Undermining Ukraine
How the Kremlin Employs Information Operations to Erode Global Confidence in Ukraine
Research coordinated by Roman Osadchuk; Edited by Andy Carvin

Atlantic Council
DFRLab
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Executive Summary

In the lead-up to Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin and its proxies perpetrated information operations to justify military action against Ukraine, mask its operational planning, and deny any responsibility for the war. Once the war began in earnest, Russia continued that strategy and added an increased focus to undermine Ukraine's ability to resist in hopes of forcing the country to surrender or enter negotiations on Russia's terms. This shift in strategy included efforts to maintain control of information and support for the war effort at home, undercut Ukrainian resistance, derail support for Ukrainian resistance among Allies and partners, especially in the immediate region, and engage in aggressive information operations internationally to shape public opinion about Russia's war of aggression, including in Africa and Latin America.

Building upon daily monitoring by the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), this report synthesizes Kremlin attempts to undermine Ukraine by targeting local, regional, and global audiences over the course of 2022 since the start of the war that year on February 24.

For audiences within Russia, changes in legislation and the regulatory environment effectively criminalized media independence and public dissent against the war, while the Kremlin and its media proxies embraced jingoistic messaging that could be reduced to symbols like the letter Z. The Kremlin also weaponized fact-checking tropes, exploiting increasingly popular Telegram channels such as War on Fakes to amplify disinformation via media outlets and diplomatic social media accounts.

From the very start of the war, the Kremlin also emphasized demoralizing Ukrainian audiences and destroying their will to fight. Early examples included so-called deepfake videos giving the appearance that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had fled the country and urged Ukraine's troops to lay down their arms. These expanded to the utilization of forged documents to embarrass Ukrainian officials and damage their reputations among their constituents, as well as fake marketplaces on the dark web suggesting that Ukraine resold Western weaponry for profit. Pro-Kremlin narratives also used fear and intimidation tactics against Ukrainians in an attempt to make them believe that Russia was unbeatable and Ukraine's neighbors were untrustworthy. We further explore Russia portraying the massacre of civilians in Bucha as either a Ukrainian atrocity or fabrication, while also playing up nuclear threats under the guise of public debate.

Russian information operations also targeted Ukraine's neighbors, partners, and allies across Europe. The DFRLab conducted three case studies based on proximity to Russia and as key indicator audiences, including Poland, Ukraine's nearest and most important NATO-member neighbor; France, a key Western European country supporting Ukraine with military and financial aid; and Georgia, a post-Soviet state under partial Russian occupation with a government highly influenced by Russia.

In Poland, Ukraine's closest Western neighbor, pro-Russian operations hacked social media accounts to spread forged documents that painted Ukrainian officials as harboring anti-Polish sentiments; similar operations also presented Ukrainian refugees as criminals exploiting Poland's financial resources and the generosity of the Polish people. In France, rumors propagated across social media flowed into mainstream media discussion of advanced French weaponry sent to Ukraine landing in the hands of Russia's security service. And in Georgia, a sympathetic pro-Russian government parroted Kremlin messaging to avoid involvement in the war, drawing the ire of both Ukraine and sympathetic Georgian citizens.

Pro-Kremlin media also exploited its international footprint to promote Russian interests, particularly in the Global South. Russia's “Return to Africa” policy has increased Moscow's engagement with the continent in recent years, including establishing military influence in West Africa through proxy forces, improving ties with anti-Western political parties, and amplifying pro-Kremlin social media campaigns of dubious provenance. And in Latin America, the Kremlin circumvents restrictions on state media like RT and Sputnik by promoting their messaging through Russian diplomatic social media accounts and YouTube channels that have replaced state media's Spanish-language presence on the platform.
Introduction

By the time the sun rose on Kyiv on February 24, 2022, the world order as we had known it for decades had changed forever. Hours earlier, Russia's armed forces began hitting targets around the city and across Ukraine. Months of Kremlin information operations that laid the groundwork for false justifications for war transformed into a kinetic war literally overnight. Vladimir Putin called it a “special military operation,” but the world knew better: Putin had invaded Ukraine to reassert Kremlin dominance over the country.

The inception of the invasion also marked a new period of Kremlin narrative warfare. As the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) explores in a companion report, Narrative Warfare, prewar Kremlin messaging focused on justifying military action against Ukraine, masking its operational planning, and denying any responsibility for the coming war.1 But now that war was under way, a fourth goal came to the fore: undermining Ukraine at every possible turn until Ukraine either surrendered outright or submitted to negotiations on Russia’s terms.

To undermine Ukraine, Russia would need to utilize using every tool at its disposal to break the nation’s collective will. Firepower would not be enough; whatever dreams the Kremlin had in conquering Kyiv in days or weeks became a nightmare for Putin and his allies that has lasted for an entire year. Conquering Ukraine would require destroying its morale and global confidence in its ability to stop Putin’s ambitions.

The DFRLab has monitored Russian hybrid warfare activities since its inception, beginning with the publishing of the groundbreaking October 2015 Atlantic Council report, Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin’s War in Ukraine.2 Using open-source research techniques, the DFRLab tracked Russian operations on the ground and in the digital sphere, from satellite imagery to social media data. As the likelihood of a Russian invasion increased, we launched a new monitoring project on January 21, 2022, that eventually became known as the Russian War Report.3 4 This effort brought together more than a dozen DFRLab researchers across Europe, the United States, and around the world to track Russian activities across multiple domains, including documenting Russian information operations, potential war crimes, crackdowns on domestic dissent, and its weaponization of technology policy as a domain of war. Over the course of 2022, the DFRLab produced sixty-six editions in the Russian War Report series, documenting hundreds of instances of Russia employing hybrid tactics to undermine Ukraine.5

This new report, a compilation of some of our most notable findings, explores how Kremlin information operations expanded over the course of the post-invasion period, presenting case studies from Russia and Ukraine, across Europe, as well as from Africa and Latin America. Throughout these case studies, we observe how the Kremlin and its proxies adapted and evolved its tactics to destroy Ukraine’s reputation as it simultaneously attempted to destroy Ukraine’s sovereignty on the ground.

Undermining Ukraine on all fronts became the primary objective in the information domain of Russia’s war, as well as a primary corollary to its military strategy: undermining global support for the Ukrainian war effort; undermining Ukrainian morale; undermining trust in Ukraine as a reliable partner; undermining sympathy for its people; undermining its relationships with its neighbors; and undermining financial support and military aid.

This even proved to be the case as Russia manipulated its own citizens, as it banned Western social media platforms, cracked down on public dissent, criminalized independent reporting on the war, and propagated symbols like the letter “Z” to rally domestic support. To defeat Ukraine on the battlefield, Russia needed to strangle all sympathy and support for Ukraine as well.

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4 Initial editions of the project were known as the “Russian Hybrid Threats Report”; the DFRLab updated the name after Russia invaded Ukraine.
5 The Russian War Report series archive can be found at https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/category/content-series/russian-hybrid-threats-report/.
From the moment the first explosions rocked Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Putin no longer needed to use false narratives to mask the military buildup toward war. His pre-dawn speech articulated his false justifications for initiating another war of aggression against Ukraine, even though he and the Kremlin continued to couch the invasion as a “special military operation.”

Russian propaganda has nurtured a sense of superiority toward Ukrainians and Ukrainian independence since czarist times, at best framing Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries as “younger siblings.” This approach was cultivated in books, broadcasts, and more recently, through using the internet and social media platforms. These efforts reached a tipping point in February 2014, when the Euromaidan protests culminated in the Revolution of Dignity that ousted pro-Kremlin Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych from power. The three-month protests received phantasmagoric coverage from mainstream Russian media, setting the stage for Russian annexation of Crimea and occupation of the Donbas. Since then, the Kremlin’s propaganda arm has released unrestrained amounts of hostile rhetoric directed at Ukrainians, reaching such extremes as an RT host calling for the “drowning and burning Ukrainian children” in October 2022.

Within the information domain of the 2022 war against Ukraine, Russia and pro-Russian actors have focused their efforts on various fronts. As we explore in our companion report, Narrative Warfare, they seeded false and misleading narratives to justify military action against Ukraine, mask its operational activities, and deny any responsibility for the war. Examples of these narratives utilized during the pre-invasion period include Ukraine as an aggressor preparing to attack the Donbas, the West using Ukraine to attack Russia, and Ukrainians as Nazis. Meanwhile, narratives related to weapons of mass destruction (WMD) continued to evolve and sprout new variants, including Ukraine utilizing US-funded research labs to develop bioweapons, as well as Ukraine preparing “dirty bombs” to attack Russia.

