Undermining Ukraine

How the Kremlin Employs Information Operations to Erode Global Confidence in Ukraine

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February 2023

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Table of Contents

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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1   "Narrative Warfare: How the Kremlin and Russian News Outlets Justified a War of Aggression against Ukraine," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), February 21, 2023.

2   Maksymilian Czuperski, John Herbst, Eliot Higgins, Alina Polyakova, and Damon Wilson, "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/.

3   "Troops Arrive in Belarus as Propaganda Narratives Heat Up," DFRLab, *New Atlanticist* (blog), Atlantic Council, January 21, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-hybrid-threats-report-troops-arrive-in-belarus-as-propaganda-narratives-heat-up/.

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/.

Background

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."[6] 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.[7] 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.[8]

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.[9] 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.[10]

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.[11] 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

6   Taras Kuzio, "Soviet and Russian Anti-(Ukrainian) Nationalism and Re-Stalinization." Communist and Post-Communist Studies 49, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 87–99, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2015.12.005; and Bridget Kendall, "Russian Propaganda Machine 'Worse than Soviet Union,' " BBC, June 6, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27713847.

7   Chytomo, "Fifty Anti-Ukrainian Propaganda Books: How Russian Publishers Stoke Hatred against Ukrainians," April 4, 2022. https://chytomo.com/en/fifty-propaganda-books-against-ukraine-and-incitement-to-hatred-against-ukrainians-from-russian-publishers/; and Elina Lange-Ionatamišvili,"Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine," NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2015, https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russian_information_campaign_public_12012016fin.pdf.

8   Mia Jankowicz, "Russian State TV Host Suspended After He Said Ukrainian Children Should Be Drowned and Burned in Their 'Monstrous Little Houses,' " Insider, October 24, 2022, https://www.businessinsider.com/rt-host-suspended-calling-for-drowning-burning-of-ukraine-kids-2022-10.

9   Givi Gigitashvili and Roman Osadchuk, "How Ten False Flag Narratives Were Promoted by Pro-Kremlin Media," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), February 18, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-ten-false-flag-narratives-were-promoted-by-pro-kremlin-media-c67e786c6085; Roman Osadchuk and Givi Gigitashvili, "Putin's Victory Day Speech: An Exercise in False Justifications for War," DFRLab, May 12, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/putins-victory-day-speech-an-exercise-in-false-justifications-for-war-823e16ed78d7; and Charlie Smart, "How the Russian Media Spread False Claims About Ukrainian Nazis," New York Times, July 2, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/07/02/world/europe/ukraine-nazis-russia-media.html.

10   DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Russia Produces 'Evidence' Claiming Ukraine Will Attack Crimea," New Atlanticist (blog), March 25, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russia-produces-evidence-claiming-ukraine-will-attack-crimea/#biolabs; and DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Kremlin Recycles Old Narratives to Claim Ukraine Is Constructing Dirty Bombs and Bioweapons," New Atlanticist, March 7, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-kremlin-recycles-old-narratives-to-claim-ukraine-is-constructing-dirty-bombs-and-bioweapons/.

11   Roman Osadchuk, "How Russia Promoted the Claim That Ukraine Re-Sold French Howitzers for Profit," DFRLab (blog), July 21, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-russia-promoted-the-claim-that-ukraine-re-sold-french-howitzers-for-profit-fd51f71a9362; "Ukrainian Refugees: Situation in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania," Demagog, April 4, 2022, https://demagog.org.pl/analizy_i_raporty/ukrainian-refugees-situation-in-poland-hungary-slovakia-and-romania/; France 24, "Disinformation Shifting Views on Ukrainian Refugees," July 23, 2022, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220723-disinformation-shifting-views-on-ukrainian-refugees; and DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Russian Forces Use Incendiary Munitions in Mariupol," New Atlanticist, May 20, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-incendiary-munitions-in-mariupol/#warsaw.

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] 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

12 EUvsDisinfo, "Pro-Kremlin Propaganda Running Out of Gas," September 8, 2022, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/pro-kremlin-propaganda-running-out-of-gas/; and David Patrikarakos, "Russia's Hunger War," *Atlantic*, July 20, 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/russian-disinformation-africa-food-crisis/670570/.

13 This section of this report builds upon previous DFRLab work published by Bled Strategic Times (official gazette of Slovenia'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 Osadchuk, "Russia's Information Warfare Against Ukraine," Bled Strategic Times, August 26, 2022, https://q2s5p4q8.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/bsf-Times-2022_v08-compressed.pdf.

14 Kseniya Kizlova and Pippa Norris. "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/europpblog/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.

15 DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Meta Officially Declared 'Extremist Organization' in Russia," March 21, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-meta-officially-declared-extremist-organization-in-russia/#concert; DFRLab, "Russian Hybrid War Report: Social Platforms Crack Down on Kremlin Media as Kremlin Demands Compliance," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, March 2, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-hybrid-war-report-social-platforms-crack-down-on-kremlin-media-as-kremlin-demands-compliance/#russiantiktok; and DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Hacked News Program and Deepfake Video Spread False Zelenskyy Claims," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, March 16, 2022. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-hacked-news-program-and-deepfake-video-spread-false-zelenskyy-claims/.

16 "Russia Criminalizes Independent War Reporting, Anti-War Protests," Human Rights Watch, March 7, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/07/russia-criminalizes-independent-war-reporting-anti-war-protests.

17 Cate Connolly, "'Motorcade of Shame': Outrage Over Pro-Russia Displays at Berlin Rally," *Guardian*, April 5, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/05/motorcade-of-shame-outrage-over-pro-russia-displays-at-berlin-rally; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Pro-Russia Supporters Rally in Germany, Face Off With Counterdemonstrators," Voice of America, April 10, 2022, https://www.voanews.com/a/pro-russia-supporters-rally-in-germany-face-off-with-counterdemonstrators-/6523264.html; Catalan News, "Russian Pro-War Z Symbol Painted in Various Public Spots in Barcelona," September 18, 2022, https://www.catalannews.com/society-science/item/russian-pro-war-z-symbol-painted-in-various-public-spots-in-barcelona; and Lesia Dubenko, "Alleged Russophobia Victim in Germany Demands Putin Bomb Dresden," Kyiv Post, October 12, 2022, https://www.kyivpost.com/russias-war/alleged-russophobia-victim-in-germany-demands-putin-bomb-dresden.html.

18 Tass, "Protestors in Rome Demonstrate against 'Canceling' Russian Culture," May 12, 2022, https://tass.com/society/1450127; and Piotr Sauer, "Putin Says West Treating Russian Culture Like 'Canceled' JK Rowling," *Guardian*, March 25, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/25/putin-says-west-treating-russian-culture-like-cancelled-jk-rowling.

19 Ingrid Dickinson, "How Russia Employs Fake Fact-Checking in Its Disinformation Arsenal," DFRLab (blog), May 4, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-russia-employs-fake-fact-checking-in-its-disinformation-arsenal-b1790d5f5442.

20 Craig Silverman and Jeff Kao, "In the Ukraine Conflict, Fake Fact-Checks Are Being Used to Spread Disinformation," ProPublica, March 8, 2022, https://www.propublica.org/article/in-the-ukraine-conflict-fake-fact-checks-are-being-used-to-spread-disinformation.

Pro-Russia protesters carry flags at a demonstration against what they say is "fake news" about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in Budapest, Hungary, April 30, 2022. (*Source:* Photo from Bernadett Szabo/Reuters.)

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.

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21   McKenzie Sadeghi, "Fact Check: Baseless Claims That Russian Attack on Mariupol Hospital Was 'Staged,' " USA Today, March 15, 2022, https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2022/03/15/fact-check-russian-attack-mariupol-hospital-not-staged/7041649001/; and Luiz Romero, "How 'War on Fakes' Uses Fact-Checking to Spread pro-Russia Propaganda," Poynter Institute, August 12, 2022, https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2022/how-war-on-fakes-uses-fact-checking-to-spread-pro-russia-propaganda/.

22   David Klepper, "Russian Propaganda 'Outgunned' by Social Media Rebuttals," AP News, March 4, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-volodymyr-zelenskyy-kyiv-technology-misinformation-5e884b85f8dbb54d16f5f10d105fe850.

23   Eliot Higgins, "Russia's Bucha 'Facts' Versus the Evidence-Bellingcat," April 4, 2022, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2022/04/04/russias-bucha-facts-versus-the-evidence/.

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. [24] 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.[25] This narrative recurred in multiple forms and messages, some of them potentially influencing mainstream Western media.[26]

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.[27] Wherever Russian information operations take aim, the goal remains the same: undermining Ukraine by any means possible.

24 Nika Aleksejeva et al., "Operation Secondary Infektion," June 22, 2019, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/operation-secondary-infektion/.

25 DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Forged Document Claims Ukraine Is Selling Surplus Weapons to African Countries," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, April 22, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-forged-document-claims-ukraine-is-selling-surplus-weapons-to-african-countries/; and DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Russian Governor Accuses Ukraine of Launching Multiple Attacks on Kursk," New Atlanticist, Atlantic Council, June 17, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russian-mayor-kursk/#telegram.

26 Osadchuk, "How Russia Promoted the Claim That Ukraine Re-Sold French Howitzers."

27 Jean Le Roux, "#IStandWithPutin Hashtag Trends amid Dubious Amplification Efforts," DFRLab (blog), Medium, March 10, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/istandwithputin-hashtag-trends-amid-dubious-amplification-efforts-2b8090ac9630; and *Economist*, "Russia Is Swaying Twitter Users Outside the West to Its Side," May 14, 2022, https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/05/14/russia-is-swaying-twitter-users-outside-the-west-to-its-side.

