



War on All Fronts: How the Kremlin's Media Ecosystem Broadcasts the War in Ukraine

PREPARED AND PUBLISHED BY THE
**NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE**



ISBN: 978-9934-619-61-8

Authors: Viktoras Daukšas, Laima Venclauskienė, Karina Urbanavičiūtė, Dr. Ofer Fridman

Project Manager: Raimundas Jareckas

Content Editor: Merle Anne Read

Design: Inga Ropša

Riga, April 2024

NATO STRATCOM COE

11b Kalnciema iela,

Riga, LV1048, Latvia

stratcomcoe.org

[@stratcomcoe](https://twitter.com/stratcomcoe)

This publication does not represent the opinions or policies of NATO or NATO StratCom COE.

© All rights reserved by the NATO StratCom COE. Reports may not be copied, reproduced, distributed or publicly displayed without reference to the NATO StratCom COE. The views expressed here do not represent the views of NATO.

War on All Fronts:
How the Kremlin's Media
Ecosystem Broadcasts
the War in Ukraine

Contents

Introduction	5
Selection of sources	7
Case studies	20
Victory Day, 9 May	20
Classification: Russia prepared for the event	20
Official communications	20
Telegram	22
Television	28
Sanctions on Russia	34
Classification: Russia prepared for the event	34
Official communications	34
Telegram	35
Television	40
Partial mobilisation	42
Classification: Event initiated by Russia	42
Television	48
Nord Stream explosions	53
Classification: Russia surprised by the event	53
Official communications	53
Telegram	54
Television	60
Kerch Bridge explosion	63
Classification: Russia surprised by the event	63
Official communications	63
Telegram	63
Television	68
Annexation referendums	73
Classification: Event initiated by Russia	73
Official communications	73
Telegram	75
Television	78
Demonopolising power while preserving control: understanding Russia's 'communication regime'	83
Establishing control over the official media—losing audience	83
Demonopolising power on Telegram—maintaining flexibility	85
Conclusion: Russia's 'communication regime' to preserve control	90
Endnotes	92
Appendix 1: Top messages about sanctions on Russia, all media types	102
Appendix 2: Top messages about 9 May, Victory Day, all media types	103
Appendix 3: Top messages about the annexation referendums, all media types	104
Appendix 4: Top messages about partial mobilisation, all media types	105
Appendix 5: Top messages about the Nord Stream explosions, all media types	106
Appendix 6: Top messages about the Kerch Bridge explosion, all media types	107
Appendix 7: List of dedicated Telegram channels participating in Russian information warfare	108

Introduction

Much ink has been spilled attempting to understand the Kremlin's strategy in the media space, particularly in its domestic hybrid media environment since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.¹ Despite this significant effort, much remains unclear about the Kremlin's true intentions, capabilities, and strategies. Most importantly experts still disagree on whether the Kremlin truly controls the Russian domestic media ecosystem. On the one side of the argument, there are those who argue that the Kremlin, like many other contemporary 'informational autocrats', seeks to control Russia's media space through ownership, censorship, and propaganda.² On the other side, however, are those who claim that in the contemporary era of digital technologies and social networks, the Kremlin not only struggles to exercise control,³ but also understands its limitations and tries to adapt its strategy accordingly by demonopolising power 'among a variety of actors who "think right"'.⁴ This raises an important question about Russia's strategy in the media space: does the Kremlin truly control it?

State-owned television has been serving narratives aligning with the Kremlin's agenda for decades. Television gets the top spot as the most trusted information source in Russia and bypasses other means of communication. Notably, after the invasion, the broadcasting strategy was changed: informational TV shows became longer and the same messages were also repeated on programmes that are not inherently political—for example, relatives of soldiers or members of the Russian military are often featured in the weekly gameshow *Pole Chudes* ('Field of Miracles') to hone the perception of support for the 'special military operation'. Such an approach to communication is not surprising, as repetition leads to familiarity, which then leads to acceptance.

After the war in Ukraine started in February 2022, Telegram rose to prominence, as more people turned to it for fresh, unlimited information. Unlike the polished

communication on television and official channels, Telegram was not so tightly controlled, at least in the beginning. Military bloggers (milbloggers) were able to react to the situation on the ground and bring insights from the front in real time. They accumulated hundreds of thousands of followers, and many allowed themselves to criticise both the Russian government and the military command. Unsurprisingly there were efforts from the state to control them, which were successful to some degree. At the same time, Vladimir Putin himself turned to milbloggers to handle issues that arose during the 'partial mobilisation' process.

Where Telegram wins with speed and amount of content (which is guaranteed through the platform's decentralised structure), it lacks credibility. However, this is where television comes into play: research indicates that social media content is perceived as most credible when it is picked up by television news, and by allocating airtime to their reports it provides milbloggers with their sought-after trust.

Through the synergy of three parts of the Russian media ecosystem analysed in this paper (official websites of Russian government institutions, television shows, and Telegram channels), the Kremlin can keep control of the media and broadcast its brutal war in Ukraine on all fronts. Content from official websites, TV, and Telegram overlaps, and therefore these sources can reach diverse audiences: people who do not watch TV get the same messages on Telegram and vice versa, and official statements find their way to Russian hearts and minds through both big and small screens. State representatives (such as Maria Zakharova and Dmitriy Peskov) have their own Telegram channels, where they present their remarks in an often simpler, heart-to-heart manner.

Whereas Russian state television is predominantly aimed at the domestic audience, Telegram has a more diverse user base. For this analysis, channels aimed at audiences

in Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltics (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) were chosen.

In the Baltics, Telegram is not the most prominent social media platform, yet it is important to keep it in mind when talking about Russian information influence in the region. As the Kremlin’s propaganda outlets were blocked in line with European Union sanctions, people who still wanted to access news from Russia started looking for other sources, one of which is the less strictly moderated Telegram. Even though channels aimed at local Russian speakers are not that big in terms of followers, their main objective is to share each other’s content and create an echo chamber where it

seems that many people share the same views. Telegram channels are also used to create a particular message about countries in the region.

In Ukraine, Telegram was most notably used for the so-called ‘information occupation’. During the first weeks of the war, dozens of channels were created in regions targeted by Russia (for example Kharkiv, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Odesa) and meant to spread the message of ‘Russian liberation’. Besides providing information about ‘humanitarian aid provision’, these channels also reposted messages from big Russian propaganda sources.