Pro-Kremlin sources have also employed narratives undermining Ukraine as a reliable partner of the West and discrediting Ukrainian refugees as an ever-growing problem for European countries. These arguments came in a variety of forms, including claims that Ukraine had resold Western-donated munitions for profit, that the West was prolonging the war by continuing to supply weapons, that host countries like Poland were spending funds helping Ukrainian refugees at the expense of their own citizens, and that ungrateful refugees were destabilizing their host countries. Additional narratives emphasized the hardships that Western countries would face for supporting Ukraine or sanctioning Russia. These included European Union member states freezing over the winter without access to Russian gas, Western sanctions coming into play, and the potential for famine in Ukraine.


back to haunt countries supporting Ukraine, global food shortages, and runaway inflation.12

For many of these narratives, the Kremlin and its proxies would target specific audiences either domestically or internationally.13 In Russia, the use of disinformation and propaganda to influence audiences occurred alongside media censorship and the decline of civil liberties and other freedoms.14 Once the invasion began, pro-Kremlin actors and officials rushed to explain the inevitability of war and the lack of alternative options. As the war progressed, the Kremlin faced a growing body of visual evidence showing death and destruction in populated areas of Ukraine, all of which contradicted official messaging regarding the morality of invasion. To inspire patriotism and unity in support of the war, the Kremlin launched social media campaigns and in-person rallies.15 To silence dissenting voices, the Russian government blocked independent media outlets and social media platforms, decrying any accusations against them as “fake news” and even going so far as criminalizing usage of the words “war” and “invasion.”16 16 As we explore in this report, the Kremlin media ecosystem presented a highly manipulated yet unified view of world affairs aimed to influence the Russian population to support the war. Another important target group for pro-Kremlin messaging is the Russian diaspora, particularly those who left the country before the invasion. Indicators of the influence of this audience include pro-Russia rallies in Europe, the defacement of tourist attractions with the pro-war “Z” symbol, and conflicts between Russian diaspora and Ukrainian refugees.17 While not all of the diaspora population supports the invasion and Russian expansionism, a subset of the community expresses direct support for the war, or does so indirectly by defending against Russophobia or combating what Putin himself has vocalized as the “canceling” of Russian culture.18

Concurrently, Russia established fake fact-checking entities to “verify” its interpretation of events at a scale not witnessed prior to the war: for example, War on Fakes, a collection of multilingual Telegram channels that “fact-check” claims to support Kremlin narratives and defend Russia’s actions.19 These initiatives create alternative explanations and invent false claims to debunk or deny evidence, often employing statements from an assortment of Russian officials.20 Russian government ministries, diplomatic missions, and political influencers then amplify these “investigations” to deny Russian atrocities, such


13 This section of this report builds upon previous DFRLab work published by Bled Strategic Times (official gazette of Russia’s annual Bled Strategic Forum): “Russia’s Information Warfare Against Ukraine.” Special thanks to Bled Strategic Forum for granting us permission to update it within this report; and Roman Osachuk, “Russia’s Information Warfare Against Ukraine;” Bled Strategic Times, August 26, 2022, https://tass.com/politics/1450127; and “What Do Ordinary Russians Really Think About the War in Ukraine?,” London School of Economics and Political Science (blog), March 17, 2022, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europolblog/2022/03/17/what-do-ordinary-russians-really-think-about-the-war-in-ukraine/; and “Nations in Transit: Russia,” Freedom House, 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/nations-transit/2022.


as the March 9, 2022, bombing of a maternity ward in Mariupol maternity hospital bombing. 21

Russia also works to undermine audiences in Ukraine. Its use of disinformation and falsified imagery, such as the pre-invasion claims of chlorine tank saboteurs, has continued throughout the invasion, such as circulating footage falsely suggesting that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had “escaped” from Kyiv in the first days of the invasion. 22 Throughout the post-invasion news cycle, Russia routinely generates multiple explanations for any given incident or claim, blurring the line between reality and fiction. For instance, after Russia withdrew its forces from Northern Ukraine, mounting evidence documented how Russian troops had tortured and killed civilians. Russia responded by engaging in multiple explanations and falsehoods, claiming Ukraine had either staged fake massacres or committed actual ones. 23

This approach of producing “alternative” explanations sows doubt among audiences that do not closely follow the war while providing ammunition for Kremlin sympathizers who actively support it. These explanations create media noise so that people who do not follow the war closely develop the impression that the truth is contested, lessening the chance of them supporting Ukraine in the conflict. This approach overburdens many news consumers around the world, making them indifferent and emotionally exhausted, which plays into the hands of the Kremlin, which seeks to avoid and deny responsibility for its actions.


Additionally, pro-Kremlin outlets created multiple crude and easily debunked forgeries to undermine support for Ukraine, in the mold of previous Kremlin influence campaigns like Operation Secondary Infektion, exposed by the DFRLab in 2019. As we explore in our case studies, one current iteration of the tactic involved the distribution of forged letters claiming that Ukraine sold Western-donated weaponry in the middle of the war for profit; to make the claim more believable, pro-Kremlin sources “invented” dark web sources and markets that Ukrainians supposedly use to resell weapons. This narrative recurred in multiple forms and messages, some of them potentially influencing mainstream Western media.

Russian influence tactics are by no means limited to the parties directly involved in the conflict, as they also target EU member states and other countries in the region, including Georgia. And in the Global South, Russia has invested in promoting pro-war hashtags via retweet networks and batch-created accounts in South Africa and in Latin America on Twitter. Wherever Russian information operations take aim, the goal remains the same: undermining Ukraine by any means possible.

26 Osadchuk, “How Russia Promoted the Claim That Ukraine Re-Sold French Howitzers.”
How Russia Targets Domestic Audiences

Controlling the Populace through Censorship, Legislation, and Propaganda

Soon after the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia doubled down on online censorship in the form of a social media crackdown. To prevent the spread of factual information about the war within its own borders, Russia blocked, banned, and fined foreign online platforms operating in the country, especially Western platforms.

In early March 2022, Russia’s internet regulator Roskomnadzor blocked Twitter and Meta’s Facebook and Instagram, with a Russian court designating Meta an “extremist organization.”28 Although Google, YouTube, TikTok, Wikipedia, and other online platforms have not yet been blocked, they have received significant fines for refusing to remove content about Russia’s war in Ukraine.29

Following these blockages in Russia, some news outlets including BBC and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty provided tips to Russian internet users on how to bypass government censorship and access their reporting online.30 Russian citizens routinely use virtual private networks (VPNs) to circumvent government bans and access content published in the West.31

Russia also employs homegrown platforms for suppressing information and spreading Kremlin propaganda and disinformation domestically. Yandex, the leading search engine and news aggregator in Russia, promotes state media and disinformation narratives in its search results and has removed and de-ranked content critical of Moscow.32 Russia also boosted copycats of popular Western online platforms to provide pro-Kremlin alternatives to its citizens. For example, they have promoted video portal RUTUBE, a knockoff of YouTube; announced the creation of Instagram knockoff Rosgram; and launched Runiversalsis, an analog of Wikipedia that pushes Russian propaganda and disinformation in the guise of an encyclopedia ostensibly edited by the Russian public.33

On March 4, 2022, Russian authorities passed legislation that expanded the list of content that could be deemed illegal, as well as enlarged the powers of state agencies dealing with internet censorship.34 Russia imposed a prison term of up to fifteen years for anything that “discredited” or shared “fake” content regarding the Russian armed forces, including describing their actions as a “war” or “invasion.”35 The same law criminalized calls for sanctioning Russia. Among other harsh legislative measures, Putin signed a law that penalizes equating the Soviet Union to Nazi Germany or denying the “decisive


Defending “traditional Russian values” has also become a matter of wartime Kremlin policy, especially under the guise of attacks on the LGBTQI+ community. In August 2022, Russia disclosed plans to create an online surveillance system that could hunt down “homosexual propaganda,” among other “prohibited” data. Meanwhile, the pro-Kremlin Wikipedia knockoff Runiversalis stated that it would not allow “homosexual propaganda” on its platform.

### Weaponizing Fact-checking Tropes

The Kremlin and its proxies have also co-opted fact-checking tropes to undermine trust in fact-checking and spread disinformation about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The Telegram channel War of Fakes, for example, presents itself as a fact-checking organization that debunks “Ukrainian disinformation,” while in reality it amplifies disinformation narratives by publishing pro-Kremlin narratives as facts.