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 Rossgram; and launched Runiversalis, 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

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28 Sarah Emerson and Richard Nieva, "Facebook and Twitter Have Been Blocked in Russia," *BuzzFeed News*, March 4, 2022, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/sarahemerson/russia-blocks-facebook-twitter; Lukas Andriukaitis et al., "Russian War Report: Global Crackdown on Russian State-affiliated Media Continues as Russia Blocks Facebook," *New Atlanticist*, DFRLab, Atlantic Council, March 4, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-global-crackdown-on-russian-state-affiliated-media-continues-as-russia-blocks-facebook/#crackdown; and Lukas Andriukaitis et al., "Russian War Report: Meta Officially Declared 'Extremist Organization' in Russia," *New Atlanticist*, DFRLab, Atlantic Council, March 21, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-meta-officially-declared-extremist-organization-in-russia/#meta.

29 Isobel Asher Hamilton, "Russia Has Hit Google with More Than $380 Million in Fines This Month," *Insider*, July 27, 2022, https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-hits-google-with-over-380-million-dollars-in-fines-2022-7; "Russia Again Fines Twitch, TikTok for Failing to Delete 'Illegal' Information," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 4, 2022, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-fines-twitch-tiktok-illegal-content-ukraine-war/32064837.html; and "Russia Fines Wikipedia Over Articles About War in Ukraine," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 1, 2022, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-fines-wikipedia-ukraine-war/32110526.html.

30 Andriukaitis et al., "Russian War Report: Global Crackdown"; and DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Kremlin Recycles Old Narratives."

31 Sead Fadilpašić, "VPN Downloads in Russia Have Skyrocketed," Techradar, May 9, 2022, https://www.techradar.com/news/vpn-downloads-in-russia-have-skyrocketed; and Nika Aleksejeva, "Cracks Emerge in Russia's 'Digital Iron Curtain,' " DFRLab, July 7, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/cracks-emerge-in-russias-digital-iron-curtain-8d5bd791815a.

32 Ingrid Dickinson and Jacqueline Malaret, "Yandex Suppresses Ukraine War Information for Russian Internet Users," DFRLab, March 31, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/yandex-suppresses-ukraine-war-information-for-russian-internet-users-caadfed968b5.

33 *Wall Street Journal*, "Rutube Vs. YouTube: How the Kremlin Is Trying to Win Over Russian Viewers," via YouTube, July 20, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdRUWFsQOl0; Lukas Andriukaitis et al., "Russian War Report: Russia Sends Military Contractors from Georgian Breakaway Region to Ukraine," DFRLab, *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, March 18, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russia-sends-military-contractors-from-georgian-breakaway-region-to-ukraine/#VPN; and Eto Buziashvili, "Pro-Kremlin Wikipedia Alternative Off to a Rough Start," DFRLab, September 1, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-kremlin-wikipedia-alternative-off-to-a-rough-start-98e94570679f.

34 Adrian Shahbaz, Allie Funk, and Kian Vesteinsson, "Freedom of the Net 2022: Russia," Freedom House, accessed January 6, 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-net/2022.

35 Adi Robertson, "Russian 'Fake News' Law Could Give Offenders 15 Years in Prison," *Verge*, March 4, 2022, https://www.theverge.com/2022/3/4/22961472/russia-fake-news-law-military-ukraine-invasion-casualties-jail-time.

The main page of Runiversalis looks nearly identical to Wikipedia, but with an additional "Special Military Operation" section (bottom right). (*Source*: Image from Runiversalis/archive, https://archive.is/tz46w.)

role" of the Soviet Union in World War II.[36] The law appears to be designed to bolster the Kremlin's narrative that Ukrainians are Nazis.

Defending "traditional Russian values" has also become a matter of wartime Kremlin policy, especially under the guise of attacks on the LGBTQI+ community.[37] In August 2022, Russia disclosed plans to create an online surveillance system that could hunt down "homosexual propaganda," among other "prohibited" data.[38] Meanwhile, the pro-Kremlin Wikipedia knockoff Runiversalis stated that it would not allow "homosexual propaganda" on its platform.[39]

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.[40]

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.[41] Russian embassies and other government-affiliated accounts routinely amplify content originating from War on Fakes on Telegram, Twitter, and other platforms.[42]

36 "Vladimir Putin's Historical Disinformation," Global Engagement Center, US Department of State, May 6, 2022, https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/vladimir-putins-historical-disinformation/.

37 Eto Buziashvili, Givi Gigitashvili, and Ruslan Trad, "Russian War Report: Russia Defends 'Traditional Values, Criminalizes LGBTQ 'Propaganda,' " *New Atlanticist*, DFRLab, Atlantic Council, November 18, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russia-defends-traditional-values-criminalizes-lgbtq-propaganda/#lgbtq.

38 Nika Aleksejeva et al., "Russian War Report: Russia and Ukraine Warn Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Plant Facing Imminent Threat," *New Atlanticist*, DFRLab, Atlantic Council, August 19, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russia-and-ukraine-warn-zaporizhzhia-nuclear-plant-facing-imminent-threat/#prohibited.

39 Buziashvili, "Pro-Kremlin Wikipedia Alternative Off to a Rough Start."

40 Ingrid Dickinson, "How Russia Employs Fake Fact-checking in Its Disinformation Arsenal," DFRLab, May 4, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-russia-employs-fake-fact-checking-in-its-disinformation-arsenal-b1790d5f5442; and Ingrid Dickinson, "Russian Telegram Channel Embraces Fact-checking Tropes to Spread Disinformation," DFRLab, March 7, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/russian-telegram-channel-embraces-fact-checking-tropes-to-spread-disinformation-c6a54393c635.

41 Lukas Andriukaitis et al., "Russian War Report: Russia Makes False Claims While Blaming Ukraine for Kramatorsk Railway Station Attack," DFRLab, Atlantic Council, April 8, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russia-makes-false-claims-while-blaming-ukraine-for-kramatorsk-railway-station-attack/#telegram.

42 Andriukaitis et al., "Russian War Report: Russia Makes False Claims While Blaming Ukraine for Kramatorsk Railway Station Attack."

Screenshot of a War on Fakes post shared by Vladimir Solovyov, a well-known Russian propagandist. The post received more than 170,000 views. (*Sources:* Image from SolovievLive.)

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.[43] 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.[44] Some observers have theorized that the letters were originally used as a means for the Russian military to distinguish between friendly and hostile units.[45] 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).[46]

The ministry also added the letter Z to slogans regarding the "denazification and demilitarization" of Ukraine.[47] 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.[48] 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.[49] The Kremlin also organized pro-war за россю (For Russia) rallies in April and May in more than thirty Russian cities.[50] 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.

43 "How 'Z' Became a Symbol of Russian Pro-war Propaganda," TRT World, March 9, 2022, https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/how-z-became-a-symbol-of-russian-pro-war-propaganda-55400; and Eto Buziashvili, "How Russia Attempts to Widen Its Arsenal of Pro-war Propaganda," DFRLab, Medium, May 18, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-russia-attempts-to-widen-its-arsenal-of-pro-war-propaganda-c0a6181b4efb.

44 Michael Sheldon (@Michael1Sheldon), "MTLBs near Aleksandrovka, Belgorod Oblast," Twitter, February 18, 2022, https://twitter.com/Michael1Sheldon/status/1494790890224762882.

45 Jeff Dean, "The Letter Z Is Becoming a Symbol of Russia's War in Ukraine. But What Does It Mean?," National Public Radio, March 9, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/03/09/1085471200/the-letter-z-russia-ukraine.

46 Russia's Ministry of Defense, "#героиz (#Geroiz)," Instagram post, March 2, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CanFwqyM5m9/; and Russia's Ministry of Defense, "#героиz (#Geroiz)," Instagram post, March 3, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/Caor9JMg4MF/.

47 Russia's Ministry of Defense, "#героиz (#Geroiz)," Instagram post, March 4, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/Car-4Ulgse1/.

48 Cara Anna and the Associated Press, "'For a World without Nazism': Putin Appears at Packed Patriotic Rally as Troops Press Attack in Ukraine," *Fortune*, March 19, 2022, https://fortune.com/2022/03/19/world-without-nazism-putin-appears-rally-troops-attack-ukraine-moscow-zelenskyy/.

49 Nicholas Reimann, "Putin Holds Massive Pro-War Rally In Moscow," *Forbes*, March 18, 2022, https://www.forbes.com/sites/nicholasreimann/2022/03/18/putin-holds-massive-pro-war-rally-in-moscow/?sh=64cb2f622abd; and Max Seddon (@maxseddon), "Moscow's Luzhniki stadium, which hosted the World Cup final in 2018," Twitter, March 18, 2022, 1:05 pm, https://twitter.com/maxseddon/status/1504790978749779971.

50 Ksenya Churmanova, "Гастроли патриотов. Как кремлевские эксперты и шоу-бизнес зарабатывают на концертах, Za Россию (Tour of the Patriots. How pro-Kremlin Experts and Show Business Make Money with For Russia concerts)," BBC, May 11, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-61401033?ocid=wsrussian.social.in-app-messaging.telegram..russiantelegram_.edit.

Flanked by the slogans "For a world without Nazism (*за мир без нацизма*)" and "For Russia (*за россю*)," Russian President Putin delivers a speech during a concert marking the eighth anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea at Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow, March 18, 2022. (*Sources:* Sputnik/Alexander Vilf/Kremlin via Reuters.)

A man walks past graffiti depicting a tank with the Z symbol in central Saint Petersburg, June 2, 2022. (*Source*: Anton Vaganov/Reuters.)

