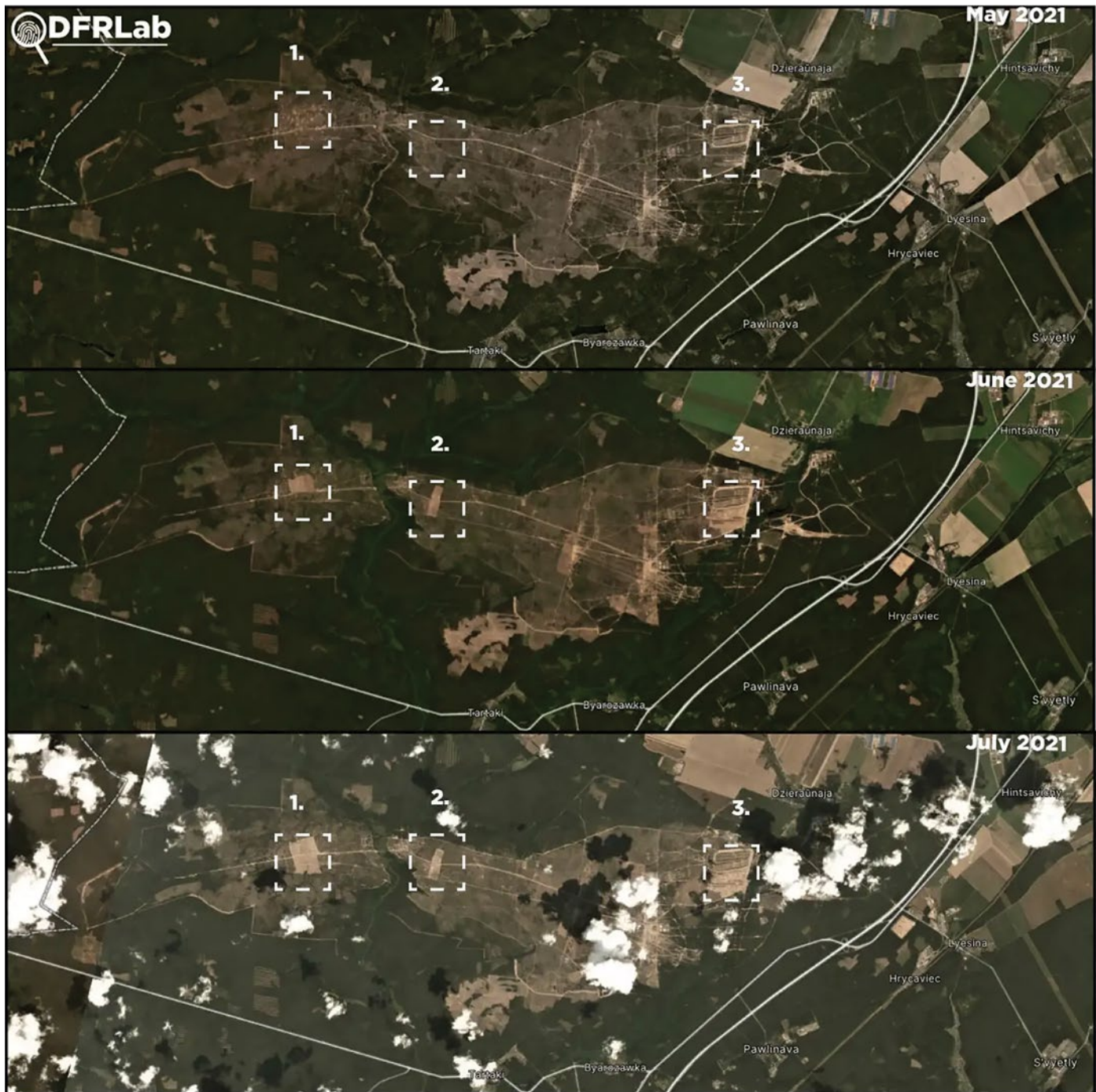


Photo released by the Belarusian Armed Forces showing the clearing of land for ZAPAD21 exercises. (Source: “Посмотрели, как Вооруженные Силы готовятся принять участие в белорусско-российском совместном стратегическом учении,” sb.by, July 10, 2021, <https://www.sb.by/articles/dan-prikaz-emu-na-zapad-2021.html>.)

In July and August 2021, Russian military equipment began appearing in Belarus, prior to the start of the ZAPAD21 exercise in September. A DFRLab satellite

analysis of the sites in Belarus hosting the military equipment concluded that construction had begun as early as May 2021.³¹

³¹ Lukas Andriukaitis, “#ZAPADWatch: First Russian Military Equipment Appears in Belarus for ZAPAD21 Exercise,” Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), August 4, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/zapadwatch-first-russian-military-equipment-appears-in-belarus-for-zapad21-exercise-b04f8361e740>.



Satellite image analysis confirming the progress in preparing the exercise grounds for ZAPAD21. Newly created sites are marked in white and numbered. (Source: DFRLab via Planet.com.)

Simultaneously, Belarus exacerbated tensions in the region by encouraging refugees from the Middle East to use the country as a starting point for journeying onward to the European Union, leading to sometimes

violent conflicts between refugees and border guards from Lithuania and Poland.³² Belarus also caused a stir by deploying S-300 surface-to-air missile systems to its borders with Lithuania and Poland, which the DFRLab

³² Lukas Andriukaitis, "Open-Source Evidence of Belarus Exploiting Refugees in Ongoing Tensions with Lithuania," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), September 2, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/open-source-evidence-of-belarus-exploiting-refugees-in-ongoing-tensions-with-lithuania-6dacc44e67a2>.



Map outlining key locations in the current military buildup in Crimea and on the Ukraine border. (Source: Michael Sheldon, "How Russia Is Placing Troops and Equipment Near the Ukraine Border," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), December 8, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-russia-is-placing-troops-and-equipment-near-the-ukraine-border-f84e1f07ab59>.)

verified by geolocating open-source footage of the deployments.³³

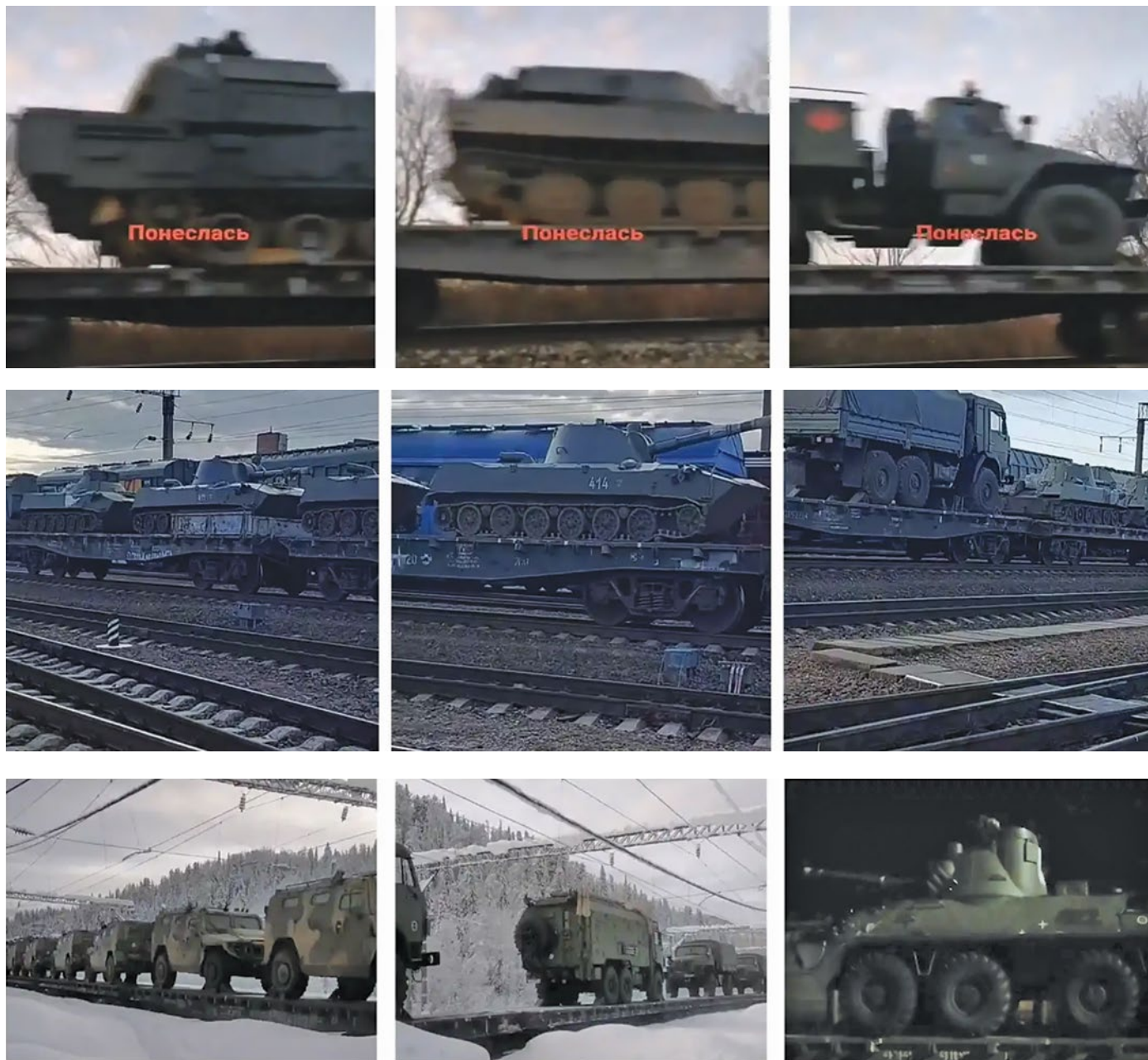
Despite the end of ZAPAD21 in mid-September 2021, Russia continued to deploy troops toward Ukraine and escalate its rhetoric. Open-source researchers and journalists documented multiple instances of additional troop deployments in October and November, arriving from bases as far away as central Russia. In numerous cases, evidence of these deployments came by way of TikTok, as users of the video platform documented Russian military

trains laden with equipment passing through their cities and towns before arriving in Crimea and western Russia, which the DFRLab confirmed through satellite imagery analysis.³⁴

On November 30, NATO foreign ministers gathered in Riga, Latvia, to discuss Russia's increasingly aggressive posture. After visiting NATO troops nearby, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg summarized Russian deployments. "We see heavy capabilities, we see armored units, drones, electronic warfare systems and we

33 Lukas Andriukaitis, "Belarusian S-300s Sighted on the Move to Lithuanian and Polish Borders," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), July 23, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/belarusian-s-300s-sighted-on-the-move-to-lithuanian-and-polish-borders-6ac23902bb89>.

34 Michael Sheldon, "How Russia Is Placing Troops and Equipment Near the Ukraine Border," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), December 8, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-russia-is-placing-troops-and-equipment-near-the-ukraine-border-f84e1f07ab59>.



Top: Screenshots of Buk-M3, 2S1, and other equipment from the 34th MRB moving to Kerch, Crimea, with the Russian word for “rushed” superimposed on them. Center: Screenshots show Nona-S from the 249th AAR moving from Stavropol, Russia, to Crimea. Bottom: Screenshots show the 55th Mountain Motor Rifle Brigade moving to Yelnya, Russia, 170 kilometers north of central Ukraine’s northern border. (Source: TikTok, top; TikTok, center; TikTok, TikTok, bottom); Michael Sheldon, “How Russia Is Placing Troops and Equipment Near the Ukraine Border,” Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), December 8, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfriab/how-russia-is-placing-troops-and-equipment-near-the-ukraine-border-f84e1f07ab59>.

see tens of thousands combat-ready Russian troops,” he stated.³⁵ Meanwhile, at a joint press conference between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics, Blinken warned, “Any

escalatory actions by Russia would be of great concern to the United States, as they would be for Latvia, and any renewed aggression would trigger serious consequences.”³⁶

35 “With US Intelligence, NATO to Discuss Russian Intent Near Ukraine,” *New Straits Times*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/with-us-intelligence-nato-to-discuss-russian-intent-near-ukraine>.

36 Ibid.



Denis Pushilin's December 23, 2021, interview on Rossiya 24. (Source: "Денис Пушилин: на территории Украины уже присутствует химоружие.")

In response, Putin issued a warning of his own, warning of "red lines" that Ukraine and NATO should not cross, including the deployment of missile systems in Ukrainian territory. "If some kind of strike systems appear on the territory of Ukraine, the flight time to Moscow will be 7–10 minutes, and five minutes in the case of a hypersonic weapon being deployed—just imagine," Putin said. "What are we to do in such a scenario? We will have to then create something similar in relation to those who threaten us in that way. And we can do that now."³⁷

Russian Demands, Pleas from the Donbas

Russian deployments continued into December, with satellite imagery confirming escalations in Kursk and Bryansk.³⁸ On December 15, 2021, Russia issued a list of security demands to the United States and NATO.³⁹ These demands

included Ukraine remaining out of NATO, and NATO removing all member states that joined the Alliance after 2007, neither of which the West would accept.⁴⁰

In the information domain, the Kremlin continued to shift away from broad narratives intended to promote negative perceptions about Ukraine, NATO, and the West, and toward specific narratives setting the stage for conflict. On December 21, 2021, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed, without evidence, that US private military companies were preparing to use chemical weapons to provoke fighting in eastern Ukraine.⁴¹ On December 23, multiple outlets featured a Rossiya 24 interview with Denis Pushilin, leader of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic.⁴² Pushilin also claimed, without evidence, that chemical weapons were "already present" on Ukrainian territory, and expressed his hope that media coverage of his claims would "have its effect" and prevent Ukraine from

37 "Putin Hits Back as NATO Warns Moscow against Attacking Ukraine," Reuters, November 30, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/putin-warns-russia-will-act-if-nato-crosses-its-red-lines-in-ukraine>.

38 Michael Sheldon, "Russia Continues to Expand Military Presence Near Ukraine Border," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), December 17, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfirlab/russia-continues-to-expand-military-presence-near-ukraine-border-c2d527f58052>.

39 "МИД опубликовал проекты документов по обеспечению безопасности со стороны США и НАТО [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Published Draft Documents on Ensuring Security from the US and NATO]," TACC [TASS], December 17, 2021, <https://tass.ru/politika/13228135>; "Текст российских проектов документов по обеспечению правовых гарантий безопасности со стороны США и НАТО [Text of Russian Draft Documents on Ensuring Legal Security Guarantees from the US and NATO]," Независимая газета [Nezavisimaya Gazeta], December 17, 2021, https://www.ng.ru/world/2021-12-17/100_docs17122021.html; "Russia Issues List of Demands It Says Must Be Met to Lower Tensions in Europe," *Guardian*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato>.

40 "Путин: Запад 'немедленно, сейчас' должен дать гарантии безопасности России, а не наоборот [Putin: The West 'Immediately, Now' Must Give Guarantees of Russia's Security, and Not Vice Versa]," TACC [TASS], December 23, 2021, <https://tass.ru/politika/13281603>.

41 "Шойгу заявил о готовящейся провокации США на востоке Украины," *Российская газета*, December 21, 2022, <https://rg.ru/2021/12/21/shoigu-zaiavil-o-gotoviyashchejsia-provokacii-ssha-na-vostoke-ukrainy.html>.

42 "Денис Пушилин: на территории Украины уже присутствует химоружие," *России 24*, December 23, 2022, <https://smotrim.ru/video/2369568>.

taking “this very serious and illegal step.”⁴³ By pushing this narrative, Pushilin would help Putin justify his decision to recognize the Donbas republics and order Russian troops into Ukraine.

In January 2022, outlets’ amplification of WMD-related narratives continued to source Pushilin’s statements. One of the most amplified examples was his January 27 interview with *Izvestiya*, in which he claimed that Ukraine might stage false-flag acts with chemical weapons in the Donbas “following the example of those that were organized in Syria by opposition fighters.”⁴⁴ This was a false narrative built upon another false narrative; as previously documented at the time by the DFRLab and other investigators, the Syrian regime employed chemical weapons on its own populace, but blamed the opposition for these war crimes.⁴⁵

In Moscow, officials began considering whether to recognize Donetsk and Luhansk as independent entities, and Russia’s Communist Party pushed the idea in the Russian State Duma. On January 19, the communist faction in the Duma proposed draft legislation for the recognition of the Donbas territories.⁴⁶ Recognizing Donetsk and Luhansk would have enormous consequences, justifying Kremlin military action on their behalf under the guise of defending them against Ukrainian aggression, and further helping Putin deny any responsibility for the war.

Between January 19 and February 22, the DFRLab observed shifts in how the Kremlin communicated the possibility of recognition, as well as inconsistent narratives about compliance with the Minsk Agreements. Kremlin officials, as well as Putin himself, varied their statements on whether recognition would violate the Minsk Agreements, as well as whether they even still supported the agreements. These contradictory messages mirrored inconsistencies

published by pro-Kremlin outlets at the time, suggesting that Putin had either tightly controlled who within the Kremlin was aware of his invasion plans, or that he was still in the process of finalizing his decision.

When the Communist Party officially proposed the draft legislation on January 19, the Kremlin appeared reluctant to openly support the idea, with Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claiming he wasn’t even aware of the proposal.⁴⁷ On January 20, State Duma member Viktor Vodolatsky said that the recognition was a “plan B” and Moscow had to ensure security guarantees from the West first.⁴⁸ The following day, State Duma member Konstantin Zatulin claimed that recognition would mean Moscow’s withdrawal from the Minsk Agreement processes.⁴⁹ By February, though, the Kremlin spread entirely contradictory statements and stressed that recognition would not violate Minsk Agreements, as Russia was no longer a party to the agreements.⁵⁰

Kremlin messaging intensified in mid-February, as the United States began warning allies that Putin had decided to invade Ukraine as soon as February 16.⁵¹ On February 15, the Russian State Duma voted for two draft laws on recognition of the Donbas. The first draft law, the Communist Party proposal, would go to Vladimir Putin directly, while the second draft, from Putin’s United Russia party, proposed additional drafting in consultation with the Russian Foreign Ministry first.⁵² The parallel moves could be assessed as an attempt to create the façade of democratic debate, as well as not appearing to rush into a conclusion that would lead to Donbas recognition. Other factors could have been at play as well; either could explain the hesitancy and contradictory messaging of Kremlin officials in January.

On the day of the State Duma vote, Dmitry Peskov said that Russia was still a “supporter” of implementing the Minsk Agreements action plans, and that the decision

43 “Глава ДНР заявил о наличии химического оружия у Украины,” *Lenta.ru*, December 23, 2022, <https://lenta.ru/news/2021/12/23/chemical>.

44 “Бумеранг дезинформации больно бьет по самой Украине,” *Izvestia*, January 27, 2022, <https://iz.ru/1282531/robert-lanskii/bumerang-dezinformatsii-bolno-bet-po-samoj-ukraine>; “Пушилин заявил, что Украина может организовать в Донбассе постановочные химатаки,” TACC [TASS], January 27, 2022, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/13538533>.

45 Lukas Andriukaitis, et al., “Breaking Ghouta,” Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), September 7, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/breaking-ghouta>.

46 “В Госдуме внесли проект обращения к Путину о признании ДНР и ЛНР [A Draft Bill to Appeal to Putin on Recognition of LNR and DNR Was Submitted to State Duma],” *Kommersant*, January 19, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5172792>.

47 Ibid.

48 “В Госдуме высказались об инициативе по признанию ДНР и ЛНР [The State Duma Commented on an Initiative to Recognize DNR and LNR],” *Gazeta.ru*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2022/01/20/17166667.shtml>.

49 “В Госдуме назвали условие признания Россией независимости ДНР и ЛНР [The State Duma Named the Conditions for Russia’s Recognition of DNR and LNR],” *Vzglyad*, January 21, 2022, <https://vz.ru/news/2022/1/21/1139792.html>.

50 “Небензя: признание Россией ДНР и ЛНР не меняет состава сторон Минских соглашений [Nebenzya: Russian Recognition of DNR and LNR Does Not Change the Parties of the Minsk Agreements],” *Kommersant*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5228806>.

51 Alexander Ward and Quint Forgey, “Putin Could Attack Ukraine on Feb. 16, Biden Told Allies,” *Politico*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2022/02/11/putin-could-attack-ukraine-on-feb-16-biden-told-allies-00008344>.

52 “«Вопрос исключительно важный»: Госдума рассмотрит два проекта постановления по признанию ДНР и ЛНР [‘The Issue Is Exceptionally Important’: the State Duma Will Discuss Two Draft Project on the Recognition of the DNR and LNR],” RT, February 23, 2022, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/article/962024-dnr-lnr-gosduma-priznanie>.

on recognition should not be rushed.⁵³ Meanwhile, Putin commented on the recognition question and said that the “Donbas problem” must be decided in the framework of the Minsk Agreements, following a meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.⁵⁴

Inciting Incidents

On February 17, artillery struck a kindergarten in Stanytsia Luhanska, reportedly injuring several adults but no children. US State Department officials told the *Washington Post* that it was unclear if this was an intentional false-flag attack by Donbas separatists, but worried Russia could use events such as this to justify an invasion.⁵⁵ The OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) could not assess culpability for the incident, as a local law-enforcement official prevented it from entering the premises. “The SMM assessed the damage as recent but was unable to determine the weapon used or the direction of fire,” it noted in its daily monitoring report.⁵⁶

Western media and policymakers put the blame on Donbas separatists. The *Guardian* described it as “an apparent coordinated bombardment by pro-Russian separatists in multiple locations across the 250-kilometre long frontline.”⁵⁷ Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy described it as “provocative shelling” in a tweet.⁵⁸

In contrast, the Kremlin presented the incident as Ukrainian aggression. “We have warned many times that excessive concentration of Ukrainian forces near the contact line, together with possible provocations, can pose terrible danger,” Putin spokesman Dmitri Peskov said.⁵⁹

The incident became fodder for pro-Kremlin outlets to blame Ukraine and deny the responsibility of Donetsk separatists.