At the time of writing, more than 750,000 Telegram users follow the original Russian language War on Fakes Telegram; its website, WarOnFakes.com, translates its content into English, French, German, Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic. Russian embassies and other government-affiliated accounts routinely amplify content originating from War on Fakes on Telegram, Twitter, and other platforms.

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39 Buziashvili, “Pro-Kremlin Wikipedia Alternative Off to a Rough Start.”
42 Andriukaitis et al., “Russian War Report: Russia Makes False Claims While Blaming Ukraine for Kramatorsk Railway Station Attack.”
**Operation Z**

From the early days of the invasion, the Kremlin took actions to increase grassroots support within Russian society for its war in Ukraine. Perhaps the most notable example is the letter Z and how it has become an omnipresent symbol to reinforce public support for the war. The letter first appeared on Russian military vehicles and equipment on social media a few days prior to the February 24 invasion, along with the letters V and O. Some observers have theorized that the letters were originally used as a means for the Russian military to distinguish between friendly and hostile units. Russia's Ministry of Defence, however, quickly expanded its meaning when it published memes to Instagram implying the Z stands for за победу (for victory) while V represents сила в правде (power is in the truth). The ministry also added the letter Z to slogans regarding the “denazification and demilitarization” of Ukraine. It appeared widely alongside a slogan, “For a world without Nazism,” during a March 2022 pro-war rally in Moscow to celebrate the eighth anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea. During a speech at a rally, Putin accused Ukraine of committing “genocide” against ethnic Russians in the Donbas region. Moscow police claimed that more than 200,000 people gathered at the rally, though some reports stated that public service employees had been bused to the event. The Kremlin also organized pro-war за россию (For Russia) rallies in April and May in more than thirty Russian cities. According to the BBC, the Russian government spent more than 95 million rubles (US$1.4 million) on organizing these concerts, the most expensive state contract ever concluded in Russia for a concert program.

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Public opinion polls in Russia suggest that the Kremlin has achieved some success in gaining public support for its war. According to an October 2022 survey by Russian independent polling firm Levada, 73 percent of surveyed Russians expressed support for their country’s military activity in Ukraine, while 20 percent did not.51 In contrast, only 36 percent of respondents expressed support for the continuation of the war, while 57 percent indicated support for negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.52

Russian Influence Operations Targeting Ukraine

Online media has become a vital source of information in the Ukrainian media landscape. Social media surpassed television in 2020 as Ukrainians’ primary news source, according to a recent USAID-Internews survey.53 Among the most popular social media platforms for news in Ukraine are Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, and Viber.54 With the onset of the war, Telegram skyrocketed in popularity, providing real-time updates and raw war footage to Ukrainian consumers. According to a summer 2022 survey commissioned by Ukrainian elections watchdog OPORA, Ukrainians spent 41 percent of their social media time on Telegram, followed by YouTube at 31 percent.55 This reliance on Telegram as an information source raises certain concerns given that Russia has a recorded history of using Telegram to attempt to influence Ukrainians. In February 2021, the Security Service of Ukraine exposed a network of anonymous Telegram channels connected to Russian special forces.56 Journalists further analyzed the accounts, revealing interconnected networks whose influence reached members of the Ukrainian parliament.57
Before the war began, Ukraine blocked many traditional pro-Kremlin media sources, like pro-Russian television channels, leaving the Kremlin in need of new avenues to reach Ukrainians. Pro-Kremlin Telegram channels attempted to adapt to the local Ukrainian context to blend in as they used fabricated stories to amplify divisions in Ukraine. For example, posts would accuse the Ukrainian army of war crimes or criticize the Ukrainian government for the war, while omitting Russia’s role in any of it. And in the occupied Donbas, a network of local Telegram channels emerged, one for each village, sharing local news alongside Russian disinformation narratives. Many of these channels ceased publishing in July.

Since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Ukraine has taken steps to limit the influence of Russian disinformation,
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Undermining Trust in Ukrainian Leadership

Throughout the war, pro-Kremlin narratives have consistently sought to undermine trust in Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, from disparaging attacks against the Ukrainian government to conspiracies claiming the president had fled the country. One of the most notable attacks on Zelenskyy’s reputation occurred three weeks into the war, when the pro-Kremlin Telegram and VK channels spread a deep-fake video and hacked a TV channel’s news ticker, making it appear that Zelenskyy was imploring Ukrainians to cease fighting and surrender.63

The video and ticker message claimed that Zelenskyy had planned to take over the Donbas and failed, and was forced to flee Kyiv: “There is no need to die in this war,” Zelenskyy appeared to suggest. “I advise you to live.”

Zelenskyy promptly denied the authenticity of the statements on his official Telegram channel.64 But once the deepfake video went viral in Russia, pro-Kremlin commentators began claiming that it was a possible sign of Zelenskyy’s indecision and readiness to give up. The life cycle of the video reveals vital information about a common Kremlin propaganda tactic in which pro-Kremlin sources create and spread a disinformation narrative, in this instance a deepfake video and a hacked news ticker. Russian media then amplify and wrongly portray it as verified information coming from within Ukraine.

The deepfake video also launched a persistent conspiracy theory that Zelenskyy fled Ukraine at varying points in time. In October 2022, for example, an iteration of the narrative claimed Zelenskyy filmed his videos from Hollywood using a green screen.65

Russian disinformation channels have relied on other falsified videos and forged documents, and tried to appear credible and undermine support for Ukraine. There have been multiple instances of fake videos masquerading as content from legitimate news outlets. These often appear first on pro-Kremlin or Kremlin-tied Telegram channels before spreading to other platforms. In one example, a fake video appearing to be from Al Jazeera “reported” that Ukrainians were employing “Nazi symbols” at the 2022 World Cup.66 In another instance, a forged video purporting to be a BBC video claimed Ukrainian troops had shelled a railway station in Kramatorsk and killed civilians, despite evidence suggesting Russia was behind the shelling incident.67 As has been the case in similar incidents, both Al Jazeera and the BBC issued statements blocking Russian TV and Ukrainian pro-Kremlin TV channels, as well as Russian social media platforms.61 In response, the Kremlin began using more unconventional means of communication to reach audiences, like anonymous Telegram channels that aim to sow division and promote mistrust of democratic values.62

Impersonations and Forgeries

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62 “SBU Exposes Russian Agent Network.”


denying the content’s authenticity. Despite these attempts to debunk the videos, pro-Kremlin Telegram channels continued to circulate them.

Forging footage and documents is a long-standing Kremlin tactic. As previously noted, the DFRLab reported in 2019 on Operation Secondary Infektion, in which the Kremlin spread forged documents on dozens of fringe websites, social networks, and blogs.68 Over the course of 2022, the DFRLab encountered numerous forgeries of diplomatic correspondences and other documents attempting to undermine Ukraine’s relationship and reputation with its regional partners.69 These forgeries often contain errors such as incorrect spelling and grammar, making them relatively straightforward for open-source researchers to identify, but this has not stopped their proliferation, particularly on pro-Kremlin Telegram channels. Some channels even use conspiratorial thinking when describing that a document might be a forgery, but it is worth sharing while waiting for the “facts” to come out.

In another instance, pro-Kremlin Telegram channels exploited the dark web to promote a narrative claiming Ukraine resold weapons donated by Western countries for profit. As supposed evidence, the channels shared screenshots of online marketplaces tagged as in Ukraine and showcasing weapons for sale.70 In each of these cases, the channels inserted images taken from other sources, or changed the location of a sale to make it appear it was coming from Ukraine rather than from

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Posts sharing this narrative received wide dissemination and readership. One post received 960,000 views on Telegram, whereas similar information on another channel received 675,000. The Russian national TV channel 1tv.ru also amplified the story. Such operations aim to create mistrust in Ukraine toward the government and armed forces, and to communicate to other foreign audiences that Ukraine is corrupt and does not deserve Western aid.

Employing Territorial Claims as a Threat

While Russian officials have a history of denying Ukrainian statehood, the evolution of this rhetoric after February 24 is crucial to understanding Russian narrative tactics. In September 2022, Russia conducted a series of bogus referenda in the occupied parts of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson oblasts. On September 30, Putin made the annexation official, declaring that the people of the newly annexed territories would become Russian citizens “forever” and that Russia would defend these territories “by all means available.” Soon after, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov boasted, “Our country has become larger from today de jure, which is very important.” These statements also implied that Russia would consider Ukrainian attacks on annexed territories as an attack on Russia itself. These justification narratives suggest Russia aimed to use the referenda as a way to escalate the stakes for subsequent Ukrainian resistance.