Institution	Website	Coded articles
 The Ministry of Defence of the RF	function.mil.ru	161
 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the RF	mid.ru	94
 The Federation Council of the RF	council.gov.ru	44
 The State Duma of the RF	duma.gov.ru	43
 The President of the RF	kremlin.ru	30
 The Security Council of the RF	scrf.gov.ru	4

TABLE 1. List of governmental/regulatory websites used in this research

Selection of sources

For the purpose of conducting the analysis, the team of analysts from disinformation analysis center Debunk.org chose to look at three segments of Kremlin owned and/or aligned media: 6 Russian official governmental/regulatory websites, 289 Telegram channels, and 2 weekly television shows aired by state-owned channels. The Telegram section was split into three parts in accordance with the intended audiences: 62 public Telegram channels with the Baltic countries as the intended audiences and/or as a source of problematic information in the region; 127 Telegram channels with their intended audiences potentially located in Ukraine (including Russian-occupied territories), and 100 public Telegram channels intended primarily for the Russian domestic audience.

In selecting the six **governmental/regulatory websites** (Table 1) we aimed at continuity of tracking and delineating strategic communication lines in the Kremlin's official communications, as we did with our research on Russia's official statements and media messaging for the period between October 2021 and March 2022.

The public Telegram channels that were used in this research were mapped out for each of the audiences separately. We used Debunk.org data collected previously on actors spreading/amplifying problematic information in the **Baltic countries**⁵ to see if they were also active on Telegram. The list of channels includes

ones that were referred to (via the share option) through the posts which were most frequently shared by Facebook groups and pages that had been previously identified as propagators and amplificatory sources of problematic information in the region. The selection also encompasses public Telegram channels run by overtly Kremlin-affiliated websites targeting the Baltic countries, as well as those that share citation bonds with them and have indications of focusing on the Baltic countries and/or having them as intended audiences. We also employed data from previous analyses done externally, that is, other organisations/researchers operating in the field.⁶

As a result, a list comprising 62 entities was compiled to include public Telegram channels that communicated in Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Russian, with the number of subscribers per channel varying from several dozen to half a million (Figure 1).

Within the list of public Telegram channels that either operated within the Baltics or focused on the region, the Kirill Fedorov / War History Weapons (Кирилл Фёдоров / Война История Оружие) channel led in terms of subscriber base (Figure 2). However, the channel was inactive and produced no posts in the period between 14 May and 18 October 2022, as Latvia's State Security Service (VDD) launched criminal proceedings against Kirill Fedorov, the YouTube blogger and owner of the Telegram channel, on 16 March 2022. A

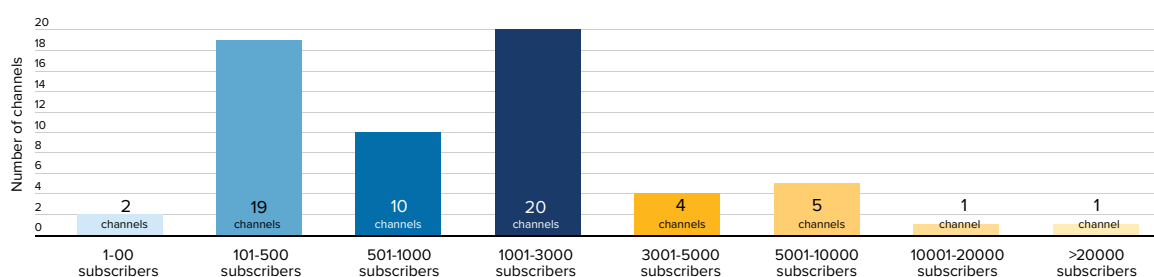


FIGURE 1. Telegram channels with the Baltic countries as intended audience by number of subscribers

day later he was detained and placed under arrest in connection with the public justification and glorification of war crimes and crimes against peace, as well as with inciting national and ethnic hatred or discord, using an automated data processing system (Article 74.1 of the Criminal Law and Article 78, second part).⁷ Fedorov was released in late June⁸ and fined by the Latvian prosecutor's office in March 2023.⁹ Soon after, he left for Moscow, where he gave an interview to RT's Maria Butina, claiming he was tortured while under arrest and had feared for his life, and comparing the Latvians to former slaves who project their hatred onto the Russians.¹⁰

of Telegram channels, garnering an average of nearly 200,000 views per post and approximately 2.4 million views in total. The Baltnews Telegram channel, which may be referred to as a gateway systematically leading to information laundering attempts that are geared towards reaching a Russian-speaking audience in the Baltic countries,¹¹ ranked second in terms of total number of views with 4.5 million. The channel is a social media account of the media outlet Baltnews.com, designed specifically to target the Baltic countries with Kremlin propaganda and disinformation. Baltnews.com has a history of restrictions and legal procedures launched by local watchdogs.¹²

Throughout the period that encompasses all the events we chose to discuss in this report (1 April to 31 October 2022), Fedorov's posts led in terms of views within this segment

Overall, within the list of Telegram channels compiled for this research, those with Latvia as the intended audience showed the signs of being targeted with the greatest