The DFRLab identified fifty-three stories published by these outlets, the majority of which appeared within forty-eight hours of the incident. TASS referred to the event as “staged shelling” by Ukrainian forces and quoted an official statement from the Luhansk People’s Republic: “‘This is confirmed by the radio interception of the conversation of the militants of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which is at the disposal of the People’s Militia, and the information received from civilians,’ the defense department of the republic noted.”⁶⁰ It also cited a Luhansk official as saying that any Western claims that Luhansk shelled the kindergarten were “misinformation.”⁶¹

Vzglyad quoted Donetsk deputy official Vladislav Berdichevsky. “The Ukrainian military is intensifying the shelling of Donbass, the attacks have been going on for the second day, and today, apparently, they will continue,” Berdichevsky told the outlet.⁶² RIA Novosti, meanwhile, first claimed Ukraine admitted to shelling the school.⁶³ In a separate report, it stated that Luhansk officials had confirmed Ukraine was to blame, and any contradictory evidence shared by Ukraine was fake:

The LPR [Luhansk People’s Republic] said that the shelling of the kindergarten in Stanytsia Luhanska was carried out at such an angle that they could only shoot from the east—the position of the alleged weapon from which the fire was fired is located on the territory controlled by the 79th brigade of the Ukrainian army. The people’s militia of the LPR showed a map where the direction of the shelling was marked with a blue arrow.

Representatives of the LPR believe that “this farce was fabricated on purpose” for representatives of the Western press, who arrived at the points of Stanytsia Luhanska, Shchastia and Krymskoye controlled by the Ukrainian security forces. Among

53 “Песков предложил «не забегать вперед» с возможным признанием ДНР и ЛНР [Peskov Suggested Not to Rush Possible Recognition of DNR and LNR],” *Kommersant*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5217116>.

54 “Путин связал вопрос признания ДНР и ЛНР с выполнением Киевом Минских соглашений [Putin Linked the Issue of Recognition of DNR and LNR with Implementation of Minsk Agreements by Kyiv],” *Kommersant*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5217295>.

55 Isabelle Khurshudyan and Alex Horton, “What to Know about Shelling in Ukraine that Hit a Kindergarten,” *Washington Post*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/17/ukraine-russia-kindergarten-shelling>.

56 “Daily Report 38/2022,” OSCE SMM, February 18, 2022, https://www.osce.org/files/2022-02-18%20Daily%20Report_ENG.pdf?itok=23379.

57 Luke Harding, Shaun Walker, and Emma Graham-Harrison, “Shelling by Russian-Backed Separatists Raises Tensions in East Ukraine,” *Guardian*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/17/shelling-by-russian-backed-separatists-hits-school-in-east-ukraine>.

58 Володимир Зеленський (@ZelenskyyUa), “Had a phone conversation with @eucopresident Charles Michel in Mariupol. Informed about the security situation and today’s provocative shelling, in particular in Stanytsia Luhanska. Thanked for the initiative of the donors’ conference in support of Ukraine. 🇺🇦🇪🇺🇵🇪,” Twitter, February 17, 2022, <https://twitter.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/1494267560497491972>.

59 Andrew E. Kramer and Valerie Hopkins, “A Whistling Sound, Then an Explosion: Shelling Hits a Kindergarten in Ukraine,” *New York Times*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/world/europe/stanytsia-lushankya-shelling.html>.

60 “В ЛНР заявили о причастности спецназа Украины к постановочному обстрелу детсада,” TACC [TASS], February 18, 2022, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/13757241>.

61 Ibid.

62 “В ДНР рассказали подробности очередной атаки ВСУ,” *Vzglyad*, February 18, 2022, <https://vz.ru/news/2022/2/18/1144300.html>.

63 “Украинские силовики заявили об обстреле Станицы Луганской в Донбассе,” RIA Novosti, February 17, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220217/donbass-1773294343.html>.



Photo of the kindergarten interior published by pro-Kremlin tabloid Komsomolskaya Pravda with the caption, "Ukraine staged shelling of a kindergarten in Donbas." (Source: "Украина инсценировала обстрел детского сада в Донбассе," Komsomolskaya Pravda, February 17, 2022, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27365/4547287>.)



Infographic published by RIA Novosti claiming to document evidence of Ukraine shelling a kindergarten in Stanytsia Luhanska. (Source: “В ЛНР привели доказательства обстрела детского сада украинскими силовиками,” RIA Novosti, February 17, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220217/dokazatelstva-1773444850.html>.)

them are employees of CNN and NBC and the Romanian Antena TV.⁶⁴

The next day, on February 18, Donetsk officials accused Ukraine of attempting to sabotage chlorine-gas tanks in Gorlovka. RT quoted a Donetsk state security statement. “On February 18, 2022, at about 04:00 Moscow time, a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group attempted to blow up tanks for storing ammonia on the territory of the Stirol plant in Gorlovka,” the statement read.⁶⁵ A separate RT article also quoted Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov. “What is happening in the Donbass, I repeat once

again, is very disturbing news that really causes a feeling of alarm, and it is potentially very dangerous,” he said. The article noted that Luhansk “believes that the Armed Forces of Ukraine are trying to provoke return fire to start hostilities,” further justifying a potential Russian military response.⁶⁶

TASS noted a Donetsk People's Militia claim that the alleged saboteurs spoke Polish.⁶⁷ The militia circulated a video on Telegram claiming to show a firefight during the operation.⁶⁸ However, open-source researchers quickly raised doubts about the video, citing metadata contained

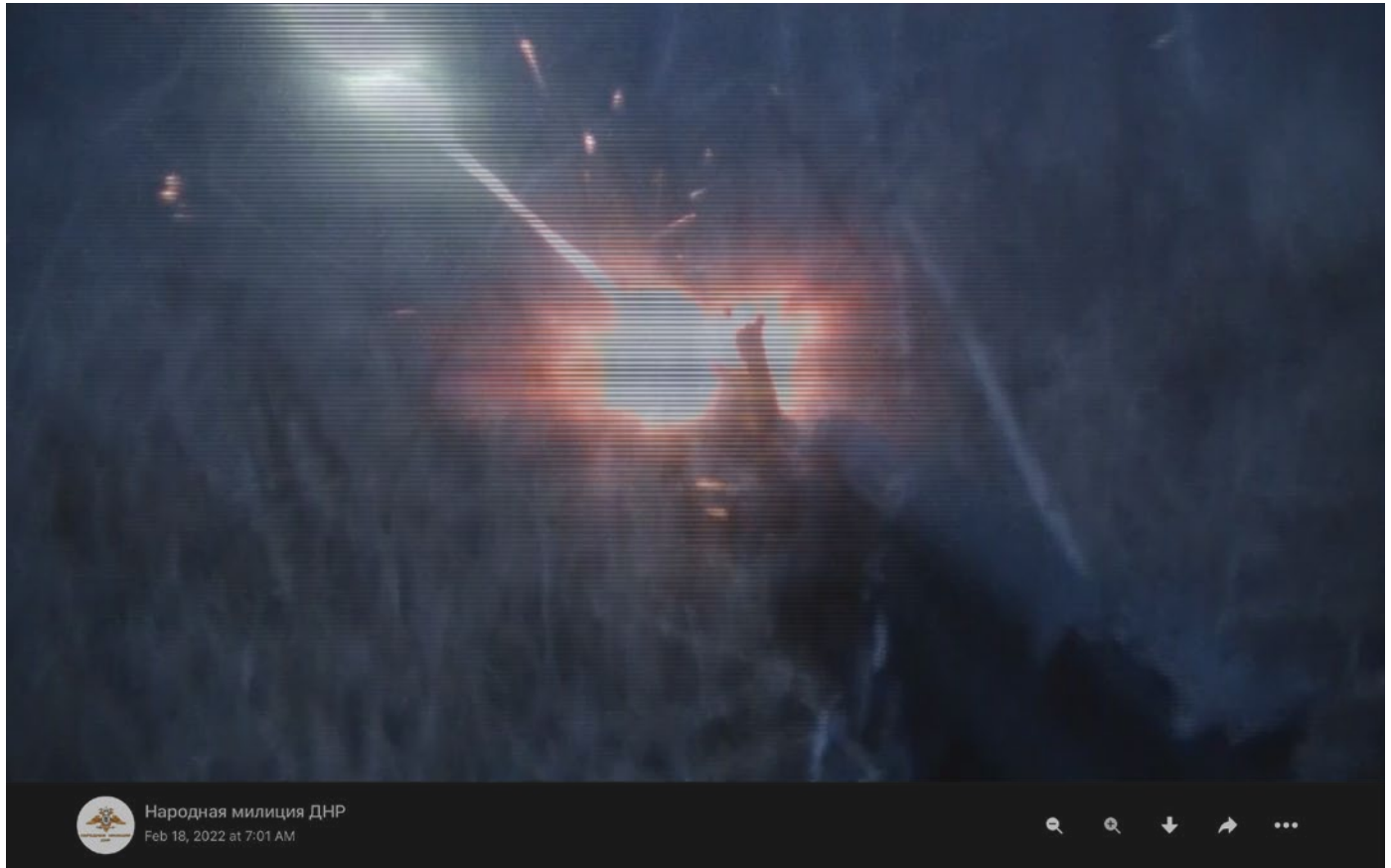
64 “В ЛНР привели доказательства обстрела детского сада украинскими силовиками,” RIA Novosti, February 17, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220217/dokazatelstva-1773444850.html>.

65 “В ДНР предотвратили теракт на заводе «Стирол», ранен охранник,” RT, February 18, 2022, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/964073-dnr-terakt-zavod>.

66 “В Кремле назвали ситуацию в Донбассе очень тревожной,” RT, February 18, 2022, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/964004-peskov-donbass-trevozhnost>.

67 “DPR Prevents Several Blasts Attempted by Ukrainian Saboteurs,” TACC [TASS], February 18, 2022, <https://tass.com/emergencies/1405995>.

68 The Telegram video can be found at: https://t.me/nm_dnr/6192.



Grainy footage of an alleged firefight with saboteurs circulated by the Donetsk People's Militia. Subsequent analysis of video metadata suggested it had been edited together ten days earlier.

within the footage showing it had been assembled from multiple audiovisual sources ten days earlier.⁶⁹

In all, the DFRLab found sixty-one articles published by the fourteen pro-Kremlin outlets about the alleged chlorine incident, citing officials from Donetsk and the Kremlin. Media promotion of doctored footage accusing Ukraine of WMD-related aggression would add further justification to Kremlin plans.

Evacuation of Donetsk and Luhansk

That same day, the pro-Russian leaders of Donetsk and Luhansk, Denis Pushilin and Leonid Pasechnik, announced they would evacuate civilians to Russia, citing alleged

Ukrainian aggression.⁷⁰ They accused Ukraine of planning to attack the Donbas, forcing them to initiate the evacuation.

Notably, Pushilin's statement referenced the shelling of the kindergarten. Even though separatist forces likely carried out the shelling, he alluded to it as evidence of further Ukrainian escalation:

Today their guns are aimed at our civilians, at us and our children. The armed forces of the enemy are in combat formations and are ready for the forceful capture of Donbas. President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy will soon give an order to the military to go on the offensive, to implement a plan to invade the territory of the Donetsk and Luhansk

⁶⁹ Лентач (@oldLentach), "Вчера канал «Народная милиция ДНР» сообщил о попытке украинских диверсантов взорвать емкости с хлором в Горловке. К этому сообщению прикрепили видео с экшн-камеры. Судя по метаданным, его смонтировали 8 февраля. А сняли, по ходу дела, еще раньше:," Twitter, February 19, 2022, <https://twitter.com/oldLentach/status/1494962375816007685>.

⁷⁰ Andy Carvin, *Leaders of Breakaway Regions Announce Evacuation of Civilians after Unverified Reports of Sabotage at a Chemical Facility*, Atlantic Council, February 18, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-hybrid-threats-report-evacuations-begin-in-ukrainian-breakaway-regions/#evacuations>; "ДНР и ЛНР объявили об эвакуации населения в Россию. В Донбассе ожидают скорого наступления украинской армии [DNR and LNR Announced Evacuation of Population to Russia. Donbas Expects Ukraine's Attack]," Lenta, February 18, 2022, <https://lenta.ru/brief/2022/02/18/evacuation>.

People's Republics. I appeal to all the residents of our state...[W]hen the enemy shells the settlements of the Republic, the life and health of our citizens may be endangered.⁷¹

Similarly, Luhansk leader Leonid Pasechnik said he was “beginning to evacuate civilians from the line of contact as Ukraine intensifies shelling of the Republic.”⁷²

Evacuations began immediately. As the DFRLab noted at the time in its monitoring report, “Following the announcements, residents reportedly began receiving SMS messages with instructions on how to prepare for evacuation. Soon, crowds in Donetsk could be seen lining up for convoys of buses and queuing at ATM machines.”⁷³

These evacuations added further justification for Russia to recognize both territories, as well as to falsely argue that the Minsk Agreements had failed and that the West could not ensure security guarantees in the region, thus denying Kremlin responsibility for imminent Russian military aggression.

News of the evacuation spread quickly across pro-Kremlin media, dominating much of their coverage. The DFRLab identified 2,778 evacuation-related stories from the fourteen outlets.

Staged Spectacle at the Kremlin

On February 21, a surreal spectacle played out on Russian media, when outlets aired footage of Putin chairing Russia's National Security Council at the Hall of the Order of St. Catherine in the Grand Kremlin Palace, demanding his ministers explain their positions on whether he should sign the legislation recognizing Donbas independence.⁷⁴ The footage did not appear to be live, as the time displayed on Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's wristwatch suggested the Kremlin had recorded it five hours earlier.⁷⁵

Putin kicked off the meeting by describing the 2014 Revolution of Dignity as “an anti-constitutional, blood-

shedding coup that killed many innocent people. It was truly an armed coup. Nobody can argue that.”⁷⁶ He continued by presenting the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk as “two independent republics” in a confrontation with Kyiv. “In this context, I would like to point out that Russia initially did everything it could to make sure these disagreements could be resolved by peaceful means,” he added, presenting the Kremlin as peacemaker. “However, the Kyiv officials have conducted two punitive operations on those territories and, apparently, we are witnessing a third escalation.”⁷⁷

One by one, leading Kremlin officials walked to a podium and made their comments as Putin sat behind a desk on a raised platform. They recited a diverse litany of Kremlin narratives justifying recognition of the Donbas republics and Russia's imperative to defend them against alleged Ukrainian aggression.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu emphasized President Zelenskyy's recent remarks at the Munich Security Forum, framing Ukraine as a potential nuclear threat:

I would like to draw the Security Council members' attention to Mr Zelensky's statement in which he said that Ukraine wants to regain its status as a nuclear power. “Power” may not be the right word. A nuclear country...They possess the equipment and technology and they have specialists who, in our estimation, have capabilities far greater than those of Iran and North Korea—the countries which are discussed at all levels in the context of agreements on their de-nuclearization.⁷⁸

Viktor Zolotov, commander in chief of the Russian National Guard, also weighed in on Zelenskyy's remarks:

Zelensky states that they are ready to create nuclear arsenals. So, what will we come to? At the same time, we do not border on Ukraine, we have no border with Ukraine. This is the Americans' border, because they are the masters in that country, while the Ukrainians are their vassals. And the fact

71 Harald Doornbos (@HaraldDoornbos), “Huge escalation this. Head of pro-Russian rebels in Donetsk says Ukrainian army is ready to attack Donetsk/ Luhansk and announces centralized departure of the population (women, children, elderly) to the Russian Federation. See statement,” Twitter, February 18, 2022, <https://twitter.com/HaraldDoornbos/status/1494672142146977796>.

72 “Ukrainian Aggression Prompts Civilians Evacuation from LPR to Russia—Pasechnik,” Luhansk Media Centre, February 18, 2022, <https://lug-info.com/en/news/ukrainian-aggression-prompts-civilians-evacuation-in-the-lpr-pasechnik>.

73 Carvin, *Leaders of Breakaway Regions Announce Evacuation of Civilians after Unverified Reports of Sabotage at a Chemical Facility*.

74 “Security Council Meeting Transcript,” Kremlin, February 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67825>.

75 Emerson T. Brooking, *Putin Recognizes DNR and LNR During Angry Speech after Security Council Meeting*, Atlantic Council, February 22, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-hybrid-threats-report-despite-debunking-of-false-flags-putin-recognizes-breakaway-republics/>.

76 “Security Council Meeting Transcript.”

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.



Putin hosts a National Security Council meeting, February 21, 2022. (Source: Reuters.)

that they are rushing weapons to Ukraine and are trying to create nuclear arsenals will backfire on us in the future...Recognizing these republics is certainly a must. I would like to say that we should go ever further to defend our country.⁷⁹

Alexander Bortnikov, director of the Federal Security Service, alluded to recent WMD narratives by citing unsupported claims that more “saboteurs” had attempted to infiltrate the Donbas:

Last night, two Ukrainian sabotage groups approached the border with Russia in the Lugansk region and Mariupol. As a result of the battle fought by our border troops, supported by the Defence Ministry, these two sabotage groups were destroyed. One military of the Ukrainian troops was captured. Further steps are being taken.⁸⁰

Multiple ministers presented Ukraine and the West as fascist aggressors threatening Russian-speaking residents of the Donbas with genocide. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov engaged in whataboutism by calling out NATO’s 1999 support of Kosovo independence:

There is this aspect here expressed in the term “genocide,” which you, Mr President, have mentioned during your press conference with Olaf Scholz. The history of the creation of Kosovo, an all but independent entity established without any referendum, is about genocide. The fact that they are now trying to prop up an overtly neo-Nazi, Banderite regime in Kyiv is also a manifestation of genocide. In both cases, this is an attack against Slavs, against Orthodox Christians, and in Ukraine’s case, against everything Russian. This runs counter to the Ukrainian constitution, as we all know very

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

well. However, this has not prevented the Kyiv regime from adopting one law after another to enforce ever tighter requirements for banning the Russian language not only in schools and universities, but in everyday life.⁸¹

Later, Igor Shchegolev, presidential plenipotentiary envoy to the Central Federal District, added, “We hear the Ukrainian Nazis describe what will happen to the people of these republics after the Ukrainian government returns there. They directly threaten to destroy them and subject them to vetting and physical execution.”⁸²

Not all of Putin’s ministers appeared to be in alignment, however. Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev recommended continuing negotiations with the West:

I motion that it would be advisable to accept the proposal of the American side, President [Joe] Biden’s proposal to have talks during which it would be possible to say that “you did everything you could to harm the people of the Lugansk People’s Republic and the Donetsk People’s Republic, and we must support them. If you can stop this blood-bath soon—say, two or three days—we will maintain a dialogue with you. Then, let the people make progress, and let them agree and implement not the ‘road map’ of the Minsk Agreements, but a plan so that there is a tight deadline for each item.” But I am convinced that the answer you receive will be negative, they will not agree with you. So, recognition is the only option.⁸³

Later, Kremlin intelligence chief Sergei Naryshkin attempted to side with Patrushev’s recommendation, leading to a visibly angry Putin demanding that Naryshkin clarify his position on recognizing Donetsk and Luhansk:

Naryshkin: I would agree with Mr Patrushev’s proposal that our, so to speak, Western partners can be given a last chance in order for them to force Kiev to make peace and comply with the Minsk Agreements as soon as possible. Otherwise, we must take the decision that is being discussed today.

Putin: What does “otherwise” mean? Do you propose starting a negotiating process or recog-

nising the sovereignty of the republics? Speak plainly.

Naryshkin: I will support the proposal to recognise...

Putin: Will support or support? Speak plainly, Mr Naryshkin.

Naryshkin: I support the proposal...

Putin: Just say yes or no.

Naryshkin: That is what I am saying: I support the proposal to have the Donetsk and Lugansk people’s republics become part of the Russian Federation.

Putin: We are not talking about this, we are not discussing this. We are talking about recognising their independence or not.

Naryshkin: Yes. I support the proposal to recognise their independence.

Putin: Good. Please take your seat. Thank you.⁸⁴

After each minister completed their remarks, Putin abruptly concluded the meeting. “Colleagues, I have heard your opinions. The decision will be made later today. I would like to thank you for this meeting, for this conference.”

Putin Recognizes Donetsk and Luhansk

That evening, Putin released another video announcing he had signed the decrees recognizing Donetsk and Luhansk, then ordered Russian armed forces into the Donbas on “peacekeeping duties.”⁸⁵ Appearing at a large desk, Putin summarized the centuries-encompassing revisionist historical lesson he had presented in written form the previous summer, once again making the case that Ukraine is a fundamental part of Russia run by criminals who cannot manage its affairs. “I would like to emphasise again that Ukraine is not just a neighboring country for us,” he insisted. “It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space.”

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid; “‘Speak Plainly!’: Putin Has Tense Exchange with His Spy Chief—Video,” *Guardian*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2022/feb/22/speak-plainly-putin-tense-exchange-spy-chief-ukraine-video>.

⁸⁵ “Ukraine: Putin Announces Donetsk and Luhansk Recognition,” BBC, February 21, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-60470900>; Andrew Ross and Julian Borger, “Putin Orders Troops into Eastern Ukraine on ‘Peacekeeping Duties,’” *Guardian*, February 21, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/21/ukraine-putin-decide-recognition-breakaway-states-today>.



Putin announces Russia's recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk. (Source: EYEPRESS via Reuters Connect.)

Eventually, Putin returned to the nuclear theme raised earlier in the National Security Council meeting:

As we know, it has already been stated today that Ukraine intends to create its own nuclear weapons, and this is not just bragging. Ukraine has the nuclear technologies created back in the Soviet times and delivery vehicles for such weapons...But they can do more; it is only a matter of time. They have had the groundwork for this since the Soviet era.

In other words, acquiring tactical nuclear weapons will be much easier for Ukraine than for some other states I am not going to mention here, which are conducting such research, especially if Kiev receives foreign technological support. We cannot rule this out either.

If Ukraine acquires weapons of mass destruction, the situation in the world and in Europe will drastically change, especially for us, for Russia.