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]

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51 "Conflict with Ukraine: October 2022", Levada, November 1, 2022, https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/11/01/conflict-with-ukraine-october-2022/.

52 "Conflict with Ukraine: October 2022," Levada.

53 "US Agency for International Development-Internews 2021 Media Consumption Survey," Internews Ukraine, November 2022, https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/USAID-Internews_Media-Consumption-Survey_2022_eng.pdf.

54 "USAID-Internews 2021 Media Consumption Survey."

55 "Democracy, Rights and Freedoms of Citizens and Media Consumption in the Conditions of War: Results of the Kiis Survey for Opora." Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, August 17, 2022, https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1132&page=1.

56 "SBU Exposes Russian Agent Network," Security Service of Ukraine (website of the security service known by Ukrainian acronym SBU), February 1, 2021, https://ssu.gov.ua/en/novyny/sbu-vykryla-ahenturnu-merezhu-spetssluzhb-rf-yaka-destabilizuvala-sytuatsiiu-v-ukraini-cherez-telegramkanaly.

57 Yuri Smirnov, "From Russia with Love. Anonymous Empire of Pavel Durov," Liga.net, February 3, 2020, https://project.liga.net/projects/durov_telegram_eng/; and Lyubov Velychko, "How Pro-Kremlin Telegram Channels Influence Ukrainian Parliamentary Decisions," Medium, September 1, 2020, https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-pro-kremlin-telegram-channels-influence-ukrainian-parliamentary-decisions-791ac939cdd.

A VKontakte (VK) account advertises women's t-shirts featuring the letter Z and the hashtag #своихнебросаем ("#We don't leave ours [behind]"). (*Source:* Eto Buziashvili, "How Russia Attempts to Widen Its Arsenal of Pro-war Propaganda," DFRLab, May 18, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-russia-attempts-to-widen-its-arsenal-of-pro-war-propaganda-c0a6181b4efb.)

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.[58] 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.[59] And in the occupied Donbas, a network of local Telegram channels emerged, one for each village, sharing local news alongside Russian disinformation narratives.[60] 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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58   Reuters staff, "Ukraine Bans Russian TV Channels for Airing War 'Propaganda,' " Reuters, August 19, 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-television-idUSKBN0GJ1QM20140819; and Peter Dickinson, "Analysis: Ukraine Bans Kremlin-linked TV Channels," *UkraineAlert* (blog), Atlantic Council, February 5, 2021. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/analysis-ukraine-bans-kremlin-linked-tv-channels/.

59   DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Russia Promotes Misleading Video Accusing Ukraine of Using Mannequins as Casualties," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, April 13, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russia-promotes-misleading-video-accusing-ukraine-of-using-mannequins-as-casualties/#bbc; and DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Russia Falsely Accuses Ukraine of Provoking Conflict Even After It Knew War Was Coming," *New Atlanticist*, April 18, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russia-falsely-accuses-ukraine-of-provoking-conflict-even-after-it-knew-war-was-coming/; and "USAID-Internews 2021 Media Consumption Survey," Internews Ukraine, November 2021, https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/USAID-Internews_Media-Consumption-Survey_2022_eng.pdf.

60   Yevhenia Drozdova, Yuliia Dukach, and Nadia Kelm, "Telegram Occupation: How Russia Wanted to Breed a Media Monster, but Ended up with a Paper Tiger," Texty.org.ua (online site), November 15, 2022, https://texty.org.ua/projects/108161/telegram-occupation-how-russia-wanted-breed-media-monster-ended-paper-tiger/.

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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]

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," Zalenskyy 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 indecisiveness 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]
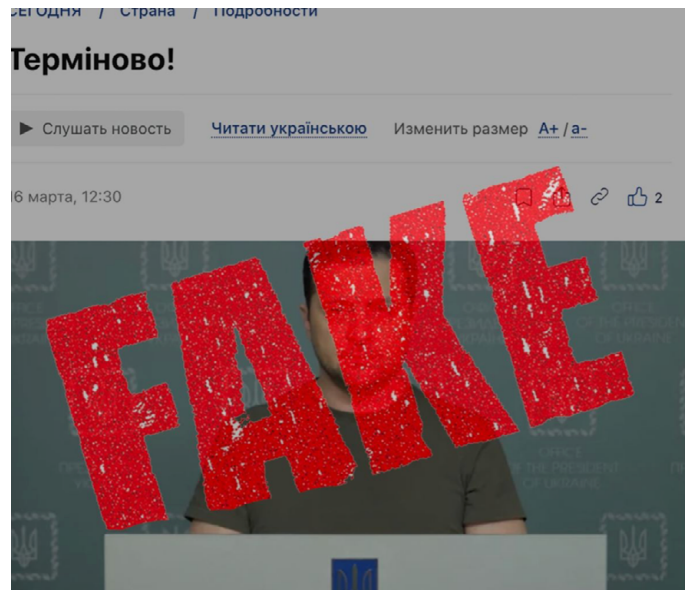
Ukrainian media quickly debunked the Zelenskyy surrender video as a deepfake, but it still spread widely via pro-Kremlin channels. (*Source:* "ЭТО ФЕЙК! ФЕЙК!" Сегодня, Segodnya Life Telegram Channel, March 16, 2022, https://t.me/Segodnya_life/48333.)

Impersonations and Forgeries

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

61   Reuters staff, "Ukraine Bans Russian TV Channels for Airing War 'Propaganda' "; "Ukraine Bans Pro-Russian TV Stations," Deutsche Welle (German international broadcaster known as DW), February 3, 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-zelenskiy-bans-three-opposition-tv-stations/a-56438505; and "Ukraine's Poroshenko to Block Russian Social Networks," BBC, May 16, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39934666.

62   "SBU Exposes Russian Agent Network."

63   DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Hacked News Program and Deepfake Video Spread False Zelenskyy Claims," *New Atlanticist* (blog), Atlantic Council, March 16, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-hacked-news-program-and-deepfake-video-spread-false-zelenskyy-claims/.

64   Zelenskiy/Official, "Ми вдома і захищаємо Україну," Telegram, March 16, 2022, https://t.me/V_Zelenskiy_official/832.

65   Roman Osadchuk, "Pro-Kremlin Influencers Reignite Zelenskyy 'Green Screen' Theory," DFRLab (blog), Medium, October 14, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-kremlin-influencers-reignite-zelenskyy-green-screen-theory-d827f761d17d.

66   DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Forged Document Claims Ukraine Is Selling Surplus Weapons to African Countries," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, April 22, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-forged-document-claims-ukraine-is-selling-surplus-weapons-to-african-countries/#forged; and Mansur Mirovalev, "Fact Check: Were Three Drunk Ukrainians Arrested in Qatar?," *Al Jazeera*, November 24, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/24/fact-check-a-fake-video-of-ukrainian-nazi-fans (https://archive.ph/aAzLb).

67   DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Russia Promotes Misleading Video Accusing Ukraine of Using Mannequins as Casualties"; and Andriukaitis et al.,"Russian War Report: Russia Makes False Claims While Blaming Ukraine for Kramatorsk Railway Station Attack."
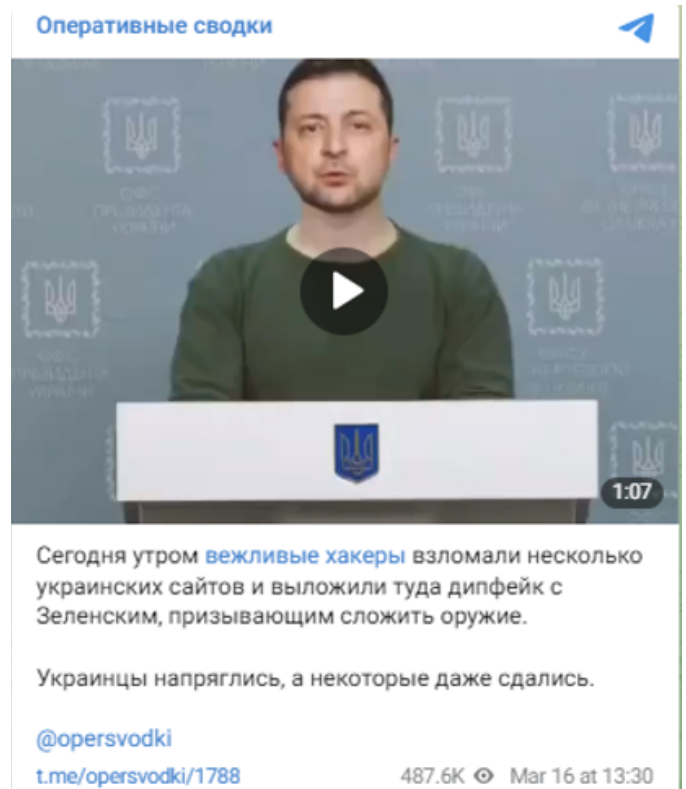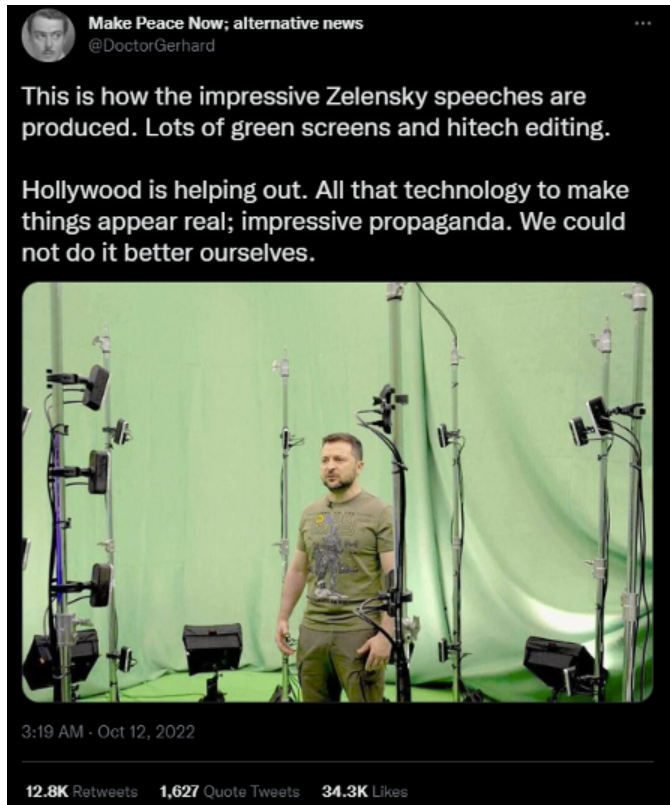
Screenshots show examples of the October 2022 iteration of the conspiracy theory claiming Zelenskyy fled Ukraine. (*Sources:* Make Peace Now; alternative news @DoctorGerhard, Twitter, October 11, 2022, https://twitter.com/DoctorGerhard/status/1579990045251207168; Opersvodki Telegram Channel, right, March 16, 2022, https://t.me/opersvodki/1788.)