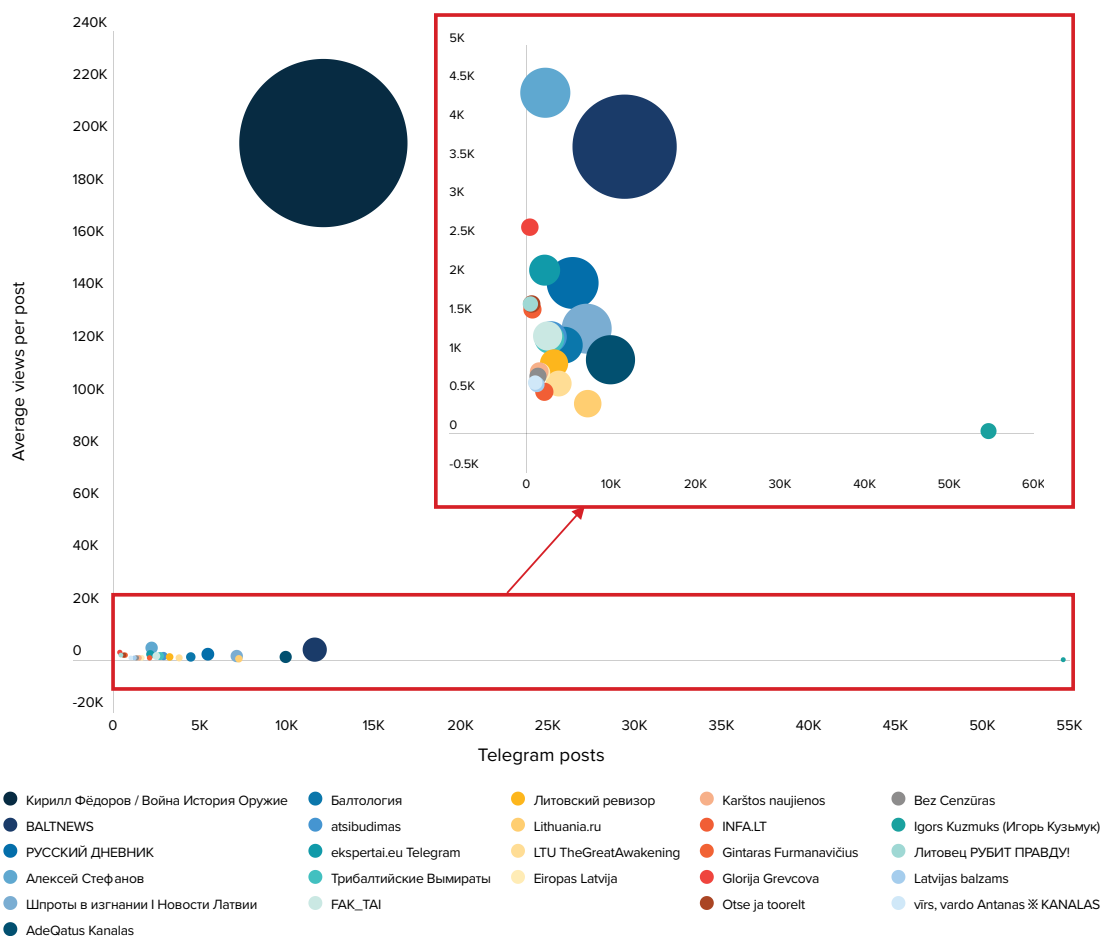


FIGURE 2. Top 25 Telegram channels as measured by average views per post, total number of posts, and total post views (intended audience: Baltic countries)

intensity and zeal, as Latvia-related pro-Kremlin channels were the most productive and amplificatory within the Baltic segment. This reflects the particular importance of countering disinformation spread from Russian propaganda in Latvia, which, of the three Baltic countries, has the most significant Russian-speaking minority, estimated at around 25–30% of the total population.¹³ The Telegram channel Aleksey Stefanov led both in terms of number of views per post and total views. The channel is run by the special correspondent for the Kremlin-owned Rossiya Segodnya, who used to live in Riga and worked in the local Russian-speaking press, but then moved to Russia and now works in another propaganda media outlet, Sputnik.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the Telegram channel Igors Kuzmuks (Игорь Кузьмук) was the most active, producing more than 54,600 posts during the analysis period. The former Riga City Council deputy Igors Kuzmuks is facing a two-year prison sentence after a call to donate funds to the Russian occupation forces in Ukraine in a video on his Telegram channel.¹⁵

As Telegram is nowhere near as popular in the Baltics as it is in Russia and/or Ukraine, many disinformation actors known in, for instance, Lithuania prefer to create accounts on more locally popular platforms such as Facebook. However, since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the growth of the Kremlin-aligned Telegram sphere in the Baltics has accelerated, as evidenced by the dates of channel creation within the pool of those used for the report.

Of the 62 tracked channels, 34 were created in 2022, with the biggest number in March 2022 (Figure 3). The only similar spike, although singular and of a smaller scale, was recorded in January 2021, and known for the record high global growth rate in the number of Telegram downloads aided by WhatsApp terms-of-service change.

Journalists and researchers have noted and scrutinised the creation of Telegram channels for the Kremlin’s influence operations in the Baltics (specifically or as a part of wider hostile information operations) to counter and deny Ukrainian and Western narratives about Russia’s invasion, and flood the information space with Kremlin propaganda and disinformation.¹⁶ This is a modus operandi of the Putin regime’s information confrontation warriors with regard to **Ukraine, both the occupied territories and those that Russia planned to seize but failed to do so.**

In early March 2022, Russian information troops targeted regional centres of Ukraine by creating dedicated Telegram channels for each township or community. These posed as a source of local news, but were in fact used to disseminate Russian narratives and bolster support for the occupiers, as well as imitate local support.¹⁷ The systematic approach was confirmed by a captured Russian senior officer and, if mapped out, reflects Russia’s initial military ambitions, as the geolocation of toponyms in the Telegram

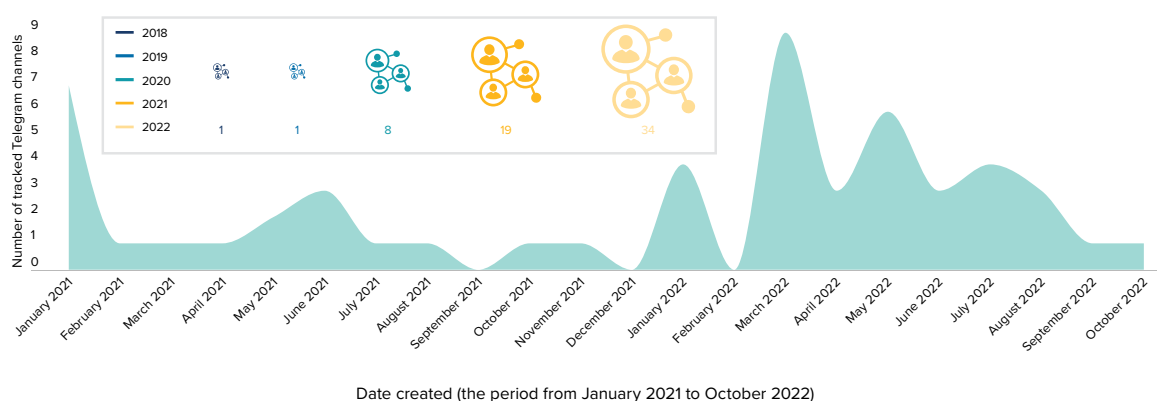


FIGURE 3. Daily dynamics of creation dates of tracked Telegram channels (intended audience: Baltic countries)

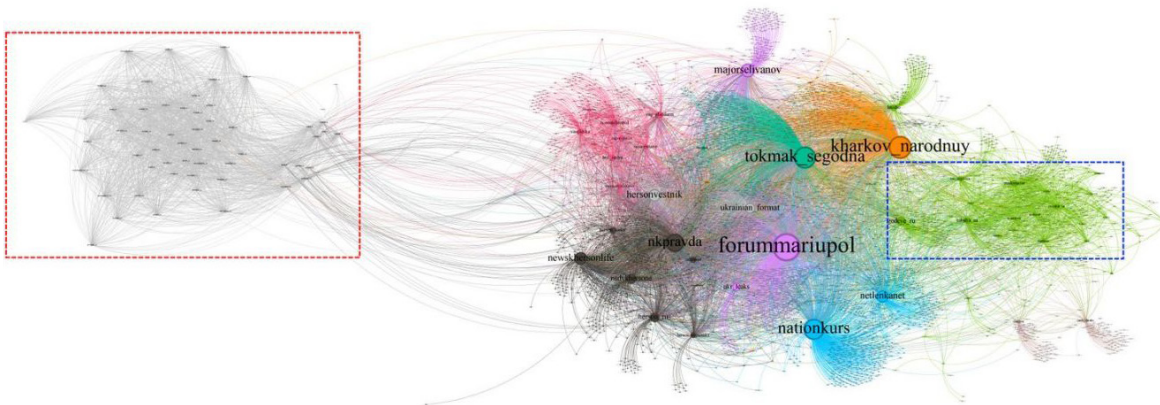


FIGURE 4. Network of Telegram channels with intended Ukrainian audience

channel names may show the territories Moscow planned to take. Moreover, in July 2022, the Security Service of Ukraine (SSU; Sluzhba Bespeky Ukrayiny, SBU) published a list of Telegram channels and warned that they were coordinated by the Kremlin.¹⁸ The list included public Telegram channels, for example Legitimnyy, Rezydent, and Kartel, that had been previously identified by the SSU as a part of a large-scale agent network specialising in intelligence and subversive activities ordered