A composite image of Telegram posts making claims of Ukraine reselling weapons on the dark web. (Sources: Images from MediaKiller/archive, left; Signal/archive, top right; dark web, bottom right.)

somewhere else. These screenshots were shared in concert with forged documents and falsified videos to generate momentum for the narrative as Telegram users and pro-Kremlin outlets amplified them.

Sourcing content allegedly from the dark web could be a deliberate strategy; for many internet users, the platform is unknown and obscure, creating an impression of underground or shady dealings. And since many internet users do not know how to navigate the dark web, they lack the technical knowledge to debunk content from it. These benefits allowed pro-Kremlin sources to manipulate content to create the impression of a Ukrainian weapons market.

Intimidation as Policy

Russian hostility against Ukrainians includes persistent threats of violence. Attempts to intimidate Ukrainians have ranged from dropping leaflets in Dnipropetrovsk oblast that describe what to do in the event of an explosion at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, to statements from Putin discussing the use of nuclear weapons. Rumors regarding what Russia might do to escalate the conflict are routinely disseminated on Telegram and other platforms. Additionally, Russia uses training flights of military aircraft as a tactic of constant intimidation from above. These lead to air raid sirens across Ukraine, prompting many people to seek shelter, inducing anxiety within the population and halting daily atrocities. Many Ukrainians ignore these alarms due to their frequency, putting themselves at risk during an actual attack.

Russian efforts to intimidate Ukrainians do not appear to be working. According to an August 2022 survey from the independent Ukrainian research organization Rating Group, 74 percent of Ukrainians declared that Ukraine is moving in the right direction, and 93 percent of respondents were confident in Ukraine’s ability to repel Russian attacks. Moreover, in an October 2022 survey by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 86 percent of Ukrainians agreed with the statement, “It is necessary to continue armed resistance to Russian aggression, even if shelling of Ukrainian cities continues.” Notably, this survey was conducted after a wave of large-scale attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure. While Russian disinformation campaigns may reach some sympathetic audiences in Ukraine, they have been unsuccessful in shifting overall public opinion, as Russian intimidation tactics often contrast with the lived experience of Ukrainians.

Case Study: The Bucha Massacre

In April 2022, Ukrainian authorities and journalists reported about dozens of corpses in civilian clothes scattered on the streets of Bucha, northwest of Kyiv, after Russian forces retreated from the region.⁸² Some victims’ hands had been tied; Ukrainian law enforcement also uncovered a Russian torture chamber.⁸³ As of August 2022, local authorities have found the remains of more than 450 people in Bucha, 419 of whom had been shot, tortured, or bludgeoned to death.⁸⁴ The International Criminal Court has launched an investigation into atrocities committed there.⁸⁵

After the emergence of evidence documenting mass civilian casualties in Bucha, the Kremlin denied the culpability of Russian forces, masking their actions by pushing alternative explanations for what had taken place.⁸⁶ The Russian Ministry of Defense posted on Telegram that Bucha footage published by Ukraine was merely a Ukrainian “provocation” and that “not a single local resident suffered from any violent actions” during Russia’s occupation of the city. The statement also claimed that Russian troops left Bucha on March 30, while footage of dead civilians appeared four days later, insinuating that Ukraine might have staged massacres in the interim period.⁸⁷ Kremlin-controlled Rossiya 1 TV asserted that the corpses visible in one video clip were moving, standing up, and avoiding cars as they drove nearby.⁸⁸ The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, meanwhile, claimed on Twitter that the Bucha massacre was “another hoax by the Kyiv regime for Western media.”⁹⁹ In particular, MFA spokeswoman Maria Zakharova insisted that Ukraine had staged the massacre to scuttle peace negotiations and escalate the conflict.⁹⁰ Russian federal investigators also threatened their own citizens, warning that Russians would face charges of spreading “deliberately false information” if they stated that Russian soldiers were responsible for murdering civilians in Bucha.⁹¹

Russia’s claim that its troops left Bucha on March 30 is contested.⁹² On April 1, Zvezda TV, run by Russia’s Ministry of Defense, reported that Russian Marines were still conducting “clean-up” operations in Bucha.⁹³ That same day, the Kyiv regional administration included Bucha on its list of the most dangerous areas in the region due to Russian forces who were in the process of retreating from there.⁹⁴ Meanwhile, reports about the killing of civilians emerged prior to April 3: videos documenting dead civilians appeared on the Irpin Bucha Gostomel Vorzel Kyiv Telegram channel as early as April 1.⁹⁵ As for Russia’s allegations about corpses moving and trying to stand up, BBC journalist Shayan Sardarizadeh debunked the claim on Twitter, noting that alleged movements were actually visual distortions within the video itself.⁹⁶

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⁸⁸ "Украинские 'трупы' шевелятся, встают и избегают транспорта (Ukrainian 'Corpses' Move, Stand Up and Avoid Transport)," Rossiya 1, April 3, 2022, https://www.vesti.ru/article/2698329.
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Rossiya 1 TV segment alleging Ukraine staged the Bucha massacre using crisis actors. *(Source: "Украинские 'трупы' шевелятся, встают и избегают транспорта (Ukrainian 'Corpses' Move, Stand Up and Avoid Transport)," Rossiya 1, April 3, 2022, https://www.vesti.ru/article/2698329.)*
Case Study: Using “Discussion” About Russia’s Nuclear Options as an Implicit Threat

Following Ukraine’s liberation of the eastern city of Lyman in October 2022, Russian military bloggers and several political figures criticized the Kremlin’s military leadership and called for nuclear strikes on Ukraine.97

On October 1, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov published a Telegram post calling for “more drastic measures” against Ukraine, including “the use of low-yield nuclear weapons.”98 It received more than nine million views on the platform. In response to Kadyrov’s statement, Kremlin spokesman Peskov suggested that “emotions should not take over” the heads of Russia’s supporters during “difficult moments.”99 Peskov added that the use of nuclear weapons was “only possible in accordance with relevant doctrine.” Valentina Matviyenko, chair of the Federation Council, denied Russia’s intentions to threaten anyone with nuclear weapons and blamed the West for demonizing Moscow.100 Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov added that Russian military doctrine considers usage of the nuclear weapons only for self-defense.101

These statements, however, were followed by further discussion in the Russian information space regarding Kremlin nuclear doctrine. A September 27 Telegram post by former President Dmitry Medvedev stated that Russia had the right to use nuclear weapons in war with Ukraine “if necessary.”102 The post received more than four million views. The outlet KP.ru amplified his remarks in an article listing four conditions for the usage of nuclear weapons, according to Russian military doctrine, including instances in which WMDs are used on Russian territory and critical state infrastructure is targeted. When discussing nuclear weapons, the Kremlin-affiliated Russian Council suggested focusing on the question of whether Ukraine’s counteroffensive endangered Russian statehood.103

Meanwhile, Ria.ru published an explainer on Russia’s tactical nuclear arsenal.104

To keep the discussion on nuclear weapons in the information space, Russia used various actors and sources, including Russian officials, media outlets, and social media channels. While some actors openly discussed nuclear options, others denied Russia’s intentions to use them. Vladimir Solovyov, a Russian TV host known for his hawkish pro-Kremlin bluster, suggested that the Kremlin utilize its nuclear arsenal to destroy satellites operated by Elon Musk’s Starlink service that provide Ukraine with internet access. “To space, and goodbye Elon Musk’s internet service, Starlink, with nuclear weapons. (Source: Tweet by Anton Gerashchenko (@Gerashchenko_en), Twitter October 25, 2022, https://bit.ly/3IaNFW7.)”

Solovyov and his guests discuss targeting Elon Musk’s satellite internet service, Starlink, with nuclear weapons. (Source: Tweet by Anton Gerashchenko (@Gerashchenko_en), Twitter October 25, 2022, https://bit.ly/3IaNFW7.)

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98 Ramzan Kadyrov, Kadyrov_95, Telegram post, October 1, 2022, https://t.me/RKadyrov_95/2911.
group,” Solovyov said of Russia’s nuclear missiles. Moscow State University Professor Andrey Anatolievich Sidorov, who was a guest on the show, warned that such actions could lead to global Armageddon. “Then they will just die, and we’ll go to heaven,” Solovyov retorted.105

Meanwhile, by October 18, Peskov had changed his tune regarding the possible use of nuclear weapons in the event that Ukraine attempted to reclaim territories recently annexed by Russia. “All these territories are inalienable parts of the Russian Federation and they are all protected,” Peskov warned. “Their security is provided for at the same level as [it is for] the rest of Russia’s territory.”106 While Western governments expressed doubts about Russian nuclear rhetoric, the issue had become a topic of global conversation, leading to those governments making efforts to avoid public “panic.”107 The “discussion,” in effect, had become the actual threat, while providing justification for the Kremlin if it ever were to utilize nuclear weapons.