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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68 DFRLab, "Operation 'Secondary Infektion,' " Atlantic Council, June 22, 2019, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Operation-Secondary-Infektion_English.pdf.

69 Eto Buziashvili et al., "Russian War Report: Russia and Ukraine Warn Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Plant Facing Imminent Threat"; DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Drone Footage Confirms Failed Russian Military Pontoon Crossing," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, May 13, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-drone-footage-confirms-failed-russian-military-pontoon-crossing/; and DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Russian Telegram Channel Spreads Digitally Modified Photo of Poland's Prime Minister," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, December 2, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russian-telegram-channel-spreads-digitally-modified-photo-of-polands-prime-minister/#photo.

70 DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Russian Governor Accuses Ukraine of Launching Multiple Attacks on Kursk," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, June 17, 2022. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russian-mayor-kursk/#telegram.
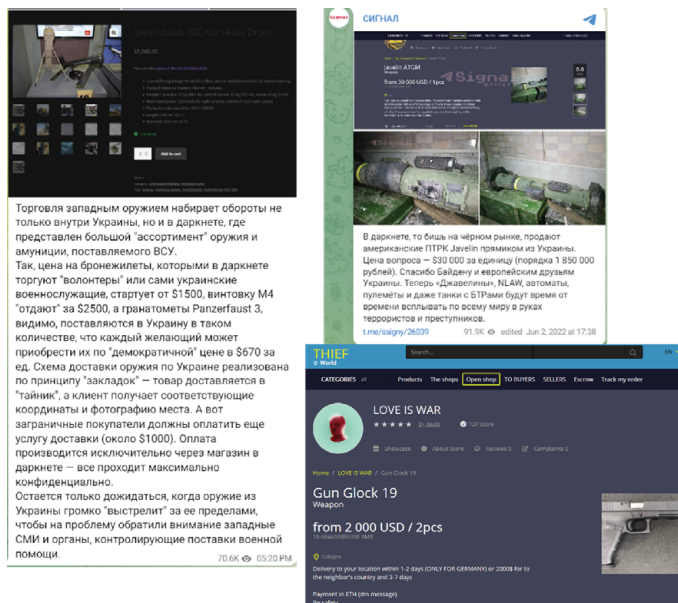
A composite image of Telegram posts making claims of Ukraine reselling weapons on the dark web. (*Sources:* Images from MediaKiller/archive, left; Signal/archive, top right; dark web, bottom right.)

somewhere else.[71] 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.

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.[72] The Russian national TV channel 1tv.ru also amplified the story.[73] 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.[74] 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."[75] 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.[76] These justification narratives suggest Russia aimed to use the referenda as a way to escalate the stakes for subsequent Ukrainian resistance.

71   DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Satellite Imagery Confirms Destruction of Aircraft at Crimea Airbase," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, August 12, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-satellite-imagery-confirms-destruction-of-aircraft-at-crimea-airbase/#narratives.

72   Военный Осведомитель, «Помимо разовых продаж «Джавелинов» в ДаркНете появилось множество крупных оружейных магазинов с огромным ассортиментом из Украины.,» June 3, 2022, https://t.me/milinfolive/84452; and Поддубный |Z|O|V| edition, «Крутое,» August 9, 2022, https://t.me/epoddubny/11865.

73   "Оружие, поставляемое Западом Украине, оказывается на черном рынке,» 1tv.ru, August 10, 2022, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-08-10/435383-oruzhie_postavlyaemoe_zapadom_ukraine_okazyvaetsya_na_chernom_rynke.

74   Mark Trevelyan, "Moscow's Proxies in Occupied Ukraine Regions Report Big Votes to Join Russia," Reuters, September 28, 2022. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moscows-proxies-occupied-ukraine-regions-report-big-votes-join-russia-2022-09-27/.

75   Jon Gambrell and Hanna Arhirova, "Putin Annexes Ukrainian Regions, Vows to Use 'All Means' to Protect Territories," *Times of Israel*, September 30, 2022. https://www.timesofisrael.com/putin-annexes-ukrainian-regions-vows-to-use-all-means-to-protect-territories/.

76   "Песков Назвал Очень Важным, Что Новые Регионы Де-Юре Вошли в Россию и Страна Стала Больше," Tass, October 5, 2022, https://tass.ru/politika/15960513.

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.[77] 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.[78]

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.[79] 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."[80] Notably, this survey was conducted after a wave of large-scale attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure.[81] 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.

Fake leaflet dropped by Russia warning Ukrainian residents of what to do in case of an explosion at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. (*Source:* Євген Євтушенко, "Довго думав - писати чи ні?," Facebook, August 10, 2022, https://bit.ly/3jRvs6r.)

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77   "Роспропаганда Залякує Аварією На ЗАЕС: Міфи, Які Розповсюджує Росія," Ukraine Health Ministry, September 23, 2022, https://moz.gov.ua/article/news/rospropaganda-zaljakue-avarieju-na-zaes-mifi-jaki-rozpovsjudzhue-rosija; and Victor Kevluk, "Putin Threatens to Increase Attacks on Ukraine's Civilian Infrastructure," *UkraineAlert* (blog), Atlantic Council, September 27, 2022. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-threatens-to-increase-attacks-on-ukraines-civilian-infrastructure/.

78   Aliide Naylor, "Sirens and Flaming Shots—Life in Wartime Odesa," Center for European Analysis, October 26, 2022. https://cepa.org/article/sirens-and-flaming-shots-life-in-wartime-odesa/.

79   "Seventeenth National Survey: Identity. Patriotism. Values (August 17-18, 2022)," Rating Group, August 23, 2022, https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/s_mnadcyate_zagalnonac_onalne_opituvannya_dentichn_st_patr_otizm_c_nnost_17-18_serpnya_2022.html.

80   Anton Hrushetskyi, "Russian Shelling of Ukrainian Cities: Continuation of the Armed Struggle or Transition to Negotiations," October 24, 2022, https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1151&page=1.

81   "Ukraine: Attack on Civilians and Infrastructure," Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, October 11, 2022, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2022/10/ukraine-attack-civilians-and-infrastructure.

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 acrocities 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."[89] 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]

82 Defense of Ukraine (@DefenceU), "New Srebrenica. The Ukrainian city of Bucha was in the hands of [Russian] animals for several weeks," Twitter, April 2, 2022, 11:44 PM, https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1510372750665433089.

83 "Torture Chamber Found in Bucha," Ukrinform (Ukrainian broadcasting platform), April 4, 2022, https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ato/3448720-torture-chamber-found-in-bucha.html

84 Liz Sly and Konstantyn Khudov, "Accounting of Bodies in Bucha Nears Completion," *Washington Post*, August 8, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/08/ukraine-bucha-bodies/.

85 Mason Bissada, "Top ICC Prosecutor Visits Bucha as Court Investigates War Crimes in Ukraine," *Forbes*, April 13, 2022, https://www.forbes.com/sites/masonbissada/2022/04/13/top-icc-prosecutor-visits-bucha-as-court-investigates-war-crimes-in-ukraine/?sh=8f4bf035e26f.

86 Givi Gigitashvili et al., "Russian War Report: Kremlin Claims Bucha Massacre Was Staged by Ukraine," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, April 4, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-kremlin-claims-bucha-massacre-was-staged-by-ukraine/#bucha.

87 МинОбороны России (Ministry of Defense of Russia), "Минобороны России опровергает обвинения киевского режима (Russian Defense Ministry Refutes the Accusations of the Kyiv Regime)," Telegram post, April 3, 2022, https://t.me/Ministerstvo_oborony/22858.

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.

89 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia (@mfa_russia), "Official Statement by @mod_russia," Twitter, April 3, 2022, 5:59 PM https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1510648066403143683.

90 Мария Захарова (Maria Zakharova), "На 4 апреля 2022 года Российская Федерация запросила проведение заседания (As of April 4, 2022, the Russian Federation has requested a meeting)," Telegram post, April 3, 2022, https://t.me/MariaVladimirovnaZakharova/2328.

91 Следком (Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation), "Председатель СК России поручил проанализировать и дать процессуальную оценку провокации (Chairman of the Investigative Committee of Russia instructed to analyze and give a procedural assessment of the provocation)," Telegram post, April 4, 2022, https://t.me/sledcom_press/1029.