by Russian intelligence (the GRU).¹⁹ A Ukrainian think tank specialising in combating propaganda and monitoring informational security with regard to the Ukrainian media also reported a systematic approach to creating and managing anonymous Telegram channels, many of which were used by the Kremlin to legitimise the occupation of specific villages and cities and to establish control over the information environment.²⁰

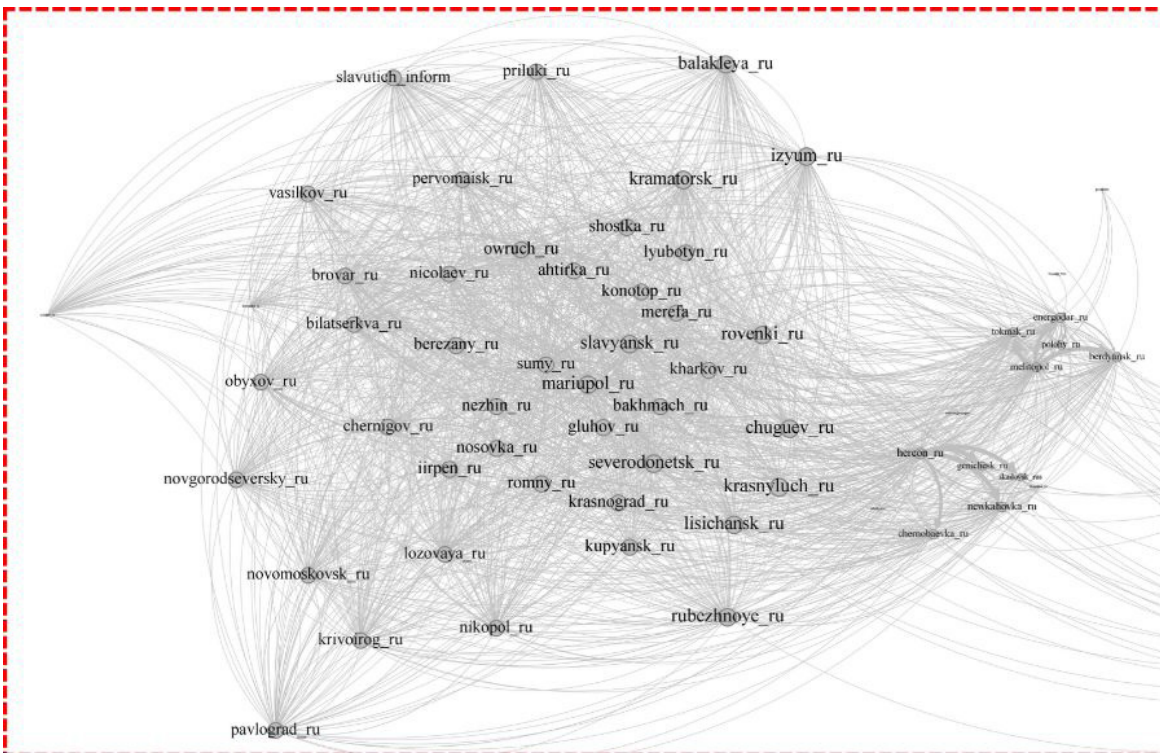


FIGURE 5. Network of channels with names of locations in Ukraine (towns and cities) created specifically for the territories that were planned to fall under Russian occupation