Countries across Europe experienced targeted information operations by Russia, as the Kremlin sought to undermine alliances, prevent nations from taking sides, and create domestic instability to turn hearts and minds against the Ukrainian cause. In this section, we document three case studies providing concrete examples of how Russia and its proxies vary their operations based on their regional interests in Poland, Ukraine’s closest Western neighbor; France, a key Western European ally; and Georgia, a post-Soviet state struggling to separate itself from Russian influence.

In Poland, Russia attempted to stir tensions between Poles and Ukrainian refugees, as well as between both governments, using a range of hybrid techniques emphasizing the two country’s sometimes uneasy history as neighbors. In France, rumors about advanced French weaponry supplied to Ukraine landing in the hands of Russia painted Ukraine as an untrustworthy partner. And in Georgia, persistent messaging by the ruling party about Russian spy chief says U.S., Poland Plotting Division of Ukraine. 

In addition to amplifying hostile and false narratives about Poland, multiple pro-Kremlin social media accounts and pages posted fabricated documents as evidence of Poland’s supposed plan to annex parts of Ukraine. The behavior and modus operandi of these actors bore some hallmarks of a Secondary Infektion-style information operation, as documented by the DFRLab in 2019.

One of earliest episodes of this operation took place in February 2022, when a seemingly fake persona by the name of “Viktor Shvets” (Віктор Швець) published the same post, entitled “Зеленський погодив з Польщею створення ’буферної зони’ в західній Україні,” to three blogs: politiko.ua, uainfo.org and teletype.in. The text included a forged map showing locations in Ukraine where Poland would allegedly deploy troops. In May 2022, a pro-Kremlin Telegram channel called Gossip Girl published a forged document with an inauthentic signature of Jarosław Mika, general commander of the Polish Armed Forces, ordering the Polish military to prepare airborne units to enter Ukraine. Throughout Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin increasingly targeted Poland with a goal of undermining its alliance with Ukraine, in part by portraying Poland as a threat to Ukraine’s territorial integrity and by capitalizing on historical and contentious events between the two countries. The Kremlin carried out a multichannel, full-spectrum disinformation campaign alleging that Poland planned to occupy territories in western Ukraine; this campaign included high-ranking officials in the Russian government, as well as covert and inauthentic social media assets.

By spreading falsehoods about alleged Polish expansionism, the Kremlin was attempting to divert attention from its activities in Ukraine as well as to intimidate Polish society into believing that Russia will respond militarily if Poland were to annex parts of Ukraine.

Case Study: Poland

Ukraine’s most important neighbor in the war effort, Poland has taken in the majority of Ukrainian refugees and serves as a staging ground for Ukrainian society. Poland is also Ukraine’s closest neighboring NATO member, making it the natural gateway for Western humanitarian aid and military support into Ukraine.

Throughout Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin increasingly targeted Poland with a goal of undermining its alliance with Ukraine, in part by portraying Poland as a


Fake billboards of Polish General Commander Mika with the alleged quote, “It’s time to remember history.” (Source: СИГНАЛ (Signal), “BBC сообщает, что Польша готовится к вводу войск на Западную Украину (BBC Reports That Poland Is Preparing to Send Troops to Western Ukraine).”)
critical infrastructure targets.112 Two days later, a fake video with the BBC News logo appeared online: the video featured the same document and reported that Poland was preparing to send troops to western Ukraine “under the pretext of protection from Russia.”113 That same day, the Russian Telegram channel Signal published forged photos of multiple billboards depicting Mika alongside the phrase, “It’s time to remember history,” referring to a period when parts of western Ukraine were part of Polish territory.114 The post also cited the fake BBC News video regarding Poland’s alleged plan to enter western Ukraine.

In September 2022, images of Polish ballot papers appeared online, allegedly printed by the Polish National Electoral Commission for conducting a referendum regarding the Ukrainian city of Lviv rejoining Poland.115 In November 2022, another pro-Kremlin Telegram channel, Ukraina.ru, published forged questionnaires allegedly prepared by the Polish embassy in Ukraine asking Ukrainians whether they wanted to live under a Polish “protectorate.”116 With the promotion of each new forgery, the operation repeatedly attempted to trigger tensions between Poland and Ukraine.

The DFRLab also previously reported on the activities of Kremlin-aligned hacktivists who targeted Poland with cyber-enabled influence operations over the summer of 2022.117 In June 2022, hacktivists Joker DPR and Beregini distributed five forged documents, allegedly signed by Polish and Ukrainian officials, suggesting that Poland had accepted a request from Ukraine to deport Ukrainian men back to the country so they could be drafted.118 In August, Joker DPR amplified another set of forged documents saying that Ukraine had asked Polish authorities to rename Belwederska Street in Warsaw, the location of the Russian embassy, in honor of Stepan Bandera, the Ukrainian far-right nationalist who led the Ukrainian Insurgent Army during World War II. In both instances, the instigators also hacked the social media accounts of several Polish nationals to further amplify these falsehoods and give them a sense of authenticity. One of these accounts belonged to Polish Air

114 СИГНАЛ (Signal), “BBC сообщает, что Польша готовится к вводу войск на Западную Украину (BBC Reports That Poland Is Preparing to Send Troops to Western Ukraine),” Telegram post, May 4, 2022, https://archive.vn/zuNOB.
118 Gigitashvili, “Russia-aligned Hacktivists.”
Pro-Kremlin social media assets also disseminated disinformation against Ukrainian refugees in Poland. In March 2022, a coordinated network on Instagram, masquerading as city news portals for seven Polish cities, disseminated false claims about Ukrainian refugees committing crimes in Poland.120 The people behind this network used Russian email services to set up registration emails.121 The DFRLab also found over twenty-five Polish-language pro-Kremlin Telegram channels and related websites spreading anti-refugee disinformation in an apparent attempt to negatively sway Polish public opinion away from refugees.122

In another effort to boost anti-Ukrainian sentiment in Poland, the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin actors actively pushed false claims that Polish mercenaries were fighting and dying in Ukraine. In June 2022, Russia’s Ministry of Defense claimed that 378 Polish mercenaries had been killed in Ukraine.123 The Polish-language, pro-Kremlin Independent Political Journal also alleged in November 2022 that more than 1,200 Polish citizens had died in Ukraine since February 2022 and that the Polish president and defense minister had officially called for Poles to join the ranks of mercenaries, neither of which was supported by corroborating evidence.124 A Polish-language Twitter account also repurposed old videos predating the invasion to show coffins of Polish soldiers allegedly being transported from Ukraine to Poland as a result of the war.125

**Case Study: Undermining Ukrainian Support**

Russia’s targeting of France is notable due to the French government’s outsize influence regarding Western support for Ukraine and its ability to provide direct support in the form of military equipment, financial aid, and sanctions regimes. In many ways, Kremlin narratives targeting France are emblematic of similar efforts to create divisions within and among Ukraine’s Western partners, including the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

Pro-Kremlin actors have attempted to undermine Western support for Ukraine with a variety of claims, from Ukraine reselling weapons on the black market to stories that Europe will freeze without Russian gas.126 These narratives appear in statements from Russian officials and pro-Kremlin organizations, in publications from conspiracy-minded pro-Kremlin media outlets and think tanks to platforms like Telegram.127 In the case of Telegram, narratives can migrate to Western social media platforms and into Western media outlets. These stories aim to hamper support for Ukraine by highlighting negative repercussions for European countries.

For example, in a case involving France supplying weapons to Ukraine, a French social media user alleged that French Caesar howitzers intended for Ukraine ended up in Russia, where they were supposedly disassembled for inspection by Russia’s security service.128 The story

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119 Gigitashvili, “Russia-aligned Hacktivists.”
128 Osadchuk, “How Russia Promoted the Claim That Ukraine Re-Sold French Howitzers.”
French Twitter user claims that French howitzers had appeared at a Russian factory. (Source: Régis de Castelnau (@R_DeCastelnau), Twitter, June 20, 2022, 7:07 a.m., https://twitter.com/R_DeCastelnau/status/1538841005612572674.)