Putin also reiterated the narrative that Ukraine and the West were engaging in “genocide” against Russians in the Donbas:

Meanwhile, the so-called civilized world, which our Western colleagues proclaimed themselves the only representatives of, prefers not to see this, as if this horror and genocide, which almost 4 million people are facing, do not exist. But they do exist and only because these people did not agree with the West-supported coup in Ukraine in 2014 and opposed the transition towards the Neanderthal and aggressive nationalism and neo-Nazism which have been elevated in Ukraine to the rank of national policy. They are fighting for their elementary right to live on their own land, to speak their own language, and to preserve their culture and traditions.

How long can this tragedy continue? How much longer can one put up with this?

Putin's speech then reached its conclusion.

In this regard, I consider it necessary to take a long overdue decision and to immediately recognise the independence and sovereignty of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic. I would like to ask the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation to support this decision and then ratify the Treaty of Friendship and Mutual

Assistance with both republics. These two documents will be prepared and signed shortly. We want those who seized and continue to hold power in Kiev to immediately stop hostilities. Otherwise, the responsibility for the possible continuation of the bloodshed will lie entirely on the conscience of Ukraine's ruling regime. As I announce the decisions taken today, I remain confident in the support of Russia's citizens and the country's patriotic forces.⁸⁶

The next forty-eight hours witnessed Russian forces making their final preparations. On February 22, Vasily Nebenzya, Russia's permanent representative to the United Nations, addressed the assembly and stressed that Russia's recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk did not violate the Minsk Agreements.⁸⁷ The next day,

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced a draft calling up all reservists ages eighteen to sixty.⁸⁸ Russia, meanwhile, closed its airspace along the Ukrainian border.⁸⁹

With his highly orchestrated National Security Council meeting at the Kremlin and his subsequent televised remarks, Vladimir Putin justified his recognition of the Donbas republics and ordering Russian troops to cross the border into occupied Ukraine. By weaving together an ever-growing list of false and misleading narratives, Putin's justifications for war fell into place, all the while denying responsibility for Ukraine's fate.

The world held its collective breath for what would happen next.

86 Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin, February 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

87 "Небензя: признание Россией ДНР и ЛНР не меняет состава сторон Минских соглашений [Nebenzya: Russian Recognition of DNR and LNR Does Not Change the Parties of the Minsk Agreements]," *Kommersant*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5228806>.

88 Monique Beals, "Ukraine President Orders Reservists to Be Drafted," *Hill*, February 23, 2022, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/595435-ukraine-president-orders-reservists-to-be-drafted-urges-ukrainians-to/>.

89 Pilar Wolfsteller, "Russia Closes Airspace Bordering Eastern Ukraine," *FlightGlobal*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.flightglobal.com/safety/russia-closes-airspace-bordering-eastern-ukraine/147674.article>.

The Speech: Putin Spins Pro-Kremlin Narratives to Justify Attacking Ukraine

As the first reports of explosions began to come in from across Ukraine before dawn on February 24, 2022, President Putin delivered a speech announcing that he had approved a “special military operation” on behalf of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics. The speech, which started at 5:30 a.m. Moscow time (4:30 a.m. in Kyiv), lasted just over twenty-eight minutes, and contained a litany of falsehoods, distortions, and excuses for initiating the war, many of which reflected the justification and denial narratives observed among the fourteen pro-Kremlin outlets.

In an analysis of the speech transcript, which runs more than 3,700 words, the DFRLab found more than two hundred instances of Putin utilizing the overarching pro-Kremlin narratives, escalatory events, and emotional themes previously outlined in this report. The speech was carefully crafted to place the blame on Ukraine, the United States, and NATO, while framing Russia as desiring peace but now taking military action as a moral responsibility.

A complete copy of the speech and our annotations can be found online at atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/markup/putin-speech-ukraine-war/. Below we outline notable examples from the speech.

“The West is creating tensions in the region”

Throughout the full length of the speech, Putin denied Kremlin responsibility and blamed the West for creating the tensions that had brought Russia to this point. He began by blaming the West for “constantly creating fundamental threats” to Russia. He named “eastward expansion of NATO” and “moving its military infrastructure closer to the Russian border” among his concerns. Putin cited NATO involvement in Serbia and Libya, as well as US involvement in Syria, as examples of the West’s willingness to go to war to protect its interests. He also blamed the West for bringing societal decay to Russia’s doorstep, including “the feeling of absolute superiority” and “low cultural standards and arrogance.”

“Russia is seeking peace”

Putin’s rhetoric routinely denied that Russia was to blame for the situation, arguing it possessed the high moral ground—a position he claimed was rooted in its history. Citing the early days of World War II, he noted how the Soviet Union had attempted “to appease the aggressor”

to avoid war. He said that following the collapse of the USSR, the new Russian state showed “unprecedented openness,” “readiness to work honestly with the United States and other Western partners,” and “practically unilateral disarmament.” He noted that, over the past thirty years, Moscow “has been patiently trying to come to an agreement with the leading NATO countries regarding the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe.” And yet, he continued, the West had tried to “destroy” the country by “actively supporting separatism and gangs of mercenaries in southern Russia”—an additional callout to the West-creating-tensions narrative.

The speech also referenced Russia’s December 2021 security demands; Putin said the Kremlin “made yet another attempt to reach agreement with the United States and its allies on the principles of European security and NATO’s non-expansion.” The effort, though, was “in vain,” he said, because the United States was “neglecting” Russia’s interests.

“Ukraine is aggressive”

More than halfway into his speech, Putin justified his decision when he commented, “The problem is that in territories adjacent to Russia, which I have to note is our historical land, a hostile ‘anti-Russia’ is taking shape.” He added that Ukraine was “doing everything to attract NATO forces and cutting-edge weapons,” potentially an allusion to WMDs as well. When discussing the Donbas, Putin stated, “We can see that the forces that staged the coup in Ukraine in 2014 have seized power, are keeping it with the help of ornamental election procedures and have abandoned the path of a peaceful conflict settlement.”

Referring to the Ukrainian government, Putin later added, “They will undoubtedly try to bring war to Crimea just as they have done in Donbas, to kill innocent people just as members of the punitive units of Ukrainian nationalists and [Adolf] Hitler’s accomplices did during the Great Patriotic War.” It would be one of multiple occasions in which he tied Ukraine to Nazis.

“Russia has moral obligation to protect the region’s security”

Toward the end of the speech, Putin warned, “Russia cannot feel safe, develop, and exist while facing a permanent threat from the territory of today’s Ukraine.” He justified his

2014 invasion of Crimea by insisting that “we supported the people of Crimea and Sevastopol,” and took action in Syria the following year to “create a reliable shield that prevented terrorists from Syria from penetrating Russia,” one of multiple references to Russia’s obligation to combat terrorists and extremists. “This was a matter of defending ourselves,” he insisted. “We had no other choice.”

“The same is happening today,” he continued. “They did not leave us any other option for defending Russia and our people, other than the one we are forced to use today. In these circumstances, we have to take bold and immediate action. The people’s republics of Donbas have asked Russia for help.” With this, Putin argues that his “special military operation” was morally justified because the pro-Kremlin leaders of Donetsk and Luhansk had called for aid.

“Ukraine is a puppet of the West”

Referring to the West, Putin stated, “The forces that staged the coup in Ukraine in 2014 have seized power, are keeping it with the help of ornamental election procedures and have abandoned the path of a peaceful conflict settlement.” He added that NATO is “a tool of US foreign policy,” and that Ukraine is “fully controlled from the outside.” Speaking more broadly of the West dominating its partners and allies, “All its satellites not only humbly and obediently say yes to and parrot it at the slightest pretext but also imitate its behavior and enthusiastically accept the rules it is offering them.”

Nazis and Genocide

References to Nazis and genocide appeared as justifications throughout Putin’s speech, from his World War II history lesson to his claims that the Ukrainian “regime” comprises murderous fascists. For example, he stated, “Leading NATO countries are supporting far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine.”

“They will undoubtedly try to bring war to Crimea just as they have done in Donbas, to kill innocent people just as members of the punitive units of Ukrainian nationalists and Hitler’s accomplices did during the Great Patriotic War,” he continued. “They have also openly laid claim to several other Russian regions.”

Addressing the people of Ukraine, Putin also noted how, in 2014, Moscow had been “obliged to protect the people of

Crimea and Sevastopol from those who you yourself call ‘nats’ [Nazis].”

“The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime,” Putin continued. “To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation.”

Weapons of Mass Destruction

The Kremlin-conjured specter of Ukraine attacking Russia with WMDs loomed throughout the speech, climaxing with Putin’s vague threats to retaliate in kind. He first raised nuclear weapons by mocking US claims prior to the 2003 Iraq war that Saddam Hussein possessed WMDs. Putin referenced former US Secretary of State Colin Powell addressing the United Nations holding “a vial with white powder” and assuring it was an Iraqi “chemical warfare agent.” To this, Putin added, “It later turned out that all of that was a fake and a sham.”

Later, Putin reminded the world that “today’s Russia remains one of the most powerful nuclear states,” and that “any potential aggressor will face defeat and ominous consequences should it directly attack our country.”

“If we look at the sequence of events and the incoming reports, the showdown between Russia and these forces cannot be avoided,” Putin declared. “It is only a matter of time. They are getting ready and waiting for the right moment. Moreover, they went as far as aspire to acquire nuclear weapons. We will not let this happen.”

Putin ended his speech with an air of confidence.

“At the end of the day,” he concluded, “the future of Russia is in the hands of its multi-ethnic people, as has always been the case in our history. This means that the decisions that I made will be executed, that we will achieve the goals we have set, and reliably guarantee the security of our Motherland. I believe in your support and the invincible force rooted in the love for our Fatherland.”

Putin’s latest war of aggression against Ukraine had begun, justified by the same narratives pro-Kremlin media trumpeted in the lead-up to the invasion.

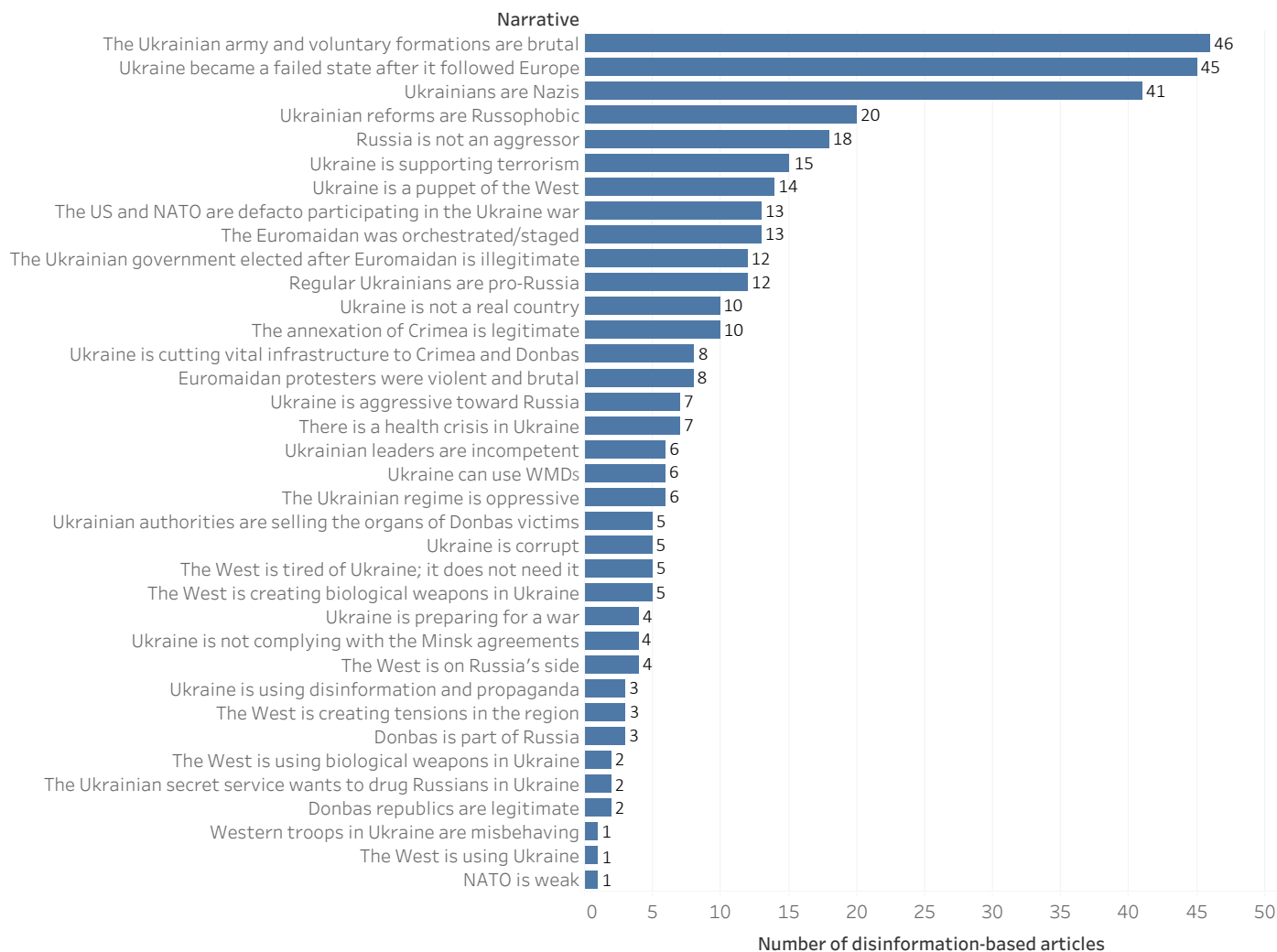
Analysis of Pro-Kremlin Media Narratives

Foundational Falsehoods (2014–2021): the Development of Pro-Kremlin Narratives

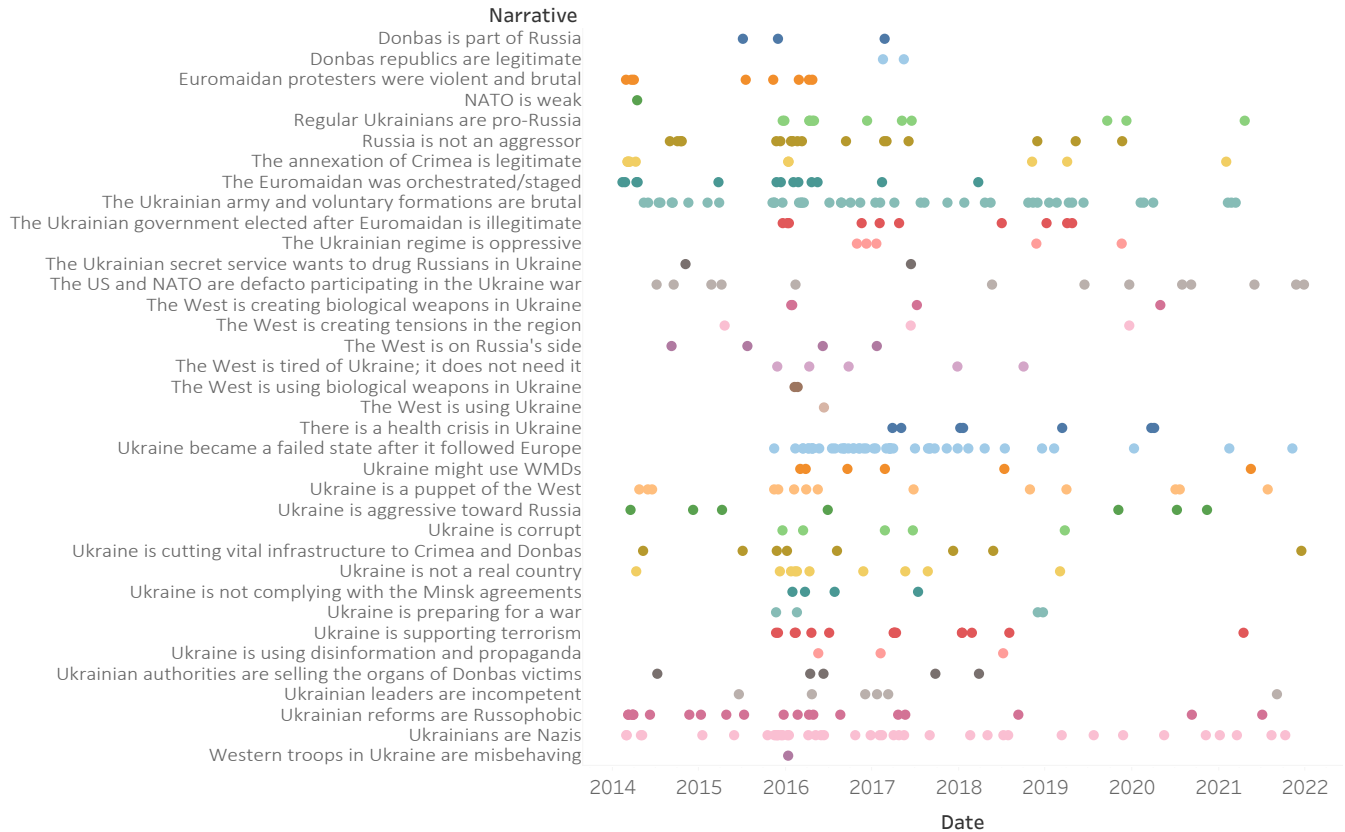
To explore how the Kremlin and its proxies weaponized false and misleading narratives promoted prior to the February 2022 invasion, the DFRLab reviewed nine thousand fact-checks published by StopFake and EUvsDisinfo between 2014 and 2021. The DFRLab shortlisted 367 claims about Ukraine published by pro-Kremlin sources, comprising a total of thirty-six narratives, many of which recurred throughout the eight-year period. The DFRLab then plotted the 367 debunks by narrative category over time to search for any emergent patterns.

Among the thirty-six narratives identified among the 367 claims collected from 2014–2021, the most-frequent pro-Kremlin narratives were “The Ukrainian army and voluntary formations are brutal,” “Ukraine became a failed state after it followed Europe,” and “Ukrainians are Nazis.” These would become recurring themes that continue in pro-Kremlin propaganda today.

The Ukrainian brutality narrative and the Ukrainians-are-Nazis narrative first surfaced in our dataset in 2014, while the narrative regarding Ukraine becoming a failed state after it followed Europe appeared in 2016. All three narratives served Kremlin interests by dehumanizing Ukrainians



Bar chart showing pro-Kremlin claims regarding Ukraine from 367 debunks published between 2014 and 2021, ranked by the number of articles. (Source: DFRLab via StopFake and EUvsDisinfo.)



Scatter plot showing frequency of 367 pro-Kremlin claim by narrative type, distributed over time by publication date. (Source: DFRLab via StopFake and EUvsDisinfo.)

and expressing contempt for their nation's sovereignty, priming Russian audiences for further escalation.

The DFRLab also identified topical themes running across the 367 debunked claims. As one would expect given the nature of the claims, conflict-related themes were among the most common, including "military" (forty-five stories), "war" (twenty stories), "WMDs" (eighteen stories), and "terrorism" (eighteen stories). The second most common theme was "Nazism" (forty-two stories), due to the sheer number of claims reiterating the Kremlin trope that Ukrainians are Nazis.

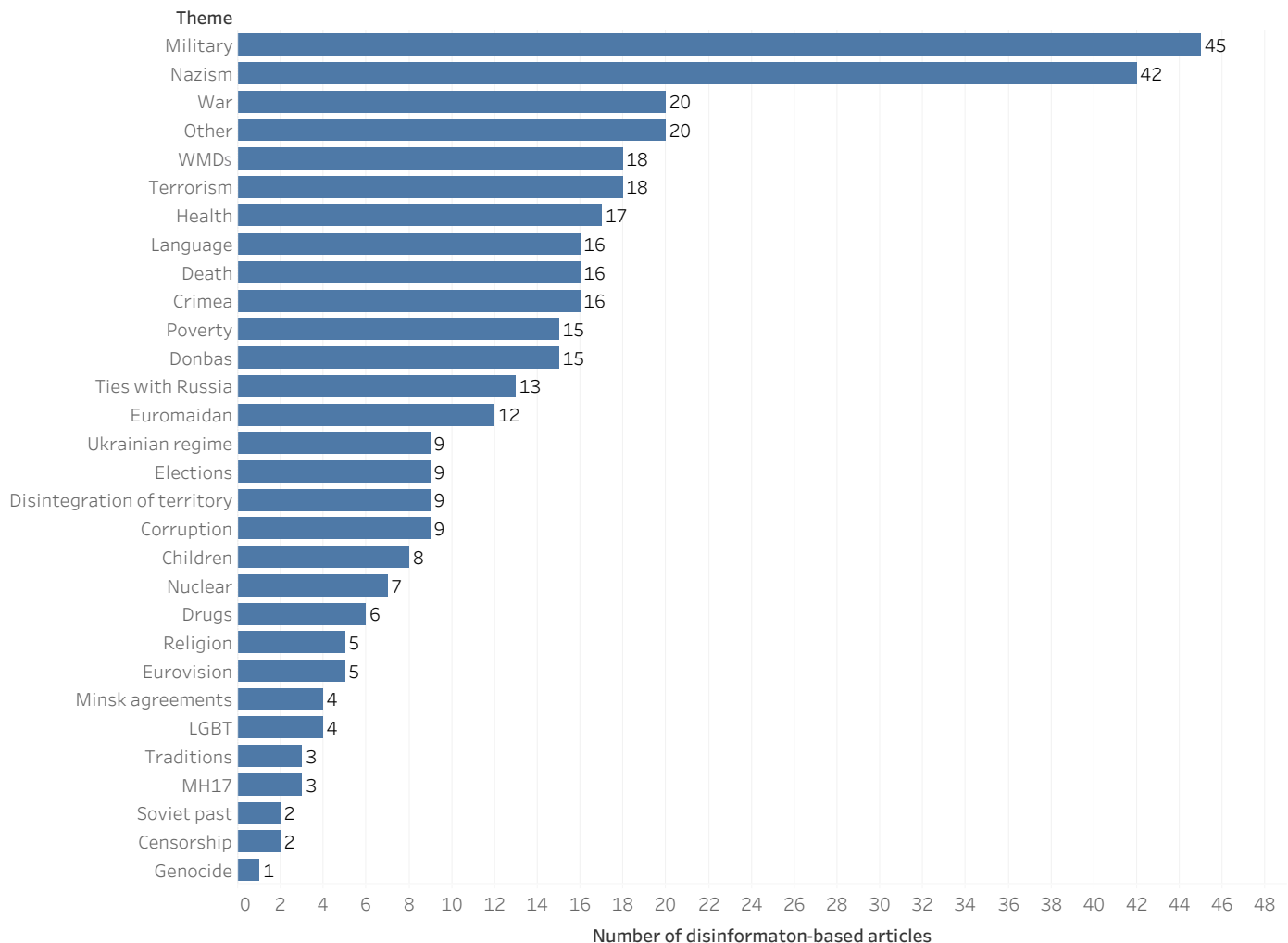
The Final Seventy Days (December 16, 2021, to February 24, 2022): Pro-Kremlin Narrative Trends

Article Frequency by Escalatory Event

Over the ten weeks leading up to February 24, pro-Kremlin media exploited a series of escalatory events that helped Putin justify his decision to invade Ukraine. Published by Kremlin outlets by the thousands, these narratives routinely alluded to Ukrainian aggression and Russia's moral

obligation to recognize and defend the Donbas republics, thus serving as information warfare to complement a marked shift of Russian preparatory military operations on the ground.