92 Givi Gigitashvili et al., "Russian War Report: Kremlin Claims Bucha Massacre Was Staged by Ukraine."

93 "Полный контроль: кадры действий морских пехотинцев и ВДВ в Киевской области (Full Control: Footage of the Actions of the Marines and the Airborne Forces in the Kyiv Region)," TV Zvezda, April 1, 2022, https://m.tvzvezda.ru/news/20224151-KMqbZ.html.

94 Київська обласна військова адміністрація (Kyiv Regional Military Administration), "Рашисти продовжують частково відходити з півночі Київської області (Rashists continue to partially withdraw from the north of the Kyiv region)," Telegram post, April 1, 2022, https://t.me/kyivoda/2860.

95 Ірпінь | Буча | Гостомель | Ворзель | Київ (Irpin Bucha Gostomel Vorzel Kyiv), "Это не кадры из фильма, это нынешняя Украина, это Буча (These are not shots from the film, this is the current Ukraine, this is Bucha)," Telegram post, April 1, 2022, https://t.me/irpin_b_politik/1945.

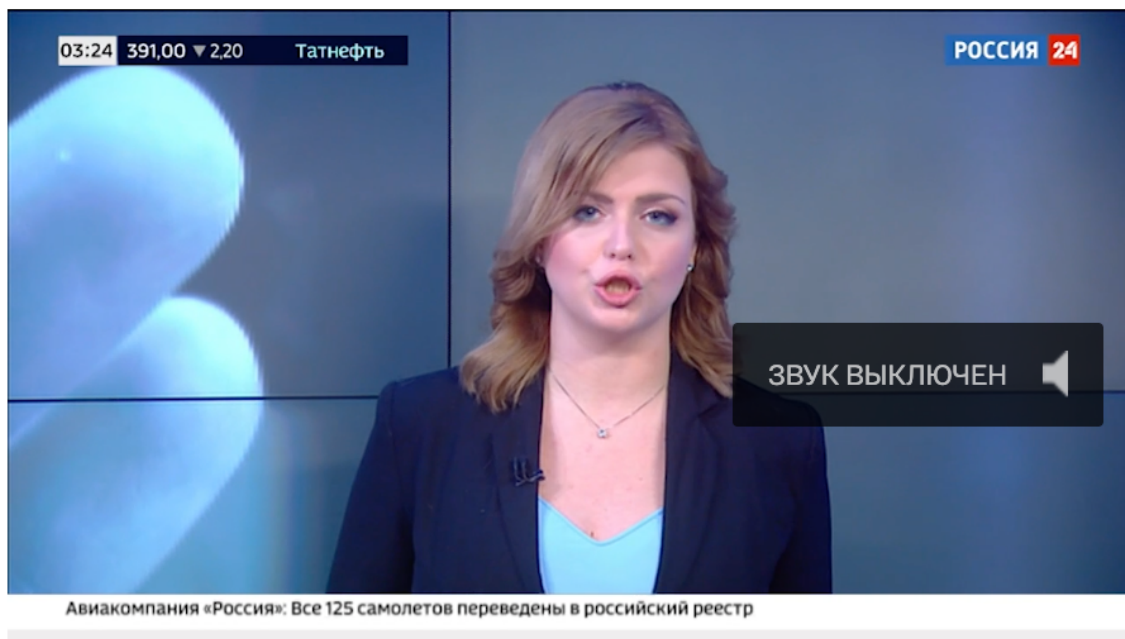96 Shayan Sardarizadeh (@Shayan86), "It's day 39 of Russia-Ukraine war," Twitter, April 3, 2022, https://twitter.com/Shayan86/status/1510695095703646212.

Тема:
Ситуация на Украине   ↻ 23 минуты назад

03 апреля 2022   17:20

Украинские "трупы" шевелятся, встают и избегают транспорта

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]

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.)

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

97   Thomas Gibbons-Neff et al., "Russia's Withdrawal from Lyman Comes a Day after Putin Said He Was Annexing the Region," *New York Times*, October 3, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/10/01/world/russia-ukraine-war-news?smid=url-share#ukraine-moves-to-encircle-lyman-a-strategic-eastern-rail-hub.

98   Ramzan Kadyrov, Kadyrov_95, Telegram post, October 1, 2022, https://t.me/RKadyrov_95/2911.

99   "Песков оценил предложение Кадырова использовать 'маломощное ядерное оружие,' " *Газету.Ru,* October 3, 2022, https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2022/10/03/15567613.shtml.

100 "'Начали запускать эту мульку,' Матвиенко заявила, что Россия никому не угрожает ядерным оружием," *Фонтанка.Ру*, October 6, 2022, https://www.fontanka.ru/2022/10/06/71714039/.

101 "Лавров ответил на вопрос о ядерной войне," *Фонтанка.Ру*, October 11, 2022, https://www.fontanka.ru/2022/10/11/71726264/.

102 "Песков назвал условия применения Россией ядерного оружия," Комсомольская Правда, October 3, 2022, https://www.kp.ru/online/news/4946763/; and Dmitri Medvedev, September 27, 2022, https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/181.

103 Arbatov Aleksey, "*Это однозначно конец света,*" Russian International Affairs Council*,* last accessed December 23, 2022, https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/eto-odnoznachno-konets-sveta/#short.

104 "Тактическое ядерное оружие: что есть у России Это однозначно конец света," РИА Новости Крым, October 3, 2022, https://crimea.ria.ru/20221003/takticheskoe-yadernoe-oruzhie-chto-est-u-rossii-1124704528.html.

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.

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105   Matthew Loh, "Russian TV Commentator Suggests Nuking Elon Musk's Starlink Satellites: 'To Space, and Goodbye Elon Musk's Group,' " *Insider*, October 27, 2022, https://www.businessinsider.com/russian-tv-commentator-suggests-nuking-elon-musks-starlink-satellites-2022-10.

106   "Russia Says Seized Ukrainian Lands Are Under Its Nuclear Protection," Reuters via US News & World Report, October 18, 2022, https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2022-10-18/kremlin-annexed-ukrainian-lands-protected-by-russian-nuclear-weapons.

107   Dan Sabbagh, "West Makes Plans to Avoid Panic if Russia Uses Nuclear Bomb in Ukraine," *Guardian*, October 14, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/14/west-plans-avoid-panic-if-russia-nuclear-bomb-ukraine-putin.

Russian Tactics Targeting Europe

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 Georgia staying out of the fight exacerbated ongoing tensions with 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 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.[108] 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.[109]

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.[110]

One of earliest episodes of this operation took place in February 2022, when a seemingly fake persona by the name of "Victor Shvets" ("Віктор Швець") published the same post, entitled "Zelenskyy agreed with Poland to create a 'buffer zone' in western Ukraine," to three blogs: politiko.ua, uainfo.org and teletype.in.[111] 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 the Ukrainian territories of Lviv and Volyn oblasts and occupy

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108 "Russian Spy Chief Says U.S., Poland Plotting Division of Ukraine," Reuters, last updated April 28, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-spy-chief-says-us-poland-plotting-division-ukraine-2022-04-28/; "Disinfo: Imperialist Poland Wants to Annex Western Ukraine," EUvsDisinfo, accessed December 10, 2022, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/imperialist-poland-wants-to-annex-western-ukraine; "Putin's Security Council Says That Poland Is 'Moving to Seize' Ukraine," Ukrainska Pravda, May 31, 2022, https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/05/31/7349685/; and Roman Osadchuk and Givi Gigitashvili, "Pro-Kremlin Telegram Channels Promote Narrative That Poland Will Annex Western Ukraine," DFRLab, Medium, May 6, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-kremlin-telegram-channels-promote-narrative-that-poland-will-annex-western-ukraine-28514c829232.

109 "'Disinformation Campaign against Poland': Statement by Stanisław Żaryn, Spokesman for Poland's Security Services" PolskieRadio.pl, May 6, 2022, https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7784/Artykul/2952644,Disinformation-campaign-against-Poland-statement.

110 Ben Nimmo et al., "Exposing Secondary Infektion," Graphika, accessed December 10, 2022, https://secondaryinfektion.org