The Telegram publication on Caesars being sold to Russians by Ukrainians, which received more than 565,000 views. (Sources: https://t.me/rybar/34628 or archived version https://archive.ph/zV3EK.)
became prevalent on multiple platforms and accounts. One iteration received 548,000 views on Telegram, while others received hundreds of shares and thousands of retweets and likes on Twitter. Russian state-owned media and anonymous pro-Kremlin channels then leveraged these unsupported claims and amplified them further.

**Case Study: Georgia**

In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia in what became known as “the August War,” which resulted in Russia’s occupation of 20 percent of the country. Georgia has been an ongoing target of Russian malign influence operations ever since.\(^{129}\)

In the broader context of regional Kremlin influence, Georgia serves as a noteworthy indicator of a post-Soviet state within Russia’s immediate reach geographically, geopolitically, and in the information domain.

Relations between Tbilisi and Kyiv have grown increasingly tense since February 2022, with the Georgian government continuing to express sympathy for the Russian cause.\(^{130}\)

In the early stage of the war, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili blamed Ukraine for failing to avoid the war with Russia and announced that Georgia would not join the sanctions against Moscow.\(^{131}\) Later, members of parliament affiliated with the ruling Georgian Dream party, as well as the pro-government pundits, accused the United States and Ukraine of attempting to pull Georgia into the Ukrainian war.\(^{132}\) On June 30, the US ambassador to Georgia stated that the narrative accusing the United States of trying to

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drag Georgia into the war "seems straight out of an FSB [Russian Federal Security Service] disinformation book." 133

This narrative was further amplified after the Georgian government failed to secure the country’s EU membership candidacy status. 134 In an attempt to draw attention away from the failure, the government targeted the EU with a narrative similar to the one that had been directed at the United States and Ukraine. The Georgian government and the ruling party have claimed that Brussels is trying to pull Georgia into war and that Ukraine has been granted EU candidate status only because of the war with Russia. 135

Introducing a false choice between EU membership and peace in Georgia, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili stated, “If war defines granting of [EU] candidate status, we do not want a war.” 136

Ukraine has accused the Georgian government several times of helping Russia bypass Western sanctions. In April, Ukraine’s Ministry of Defense stated that Russia was establishing smuggling routes as a means of avoiding international sanctions. 137 Then, in May, Ukraine’s military intelligence department stated that Moscow was negotiating with Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan to re-export Russian products to international markets. 138 The Ukrainian ministry suggested that two hundred companies were registered in the host countries for the purposes of re-exportation. According to the Georgian investigative

133 “As Ivanishvili Battles Swiss Bank,” Civil Georgia.
134 Ukraine had applied earlier, on February 28, shortly after Russia’s invasion. Moldova and Ukraine were granted EU candidate status, while Georgia was not. The EU states recognized Georgia’s European perspective and gave the country twelve recommendations to implement by the end of 2022, including some concerning democratic backsliding, of which the Georgian government has long been accused. See also https://civil.ge/archives/497784; and https://civil.ge/archives/496656
news outlet iFact, between February 24 and April 30, 3,442 Russian citizens received entrepreneur status and registered 184 companies in Georgia. The Georgian government denied the allegations and insisted they lack merit.

Meanwhile, the Russian-occupied Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia joined the war against Ukraine, as Russia redeployed military units from military bases in both occupied regions. Kremlin-installed regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia also hailed Putin’s decision to recognize the independent status of the Donbas region and followed suit by doing the same.

The tense political situation has been further aggravated by an influx of Russian citizens in Georgia. Between March and August, up to 800,000 Russian citizens entered Georgia. The influx raised national security concerns among civil society actors in Georgia regarding stability in the country, and pro-democracy activists organized demonstrations to demand the closure of the Russia-Georgia border.

142 Following Russia’s September 21 announcement of a “partial” mobilization, citizens fled to bordering countries to avoid being drafted and sent to Ukraine. Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Finland closed their borders to Russian citizens, leaving Georgia as one of the few neighboring states that Russians could easily access.
143 The URL is https://info.police.ge/page?id=625&parent_id=94, but it is inaccessible from some places.
Since the start of the war, Western media routinely claimed that Ukraine is winning the information war against Russia, pointing to its charismatic president, its ability to deploy memes to embarrass Russia, and its information operations designed to undermine Russian morale. While Ukraine has indeed successfully deployed such tactics, the notion of Ukraine winning the information war is not a universally held one, and to date faces limited analysis beyond information environments in Ukraine and Western countries.

With its vast global reach, pro-Kremlin media continue to pour resources and messaging into other parts of the world, including the Global South, exploiting anti-imperialist sentiments and historical distrust of the West. By maintaining these information operations at a global scale, Russia has successfully prevented international consensus rallying behind Ukraine at a level that is often presumed in the West. Russian tactics in Africa and Latin America are a case in point.

Case Study: Africa

Over the past five years, Russia has implemented a “Return to Africa” policy to increase Moscow’s engagement with the continent. Thanks to official visits, diplomatic initiatives, massive arms imports to African countries, and the concerted action of state-sponsored actors like the Wagner Group, relations between members of African autocratic and military governments and Moscow elites have expanded—along with Russia’s reach in the region.

A crucial part of this strategy to stage a return to the continent has been to focus on disinformation operations to spread Russian narratives and influence African information environments. In this case study, we analyze how media cooperation agreements between Moscow’s state-owned media outlets and African local media outlets became instrumental in amplifying pro-Kremlin narratives in Africa. We then describe how Russia’s modus operandi changed after the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, in an attempt to exacerbate anti-Western sentiments and sway African public opinion toward positions that would better serve the Kremlin’s political goals.

Kremlin Media in Africa

In the framework of its renewed engagement in Africa, Russia has deployed strategic narratives to advance its interests on the continent. Particularly since the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Moscow’s state-owned media outlets became central to the Kremlin’s strategy to further its influence in Africa. During a session at the 2019 Sochi summit devoted to the role of the media in Russian-African relations, Mikhail Bogdanov, Russia’s special representative for the Middle East and Africa and a leading figure in Kremlin Africa policy, urged RT and Sputnik to interact with African news agencies to broadcast their French-language content. Some of these agreements included Russian media training for African journalists, while others involved intergovernmental cooperation exchanges between Russia’s Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media and its foreign counterparts.

Russia has signed media cooperation agreements with foreign media in several countries in Africa in the past decade, most of which are content-sharing agreements between Russian state media outlets (like RT and Sputnik) and local outlets in countries including Egypt, Algeria, South Africa, Morocco, the Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, and Côte d’Ivoire. Some of these agreements included Russian media training for African journalists, while others involved intergovernmental cooperation exchanges between Russia’s Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media and its foreign counterparts.


147 See the transcription of this October 23, 2019, session of the Sochi Economic Forum, https://roscongress.org.


Deputy Minister Aleksei Volin said in Sochi that both media outlets, together with Tass, were ready to provide training for African journalists, either in Moscow or directly in African countries interested in this type of cooperation. Russia has carried out several training sessions since 2020 with journalists from Côte d’Ivoire, Congo, Kenya, Mali, and Zimbabwe.¹⁵⁰

The influence can be seen outside of official agreements, as African news websites republish content from Kremlin-sponsored media on a large scale. Russian narratives are amplified far beyond their original sources with services like Sputnik and RT finding resonance among African editors. Building on anti-imperialist credentials and positioning themselves as alternative news sources, African state-owned media organizations can spread anti-Western rhetoric, while combatting Western narratives across the continent.

Since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Western sanctions have limited the reach of pro-Kremlin media. For instance, MultiChoice, a South African broadcaster, announced that it would no longer air RT because the latter’s global distributors had to comply with EU-based sanctions.¹⁵¹ Even though some of the sanctions were short-lived—China’s StarTimes Media began broadcasting RT in May 2022—they exposed a vulnerability in the Kremlin’s communications apparatus on traditional platforms.¹⁵² Diplomatic accounts for various Russian embassies located in African countries began creating their own regional channels on Telegram that linked to content published by pro-Kremlin media including RT and RIA FAN, as well as official press releases from the Russian government.