When reviewed through the lens of seven escalatory events leading up to the February 24 invasion described in our timeline, the most frequent topic referenced in our archive of more than ten thousand pro-Kremlin articles was Russia demanding security guarantees from NATO and the United States, which featured in 5,941 articles between December 16 and January 31, an average of 132.02 articles per day. This was followed by 2,778 articles regarding the evacuation of the Donbas region over an eight-day period (February 17–24), averaging 347.25 stories a day, while calls for Russia to recognize Donetsk and Luhansk independence appeared in 1,540 articles between January 10 and February 24, averaging 32.22 per day. A total of 297 articles between February 19–24 focused on Zelenskyy's Munich Security Council remarks about Ukraine reconsidering the 1994 Budapest Memorandum that surrendered Ukraine's nuclear stockpile for security guarantees (49.5 per day), while Donbas breakaway leaders demanding Russia's help appeared in 113 articles from February 1–24 (4.71 per day). Regarding the alleged chlorine-tank



Bar chart showing themes of debunked pro-Kremlin narratives about Ukraine 2014–2021 ranked by the number of articles. (Source: DFRLab via StopFake and EUvsDisinfo.)

saboteurs and the shelling of a kindergarten, the former appeared in sixty-one articles, while the latter was featured in fifty-three articles between February 17–24. In both cases, most stories appeared in the first twenty-four hours after each incident before being subsumed by the ongoing pro-Kremlin news cycle.

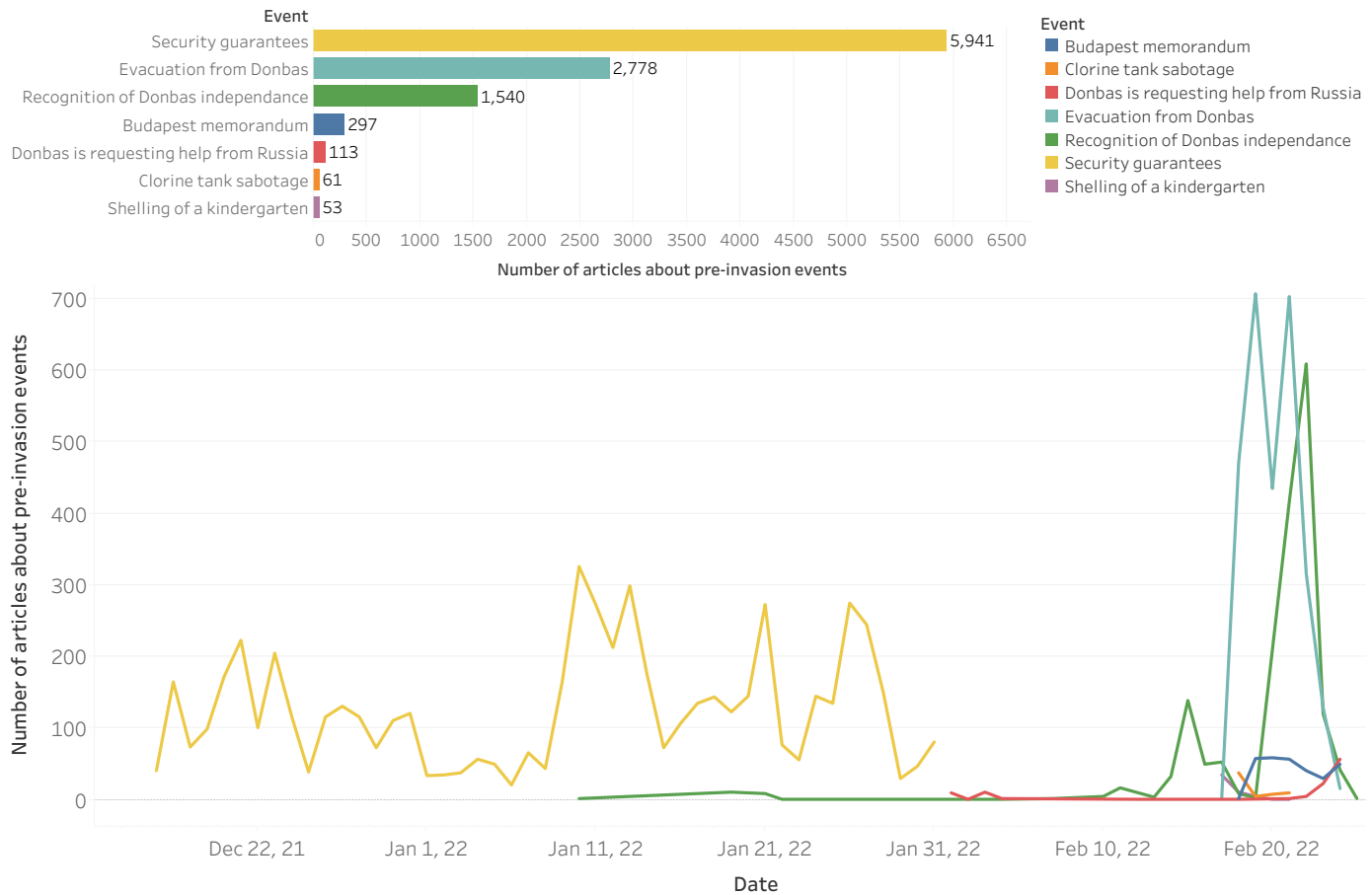
On Facebook and Twitter, articles about Ukraine reconsidering the Budapest Memorandum and stories about Donbas officials requesting help from Russia garnered the most engagement, with the former more popular on Facebook (38.48 reactions, 22.82 comments, and 10.97 shares on average), and the latter more popular on Twitter (19.58 favorites and 7.43 retweets on average). Alleged chlorine-tank sabotage, on average, garnered 14.61 reactions on Facebook, 7.74 comments on Facebook, 5.74 shares on Facebook, 4.23 favorites on Twitter, and 2.10 retweets on Twitter. Shelling of a kindergarten in Luhansk, on average, garnered 6.96 reactions on Facebook, 3.04

comments on Facebook, 4.93 shares on Facebook, 5.42 favorites on Twitter, and 3.32 retweets on Twitter.

Narrative Frequency During the Seventy-Day Invasion Lead-up

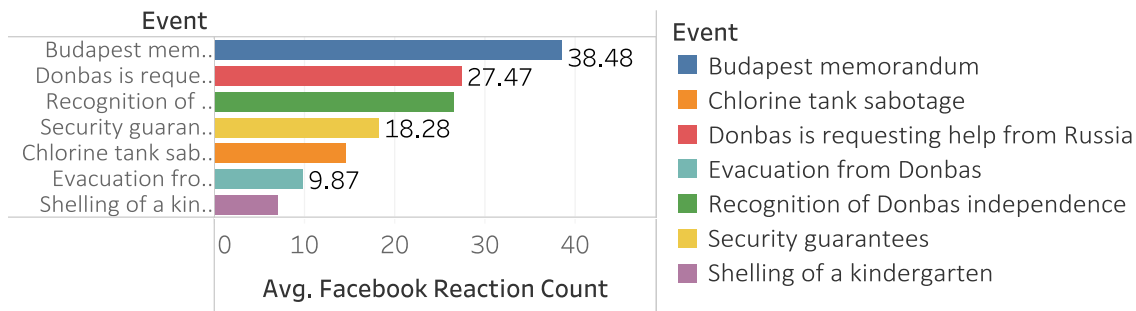
Among the 10,783 pro-Kremlin articles analyzed by the DFRLab, the overarching narrative “Russia is seeking peace” appeared the most frequently, featuring in 2,201 articles, while “Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region’s security” appeared in 2,086 articles. This dual rhetorical approach—simultaneously claiming peaceful intentions while preparing to fight—allowed the Kremlin to argue that it stood on higher moral ground than Ukraine and the West. Similarly, the narratives claiming “Ukraine is aggressive” (1,888 articles), “The West is creating tensions in the region” (1,729 articles), and “Ukraine is a puppet of the West” (182 articles) framed Russia’s adversaries as the instigators of the looming conflict.

Narrative warfare: How the Kremlin and Russian news outlets justified a war of aggression against Ukraine

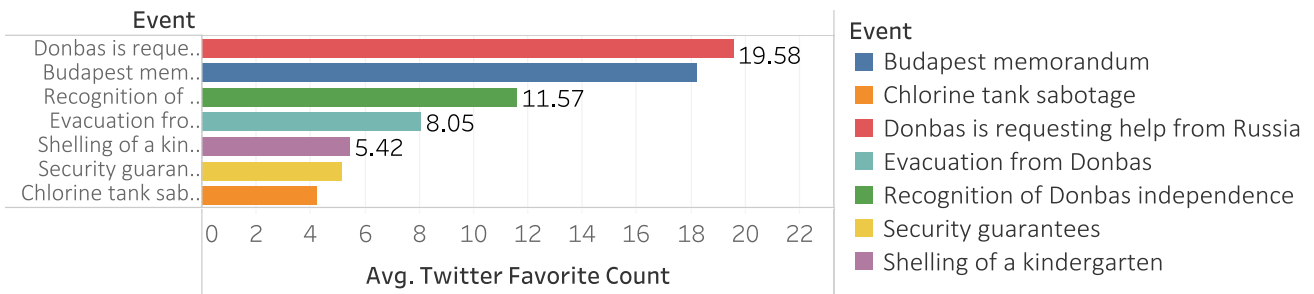


Top: Bar chart comparing number of articles per escalatory event. Bottom: Line chart showing the number of articles per escalatory event over each queried timespan. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

Average engagement on Facebook



Average engagement on Twitter



Bar charts comparing average number of engagements by narrative topic on Facebook (top) and Twitter (bottom). (Source: DFRLab via Facebook API and Meltwater.)



Of the 4,068 articles that did not fall into one of the five overarching pro-Kremlin narratives and were initially categorized as "Other," 2,647 of them featured pro-Kremlin outlets acknowledging five additional narratives playing out in the West, including "The West is ready for both dialogue and sanctions to deter Russia" (1,084 articles), "NATO should protect security in Europe and Ukraine" (473 articles), "Talks about security in Europe need to evolve everyone in Europe" (380 articles), "Evacuation Logistics" (274 articles), "Russia is violating the Minsk Agreements" (228 articles), and "Russia is preparing to attack Ukraine" (208 articles). The remaining 1,421 stories covered miscellaneous topics related to Western narratives at lower frequencies.

Overarching Pro-Kremlin Narratives and Related Sub-Narratives

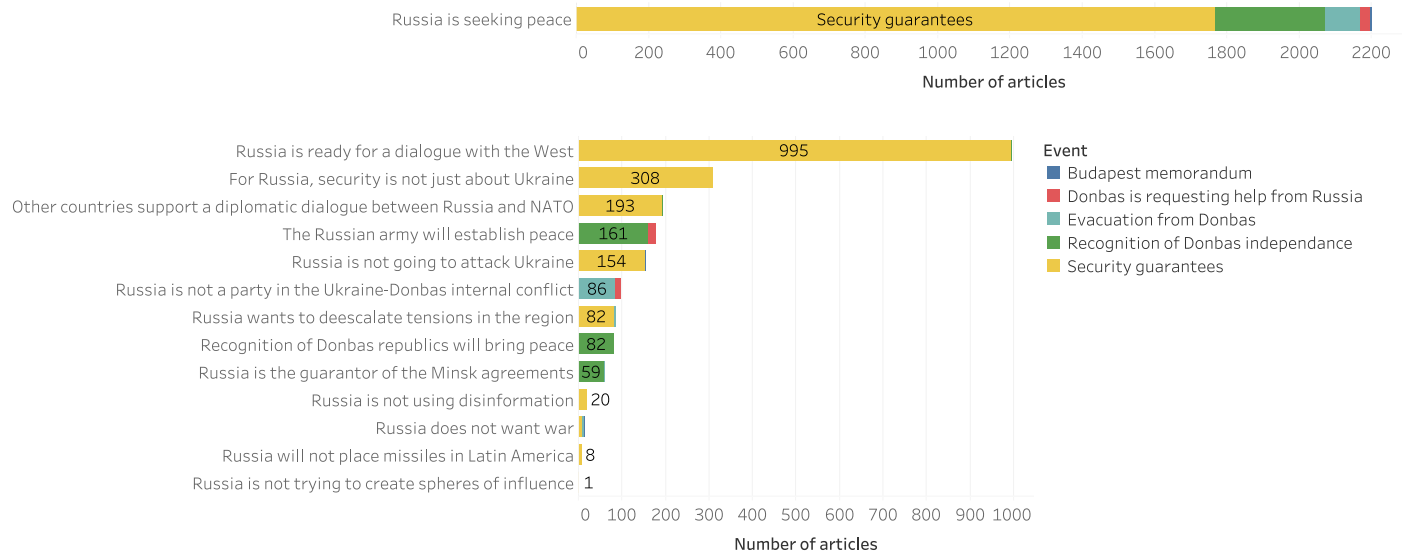
"Russia is seeking peace"

The 2,201 articles containing the narrative "Russia is seeking peace" ebbed and flowed in the news cycle over the seventy-day period leading up to February 24, serving as a moral-high-ground argument masking Putin's belligerent intentions and denying any responsibility for military action.

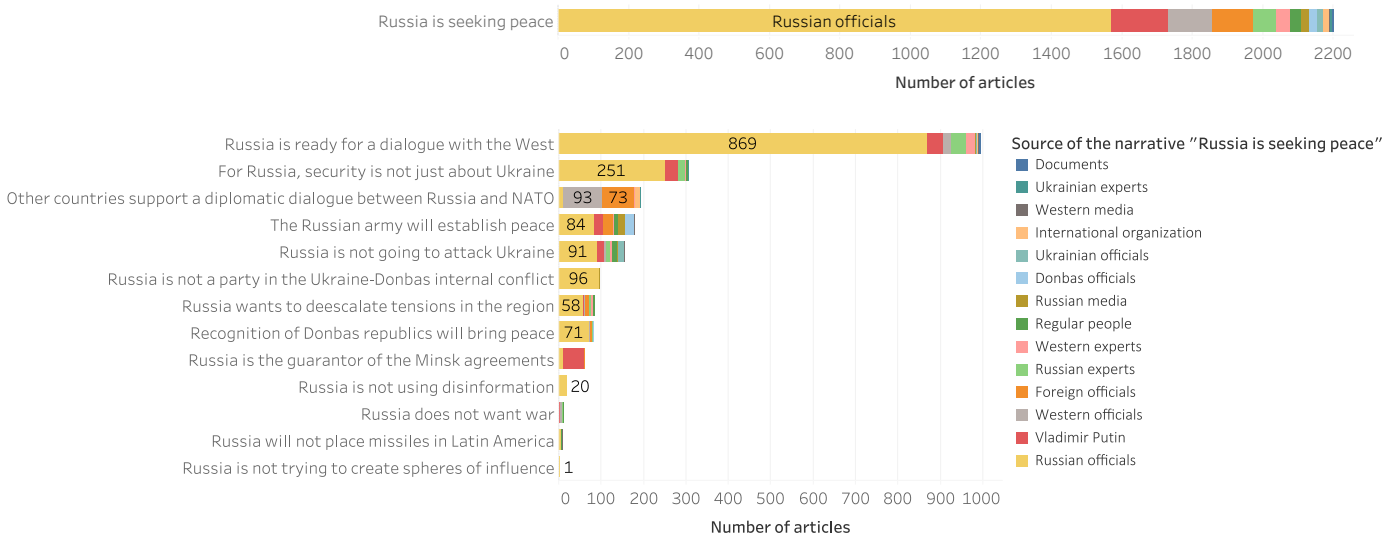


Line chart showing the number of articles containing the narrative "Russia is seeking peace" over time, and word cloud of sub-narratives sized relatively to each other by the number of articles. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

Narrative warfare: How the Kremlin and Russian news outlets justified a war of aggression against Ukraine



Bar chart showing the number of articles for “The West is creating tensions in the region,” categorized by escalatory event (top) and sub-narrative (bottom). (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)



Bar charts showing the number of articles containing sub-narratives related to the narrative “Russia is seeking peace,” categorized by the sources cited in them. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

They were most commonly found in stories regarding Russia demanding security guarantees, appearing in 1,768 out of 2,201 articles (80.32 percent). While the unrealistic nature of Kremlin demands effectively made them an untenable ultimatum to Ukraine and the West, framing them as Russia seeking security guarantees reinforced the Kremlin’s desire to appear to be taking the moral high ground.

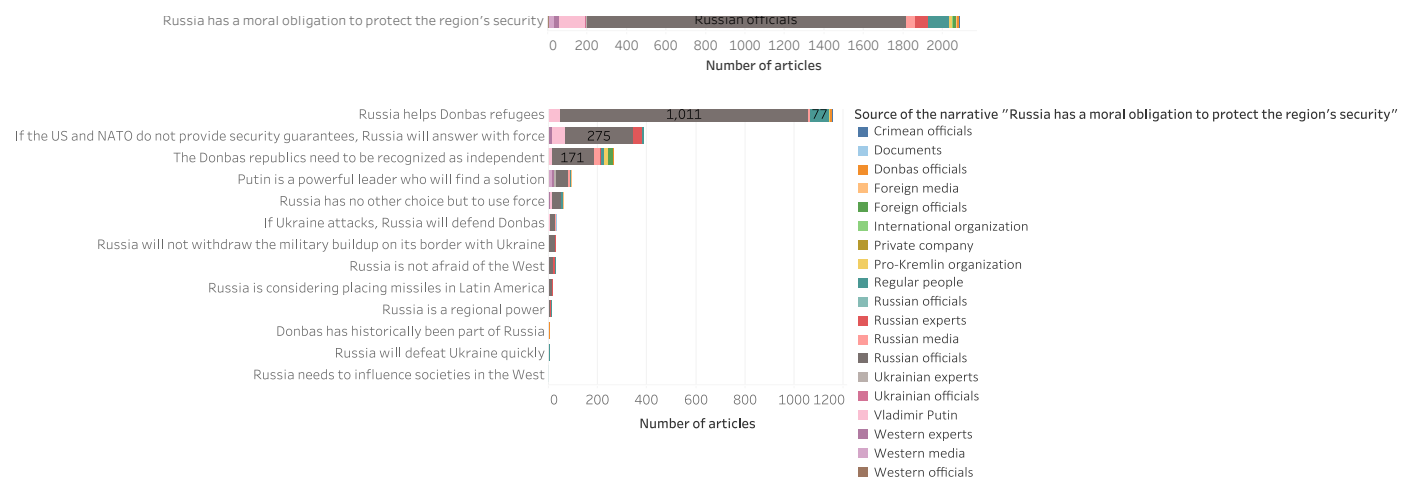
This is reflected in multiple sub-narratives identified within the overarching narrative that further masked Kremlin intentions and feigned constructive engagement, including “Russia is ready for dialogue with the West” (995 articles),

“For Russia, security is not just about Ukraine” (308 articles), and “Other countries support a diplomatic dialogue between Russia and NATO” (194 articles). Additional sub-narratives included justifications such as “The Russian army will establish peace” (161 articles), “Recognition of Donbas republics will bring peace” (eighty-two articles), and “Russia is the guarantor of the Minsk Agreements” (sixty-one articles), among others.