111 "Viktor Shvets," Зеленський погодив з Польщею створення 'буферної зони' на Заході України (Zelenskyy Agreed with Poland to Create a 'Buffer Zone' in Western Ukraine)," *Politiko*, February 3, 2022, https://archive.vn/6O6ON#selection-169.0-169.72; "Viktor Shvets," "Зеленський погодив з Польщею створення 'буферної зони' на Заході України (Zelenskyy Agreed with Poland to Create a 'Buffer Zone' in Western Ukraine)," UAinfo, February 4, 2022, https://archive.vn/bidXv; and "Viktor Shvets," "Зеленський погодив з Польщею створення 'буферної зони' на Заході України (Zelenskyy Agreed with Poland to Create a 'Buffer Zone' in Western Ukraine)," Teletype, February 4, 2022, https://archive.vn/Pd5sd.
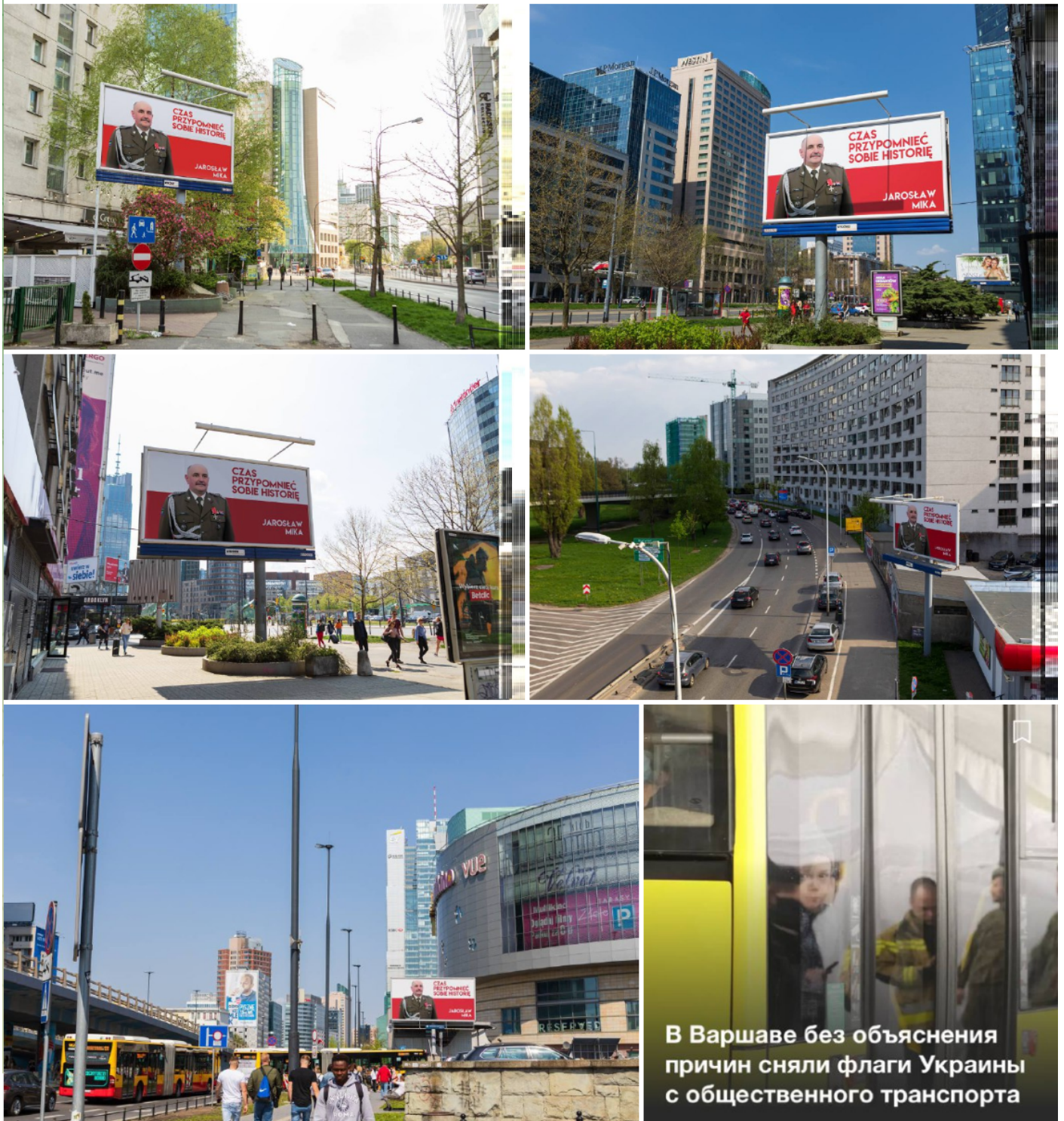
Fake billboards of Polish General Commander Mika with the alleged quote, "It's time to remember history." (*Source:* СИГНАЛ (Signal), "BBC сообщает, что Польша готовится к вводу войск на Западную Украину (BBC Reports That Poland Is Preparing to Send Troops to Western Ukraine).")

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
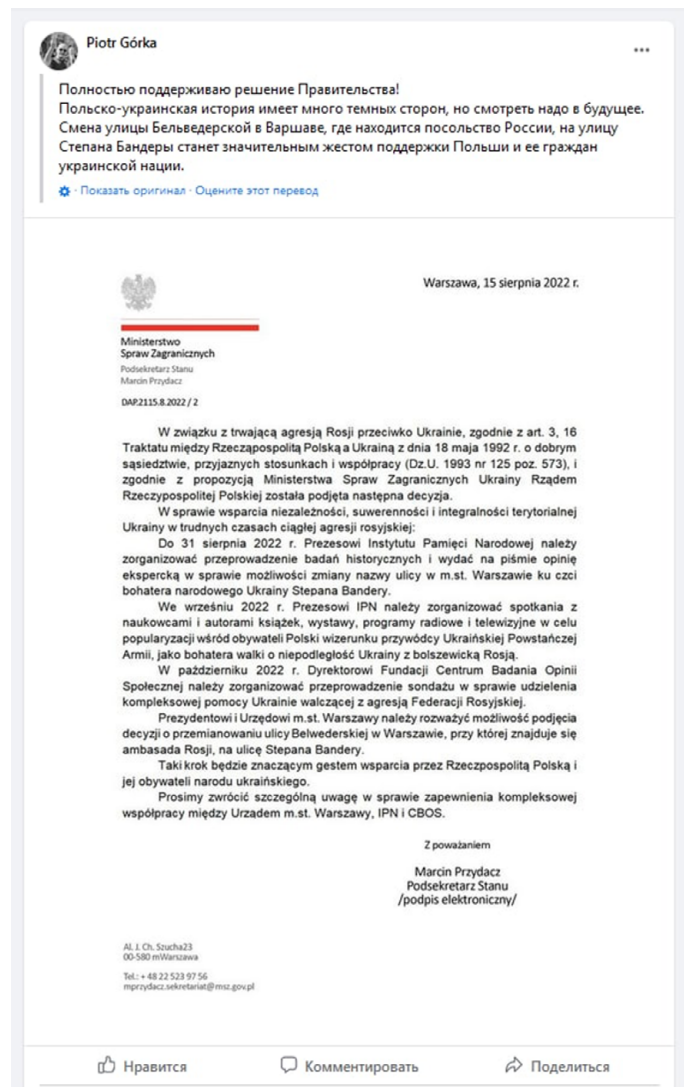
Screenshot of post from Górka's Facebook page. Górka told the DFRLab he was hacked. (*Source:* Image from Joker DPR)

112   Roman Osadchuk et al., "Russian War Report: New Fires and Alleged Sabotage Operations across Russian Territory," Atlantic Council, May 3, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-new-fires-and-alleged-sabotage/#forged.

113   Osadchuk et al., "Russian War Report: New Fires and Alleged Sabotage Operations across Russian Territory."

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.

115   "Lwów przyłączany do Polski? Uwaga na sfabrykowany dokument! (Lviv Annexed by Poland? Beware of a Fabricated Ddocument)," Demagog, September 30, 2022, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/lwow-przylaczany-do-polski-uwaga-na-sfabrykowany-dokument/.

116   Украина.py (Ukraine.ru), "Как вы думаете, чем занимаются польские дипломаты в Украине? (In Your Opinion, What Polish Diplomats Do in Ukraine?)," Telegram post, November 24, 2022, https://archive.vn/F48jn#selection-225.0-225.60.

117   Givi Gigitashvili, "Russia-aligned Hacktivists Stir Up Anti-Ukrainian Sentiments in Poland," DFRLab, Medium, September 9, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/russia-aligned-hacktivists-stir-up-anti-ukrainian-sentiments-in-poland-f2d6660cf09a.

118   Gigitashvili, "Russia-aligned Hacktivists."

Force historian Piotr Górka. According to Górka, someone had broken into his Facebook account and posted it. "This is not my post loaded to my Facebook page," he told the DFRLab after the incident. "My site was hacked, some days ago."[119]

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 French 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."

120   Givi Gigitashvili et al., "Russian War Report: Russia Escalates Nuclear and Chemical False-flag Allegations," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, March 9, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russia-escalates-nuclear-and-chemical-false-flag-allegations/#instagram.

121   "Ruskie trolle w Twoim mieście–jak działa skoordynowana dezinformacja? (Russian Trolls in Your City–How Does Coordinated Disinformation Work?)," Demagog, March 8, 2022, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/ruskie-trolle-w-twoim-miescie-jak-dziala-skoordynowana-dezinformacja/.

122   Givi Gigitashvili and Esteban Ponce de León, "Polish-language Telegram Channels Spread Anti-refugee Narratives," DFRLab, Medium, May 31, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/polish-language-telegram-channels-spread-anti-refugee-narratives-aaf3ffdc81ed.

123   "Poland Leads in Numbers of Mercenaries Killed in Ukraine, Russian Top Brass Says," Tass, June 17, 2022, https://tass.com/society/1466897.

124   Jakub Moźniak, "Niechlubny koniec. Amerykańskie kwatery dla polskich najemników (Disgraceful End. American Graves for Polish Mercenaries," Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny, November 23, 2022, https://dziennik-polityczny.com/2022/11/23/niechlubny-koniec-najemnicy-ktorzy-zgineli-na-ukrainie-zostana-pochowani-w-amerykanskich-grobach/.

125   Ministerstwo Prawdy (@Minister_Prawdy) (Ministry of Truth), "W nocy wracają do Polski z Ukrainy w trumnach (They return to Poland from Ukraine in coffins at night)," Twitter, November 18, 2022, https://twitter.com/Minister_Prawdy/status/1593639092046241793; "5 pogrzebów w Wigilię. Ciała żołnierzy wróciły do Polski (5 funerals on Christmas Eve. The bodies of the soldiers returned to Poland)," Fakt, December 24, 2011, https://www.fakt.pl/wydarzenia/polska/5-pogrzebow-w-wigilie-ciala-zolnierzy-wrocily-do-polski/l6setfx.

126   Osadchuk, "How Russia Promoted the Claim That Ukraine Re-Sold French Howitzers"; and Victor Jack, "You'll 'Freeze Freeze,' Putin Warns West over Energy Sanctions," September 7, 2022.