Russia also overtly uses diplomatic channels to spread disinformation. Previously, Russia’s efforts in Africa made use of proxies and nongovernmental organizations as clandestine mechanisms to further its influence, especially

around disinformation narratives. For example, the Russian embassy in South Africa tweeted claims that Western media was racially biased against Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan; that the Ukrainian embassy in South Africa was recruiting mercenaries; and that Ukraine was committing war crimes in the Donbas region. The Russian ambassador to South Africa also met with the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the third-largest political party in South Africa on March 16, 2022. Following the meeting, the EFF issued a statement repeating several false narratives around Russia's invasion. “We met with the Ambassador of the Russian Federation in South Africa, Ambassador Ilya Rogachev, in Tshwane today,” EFF’s Julius Malema tweeted after the meeting. “We received first-hand information on the ongoing military operations in Ukraine from the embassy, not from neo-Nazi propagandists.”

Russia’s influence apparatus in Africa is based on a heterogeneous ecosystem, made up of public and nonstate actors who typically act directly or by delegation, though most often independently and without apparent synchronization. However, since February 2022, this apparatus has started to operate with a greater level of coordination and to promote more punctual and opportunistic narratives. These narratives are tailored to local contexts to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine and sway African countries to support Russia’s actions and secure Moscow’s influence over the region.

### #IStandWithPutin in Africa and Other Russian Narratives

Another component in Russia’s influence strategy in Africa is using social media to generate solidarity with the Kremlin. Russian networks increasingly worked with local actors in African countries to better disguise their activities and promote their narratives.

On March 4, 2022, the hashtag #Istandwithputin trended in various regions, culminating in more than 300,000 mentions by around 106,000 user accounts. By isolating the most retweeted posts containing the hashtag and the accounts that retweeted them, the DFRLab found that a significant portion of #Istandwithputin mentions originated from a small number of accounts that were retweeted extensively.

This inorganic amplification promoted the hashtag into Twitter’s trending algorithms, ensuring more people would be exposed to it organically. Additionally, as the popularity of the hashtag grew, Twitter users from South African engaged with the hashtag, albeit opportunistically and less geared toward furthering Russian interests.

Although there is no clear evidence of direct Kremlin involvement, the overarching narrative promoted by these accounts was decidedly pro-Russian. In many instances, the accounts would pivot jarringly from posts about Indian celebrities and cricket to pro-Russian narratives and back again.

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154 See the following Twitter posts by the Russian embassy in South Africa, respectively: https://twitter.com/EmbassyofRussia/status/1499689302007205888; https://twitter.com/EmbassyofRussia/status/1502233888386596869; and https://twitter.com/EmbassyofRussia/status/151015948539930336.

155 Julius Sello Malema (@Julius_S_Malema), “We met with the Ambassador of the Russian Federation in South Africa, Ambassador Ilya Rogachev, in Tshwane today,” EFF’s Julius Malema tweeted after the meeting. “We received first-hand information on the ongoing military operations in Ukraine from the embassy, not from neo-Nazi propagandists.”


Retweets of accounts of accounts that amplified the hashtag, shown over time. (Source: Content via DFRLab.)
That #istandwithputin trended in Africa is an example of how different Russian narratives aimed at exploiting existing tensions and grievances have trended in the African online space since the February 2022 invasion. For example, Russian accounts co-opted narratives about anti-African racism in Ukraine to promote the perception that all Ukrainians—and in some instances, all Europeans—are racist. Several of these narratives focused on accusing the European Union of instructing Ukraine not to let African students escape the conflict.

Over time, narratives started to include more general anti-West rhetoric, alluding to past conflicts, particularly in Libya and Afghanistan, and how the world ignored conflicts in Africa and the Middle East while paying biased attention to the war in Ukraine. At the same time, anti-colonialist narratives attempted to portray the EU and the United States as “economic bandits,” while claiming that Russia does not have a history of slavery or colonialism. These narratives often employed whataboutism to push the conversation to other topics, disregard the ongoing conflict, reject criticism of Russia’s actions and political influence, or proclaim hypocrisy. These narratives often discussed conflicts in other parts of the world, pointing out how domestic issues in these countries are far more dire than in Ukraine. Finally, particularly effective were the narratives focused on blaming Ukraine for Africa’s food, grain, and fertilizer shortages; Russian sources insisted that Ukraine exported wheat to the EU and not Africa, while highlighting selective outrage and attempts to mobilize the international community and media.

Russian narratives and disinformation operations have been part of larger Russian efforts to maintain and expand its presence in parts of Africa that Moscow consider crucial for its military efforts in Ukraine. In this context, anti-French and anti-EU narratives have served the purpose of weakening the presence of European actors in strategic areas of the continent such as the Sahel, while facilitating the further infiltration of Kremlin proxies including the Wagner Group.\footnote{Esteban Ponce de León, “Analyzing the Volume of Kremlin Narratives Targeting the Spanish-speaking World,” DFRLab, December 30, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/analyzing-the-volume-of-kremlin-narratives-targeting-the-spanish-speaking-world-38da532d74ba.}

**Case Study: Latin America**

A DFRLab analysis of Spanish-language media articles about the war in Ukraine over the course of eight months, including the first six months of the Ukraine war, revealed that Spanish speakers on social media continue to be exposed to Russian propaganda and misleading information published by Russian state-backed media outlets.\footnote{Tessa Knight, Mattia Caniglia, and Ruslan Trad, “Footage Raises Additional Questions About Wagner Presence in Sudan,” DFRLab, Medium, October 19, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/footage-raises-additional-questions-about-wagner-presence-in-sudan-f6a30d9e85a4.}

Russian diplomatic Twitter accounts have played an important role in sharing Russian narratives beyond Europe’s borders, amplifying false claims and conspiracies from Kremlin media outlets.\footnote{Esteban Ponce de León, “RT and Sputnik in Spanish Boosted by Russian Embassy Tweets and Suspicious Accounts,” DFRLab, March 17, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/rt-and-sputnik-in-spanish-boosted-by-russian-embassy-tweets-and-suspicious-accounts-3a24ded7e57.} Spanish-language Russian diplomatic Twitter accounts frequently share content related to the Ukrainian WMD narratives. Some posts focus on justifying Russia’s invasion of Ukraine by promoting anti-NATO narratives, as well as Kremlin rhetoric about “demilitarizing and de-Nazifying” Ukraine.

In addition to Russian diplomatic accounts, the Spanish sections of the Russian state-backed media outlets RT en Español and Sputnik News also promoted pro-Kremlin narratives alongside other news events. For example, on March 29, these outlets highlighted talks between Russia and Ukraine in Turkey while simultaneously publishing narratives about neo-Nazis in Donestk targeting US President Joe Biden. On May 30, there was another spike in coverage when these outlets reported on Biden’s announcement that the United States would not provide Ukraine with long-range rockets; simultaneously, the outlets published a Russian claim that casualties in Donestk resulted from a Ukrainian armed forces strike.

Kremlin-backed media outlets publishing in Spanish have played a role in influencing public perception about the conflict in Ukraine. The DFRLab found that social media users in Spanish-speaking countries continue to engage with content from Russian state-backed outlets. On Twitter, RT en Español ranked third in terms of engagement among ten analyzed news sources; on Facebook, it ranked sixth. This suggests that Kremlin-owned outlets continue to have a significant presence on social media in Spanish-speaking countries and that their content is being widely shared and interacted with by users. While Facebook’s restrictions on Russian state media appear to have resulted in lower engagement levels, Twitter continues to be a significant platform for these outlets, particularly RT en Español.\footnote{Elizabeth Dwoskin, Cat Zakrzewski, and Gerrit De Vynck, “Major Social Media Platforms Ban Russian State Media in Europe,” Washington Post, last updated March 1, 2022, 12:15 p.m., https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/03/01/youtube-tiktok-facebook-state-media-ban/.} This demonstrates that Russian state-backed outlets continue to target Latin American audiences with Kremlin-approved narratives.
Screengrabs from tweets posted by Russian diplomatic accounts in early March 2022, including the Spanish-language Twitter account for the Russian Foreign Ministry.