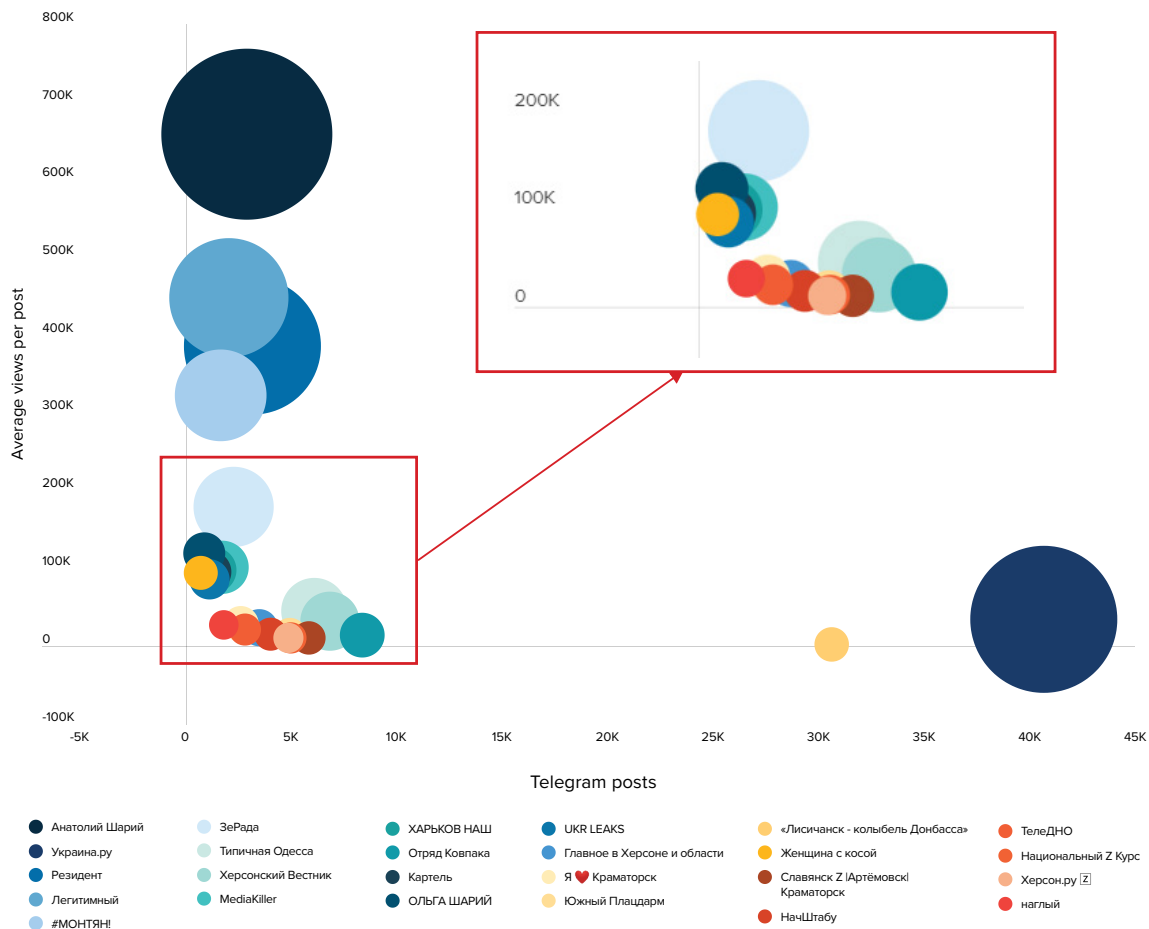


FIGURE 7. Top 25 Telegram channels as measured by the average views per post, total number of posts, and total post views (intended audience: Ukraine)

guest on Russian television, and was used by the aggressor to justify the invasion of Ukraine at an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council in February 2022.²⁴

The channels with the highest subscriber base and views per post among the Russian intelligence-related Telegram accounts with a Ukrainian intended audience included Legitimnyy and Rezydent. Each of them has had over a million subscribers since around mid 2023 and saw around a threefold subscriber rate increase in the half-year from the launch of Russia’s war against Ukraine in February 2022. The patterns of subscriber growth, however, demonstrate signs of inauthentic behaviour: some Telegram channels managed by Russia’s intelligence agencies saw major follower surges in the synchronised increases of the Legitimnyy, Rezydent, Spletnitsa,

and Kartel subscriber bases on 15–18 March and 13–18 May.²⁵

With 40,659 content pieces, the Telegram channel Ukraina.ru led in terms of the number of posts produced from April to the end of October 2022 (the period which encompasses the list of events analysed for the research). Thanks to such high productivity, this channel (a Russian state-run online resource owned by the Rossiya Segodnya news agency and a part of Russia’s disinformation and propaganda ecosystem²⁶) ranked second in terms of total post views, with approximately 1.4 billion.

As for the Telegram channels with **Russian domestic viewers** as the intended audience, we compiled a list of the top 100 public Russian Telegram channels in terms of their

reach, citation, and subscribership under the categories of blogs, media and news, and politics, as defined by TGStat.²⁷ Afterwards the list was reviewed to leave only the channels that were part of the known Russian propaganda and disinformation ecosystem and/or showed signs of continuously promoting/amplifying pro-Kremlin rhetoric. We then made sure the list included public Telegram channels that were most often referred to by the Critical Threats Project and the Institute for the Study of War as the Russian side's sources of reference on Telegram for the daily synthetic products covering key events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine.²⁸

The Telegram channel of Russia's information agency RIA Novosti led in terms of accumulated views, at approximately 16.8 billion (Figure 8). Unlike such players in the Kremlin propaganda and disinformation ecosystem as Sputnik or RT, RIA Novosti has been oriented domestically and, as a rigorous ally of the Putin regime, has since the start of the invasion been

known for posting at least two highly controversial articles: on 26 February 2022 it posted a pre-written article to mark the end of the special operation in Ukraine, and on 3 April, after Russian war crimes in Bucha started to unravel, it published an article arguing for Ukrainian ethnocide and ideological purges.²⁹ The RIA Novosti channel was also a leader in terms of the number of posts it produced. It was outpaced by a channel of Vladimir Solov'yov, who has served the Kremlin as a prominent radio and television presenter for the state-owned All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK) since 2010. Along with his producers and TV show guests, he has been flooding 'Russian-language audiences with Guinness World Record-breaking diatribes of anti-Western and anti-Ukraine disinformation, hatred, and vitriol' daily.³⁰ The fact that Solov'yov is also very active on social media, especially on Telegram (where he reportedly runs an affiliated network of 17 Telegram channels), is also attested by a graphic visualisation that we made. This

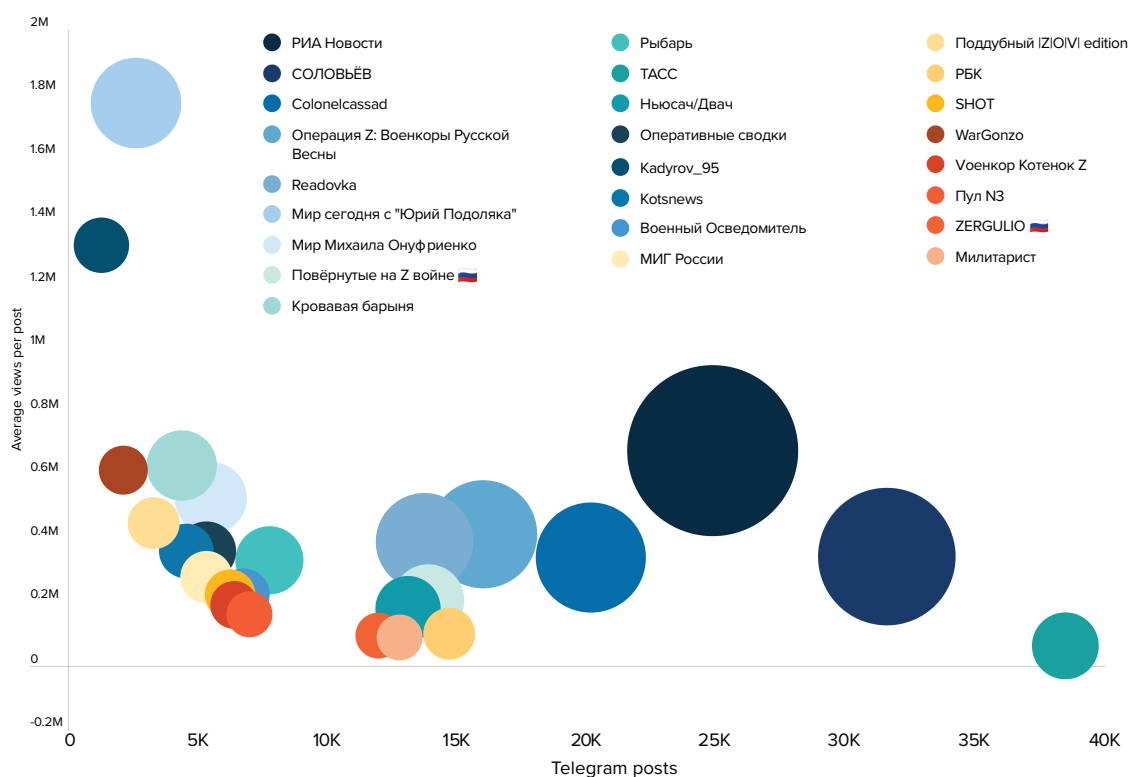


FIGURE 8. Top 25 Telegram channels as measured by the average views per post, total number of posts, and total post views (intended audience: Russian domestic)