For each overarching narrative, the DFRLab also analyzed the sources cited by the pro-Kremlin outlets. The most common sources cited within the “Russia is seeking peace”



Line chart showing the number of articles containing the narrative "Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security" over time, and word cloud of sub-narratives sized relatively to each other by the number of articles. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)



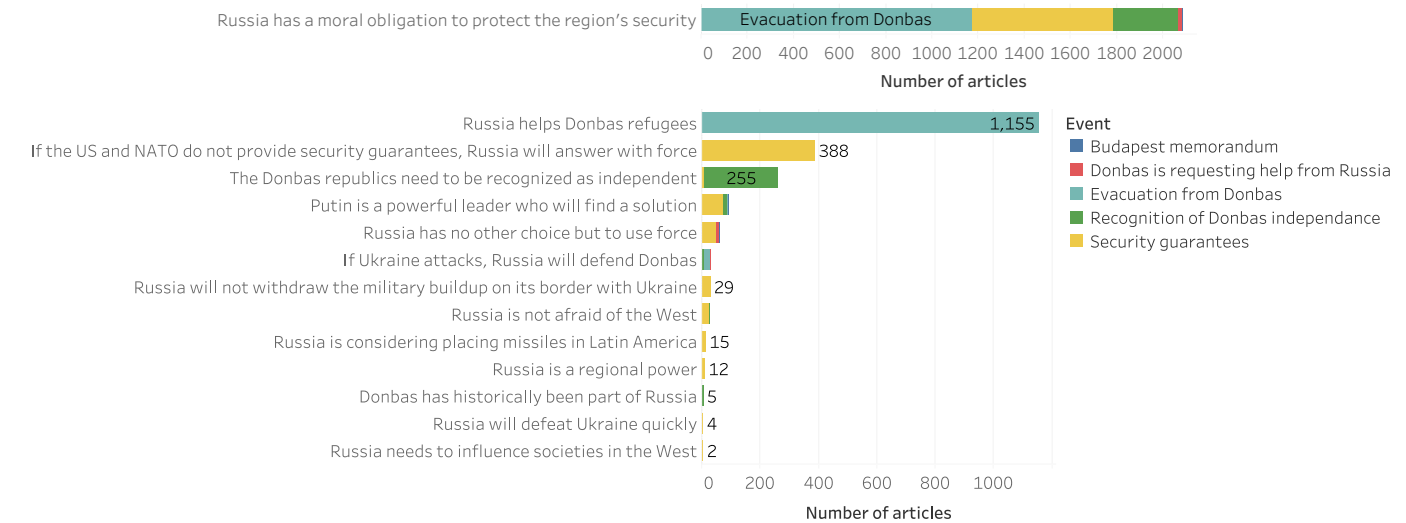
Bar charts showing the number of articles containing "Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security" sub-narratives divided by source. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

narrative were Russian officials (1,570 articles), followed by Vladimir Putin (161 articles), establishing the narrative as the Kremlin's position. Russian officials were the primary source cited in ten of thirteen sub-narratives, while Putin was cited forty-nine times for the sub-narrative "Russia is the guarantor of the Minsk Agreements." In contrast, articles for the sub-narrative "Other countries support a diplomatic dialogue between Russia and NATO" cited Western officials (ninety-three articles) and foreign officials (seventy-three articles).

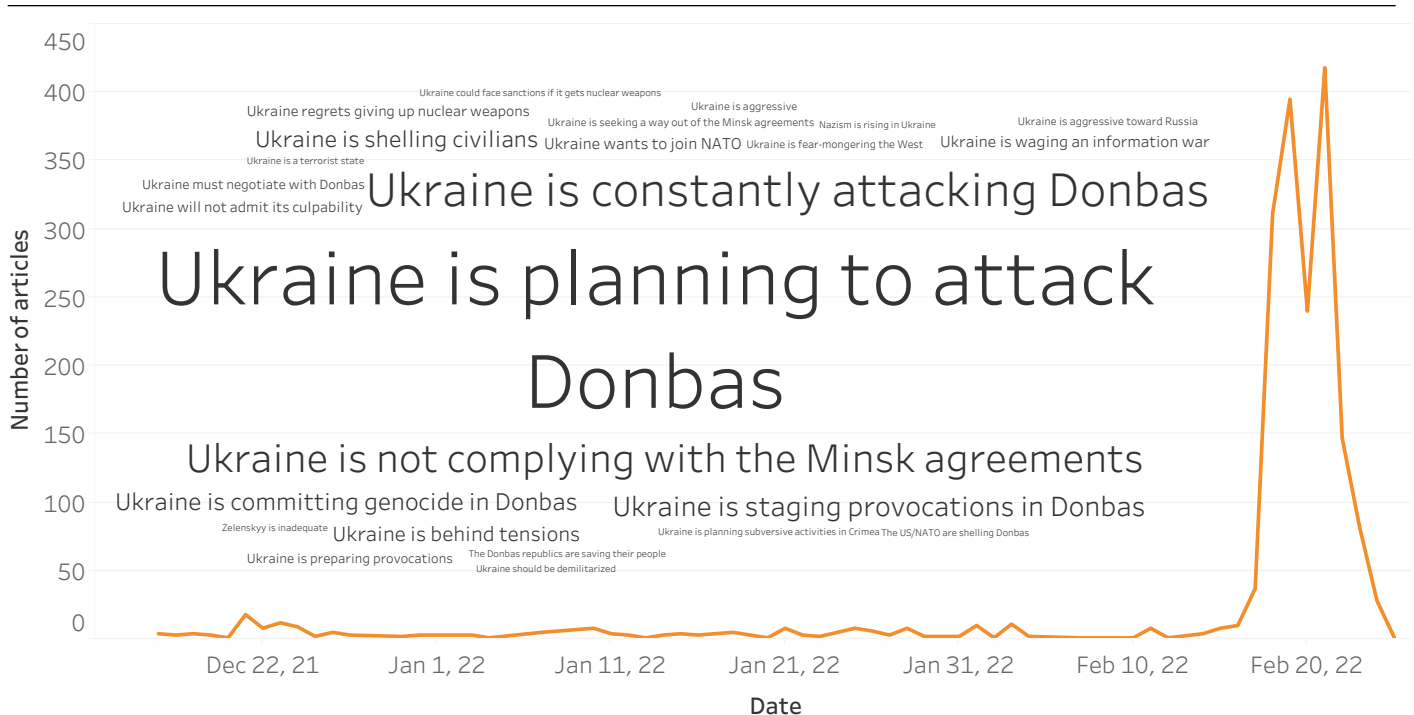
"Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security"

The second most common overarching narrative, "Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security," appeared in 2,086 articles, reinforcing Kremlin justifications for war. While the theme appeared throughout the seventy-day period, the DFRLab identified spikes on February 19 (262 articles) and February 21 (401 articles), as Kremlin

Narrative warfare: How the Kremlin and Russian news outlets justified a war of aggression against Ukraine



Bar chart showing the number of articles for “Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region’s security,” categorized by escalatory event (top) and sub-narrative (bottom). (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)



Line chart showing the number of articles containing the narrative “Ukraine is aggressive” over time, and word cloud of sub-narratives sized relatively to each other by the number of articles. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

rhetoric intensified prior to recognition of the Donbas republics. Notably, the articles were framed by sub-narratives that were supportive of the Donbas region, such as “Russia helps Donbas refugees” (1,155 articles), while others took a more aggressive tone, including “Russia will answer with force if the US and NATO do not provide security guarantees” (388 articles) and “The Donbas republics need to be recognized as independent” (263 articles).

Similar to the Russia-seeking-peace narrative, Russian officials were the most common source for the moral-obligation narrative, cited in 1,620 articles and dominating nine out of thirteen identified sub-narratives. Articles cited Vladimir Putin on 133 occasions, while 106 of them referenced “regular people”—generally in the form of “man-on-the-street” or “vox-pop” interviews—while an additional sixty-seven articles cited Russian political experts.

The tone of the sub-narratives was often reflected in the sources cited; for example, fifty-six of the articles citing Putin contained an aggressive theme, “If the US and NATO do not provide security guarantees, Russia will answer with force,” while, at the same time, he appeared in forty-seven instances of the more positive theme, “Russia helps Donbas refugees.” The former theme also routinely cited Russian experts (thirty-eight articles), while the latter cited regular people (seventy-seven articles).

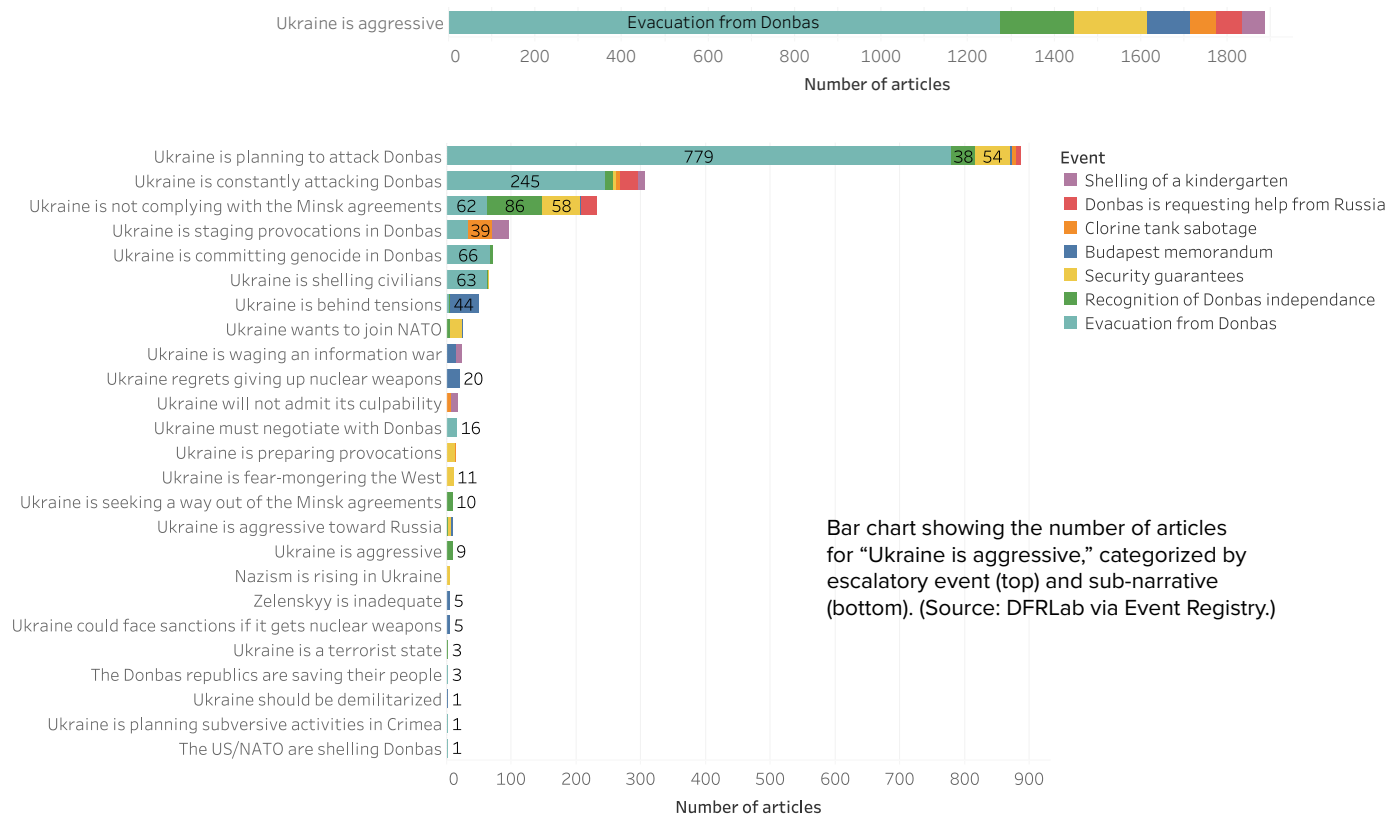
When the moral-obligation narrative was viewed through the lens of escalatory events leading up to the invasion, related sub-narratives stood out. Among the 2,086 moral obligation narrative articles, 1,176 of them came within the context of discussing Russian security demands, 388 of which embraced the ominous sub-narrative, “If the US and NATO do not provide security guarantees, Russia will answer with force.” An additional 255 articles within the moral-obligation narrative included the sub-narrative “The Donbas republics need to be recognized as independent.”

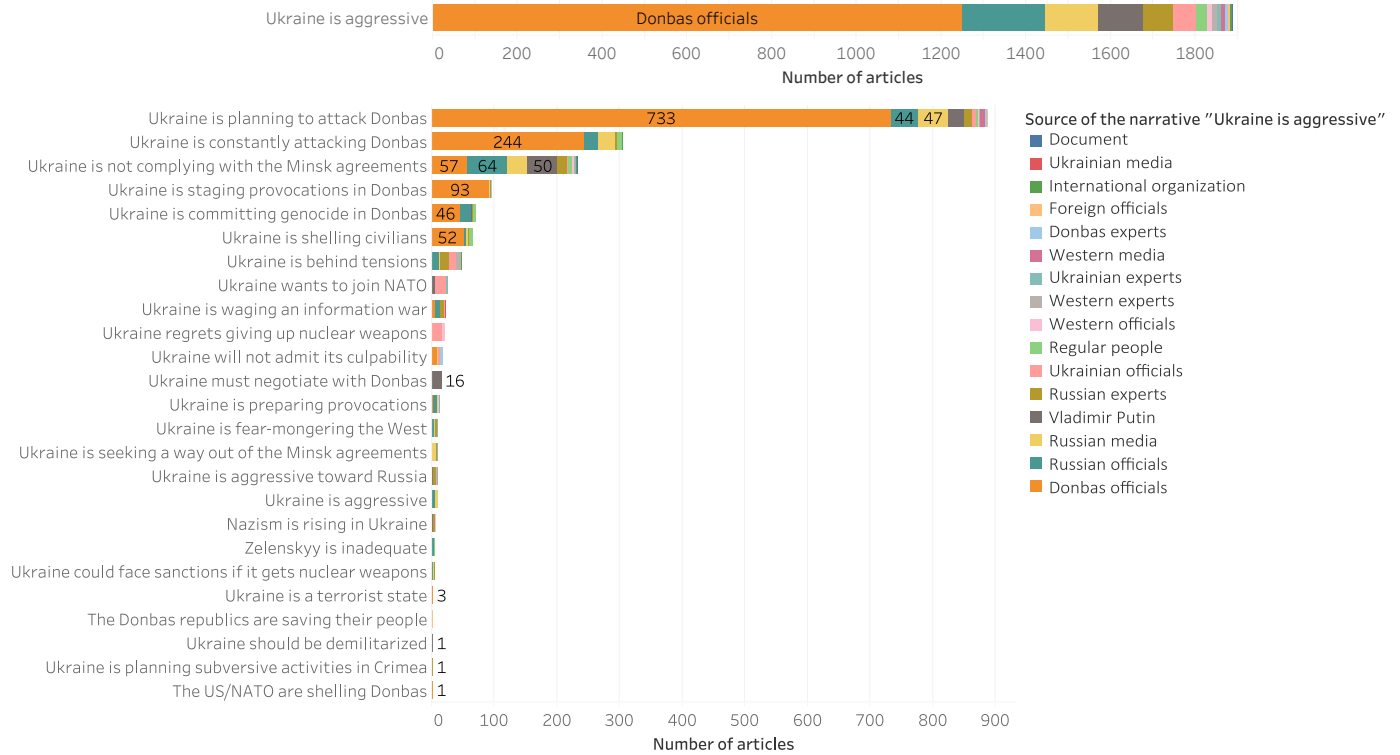
“Ukraine is aggressive”

“Ukraine is aggressive,” the third most common narrative found in our dataset (1,888 articles), served as an additional

retorical tool to justify war and deny Russian responsibility. It appeared in large numbers in the days following pro-Kremlin claims that Ukraine attacked a kindergarten and targeted chlorine tanks in the Donbas, with 395 articles on February 19 and 418 articles on February 21. Within this overarching narrative, the most common sub-narratives were “Ukraine is planning to attack Donbas” (887 articles), “Ukraine is constantly attacking Donbas” (306 articles), and “Ukraine is not complying with the Minsk Agreements” (233 articles).

Notably, Donbas officials were the most common source for “Ukraine is aggressive” narrative (1,250 articles). Other popular sources of the narrative were Russian officials (196 articles), Russian media outlets (125 articles), and Vladimir Putin (106 articles). Donbas officials dominated eight out of twenty-four sub-narratives, including “Ukraine is planning to attack Donbas,” “Ukraine is constantly attacking Donbas,” “Ukraine is staging provocations in Donbas,” and “Ukraine is committing genocide in Donbas.” The sub-narrative “Ukraine is not complying with the Minsk Agreements” was voiced by the most diverse range of sources, including Russian officials (sixty-four articles), Donbas officials (fifty-seven articles), Vladimir Putin (fifty articles), and Russian media (thirty-one articles).





Bar charts showing the number of articles containing "Ukraine is aggressive" sub-narratives divided by source. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

The sub-narrative "Ukraine is not complying with the Minsk Agreements" appeared in eighty-six articles about recognition of Donbas independence, sixty-two articles about Donbas evacuations, fifty-eight articles about Russian security demands, and twenty-five articles about Donbas officials requesting help from Russia. Similarly, the sub-narrative "Ukraine is staging provocations in Donbas," appeared in thirty-nine articles referencing Ukraine allegedly sabotaging chlorine tanks, and twenty-five articles referencing the shelling of the kindergarten in Luhansk.

Overall, in the days prior to the invasion, 733 of the 1,888 articles claiming Ukraine was planning to attack Donbas cited Donbas officials as their source (39 percent). The vast majority of these articles—716 out of 733—focused on evacuating civilians from Donetsk and Luhansk.

"The West is creating tensions in the region"

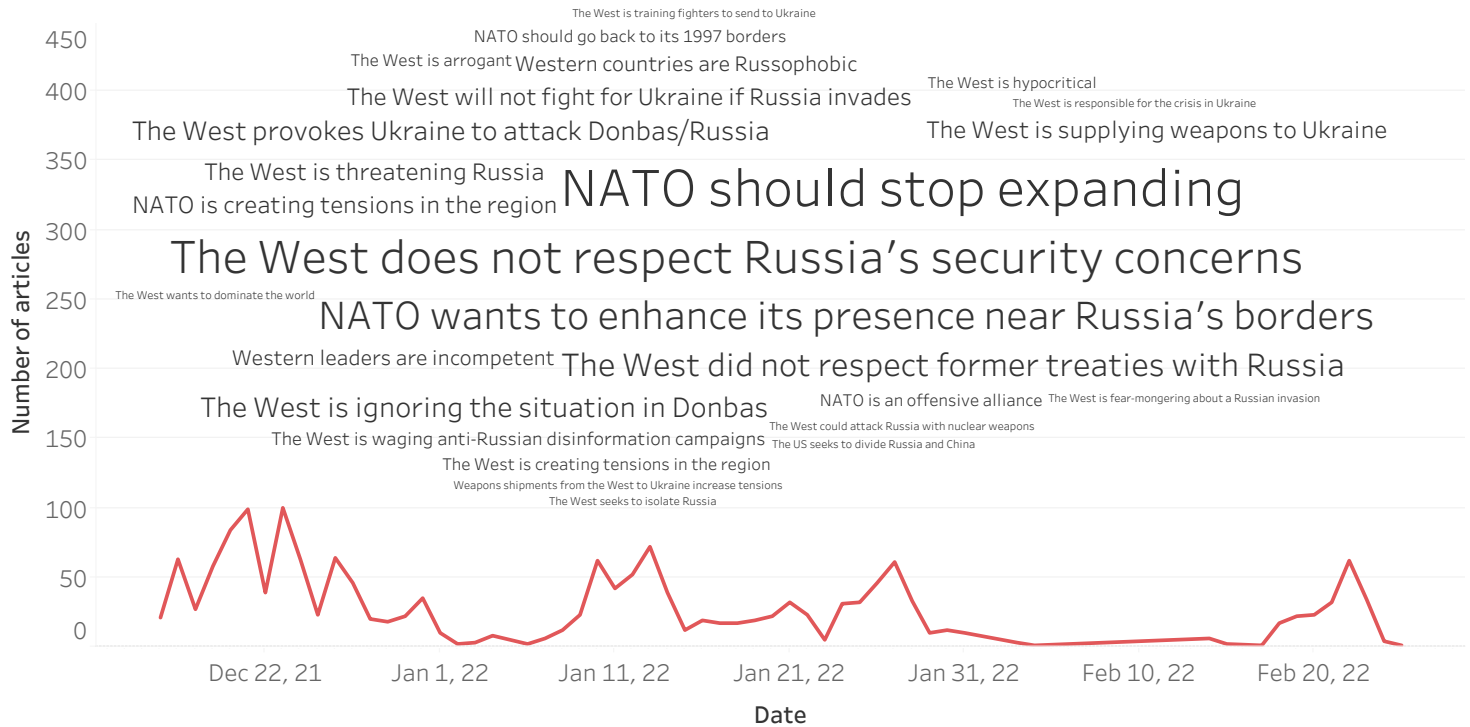
The responsibility-denying narrative "The West is creating tensions in the region" appeared consistently throughout the time period ranging from December 16, 2021, to February 24, 2022, though never reaching the same levels of other overarching narratives on any given day. Relative spikes occurred on several occasions during December 2021, including sixty-three articles on December 17, ninety-nine on December 21, one hundred on December 23,

and sixty-four articles on December 26. Overall, the most common sub-narratives in this category included "NATO should stop expanding" (372 articles), "The West does not respect Russia's security concerns" (307 articles), "NATO wants to enhance its presence near Russia's borders" (191 articles), and "The West did not respect former treaties with Russia" (129 articles).