(Sources: (left to right, and top to bottom): Embajada de Rusia en México (@EmbRusiaMexico), Twitter, March 9, 2022, 10:01 p.m., https://twitter.com/EmbRusiaMexico/status/1501679543676915719; Embajada de Rusia en México (@EmbRusiaMexico), Twitter, March 10, 2022, 12:23 p.m., https://twitter.com/EmbRusiaMexico/status/150197197257644548; Cancillería Rusia (@mae_rusia), Twitter, March 10, 2022, 1:48 p.m., https://twitter.com/mae_rusia/status/1501993432893599751; Rusia en Panamá (@EmbRusPan), Twitter, March 2, 2022, 7:16 p.m., https://twitter.com/EmbRusPan/status/1499176895677673474; Cancillería Rusia (@mae_rusia), Twitter, March 5, 2022, 7:55 a.m., https://twitter.com/mae_rusia/status/1500092755070144512; and Cancillería Rusia (@mae_rusia), Twitter, March 10, 2022, 8:27 a.m., https://twitter.com/mae_rusia/status/1501912574253748226.)
Despite YouTube’s efforts to restrict Kremlin-backed media outlets in March 2022, content created by the banned pro-Kremlin media accounts reappeared on the platform, garnering thousands of subscribers and views. Multiple channels including newly created accounts and existing ones linked to Latin American fringe media and left-wing organizations have uploaded content on YouTube that first appeared on RT en Español-affiliated websites, or on alternative social media and video platforms like VK and Odysee. For example, after YouTube banned the RT-affiliated channel ¡Ahí Les Va! (“There it goes!”), six new channels appeared between March 1 and April 5, impersonating the banned Kremlin-backed channel by reusing its channel name or displaying its branding. Three additional channels surfaced between June 26 and August 17, after YouTube banned three of the channels created in the spring; the other three accounts from the spring remained inactive at the time of writing. YouTube later deplatformed the three channels launched over the summer of 2022.

Of the newly created channels, only one of them, ¡Censúrame otra vez!, remained active without restrictions as of January 2023. YouTube banned a similarly named channel in September. The YouTube channel with the most views, ¡Censúrame estol!, gathered an average of 44,870 views per video—and this is noteworthy as the account restricts its videos to certain geographical regions. Queries to identify a video's country restrictions showed the channel was restricted in most countries and is currently only visible in three regions: Somaliland, Kosovo, and Northern Cyprus. The views received by ¡Censúrame estol! are likely the result of VPN use, for which RT en Español has published Spanish-language guidance. By December 2022, all three channels had amassed more views and subscribers than the six channels activated last spring.

164 “¿Cómo pueden continuar al tanto de los videos y publicaciones de RT en Español tras el bloqueo?,“ RT en Español, March 11, 2022, archived at https://archive.ph/2irVh.
Table shows the engagements of the channels that impersonated ¡Ahí Les Va! between March 1 and April 5, 2022. (Source: DFRLab-generated table; data from YouTube and Social Blade.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel name</th>
<th>Date of first video posted</th>
<th>Banned by Youtube</th>
<th>Views</th>
<th>Subscribers</th>
<th>Videos uploaded</th>
<th>Average views per video</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ahí les Va</td>
<td>3/12/22</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>221,474</td>
<td>26,900</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9,228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahí les Va... RT!</td>
<td>3/15/22</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>110,050</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahí les va</td>
<td>3/18/22</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2,685</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2,685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INNA AHÍ LES VA Fans</td>
<td>3/26/22</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ahí les va LATAM fans</td>
<td>3/12/22</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahí les Va</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>334,401</td>
<td>27,557</td>
<td>229</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table shows ¡Censúrame esto! (@censurameesto9770), the channel with the most views, gathered an average of 44,870 views per video. As of December 2022, all three channels amassed more views and subscribers than the six channels activated in March. (Sources: DFRLab-generated table; data from YouTube and Social Blade.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel name</th>
<th>Channel handle</th>
<th>Date of first video posted</th>
<th>Views</th>
<th>Subscribers</th>
<th>Videos uploaded</th>
<th>Average views per video</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>¡Censúrame esto!</td>
<td>censurameesto9770</td>
<td>17/8/22</td>
<td>1,166,636</td>
<td>54,600</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>44,870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¡Censúrame otra vez!</td>
<td>censurameotravez</td>
<td>6/26/22</td>
<td>95,751</td>
<td>4,560</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>1,113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¡Censúrame otra vez!</td>
<td>censurameotravezrt</td>
<td>8/8/22</td>
<td>14,595</td>
<td>2,130</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,276,982</td>
<td>61,290</td>
<td>136</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The channels are named after the Spanish word *Censúrame* ("Censor me"), which can be interpreted as a defiant criticism of YouTube's restrictions. The narratives in other videos also echo pro-Kremlin sentiments, as they are critical of the United States, the European Union, NATO, and Western media. They have also reuploaded videos of Inna Afinogenova, who previously was the deputy director of RT en Español, as well as a former presenter for ¡Ahí les Va!

The metadata for videos published by ¡Censúrame otra vez! and ¡Censúrame esto! also show that the uploaders added variations of Afinogenova's name to the keywords.

In May, Afinogenova announced her departure from RT and launched a new YouTube channel named after herself. At least three of the first videos that Afinogenova uploaded to the channel also had keywords mentioning ¡Ahí les Va!, an apparent attempt to reclaim her audience.

The activity of Russian-affiliated assets on social media suggests that despite restrictions on some platforms, Spanish-speaking users are still being exposed to or actively seeking out Kremlin propaganda.
Conclusion

When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Kremlin information operations expanded beyond pre-invasion false narratives justifying military action, masking operational planning, and denying responsibility for the war. To win the war, the Kremlin needed to undermine Ukrainian resistance and outside support for Ukraine on multiple fronts, including locally, regionally, and internationally. The case studies presented in this report paint a picture of pro-Kremlin propaganda taking many forms and approaches on an international scale. Messaging from Kremlin officials and state media routinely presents Ukraine in a negative light, while framing Russia’s invasion as a noble cause.

Has the Kremlin succeeded in these propagandistic endeavors? If the sole indicator were “Has Ukraine surrendered or accepted negotiations on Russia’s terms,” the answer would be no. Ukraine continues to fight, gaining ground on multiple fronts, while billions of dollars of Western weapons systems and financial support still flow into the country. If Russia’s goal was to break Ukraine’s will by undermining its reputation and morale, it has not yet succeeded. The fight for Ukraine’s sovereignty continues.

Given Ukraine’s tenacity on the front line as well as online, would it then be accurate to say that Ukraine is “winning the information war” against Russia? Temple5 It is tempting as it might be, in reality there is no monolithic information war in which descriptors such as “winning” and “losing” provide much clarity or nuance, particularly when viewed at a global scale. Rather, it is more accurate to describe this information war as theaters of operation in which the Kremlin targets different regions and audiences with tailored messaging to support its interests.

Russia’s reputation as unparalleled information warriors has taken a beating in the West, but this view is by no means universal. And while it is easy to make overarching assumptions of “victory” in the information domain of Russia’s war, the more accurate assessment is that the impacts of information operations related to the war will have much longer shelf life, well beyond the confines of the current conflict.

When viewed through regional lenses, Russia’s anti-Ukraine messaging has found varying levels of success, each warranting further scholarship. In Europe and North America, where support for Ukraine generally remains high, contentious debates persist over supplying Ukraine with advanced weaponry and additional funding, while attitudes toward Ukraine have become increasingly partisan in the United States. Kremlin propaganda and legislation promoting “traditional Russian values” are met with approval in parts of the world among far-right nationalists and ultra-conservative groups. China’s global media ecosystem is often sympathetic to Russian interests, while nations such as India work to maintain productive relations with both the Kremlin and the West. And in parts of Africa, anti-imperialist sentiment manifests itself paradoxically in favor of Russia, where it is often presented as a friend and ally in opposition to historic colonizers such as France, rather than as a twenty-first-century colonizer in its own right. These examples, and countless others, continue to present opportunities for Russia to increase its stature and influence while simultaneously eroding Ukraine’s.

It is also likely that the nature of Russian information operations will continue to evolve alongside the conflict itself. Ongoing documentation of potential war crimes like the Bucha massacre periodically forces the Kremlin into a more defensive stance, peddling excuses and conspiracy-laden denials, though there remains the ongoing risk that public weariness and indifference about the war leads to decreasing media coverage of atrocities in ever-briefer news cycles. Similarly, while policymakers and pundits debate the seriousness of Russia’s nuclear saber-rattling, the existential nature of these recurring threats tap into widespread public fears, potentially making a negotiated settlement more palatable, no matter the terms—something that the Kremlin is keenly aware of.

As the war enters its second year, Kremlin information operations will continue their attempts to erode confidence in Ukraine. With each narrative they amplify, whether through social media campaigns, false fact-checking efforts, deepfakes, forged documents, or symbols as simple as the letter Z, the Kremlin will pursue its goal of undermining Ukraine until it gives up the fight. Only time will tell if Russia succeeds or fails; its record to date is spotty at best.

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165 A google search for “Is Ukraine winning the information war” yields multiple examples of Western media outlets and pundits attempting to answer this question with varying levels of definitiveness.
Contributors

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