features 47 Telegram channels associated with pro-Kremlin milbloggers, as well as sources of reference for those seeking information on the Russian war against Ukraine domestically in Russia and, to a lesser extent, abroad (the list is attached as Appendix 7 to the report, featuring brief introductions to the channels/personalities on the list). The list includes Telegram channels that fall into several groups, each of which has its own distinctive nature, such as Rybar', created by a former member of the Russian Ministry of Defence's press service, the Wagner Group-connected Reverse Side of the Medal, or bloggers who are thought to be connected with the ministry (e.g. Colonelcassad by Boris Rozhin),³¹ as well as one by the long-time Kremlin critic Igor Strelkov (Girkin).

The SolovievLive channel can be seen as a major amplifier for other sources (Figure 9), as it contributes to the dissemination of content from a wide array of other channels. Those include Yevgeniy Poddubnyy (a war correspondent since 2011 on the Rossiya-1 and

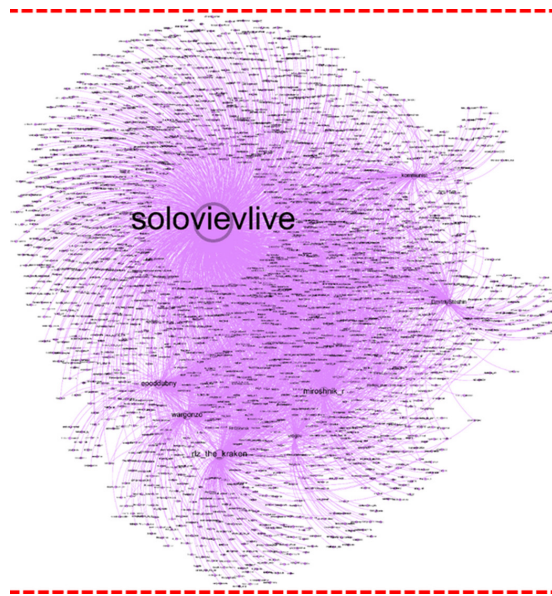


FIGURE 9. Channels amplified by the SolovievLive channel

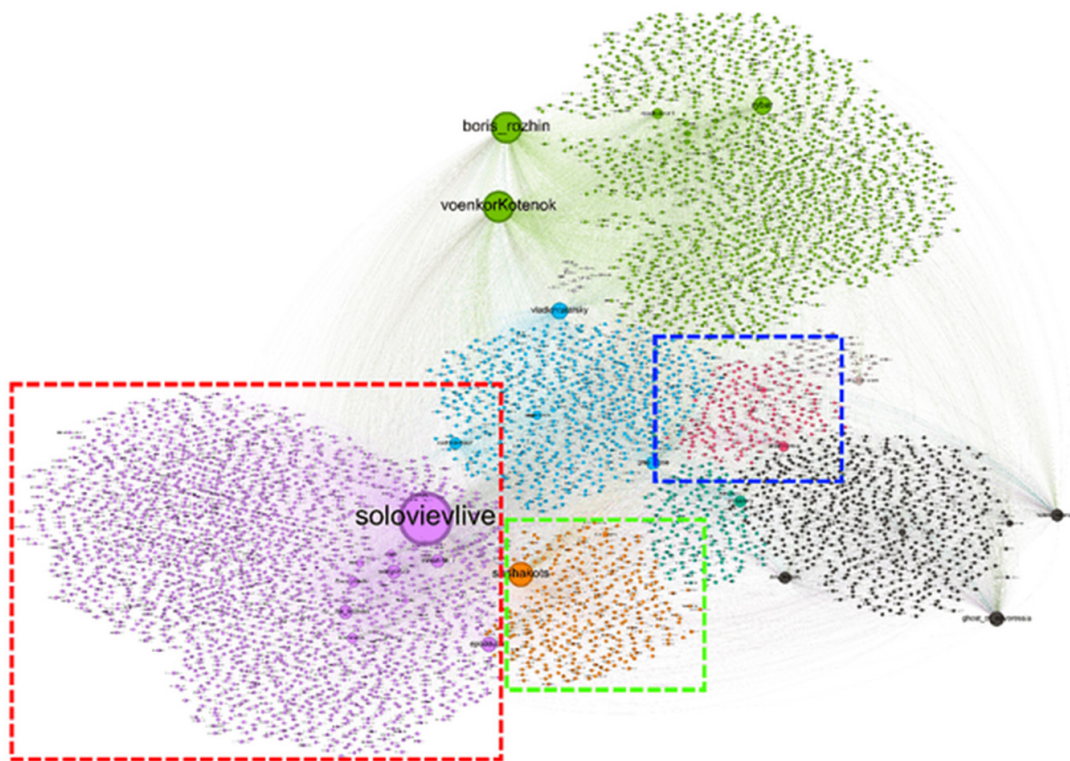


FIGURE 10. Telegram channel clusters and the biggest amplifiers among selected dedicated Telegram channels participating in Russian information warfare

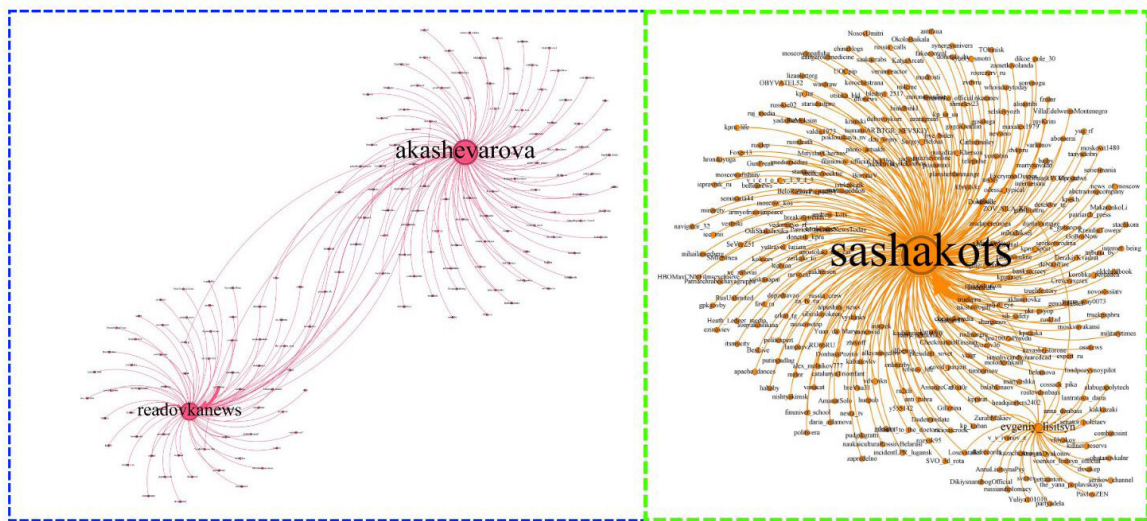


FIGURE 11. Channels amplified by the Sasha Kots and Akasheverova Telegram channels