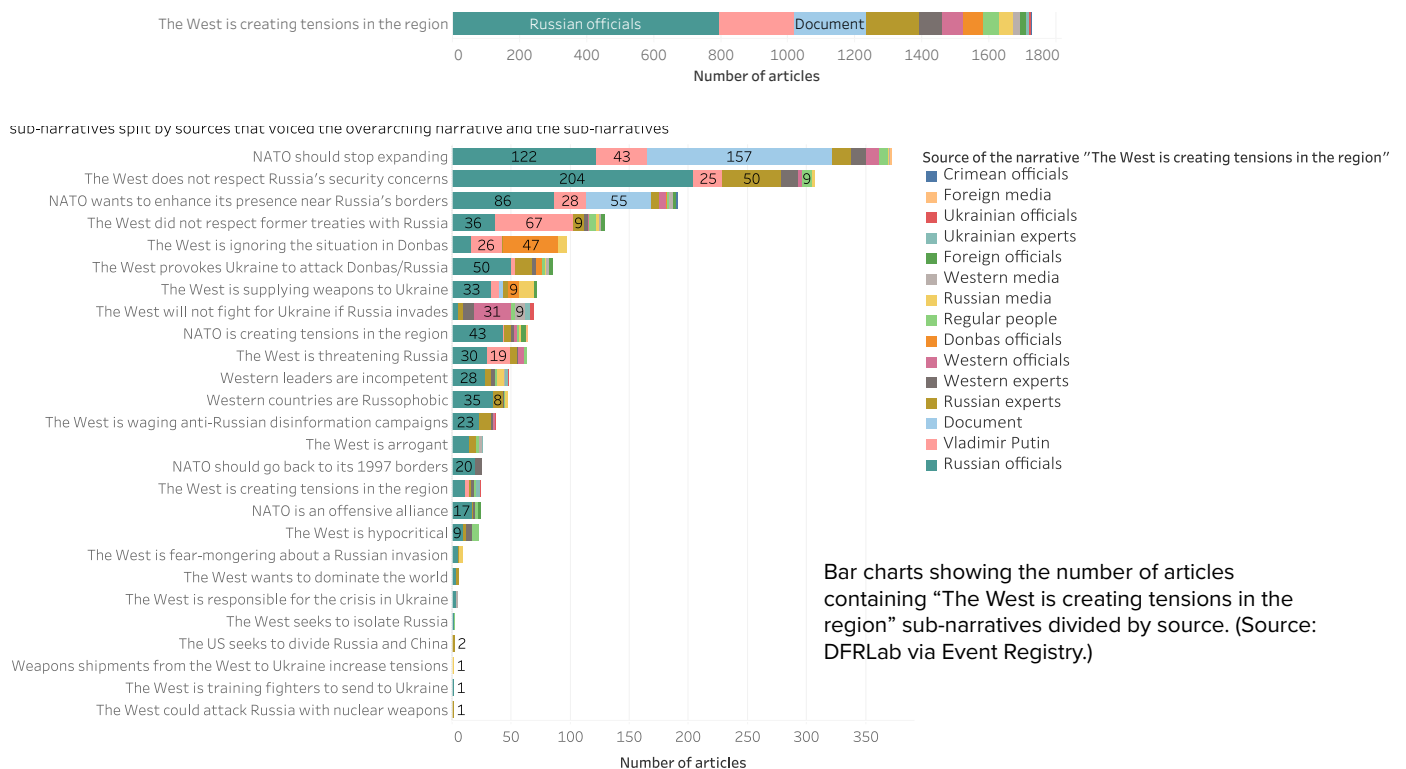
In terms of citations, the West-creating-tensions narrative was attributed most often to Russian officials (796 articles) and Putin (223 articles). An additional 215 articles cited documents articulating Russia's security demands, while 147 articles cited Russian experts. Overall, citations of Russian officials dominated sixteen out of twenty-four sub-narratives in this category, while Putin represented the majority of sources cited in sixty-seven out of 129 articles regarding the sub-narrative "The West did not respect former treaties with Russia."

Articles about Russia demanding security guarantees from NATO and the United States dominated nineteen of twenty-four sub-narratives, including "NATO should stop expanding" (372 articles), "the West does not respect Russia's security concerns" (307 articles), "NATO wants to enhance its presence near Russia's borders" (186 articles), and "the West did not respect former treaties with Russia" (129 articles). Seventy of ninety-seven articles related to the sub-narrative "The West is ignoring the situation in

Narrative warfare: How the Kremlin and Russian news outlets justified a war of aggression against Ukraine



Line chart showing the number of articles containing the narrative "The West is creating tensions in the region" over time, and word cloud of sub-narratives sized relatively to each other by the number of articles. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)



The West must force Ukraine to deescalate the situation

Ukraine is in the middle of the US and Russia
confrontation

The US controls Europe
and Ukraine

The US is using Ukraine

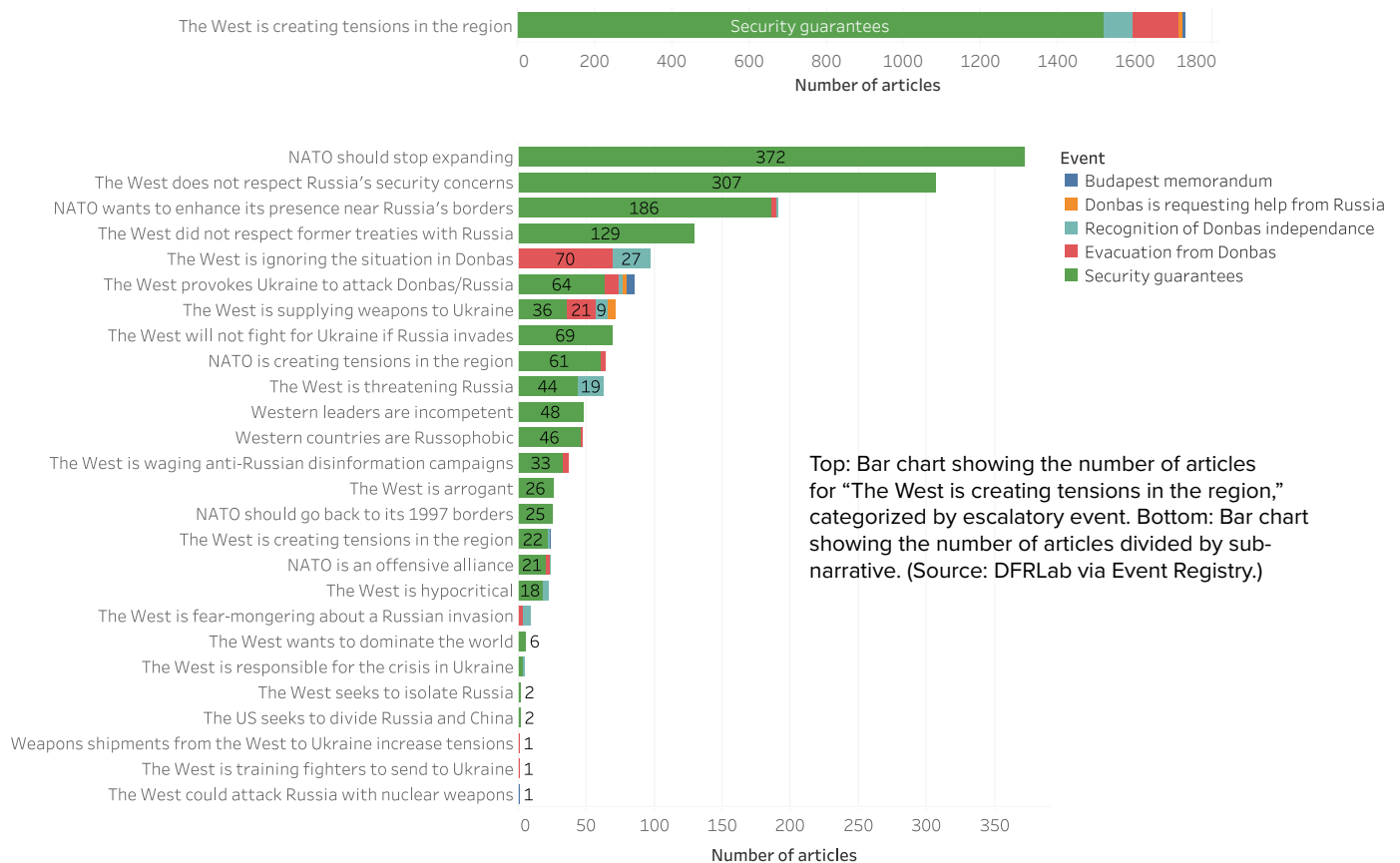
The West is holding Ukraine hostage

Ukraine is a puppet of the West

The West is meddling in the affairs of other countries

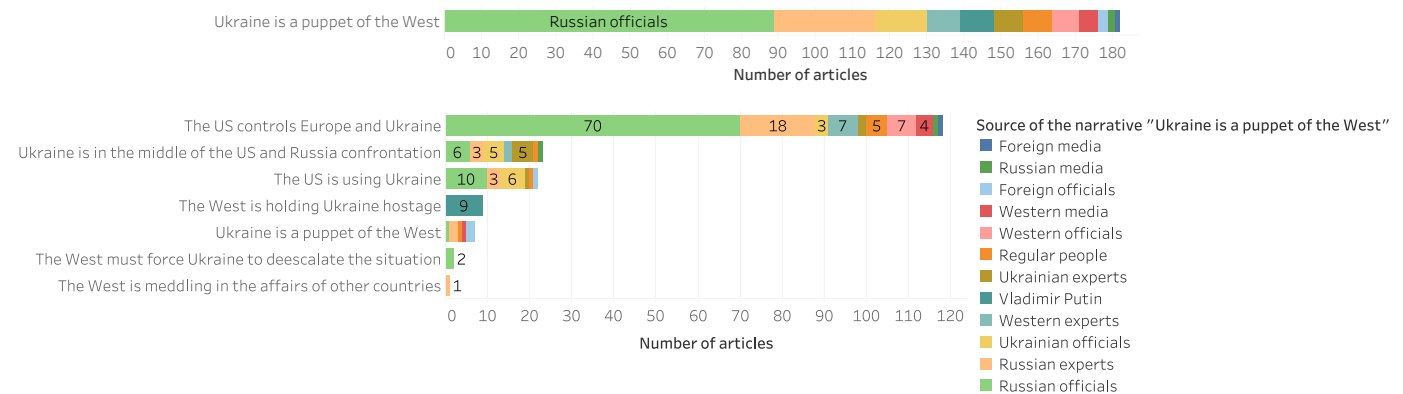


Line chart showing the number of articles containing the narrative “Ukraine is a puppet of the West” over time, and word cloud of sub-narratives sized relatively to each other by the number of articles. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

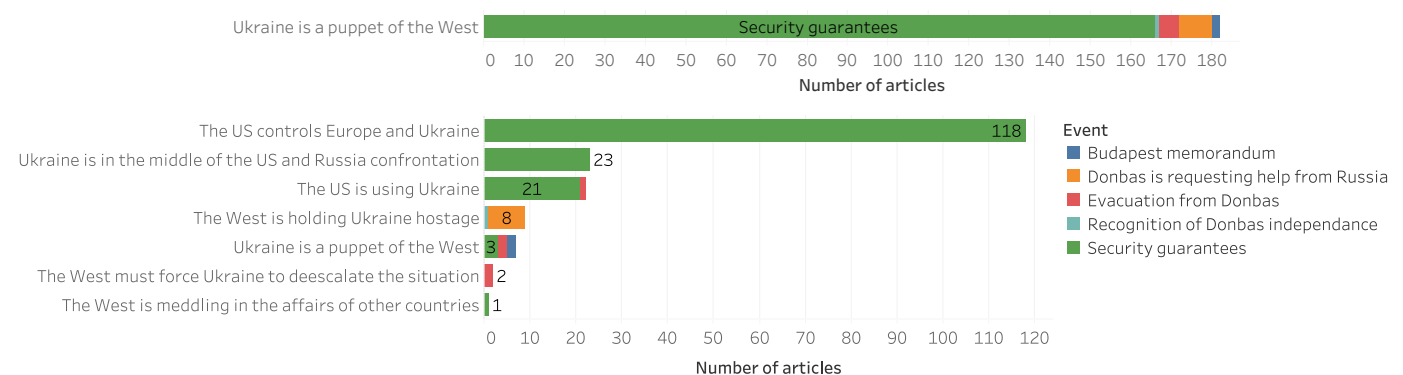


Top: Bar chart showing the number of articles for “The West is creating tensions in the region,” categorized by escalatory event. Bottom: Bar chart showing the number of articles divided by sub-narrative. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

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Bar charts showing the number of articles containing "Ukraine is a puppet of the West" sub-narratives divided by source. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)



Bar chart showing the number of articles containing "Ukraine is a puppet of the West" sub-narratives categorized by escalatory event. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

Donbas" focused on evacuating the Donbas, with the remaining twenty-seven stories focused on calls for Donbas independence. Meanwhile, the sub-narrative "The West is supplying weapons to Ukraine" (seventy-two articles) appeared in multiple contexts, including coverage of Russian security demands (thirty-six articles), Donbas evacuations (twenty-one articles), recognition of Donbas independence (nine articles), and Ukraine reconsidering the terms of the Budapest Memorandum (six articles).

Overall, the West-creating-tensions narrative was dominated by Russian officials calling for NATO to reverse its expansion when Russia published its list of security demands in December 2021.

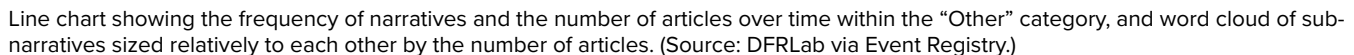
"Ukraine is a puppet of the West"

The justification narrative "Ukraine is a puppet of the West" appeared in only 182 articles, remaining at consistently modest levels over the seventy-day period; 166 of these articles were in the context of reporting on Russian security demands. The most popular sub-narratives were

"The US controls Europe and Ukraine" (118 articles), "Ukraine is in the middle of the US and Russia confrontation" (twenty-three articles), and "The US is using Ukraine" (twenty-two articles). The most common sources cited for this narrative were Russian officials (eighty-nine articles), Russian experts (twenty-seven articles), and Ukrainian officials (fourteen articles).

Additional Narratives that Emerged in the Dataset

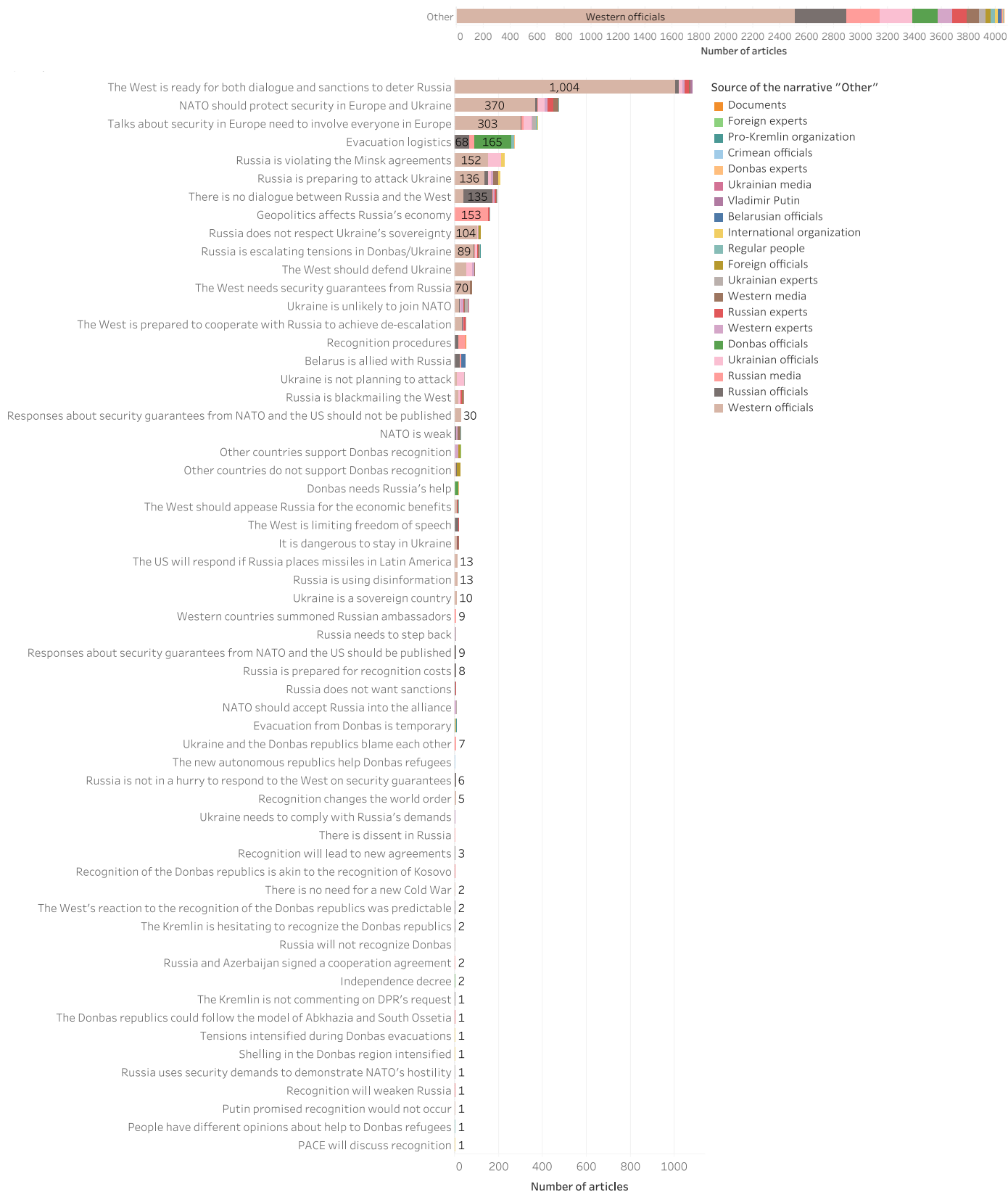
As noted previously, the "Other" category largely comprised pro-Kremlin media coverage of statements from Western officials. Among the most common narrative themes were "The West is ready for both dialogue and sanctions to deter Russia" (1,084 articles), "NATO should protect security in Europe and Ukraine" (473 articles), and "Talks about security in Europe need to involve everyone in Europe" (380 articles). The most active day for these miscellaneous narratives was February 22 (352 articles), one day after Putin recognized the Donbas republics and two days before the invasion.



Overall, the “Other” category contained sub-narratives expressed by Western officials, usually in response to Kremlin statements, demands, and actions. Such replies

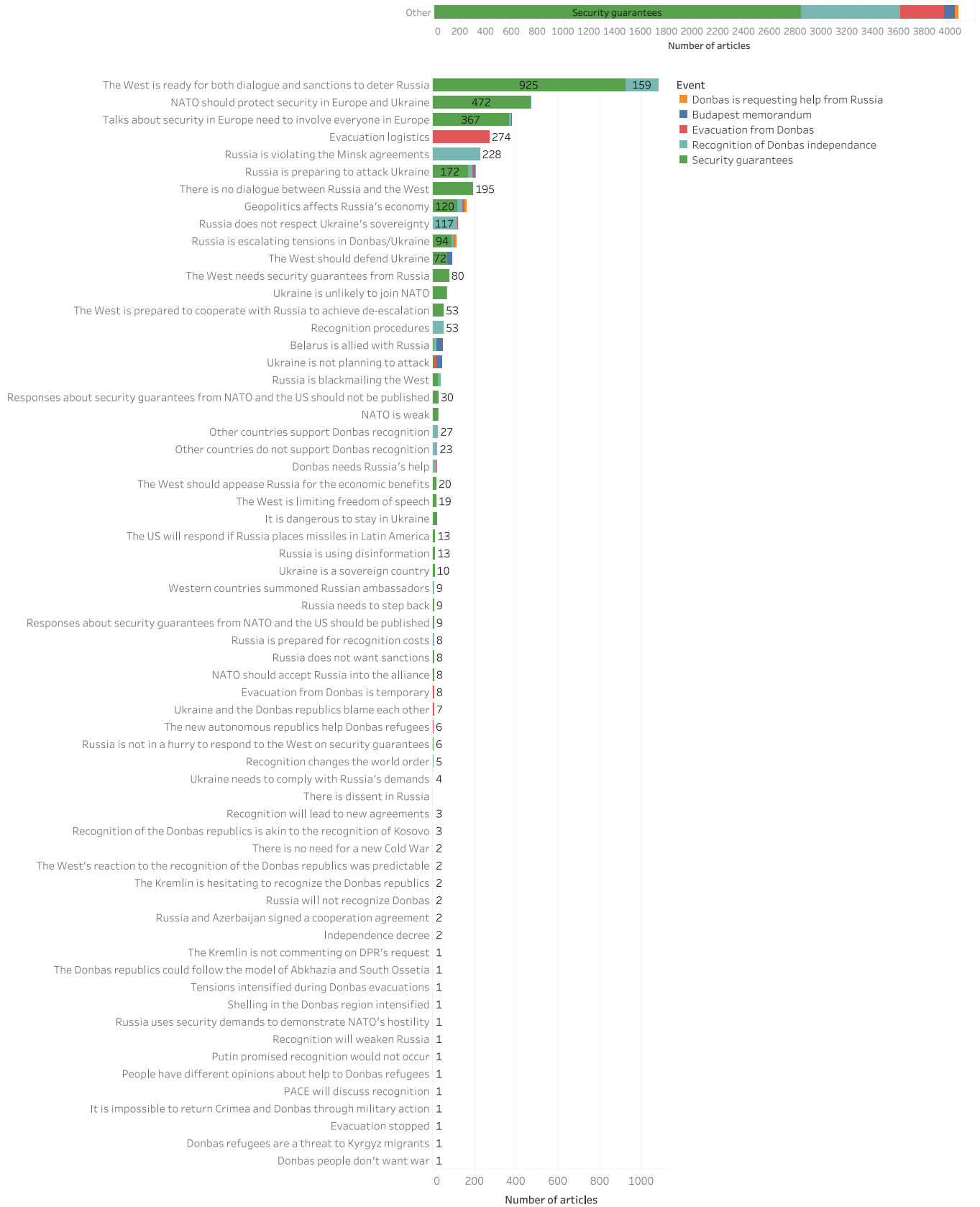
Among these themes, WMDs featured in 495 articles, the majority of which appeared in the final week prior to the invasion. In contrast, articles referenced Nazis on 141 occasions scattered throughout the seventy-day period.