127   Oleksii Nabozhniak, "The Germs of the Russian World," Texty.org.ua, December 1, 2022, https://texty.org.ua/projects/108323/germs-russian-world-who-supports-russia-europe/; "Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem," Global Engagement Center Special Report, US Department of State, August 2020, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf; and DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Russian Governor Accuses Ukraine of Launching Multiple Attacks on Kursk," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, June 17, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russian-mayor-kursk/#telegram.

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.)

Pro-Ukraine demonstrators gather in front of a screen to watch the broadcast of the live speech of Ukraine's President Zelenskyy during an anti-war rally in Tbilisi, Georgia, March 4, 2022. (Source: Photo from Irakli Gedenidze/Reuters.)

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 Ukraine 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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129 "Mapping Research: Comparing Foreign Influence in Georgia," European Values Center for Security Policy, 2021, https://europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/MAPPING_RESEARCH_COMPARING_FOREIGN_INFLUENCE_IN_GEORGIA.pdf; and Eto Buziashvili et al., "Fighting for the Hearts and Minds of Sakartvelo," DFRLab, April 19, 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/fighting-for-the-hearts-and-minds-of-sakartvelo.

130 Will Cathcart, "Georgia Threatens to Sue Its Own President Over Her Support for Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/21/russia-war-georgia-ukraine-zourabichvili-protest/; and "Ukraine Recalls Ambassador over Georgia Government's 'Immoral Position,' " website of civil.GE (a UN Association of Georgia project), January 3, 2022, https://civil.ge/archives/476348.

131 "Georgian PM: Ukraine Failed to Avoid War, Georgia Will Not Join Anti-Russian Sanctions," *JAMnews*, February 25, 2022, https://jam-news.net/georgian-pm-ukraine-failed-to-avoid-war-georgia-will-not-join-anti-russian-sanctions/.

132 "As Ivanishvili Battles Swiss Bank, GD Hints at U.S. Pushing Georgia into War," Civil Georgia, May 10, 2022, https://civil.ge/archives/489794.

Georgian Prime Minister Garibashvili. (*Source*: Photo from Georgy Kakulia/Reuters.)

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

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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

135 "კალაძე: სამარცხვინოა ევროკავშირის მიერ მიღებული რეზოლუციის თითოეული სიტყვა," *Formula News*, June 13, 2022, https://formulanews.ge/News/72416; and "Submission of the Annual Report to the Parliament," Prime Minister of Georgia, June 6, 2022, https://garibashvili.ge/ka/n/all/tsliuri_angarishis_tsardgena_parlamentshi.

136 "ღარიბაშვილი: თუ ომით განისაზღვრება EU-ს სტატუსის მინიჭება, ჩვენ ომი არ გვინდა," Formula News, June 13, 2022, https://formulanews.ge/Phrase/72421.

137 "Росіяни налагоджують канал контрабанди підсанкційних товарів через територію Грузії," Ukrainian Intelligence Directorate, April 4, 2022, https://gur.gov.ua/content/rosiiany-nalahodzhuiut-kanal-kontrabandy-pidsanktsiinykh-tovariv-cherez-terytoriiu-hruzii.html.

138 Головне управління розвідки Міністерства оборони України, May 1, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/DefenceIntelligenceofUkraine/posts/302426942068733.

news outlet *iFact*, between February 24 and April 30, 3,442 Russian citizens received entrepreneur status and registered 184 companies in Georgia.[139] 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.[140] 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.[141]

The tense political situation has been further aggravated by an influx of Russian citizens in Georgia.[142] Between March and August, up to 800,000 Russian citizens entered Georgia.[143] The influx raised national security concerns among civil society actors in Georgia regarding stability in the country,[144] and pro-democracy activists organized demonstrations to demand the closure of the Russia-Georgia border.[145]

139 აი, ფაქტი • ifact.ge, via Facebook, May 17, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/ifact.ge/photos/a.1283130668371519/7717331828284672/?type=3.

140 "Russian War Report: Additional Units from Georgian Breakaway Regions Join Russian Offensive," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, March 28, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-additional-units-from-georgian-breakaway-regions-join-russian-offensive/#georgianbreakaway; and "Russian War Report: Russia Sends Military Contractors from Georgian Breakaway Region to Ukraine," *New* Atlanticist, Atlantic Council, March 18, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russia-sends-military-contractors-from-georgian-breakaway-region-to-ukraine.

141 "Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh Hail Donbas Recognition," OC Media, February 22, 2022, https://oc-media.org/abkhazia-south-ossetia-and-nagorno-karabakh-hail-donbas-recognition/.

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.

144 Davit Gabunia, "Why We Are Wary of Russian Émigrés in Georgia–So Soon After Russian Invaders," *Guardian*, October 26, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/oct/26/why-we-are-wary-of-russian-emigres-in-georgia-so-soon-after-russian-invaders.

145 "Review | Confusion in Tbilisi as Thousands of Russians Try to Enter Georgia," Civil Georgia, September 27, 2022, https://civil.ge/archives/509375.

Russia and the Global South

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.[146]

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.[147]

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.[148] 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.[149]

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146 See, for example, Stephen Blank, "Sergei Lavrov's Africa Trip: Regional Promises and Global Ambitions," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 53, April 9, 2018, https://jamestown.org/program/sergei-lavrovs-africa-trip-regional-promises-and-global-ambitions/; Paul Stronski, *Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa,* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 16, 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/16/late-to-party-russia-s-return-to-africa-pub-80056; Abu-Bakarr Jalloh, Mikhail Bushuev, and Benita van Eyssen, "Lavrov Tours Africa amid Diplomatic Isolation," Deutsche Welle (DW), July 25, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/sergey-lavrov-tours-africa-amid-diplomatic-isolation/a-60745880; *Africa Times* editor, "Russia Reaffirms SADC Ties, Support for UNSC Reform and C.A.R.," *Africa Times*, October 25, 2018, https://africatimes.com/2018/10/25/russia-reaffirms-sadc-ties-support-for-unsc-reform-and-c-a-r/; Jean-Michel Bos, "En Afrique, le commerce des armes russes se porte bien," DW, March 25, 2022, https://www.dw.com/fr/guerre-en-ukraine-russie-livraisons-darmes-afrique-pays-africains-non-alignement-onu/a-61254723; and Catrina Doxsee, Wagner: the Cornerstone of Russia's Strategy in Africa, Commentary, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, December 27, 2022, https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/wagner-cornerstone-russias-strategy-africa-37141.

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

148 See "Sputnik élargit sa présence en Afrique," Sputnik France, May 23, 2019, https://fr.sputniknews.africa/20190523/sputnik-rdc-cooperation-rtnc-1041277012.html; and "Sputnik renforce sa présence en Afrique en signant un accord de partenariat avec AIP," Sputnik France, August 9, 2018, https://fr.sputniknews.africa/20190809/sputnik-renforce-sa-presence-en-afrique-en-signant-un-accord-de-partenariat-avec-aip-1041905444.html.

149 Nataliya Bugayova and George Barros, "The Kremlin's Expanding Media Conglomerate," Institute for the Study of War, January 15, 2020, https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/kremlin%E2%80%99s-expanding-media-conglomerate.

Kremlin special representative Mikhail Bogdanov arrives at the airport in Abuja, Nigeria, for a meeting with officials, May 28, 2015. (Source: Photo from Afolabi Sotunde/Reuters.)

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

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150 "RT и Sputnik будут обучать африканских журналистов [RT and Sputnik Will Train African Journalists]," RFI na russkom, October 23, 2019, https://www.rfi.fr.

151 Mia Lindique, "Multichoice Explains Why It Stopped Rt Airing on DSTV," Eyewitness News, March 3, 2022, https://ewn.co.za/2022/03/03/multichoice-explains-why-it-stopped-rt-airing-on-dstv.

152 Thinus Ferreira, "Russia Today Is Back on SA TV," News24, https://www.news24.com/channel/tv/news/russia-today-is-back-on-sa-tv-20220513-2.

around disinformation narratives.[153] 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.[154] 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."[155]

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.[156]

#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

We met with the Ambassador of the Russian Federation in South Africa, Ambassador Ilya Rogachev, in Tshwane today. We received first-hand information on the ongoing military operations in Ukraine from the embassy, not from neo-Nazi propagandists.

9:48 AM · Mar 16, 2022

(*Source:* Twitter, March 16, 2022, https://twitter.com/julius_s_malema/status/1504092125193019393.)

that a significant portion of #istandwithputin mentions originated from a small number of accounts that were retweeted extensively.[157]

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.

153   Joseph Siegle, "Russia in Africa: Undermining Democracy through Elite Capture," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, September 24, 2021, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russia-africa-undermining-democracy-elite-capture/.

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/1501594685399310336.

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. We received first-hand information on the ongoing military operations in Ukraine from the embassy, not from neo-Nazi propagandists," Twitter, March 16, 2022, https://twitter.com/julius_s_malema/status/1504092125193019393.

156   See Mary Blankenship and Aloysius Uche Ordu, "Russia's Narratives about Its Invasion of Ukraine Are Lingering in Africa," *Africa in Focus* (blog), Brookings Institution, June 27, 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2022/06/27/russias-narratives-about-its-invasion-of-ukraine-are-lingering-in-africa/.

157   *Jean Le Roux,* "#IStandWithPutin Hashtag Trends amid Dubious Amplification Efforts," DFRLab, Medium, March 10, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/istandwithputin-hashtag-trends-amid-dubious-amplification-efforts-2b8090ac9630.