Rossiia-24 television channels, part of the VGTRK media holding), Semyon Pegov (among those appointed as a ‘trusted person’ by Putin), Radion Miroshnik (a former official in the Russian-backed self-styled separatist administration of the so-called Luhansk People’s Republic [LPR] in eastern Ukraine), and the Yevgeniy Prigozhin-linked Telegram channel Release the Kraken! (Выпускайте Кракена!). Among the biggest content amplifiers (Figure 10), we also find Boris Rozhin (who conducts active pro-Putin propaganda and promotes the war on the Colonelcassad and LiveJournal Telegram channels) and Voenkor Kotenok Z, by Yuri Kotenok (a war correspondent, previously the head of the Media and Public Affairs Section at the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies). Within other info-space clusters, a similar role is played by Aleksandr (Sasha) Kots, a war correspondent from the *Komsomol’skaya Pravda* newspaper, also appointed as a ‘trusted person’ by Putin, and Russian pro-war blogger Anastasia Kashevarova (Figure 11).

The list of public Telegram channels mapped out for this research was cross-checked to include the accounts of those who participated at the meeting Putin held with Russian journalists/milbloggers on 13 June 2023.³² This meeting reflected how much the Kremlin promotes this group, as it had failed to prepare the Russian public for a serious and

protracted war and gain full control of the social media sphere.³³ To defuse growing discontent about Russian setbacks in Ukraine, a closed-door meeting with milbloggers had also been held on 17 June 2022. The Kremlin has been protecting Russian milbloggers from criticism and calls for censorship, rewarding selected actors with official positions and prestigious state honours³⁴ to co-opt their audience and gain access to their close ties to prominent nationalist and pro-war groups.

Such special attention to the milbloggers, however, was in line with the Kremlin’s attempts to set boundaries for criticism: what was allowed in the information space, and which high-ranking officials could be called out by milbloggers and journalists. Thus, in October 2022, Semyon Pegov, a Russian military blogger who runs WarGonzo, one of the most popular pro-war social media channels in Russia, attested that ‘the hunt for military officers and bloggers is on again’, as ‘lists of channels and journalists [were] delivered from above by individual generals and military commanders who allegedly discredit the Northern Military District and the activities of the Ministry of Defence’.³⁵ In August 2022 Aleksey Slobodenyuk, an employee of the Patriot Media group run by Prigozhin (head of the Wagner Group private military company), was detained by the Russian Special Rapid Response Unit.

He ran a network of Telegram channels known for criticising major state officials and military personnel (including Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitriy Peskov, and others).³⁶ Slobodenyuk was one of three managers at the Project Scanner channel that were arrested.³⁷ This channel was linked to the catering, propaganda, and mercenary tycoon Prigozhin.

As for the televised content, two TV shows were selected for our analysis:

- *Vesti Nedeli* ('News of the Week'): weekly informational-analytical show anchored by Dmitriy Kiselyov; airs

every Sunday at 7 p.m. Moscow time on Rossiya-1 (Russia 1)

- *Voskresnoe Vremya* ('Sunday Time'): Sunday edition, anchored by Yekaterina Berezovskaya and Vitaliy Yeliseev, of the daily news broadcast *Vremya*; airs at 7 p.m. Moscow time on Pervyy Kanal (Channel One).

The channels that these shows air on are the two most trusted among the Russian audience. Sunday shows were selected for this sample as they provide a comprehensive overview of all the important events of the week.

Methodological approach and dataset

For the research we looked at events during Russia's war against Ukraine within the overall timeframe of 1 April to 31 December 2022. **Six major events/occurrences were selected** based on the resonance they produced in the info-sphere and in correspondence with **three predefined types of event** that would hypothetically present us with different levels of preparedness by the Kremlin

to respond to them and/or use them in the informational warfare against Ukraine/the West; the aim was to highlight any cracks in the strategic communication, as well as the means of responding to them.

For each of the events, case-specific timeframes were built for the different categories of communication sources (Table 2). The

Event categories	Event/occurrence	Timeframe: official government communications; Telegram	Extended timeframe: television
Russia prepared for the event	Sanctions on Russia	1–12 April	1–24 April
	Victory Day, 9 May	7–13 May	1–15 May
Event initiated by Russia	Annexation referendums	20–27 September	20 September – 9 October
	Partial mobilisation	21–28 September	21 September – 9 October
Russia surprised by the event	Nord Stream explosions	25 September – 9 October	25 September – 16 October
	Kerch Bridge explosion	8–14 October	8–23 October

TABLE 2. Events and timeframes of analysis, April to October 2022

Event	Keywords, official government communications	Coded
Sanctions on Russia	санкц*	78
Victory Day, 9 May	(День AND Победы) OR (Дн* AND Побед*) OR ("9 AND мая")	207
Partial mobilisation	мобилизац*	46
Annexation referendums	референдум*	27
Nord Stream explosions	газопровод* OR (Северн* AND поток*) OR СП-1 OR СП-2 OR (Nord stream)	11
Kerch Bridge explosion	крымск* AND мост*	13

TABLE 3. List of keywords, official government communications

event timeframes for television were extended because both TV shows selected for the research were weekly programmes and hence needed additional time to encompass the pre- and post- Sunday editions within the timeframes designed for the official government communication and Telegram content.

A list of keywords (Table 3) was devised to find the relevant data concerning the selected events/occurrences. Within the six sources of official government communications, all articles that corresponded to the search query

regarding the predefined list of events and timeframes were coded. These articles were regarded as vectors of the Kremlin's strategic messaging throughout the three segments of communication mediums and hence required full dataset coding.

Within the Telegram posts segment, we coded sample sets in accordance with the timeframes and the search queries with the aim of a minimal margin of approximately 10% and maximum margin of approximately 15% (Table 4).