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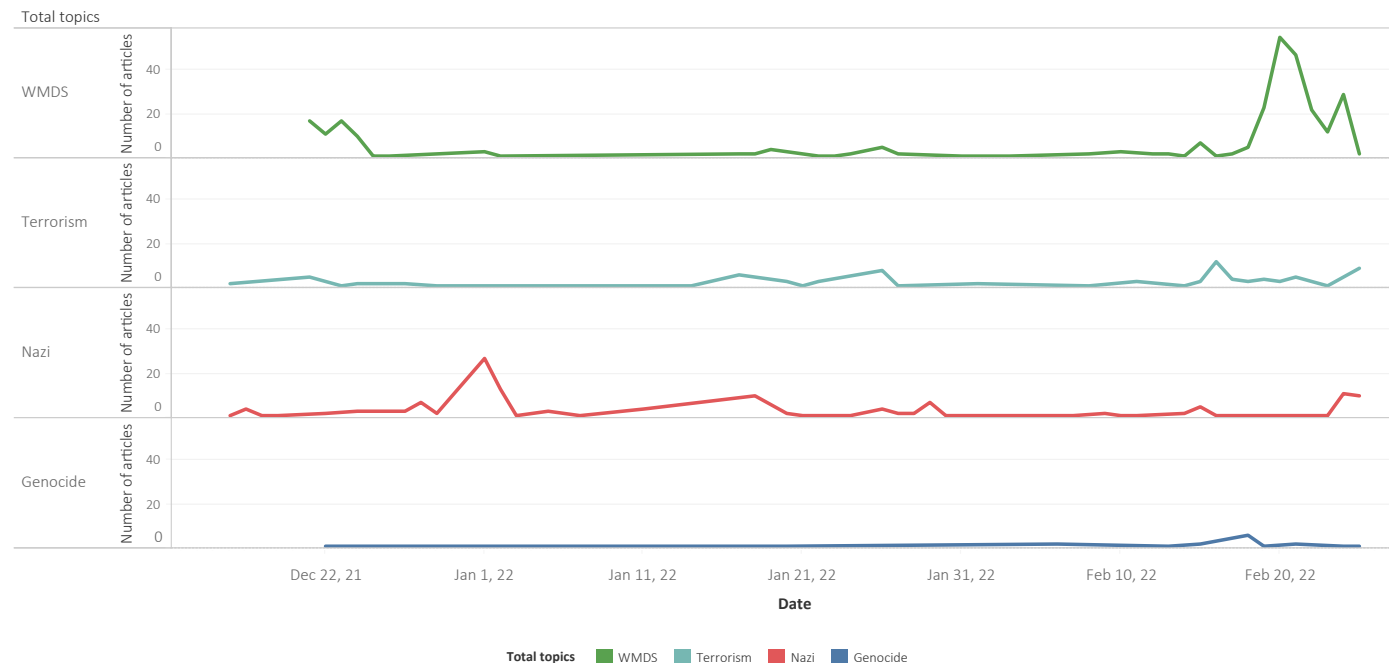
Bar charts showing the variety of sources in narratives collected in the "Other" category. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

Narrative warfare: How the Kremlin and Russian news outlets justified a war of aggression against Ukraine

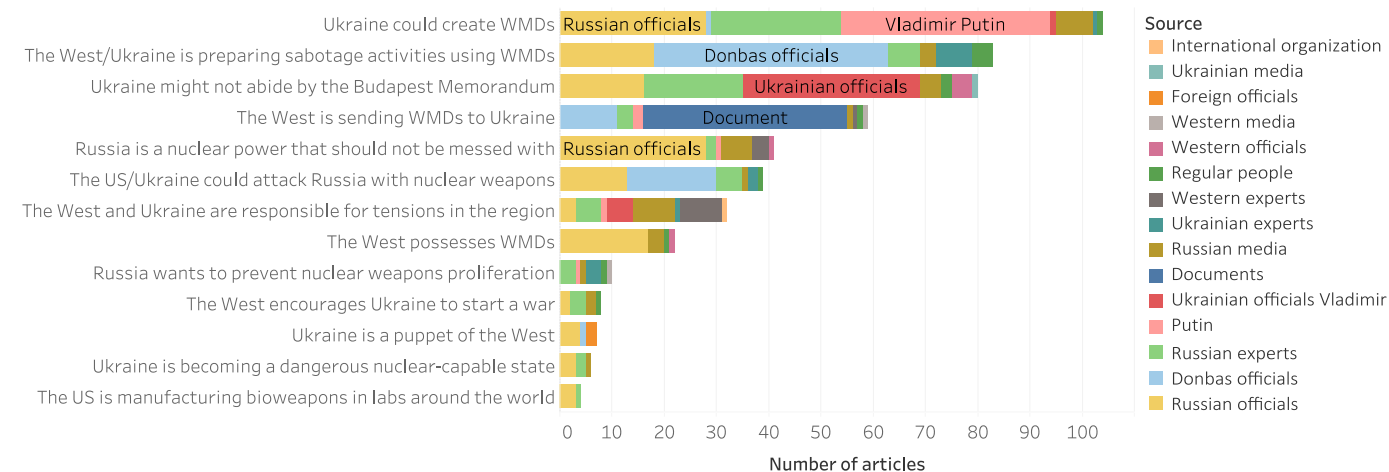


Bar charts showing the number of articles per sub-narrative within the “Other” category, color coded by escalatory event. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

Narrative warfare: How the Kremlin and Russian news outlets justified a war of aggression against Ukraine



Line charts showing the number of articles containing long-standing pro-Kremlin themes about Ukraine over time. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)



Bar chart showing the number of articles for each WMD sub-narrative categorized by source cited within each article. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

peaking with twenty-seven articles on January 1, after a rally in Kyiv in memorialized the late far-right Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera.⁹⁰ The other topics—terrorism (105 articles) and genocide (nineteen articles)—appeared at a generally consistent frequency over the seventy-day period.

The DFRLab then analyzed the 495 articles that invoked WMDs, searching the text for variants of specific keywords, including “химическ” (“chemical”), “биологическ” (“biological”), “аммиак” (“ammonia”), “оружие массового поражения” (“weapon of mass destruction”), “ядерн оруж” (“nuclear weapon”), “атомн оруж” (“atomic

⁹⁰ “Факельное шествие в честь пособника фашистов Бандеры стартовало в Киеве [Torchlight Procession in Honor of Nazi Accomplice Bandera Started in Kyiv],” Regnum, January 1, 2022, <https://regnum.ru/news/3467885.html>.

weapon”), “США” (“USA”), “ядерн” (“nuclear”), “гарантии” (“guarantees”), and “грязн бомб” (“dirty bomb”).

Thirteen narratives emerged from these keyword searches. The most common was “Ukraine could create WMDs” (104 articles), followed by “The West/Ukraine is preparing sabotage activities using WMDs” (eighty-three articles), “Ukraine might not abide by the Budapest Memorandum” (eighty articles), and “The West is sending WMDs to Ukraine” (fifty-nine articles). In terms of sources cited, Vladimir Putin was the most frequent source for the “Ukraine could create WMDs” narrative (forty articles), followed by Russian officials and Russian experts (twenty-eight articles each). The WMD sabotage narrative, meanwhile, mostly featured Donbas officials (forty-five articles), followed by Russian officials (eighteen articles). Regarding the narrative that Ukraine might not abide by the Budapest Memorandum, thirty-four articles cited Ukrainian officials, while documents articulating Russian demands were cited in thirty-nine articles regarding the narrative “The West is sending WMDs to Ukraine.”

While narratives suggesting Ukraine might use WMDs were less frequent than other overarching pro-Kremlin narratives, their increased preponderance in the week leading up to the invasion often overlapped with Russian-moral-obligation narratives and Ukrainian-aggression narratives, both of which featured prominently in those final days before the invasion. WMD narratives might not have been the most dominant narrative throughout the period, but they served as a menacing backdrop that became central to Kremlin rhetoric immediately prior to February 24.

How Pro-Kremlin Outlets Cited Each Other

The fourteen Pro-Kremlin outlets cited a range of sources in their Ukraine-related narratives, sometimes including each other. To analyze potential reference patterns, the DFRLab identified which articles cited the other outlets. Circular sourcing can reinforce Kremlin interests, as it creates the facade of credibility by establishing a media echo chamber, prolonging the relevancy of any given narrative through repetition and recycling.

In total, 6,368 articles referenced at least one outlet, though 4,493 of them were self-citations referencing their own previous coverage. The remaining 1,875 articles—18.4 percent of the entire archive—cited one or more of the other outlets, with a total of 2,502 references among them. In network-analysis terms, the network contained fourteen *nodes* (the pro-Kremlin outlets) and 2,502 edges (instances of one outlet referencing another outlet).

TASS was cited more than any of the other thirteen outlets—a total of 982 times—followed by RIA Novosti (808

citations) and RT (216 citations). Both RIA Novosti and TASS are Kremlin-owned news agencies, so their high level of relative influence was to be expected.

In terms of citation frequency between individual outlets, *Lenta* cited RIA Novosti in 241 articles, while *Gazeta.ru* cited TASS 186 times; *Lenta* also cited TASS in one 183 articles. Overall, *Lenta* relied on the other outlets the most, citing them in 539 articles, while *Gazeta.ru* cited 306 articles and RT cited three hundred articles. Two outlets, *Gazeta.ru* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, received zero citations from the other outlets.

Pro-Kremlin Outlets Prioritized Different Narratives

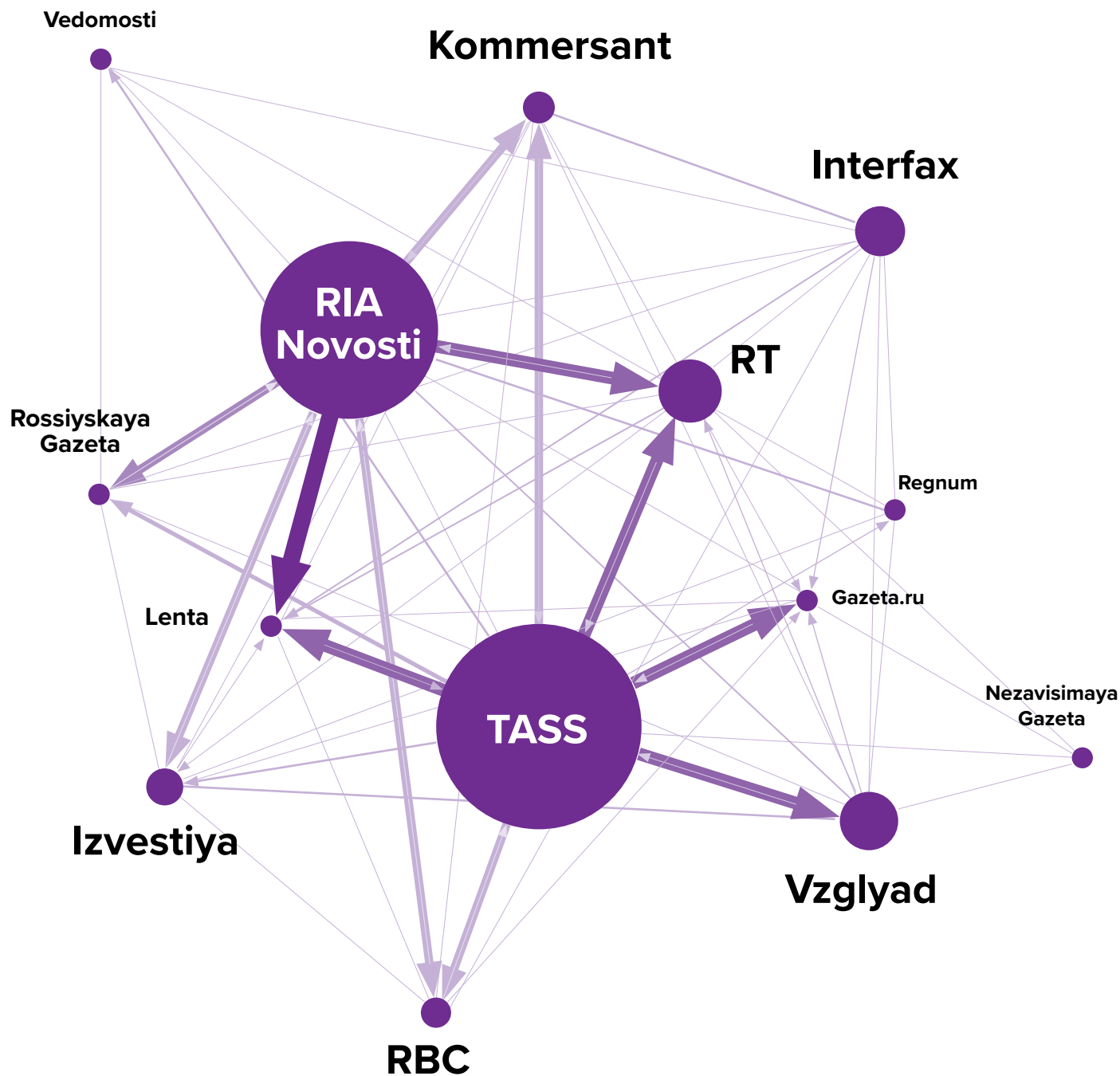
The DFRLab also tabulated each of the fourteen outlets’ total output and ranked them by frequency of each overarching theme, giving us a snapshot of the varying priorities for them and their target audiences.

The most common narrative, “Russia is seeking peace” (2,201 articles), ranked highly among the narratives published by each outlet. Of the fourteen entities, nine of them—*Gazeta.ru*, *Izvestiya*, *Kommersant*, *Lenta*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, RBC, RT, *Vedomosti*, and VA—published more pieces referencing this narrative than any of the other overarching narratives; it ranked second in three additional outlets (Regnum, RG, and TASS) and third in two outlets (RIA Novosti and Interfax).

The narrative “Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region’s security” (2,086 articles), appeared throughout the frequency rankings for the outlets, sitting in first place for three of them (Regnum, RG, and TASS), second place for four outlets (Interfax, *Lenta*, RBC, RT, and *Vedomosti*), third place for three outlets (*Gazeta.ru*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, and *Vzglyad*), and fourth place for three other outlets (*Izvestiya*, *Kommersant*, and RIA Novosti).

The next most common narrative, “Ukraine is aggressive” (1,888 articles), was ranked first for two of the largest outlets (Interfax and RIA Novosti) and in second for two others (*Izvestiya* and *Kommersant*). But it was a lower priority for the rest, appearing in third place for three (Regnum, RT, TASS) and fourth place for seven others (*Gazeta.ru*, *Lenta*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, RBC, RG, *Vedomosti*, and *Vzglyad*).

The narrative “The West is creating tensions in the region” (1,729 articles) failed to rank as the most frequent narrative published by any of the outlets. It found itself in second place for four of them (*Gazeta.ru*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, RIA Novosti, and *Vzglyad*), third for six others (*Izvestiya*, *Kommersant*, *Lenta*, RBC, RT, and *Vedomosti*), and fourth for four more (Interfax, Regnum, RG, and TASS).



Network graph showing connections between fourteen Kremlin-approved media outlets citing each other, thus referencing each other's content. Larger nodes represent outlets cited most frequently in relation to other outlets, while thicker arrows represent high levels of citation, pointing to the outlet publishing the citation. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

The fifth narrative represented in the fewest number of articles, "Ukraine is a puppet of the West," ranked last for all fourteen outlets.

In terms of shared publishing patterns, the ranking of narratives matched for three pairs of outlets: *Izvestiya* and *Kommersant*; *Gazeta.ru* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*; and RT and *Vedomosti*. The narrative ranks for two influencers

within the network—RIA Novosti and TASS—did not match with any other outlet. The two outlets that cited other outlets the most—*Lenta* and *Gazeta.ru*—also did not have matching narrative rankings.

While the DFRLab did not detect any conclusive data-driven evidence of coordination between the fourteen Kremlin-approved media outlets, it does not mean that the

Narrative warfare: How the Kremlin and Russian news outlets justified a war of aggression against Ukraine

Narratives	gazeta.ru	Narratives	interfax.ru	Narratives	iz.ru	Narratives	kommersant.ru
Russia is seeking peace	206	Ukraine is aggressive	106	Russia is seeking peace	331	Russia is seeking peace	124
The West is creating tensions in the region	156	Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security	86	Ukraine is aggressive	254	Ukraine is aggressive	108
Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security	147	Russia is seeking peace	84	The West is creating tensions in the region	252	The West is creating tensions in the region	90
Ukraine is aggressive	137	The West is creating tensions in the region	41	Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security	110	Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security	71
Ukraine is a puppet of the West	15	Ukraine is a puppet of the West	2	Ukraine is a puppet of the West	24	Ukraine is a puppet of the West	9
Narratives	regnum.ru	Narratives	rg.ru	Narratives	ria.ru	Narratives	russian.rt.com
Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security	463	Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security	194	Ukraine is aggressive	546	Russia is seeking peace	182
Russia is seeking peace	209	Russia is seeking peace	136	The West is creating tensions in the region	317	Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security	161
Ukraine is aggressive	173	The West is creating tensions in the region	94	Russia is seeking peace	265	The West is creating tensions in the region	125
The West is creating tensions in the region	167	Ukraine is aggressive	69	Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security	207	Ukraine is aggressive	67
Ukraine is a puppet of the West	26	Ukraine is a puppet of the West	11	Ukraine is a puppet of the West	28	Ukraine is a puppet of the West	15
Narratives	lenta.ru	Narratives	ng.ru	Narratives	rbc.ru	Frequency of overarching narratives published by each outlet, ranked by frequency.	
Russia is seeking peace	173	Russia is seeking peace	34	Russia is seeking peace	105		
Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security	169	The West is creating tensions in the region	30	Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security	81		
The West is creating tensions in the region	153	Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security	20	The West is creating tensions in the region	66		
Ukraine is aggressive	131	Ukraine is aggressive	17	Ukraine is aggressive	65		
Ukraine is a puppet of the West	17	Ukraine is a puppet of the West	2	Ukraine is a puppet of the West	5		
Narratives	tass.ru	Narratives	vedomosti.ru	Narratives	vz.ru		
Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security	290	Russia is seeking peace	37	Russia is seeking peace	99		
Russia is seeking peace	216	Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security	36	The West is creating tensions in the region	97		
Ukraine is aggressive	154	The West is creating tensions in the region	18	Russia has a moral obligation to protect the region's security	51		
The West is creating tensions in the region	123	Ukraine is aggressive	17	Ukraine is aggressive	44		
Ukraine is a puppet of the West	14	Ukraine is a puppet of the West	2	Ukraine is a puppet of the West	12		

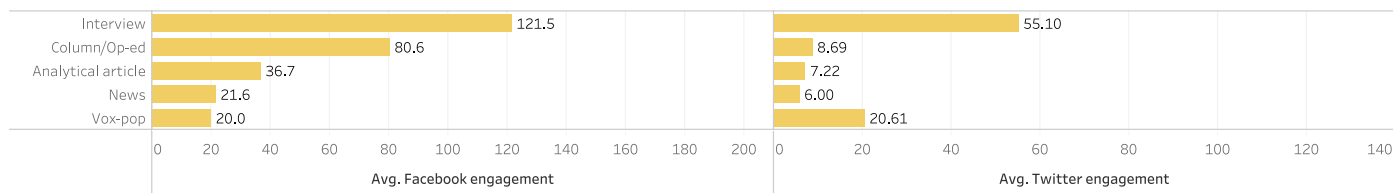
outlets are independent. For example, multiple media reports suggest that the Kremlin instructed Russian outlets

that remain in operation to promote certain topics, adjust the use of particular words, and ignore certain events.⁹¹

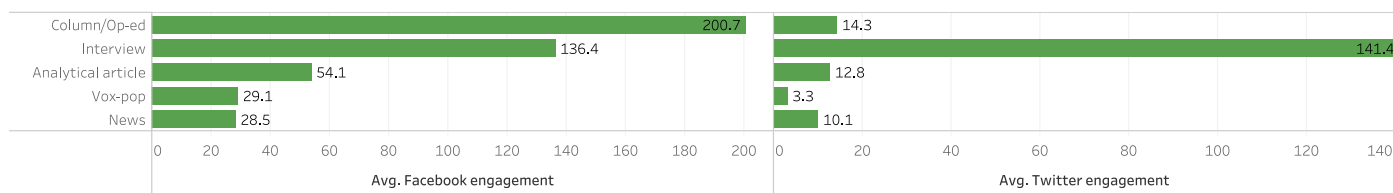
⁹¹ “В Кремле подготовили новую методичку о том, как пропаганда должна рассказывать о войне. Мы ее прочитали «Спецоперацию» нужно сравнивать с крещением Руси, а Путина — с Александром Невским [The Kremlin Has Prepared a New Manual on How Propaganda Should Talk about the War. We Read It ‘Special Operation’ Should Be Compared with the Baptism of Rus,’ and Putin—with Alexander Nevsky],” Медуза [Meduza], August 1, 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/08/01/v-kremle-podgotovili-novuyu-metodichku-o-tom-kak-propaganda-dolzhna-rasskazyvat-o-voynemy-ee-prochitali>; “Почему в новостях пишут «хлопок газа» вместо «взрыв газа»? Это методичка такая? Расследование «Медузы» [“Why Does the News Say ‘Gas Pop’ Instead of ‘Gas Explosion’? Is This a Methodology? Meduza’s Investigation],” Медуза [Meduza], February 13, 2020, <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/02/13/pochemu-v-novostyah-pishut-hlopok-gaza-vmesto-vzryv-gaza-eto-metodichka-takaya-rassledovanie-meduzy>; Nika Aleksejeva, “#ElectionWatch: Kremlin Media Ignores Inaugural Protests,” Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), May 8, 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/electionwatch-kremlin-media-ignores-inaugural-protests-ff9b02babea3>.