Undermining Ukraine: How the Kremlin Employs Information Operations to Erode Global Confidence in Ukraine
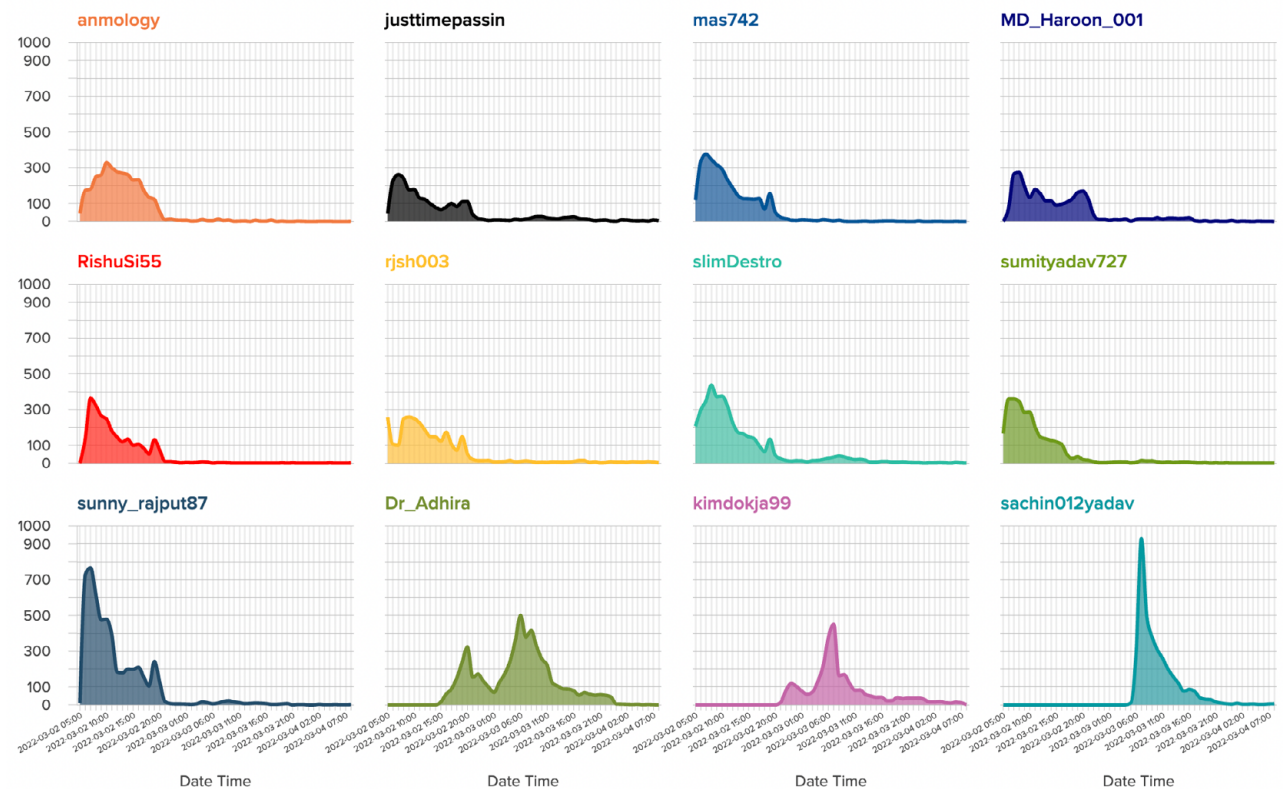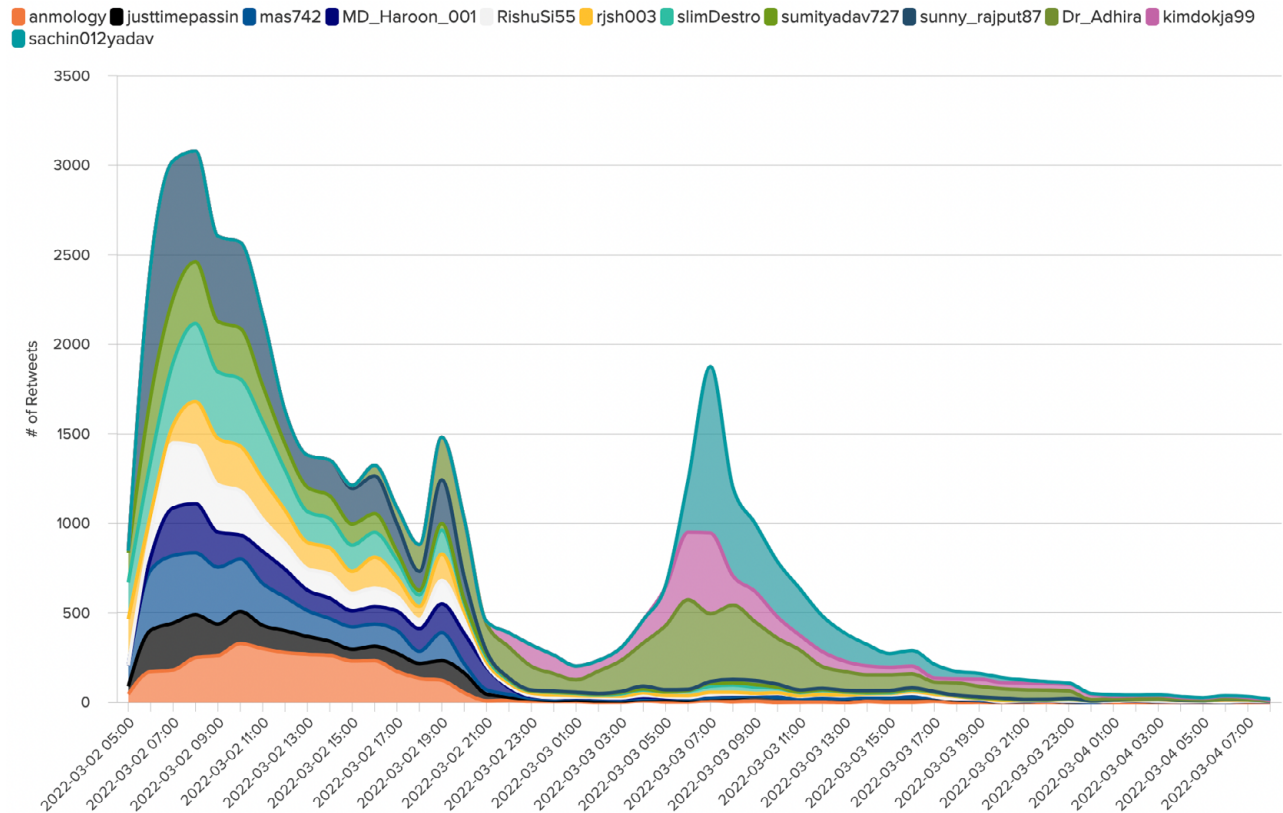
Retweets of accounts of accounts that amplified the hashtag, shown over time. (*Source:* Content via DFRLab.)

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.[158]

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.[159]

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.[160] 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 Donetsk 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 Donetsk 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.[161] This demonstrates that Russian state-backed outlets continue to target Latin American audiences with Kremlin-approved narratives.

158 *Tessa Knight, Mattia Caniglia, and Ruslan Trad, "Footage R*aises 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.

159 Esteban Ponce de León, "Analyzing the Volume of Kremlin Narratives Targeting the Spanish-speaking World," DFRLab, Medium, November 30, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/analyzing-the-volume-of-kremlin-narratives-targeting-the-spanish-speaking-world-38da532d74ba.

160 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-3a24ded7ef57.

161 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/.

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/1501971972577644548; 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.)

Graph showing the number of articles published by Russian and Chinese state-backed media between January 1 and August 24, 2022. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

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.[162] 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 esto!, 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.[163] The views received by ¡Censúrame esto! are likely the result of VPN use, for which RT en Español has published Spanish-language guidance. [164] By December 2022, all three channels had amassed more views and subscribers than the six channels activated last spring.

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162 Daniel Suárez Pérez and Esteban Ponce de León, "Videos in Spanish Created by Kremlin Outlets Reappear on YouTube Despite Restrictions," DFRLab, May 10, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/videos-in-spanish-created-by-kremlin-outlets-reappear-on-youtube-despite-restrictions-8d2374f4bf1f.

163 WatanNerwork, https://watannetwork.com/tools/blocked/#url=8WRly20SNvk and Polsy, http://polsy.org.uk/stuff/ytrestrict.cgi?ytid=515GtUdn-f4.

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/2inVh.

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

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.)

Channel name	Channel handle	Date of first video posted	Views	Subscribers	Videos uploaded	Average views per video
¡Censúrame esto!	censurameesto9770	17/8/22	1,166,636	54,600	26	44,870
¡Censúrame otra vez!	censurameotravez	6/26/22	95,751	4,560	86	1,113
¡Censúrame otra vez!	censurameotravezrt	8/8/22	14,595	2,130	24	608
		Total:	**1,276,982**	**61,290**	**136**	

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.)

Graph shows tags used in two videos that mentioned Afinogenova (blue boxes). "Alv" is the acronym for ¡Ahí les Va!. (*Sources*: Censurameotravez, "Perú: ¿permanente crisis en un orden establecido?," YouTube, December 13, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxrPo4Swybs; and Censurameesto9770, "Elecciones en Italia: ¿qué teme la Unión Europea? (Y no, no es a la ultraderecha)," YouTube, September 26, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WRIy20SNvk.)

Graph shows keywords about ¡Ahí les Va! used by Inna Afinogenova's YouTube channel (blue boxes). Tags at the bottom belong to a video about the electoral campaign of left-wing Colombia's Gustavo Petro. However, the content did not mention topics related to RT or ¡Ahí les Va!, as the tags suggest. (*Sources*: Censurameotravez, "Perú: ¿permanente crisis en un orden establecido?"; and Censurameesto9770, "Elecciones en Italia.")

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?[165] 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.

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