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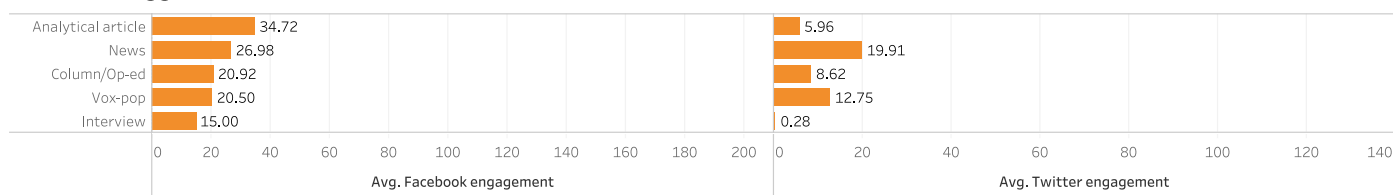
Russia is seeking peace



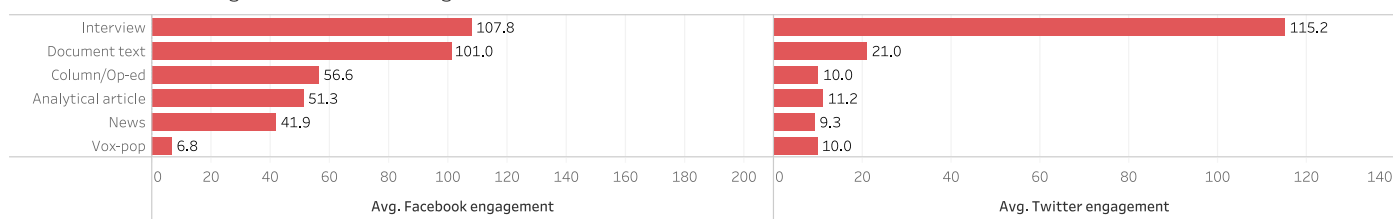
Russia has moral obligation to protect the region's security



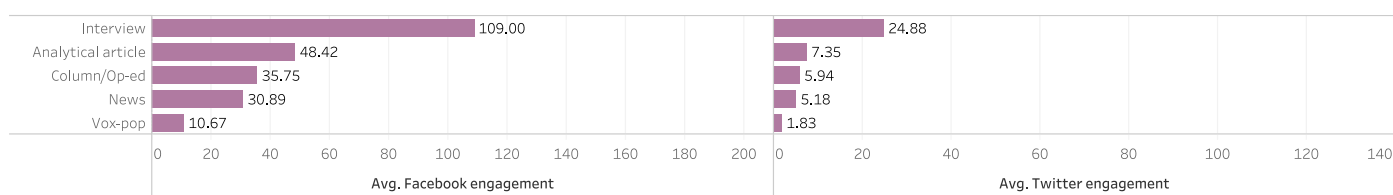
Ukraine is aggressive



The West is creating tensions in the region



Other



Bar charts showing average engagement with each overarching narrative on Facebook (left) and Twitter (right), categorized by article genre. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

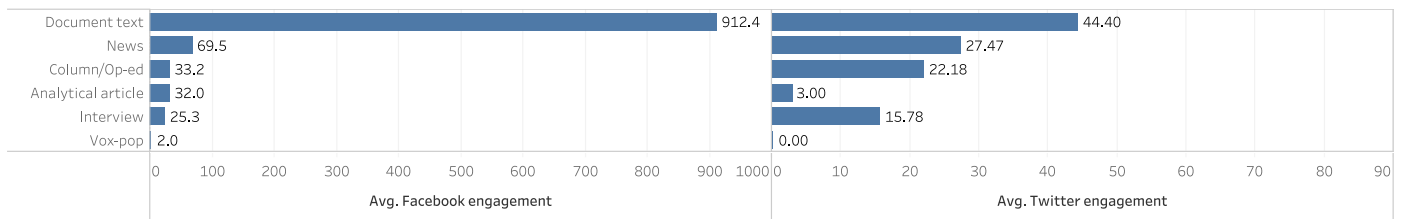
Our analysis suggests that these outlets, having navigated Putin-era politics for many years, understood Kremlin priorities and presented pro-Kremlin narratives in alignment with official statements and events as they occurred. It remains an open question, however, as to whether the Kremlin explicitly informed the outlets to prepare their audiences for war.

Performance of Pro-Kremlin Narratives on Western Social Media

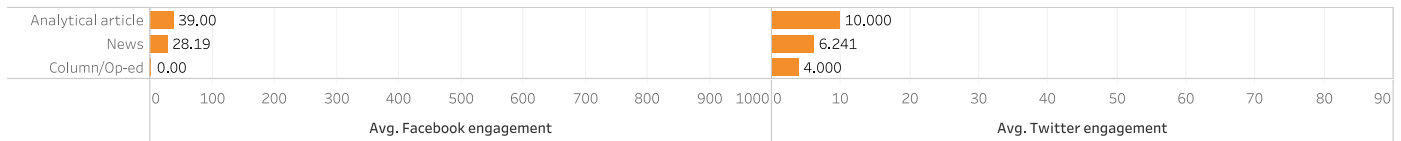
Of all the articles within the dataset, one story received the most engagements on Facebook (7,416 engagements): a RIA Novosti article citing former US President Donald Trump saying that Russia's decision to recognize

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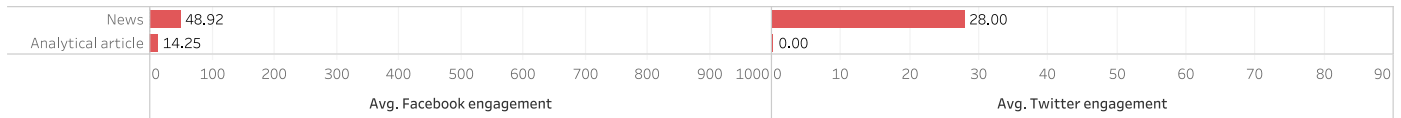
Budapest memorandum



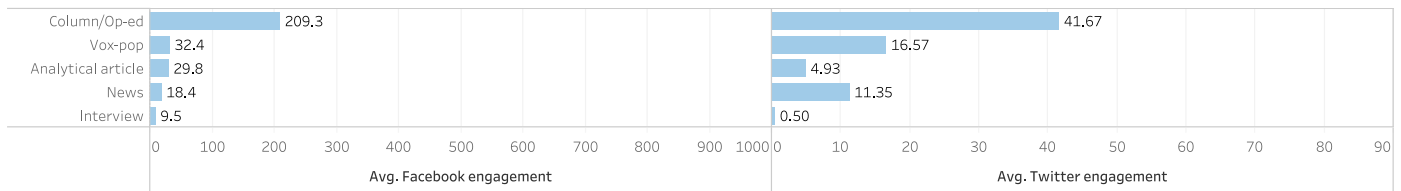
Chlorine tank sabotage



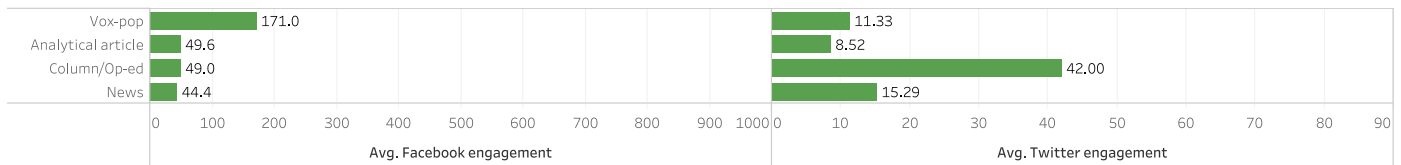
Donbas is requesting help from Russia



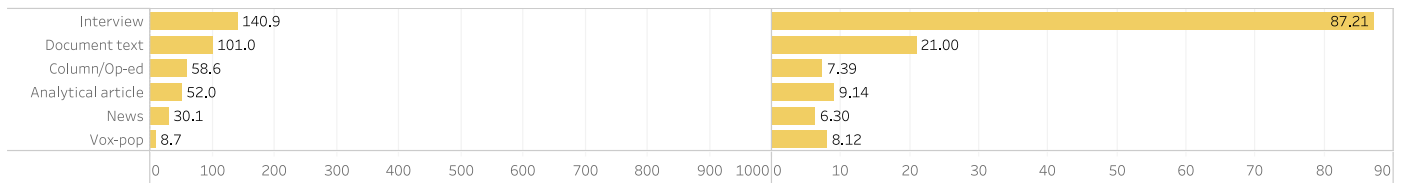
Evacuation from Donbas



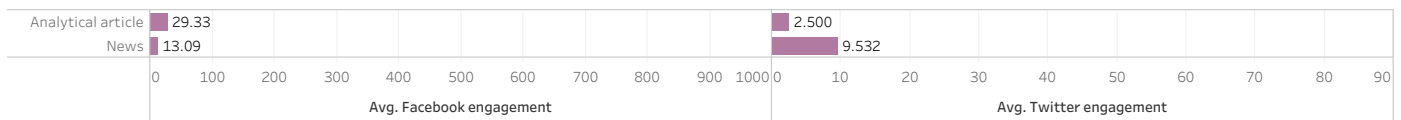
Recognition of Donbas independence



Security guarantees



Shelling of kindergarten



Bar charts showing average engagement with each escalatory event on Facebook and Twitter split by article genre. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

the breakaway Donbas republics was “genius,” and that Russia is “the largest peacekeeping power in the world.”⁹² On Twitter, the article receiving the most engagements (3,728 engagements) was a TASS story about Putin informing French President Emanuel Macron and German President Olaf Scholz of his decision to recognize the Donbas republics.⁹³

To better understand how pro-Kremlin articles performed on Western social media, the DFRLab identified six genres of articles published by the fourteen outlets. Stories framed as news were by far the most popular genre, comprising 10,195 articles. These were followed by analysis pieces (346 articles), columns and op-eds (104 articles), interviews (sixty-seven articles), “vox-pop” articles that solicited individual opinions from the general public (sixty-five articles), and document texts (six articles).

The DFRLab also analyzed social media engagement by overarching narrative type and relevant escalatory event; these were then broken down further by the six genres listed above.

On Facebook, the most engaged-with articles were columns/op-eds (200.7 average engagements) and interviews (136.4) that contained the narrative, “Russia has moral obligation to protect the region’s security.” The most engaged-with article (1,589 engagements) was a

December 20, 2021, column by RT political commentator Aleksey Martinov. In the essay, Martinov stated that the United States and NATO need to accept Russia’s demands for security guarantees, or “deal with military-technical alternative,” which had been suggested earlier that day by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Grushko.⁹⁴

On Twitter, interviews containing the narratives “Russia has moral obligation to protect the region’s security” and “The West is creating tensions in the region” received the most engagements on average—141.4 and 115.2 engagements, respectively. A January 25 *Kommersant* interview with Dmitry Trenin, director of the Moscow Carnegie Center, received the highest number of engagements (573). In the interview, which discussed Russian security demands, Trenin stated, “Any such [Ukrainian] provocation cannot end otherwise than the defeat of the Ukrainian forces.” *Kommersant* emphasized the quote by highlighting it in an enlarged bold font.⁹⁵

Transcripts of Putin’s February 2022 invasion announcement averaged 912.2 engagements on Facebook and forty-four on Twitter.⁹⁶ Multiple pro-Kremlin outlets published the full transcript, including TASS, Regnum, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, RIA Novosti, and *Kommersant*.⁹⁷ Among the many misleading accusations made in the speech, Putin falsely stated that Ukraine “now also claims to possess nuclear weapons. We will not allow this to be done.”⁹⁸

92 “Трампа назвал признание Россией ДНР и ЛНР гениальным решением [Trump Called Russia’s Recognition of the DNR and LNR a Brilliant Decision],” РИА Новости [RIA Novosti], February 23, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220223/tramp-1774511966.html>.

93 “Путин сообщил Макрону и Шольцу, что скоро подпишет указ о признании ДНР и ЛНР [“Putin Told Macron and Scholz that He Would Soon Sign a Decree Recognizing the DNR and LN],” TACC [TASS], February 21, 2022, <https://tass.ru/politika/13790707>.

94 Aleksey Martinov, “Брюссельский пациент [Brussels Patient],” RT на русском [RT in Russian], December 21, 2021, <https://russian.rt.com/opinion/940601-martynov-stoltenberg-nato-rossiya-dogovor>.

95 “Оба сценария предполагают определенную цену и сопряжены с рисками [Both Scenarios Involve a Certain Price and Involve Risks],” Коммерсант [*Kommersant*], January 25, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5181967>.

96 “Zelensky’s Full Speech at Munich Security Conference.”

97 “Обращение Владимира Путина. Полный текст [Message from Vladimir Putin. Full Text],” TACC [TASS], February 24, 2022, <https://tass.ru/politika/13829919>; “Обращение президента России к нации о начале военной операции. Полный текст [Speech of the President of Russia to the Nation on the Start of a Military Operation. Full Text],” Regnum, February 24, 2022, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3515974.html>; “Владимир Путин выступил с обращением. Стенограмма [Vladimir Putin Delivered an Address. Transcript],” RG.RU, February 24, 2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/02/24/vladimir-putin-vystupil-s-obrashcheniem-k-rossiianam.html>; “Текст обращения президента России Владимира Путина [The Text of the Address of the President of Russia Vladimir Putin],” РИА Новости [RIA Novosti], February 24, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220224/obraschenie-1774658619.html>; “Обращение президента России о начале специальной военной операции [Address of the President of Russia on the start of a special military operation],” Коммерсант [*Kommersant*], February 24, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5229815>.

98 “Обращение Владимира Путина. Полный текст [Message from Vladimir Putin. Full Text],” TACC [TASS], February 24, 2022, <https://tass.ru/politika/13829919>.

Conclusion: Holding Russia Accountable and Preserving Evidence

Russia's war against Ukraine has now reached its first anniversary. The fact that Ukraine continues to fight and regain ground in many areas is an extraordinary accomplishment, given the many dire predictions at the start of the war that it would be over in weeks or even days, with Russian forces taking charge in Kyiv.

The Kremlin's use of information warfare has continued unabated throughout the last twelve months—something we explore in depth in our companion report, *Undermining Ukraine*. But none of this would have happened if Vladimir Putin and his proxies had not concocted false justifications for war, masking Russia's intentions and denying its culpability in the months and years leading up to February 24, 2022.

The Legality of “Ruses of War”

It remains to be seen whether Putin and his partners in war will be held accountable for conducting a war of aggression—or, for that matter, for their use of information warfare to initiate the invasion.

International law covers an array of crimes that can occur in wartime, from combatants disguising themselves for battlefield advantage to mass atrocities such as ethnic cleansing and genocide. But what about information warfare as a crime in its own right?

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1966 and ratified by Russia in 1973, attempted to address wartime propaganda. According to Article 20 of the covenant

1. Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law.
2. Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.⁹⁹

What this means in practice, however, has been open to debate ever since. While Russia's war propaganda and incitement to violence violate its obligations under the ICCPR, for example, it remains an open question whether those narratives would constitute a crime under international law.

In February 2017, the *Tallinn Manual 2.0*, an academic analysis of international law and cyber operations published on behalf of the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence, explored legal questions regarding a broad array of cyber operations, including information operations. “Cyberspace is new, and there's a lot of gray out there,” explained Michael Schmitt, director of the *Tallinn Manual 2.0* process, at a 2017 Atlantic Council event on the release of the manual.¹⁰⁰

While international law addresses a range of war crimes, it does not prohibit “ruses of war,” including engaging in disinformation. According to Article 37 of the 1977 update of the 1949 Geneva Conventions

Ruses of war are not prohibited. Such ruses are acts which are intended to mislead an adversary or to induce him to act recklessly but which infringe no rule of international law applicable in armed conflict and which are not perfidious because they do not invite the confidence of an adversary with respect to protection under that law. The following are examples of such ruses: the use of camouflage, decoys, mock operations, and misinformation.¹⁰¹

Propaganda can be considered an international crime only in rare exceptions, such as in the context of inciting genocide. According to Article 25 of the Rome Statute, a person “shall be individually responsible and liable for punishment” for “directly and publicly incites others to commit genocide.”¹⁰² Inciting war more generally, however, is not addressed.

99 “The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 20,” United Nations General Assembly, December 19, 1966, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%20999/volume-999-i-14668-english.pdf>.

100 Rachel Ansley, *Tallinn Manual 2.0: Defending Cyberspace*, Atlantic Council, February 15, 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/tallinn-manual-2-0-defending-cyberspace>.

101 “Article 37—Prohibition of Perfidy,” Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), June 8, 1977, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977/article-37>.

102 “Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,” International Criminal Court, 2011, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/RS-Eng.pdf>.

Alternate Viewpoints Argue for a “Re-evaluation”

Some scholars now argue that international law should reconsider how it addresses the role of influence operations in wartime. “The contemporary trend of disinformation being deployed in ways that threaten civilian populations challenges that underlying assumption and begs for a re-evaluation of its treatment in IHL [International Humanitarian Law],” human-rights attorney Eian Katz wrote in the December 2021 issue of the *International Review of the Red Cross*.¹⁰³

[D]isinformation today is often employed by highly sophisticated combatants and non-combatants using complex methods. For these reasons, it no longer makes sense to label disinformation as a “ruse of war” without fuller consideration of the circumstances.

“[P]ublishers may become legitimate military objectives if they engage in incitement,” Katz also argued. “Depending on the context, disinformation may be more akin to propaganda, incitement, or neither...The inadequacy of the legal response to disinformation in armed conflict, coupled with the gravity of the harms it may occasion, underscores the need for the articulation of clearer standards.”

Meanwhile in June 2021, more than 110 legal scholars signed an Oxford Statement on International Law Protections in Cyberspace entitled “The Regulation of Information Operations and Activities.” In it, they proposed ten principles regarding the application of international law to information operations. These recommendations included the following.

States must refrain from conducting information operations and activities when they would violate the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention in a State’s internal or external affairs.

States must refrain from engaging in, supporting or allowing forms of speech within their jurisdiction that are prohibited under international law, such as any propaganda for war and any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

To enforce this duty, States must prohibit by law information operations and activities amounting to such forms of speech.¹⁰⁴

For the time being, a lack of consensus will likely persist on information warfare as a violation of international law. As Harriet Moynihan noted in a report on cyber operations and international law published by Chatham House in December 2019, “The prospects of a general treaty in this area are far off.”¹⁰⁵

The Crime of Aggression

While engaging in information operations might not be a crime within international law, the *messages* conveyed in those operations could constitute *evidence* of a crime, including engaging in **the crime of aggression**. According to Article 8 of the Rome Statute, a crime of aggression “means the planning, preparation, initiation or execution, by a person in a position effectively to exercise control over or to direct the political or military action of a State, of an act of aggression which, by its character, gravity and scale, constitutes a manifest violation of the Charter of the United Nations.”¹⁰⁶

It continues by defining an “act of aggression” as “the use of armed force by a State against the sovereignty, territorial integrity, or political independence of another State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations.” These include “the invasion or attack by the armed forces of a State of the territory of another State,” and “annexation by the use of force of the territory of another State,” among other examples.¹⁰⁷

Any prosecution for the crime of aggression would require proving each of these elements. Documenting the Kremlin’s use of information warfare—particularly the employment of disinformation—could help provide some of that evidence.

First, Kremlin disinformation published in the leadup to the invasion may be **evidence of planning or preparing for an act of aggression**. This includes many of the false and misleading narratives documented in this report: claims of Ukraine’s alleged planned chemical-weapons attacks,

103 Eian Katz, “Liar’s War: Protecting Civilians from Disinformation During Armed Conflict,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 914, December 2021, <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/protecting-civilians-from-disinformation-during-armed-conflict-914>.

104 “The Oxford Statement on International Law Protections in Cyberspace: The Regulation of Information Operations and Activities,” Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law, and Armed Conflict, June 2021, <https://elac.web.ox.ac.uk/the-oxford-statement-on-the-regulation-of-information-operations-and-activities>.

105 Harriet Moynihan, “The Application of International Law to State Cyberattacks,” Chatham House, December 2, 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/12/application-international-law-state-cyberattacks/7-conclusions-and-recommendations>.

106 “Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,” International Criminal Court, 2011, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/RS-Eng.pdf>.

107 Ibid.

the shelling of the kindergarten, sabotage of chlorine tanks, development of nuclear weapons, and genocidal acts against Russians in the Donbas. These and other narratives by Kremlin and Donbas officials in the days and weeks leading up to the invasion were used to create a pretext for the invasion, thus making them part of the planning that went into the invasion.

Second, disinformation narratives that started prior to the invasion and continued afterward may be **evidence that Russian or Donbas officials knew the invasion was inconsistent with the UN Charter and constituted a “manifest violation” of it.** For example, if officials believed the invasion was legally justified, there would be no need to create a pretext for it. The fact that they created a pretext for the invasion could help prosecutors prove that they were aware a pretext was needed. No doubt, Russian and Donbas officials would argue that they did not create a pretext and the information they published was accurate, or that they believed it to be accurate. This argument would, therefore, require establishing that officials knew their public claims to be false but published them anyway.

For weeks, months, and even years prior to the invasion, Putin, the Kremlin, and their proxies telegraphed an array of narratives to justify it, deny responsibility for it, and mask their hostile intentions. If subsequent investigations establish that these officials knew these narratives to be inaccurate, the deployment of disinformation narratives could serve as evidence of knowledge that the invasion was a manifest violation of the UN Charter.

Final Thoughts: Preserving Evidence, Both Online and Offline

Whether or not the international community ultimately pursues cases against Putin, Kremlin officials, or Donbas separatist leaders, it will first need to finish compiling an enormous body of potential evidence to document how

they initiated the war and how they have conducted it ever since. This work has already begun, as Ukraine, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), forensic investigators, and others gather physical evidence of innumerable crimes committed by Russian forces and their allies.

As this work continues, so too must we collect *digital evidence*, whether it be open-source footage of potential war crimes or the incessant waves of hostile narratives trumpeted by the Kremlin prior to the invasion. For the thousands of pro-Kremlin articles analyzed in this report, the DFRLab collaborated with the Starling Lab for Data Integrity at Stanford and USC, utilizing the lab’s advanced research in authenticated web archiving and decentralized storage technology. This will ensure their preservation at the highest possible standards if they are ever needed for evidentiary purposes in the future.

When it comes to documenting how Putin and his cronies started the war, their lies, distortions, and excuses can be found in the thousands with a simple Google search—or a Yandex search, for that matter—in no small part due to the pro-Kremlin outlets that dutifully promoted and telegraphed Putin’s intentions.

This report analyzes more than ten thousand examples of these narratives amplified by fourteen pro-Kremlin outlets, but there is much more to be documented and preserved. As of March 2016, there were more than eighty-three thousand media outlets officially registered in Russia.¹⁰⁸ The Kremlin operates a vast array of official government websites, and its social media footprint is enormous, both in terms of official channels and its proxies. The DFRLab currently monitors more than five hundred pro-Kremlin Telegram channels, for example; on Twitter, the Russian foreign ministry alone runs at least two hundred different accounts.¹⁰⁹

If the international community is to hold Russia accountable, there is an enormous body of open-source evidence yet to be collected.

¹⁰⁸ “Number of Media Outlets Registered in Russia up 24% to 4-Year Highs—Research,” TACC [TASS], March 9, 2016, <https://tass.com/economy/861230>.

¹⁰⁹ “Diplomacy on Twitter,” MFA Russia, last visited January 20, 2023, <https://twitter.com/i/lists/1275328087312523265>.

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