Event	Keywords, Ukrainian intended audience	N=100%	Coded	Sample size (%)
Sanctions on Russia	санкц*	667	67	10.04
Victory Day, 9 May	(День AND Победы) OR (Дн* AND Побед*) OR ("9 AND мая")	1287	130	10.10
Partial mobilisation	мобилизац*	1152	116	10.07
Annexation referendums	референдум*	4230	427	10.09
Nord Stream explosions	газопровод* OR (Северн* AND поток*) OR СП-1 OR СП-2 OR (Nord stream)	541	55	10.17
Kerch Bridge explosion	крымск* AND мост*	1336	135	10.10
Event	Keywords, Baltic intended audience	N=100%	Coded	Sample size (%)
Sanctions on Russia	sanktsioon* OR sankcij* OR санкци*	469	52	11.09

Victory Day, 9 May	(9 мая) OR Побед* OR Pergalēs OR Võidupüha OR võidupäev OR Uzvaras	639	86	13.46
Partial mobilisation	мобилизац* OR mobilizacij* OR mobilisatsioon* OR mobilizācij*	532	55	10.34
Annexation referendums	референдум* OR referendum* OR rahvahääletus*	641	71	11.08
Nord Stream explosions	газопровод* OR (Северн* AND поток*) OR СП-1 OR СП-2 OR (Nord stream)	581	60	10.33
Kerch Bridge explosion	(крымск* AND мост*) OR (Кёрченск* AND мост*) OR (Kerçës AND tilt*) OR (Крымo AND tilt*) OR (Kertši AND sild) OR (ka Krimm* AND sild) OR (Krimas AND tilt*) OR (Kerčas AND tilt*)	432	53	12.27
Event	Keywords, Russian domestic intended audience	N=100%	Coded	Sample size (%)
Sanctions on Russia	санкц*	2563	325	12.68
Victory Day, 9 May	(День AND Победы) OR (Дн* AND Побед*) OR ("9 AND мая")	1283	145	11.30
Partial mobilisation	мобилизац*	4191	424	10.12
Annexation referendums	референдум*	3722	403	10.83
Nord Stream explosions	газопровод* OR (Северн* AND поток*) OR СП-1 OR СП-2 OR (Nord stream)	1508	166	11.01
Kerch Bridge explosion	крымск* AND мост*	2923	383	13.10

TABLE 4. List of keywords, Telegram, by intended audiences

The samples were labelled by ranking content pieces in terms of the views they garnered on Telegram. As the list of Telegram public channels with Baltic countries as intended audience was highly diversified, 50% of the posts within this segment were labelled

ranked by the number of views per post, while the remainder were coded as ranked by Infometer[®], a set of parameters designed by Debunk.org to measure harmfulness of content pieces, taking into account social metrics and relevance of the post. A similar approach was

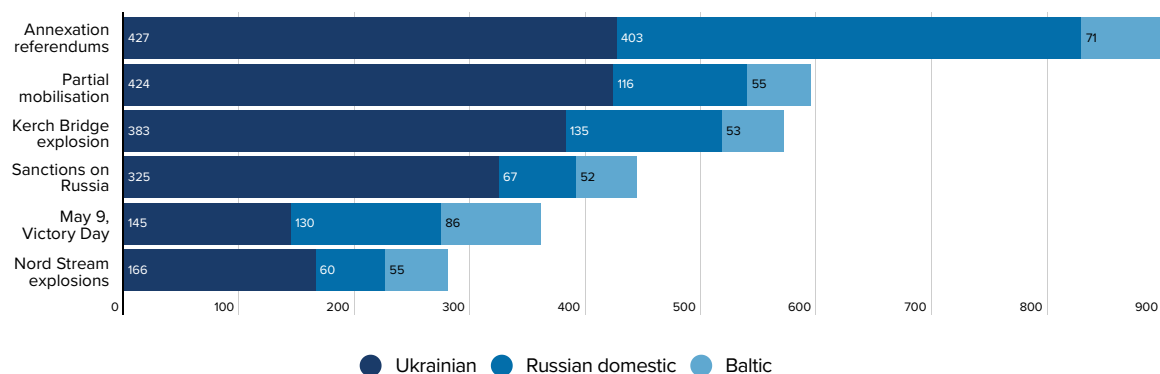


FIGURE 12. Coded content pieces per event, Telegram audiences

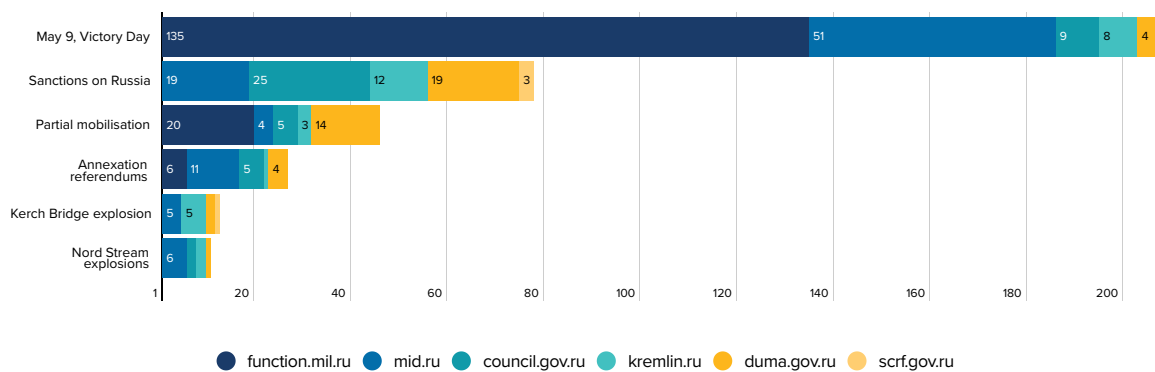


FIGURE 13. Coded content pieces per event, official government communications

used for the coding of the post content with the Russian domestic intended audience: 50% of the posts within this segment were coded as ranked by the number of views per post, while the remainder were selected from the special list of Russian milbloggers and prominent pro-Kremlin Telegram channels producing and/or amplifying content related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

In terms of the televised material, we reviewed and coded the audiovisual content in the shows that fitted into the extended timeframes, looking for strategic narration concerning the events.

Aggregated and labelled data were then reviewed, recoded, and cross-referenced, according to clustered categories of narratives, sub-narratives, and messages. The first two categories were based on the previous research carried out by Debunk.org entitled *Kremlin Communication Strategy for Russian Audiences Before and After the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine, which deals with strategic narrative formation and strategic narrative*

projection.³⁸ In the present research we also speak of strategic narratives understood as a set of media discourses built to reinforce, subvert, undermine, overwhelm, or replace a pre-existing discourse on a subject significant to both the audience and the actor, as well as an interlocking framework of ‘truths’ that explain how a conflict came to be, where it is going, and how it should be argued over and described.³⁹ The coding parameter ‘message’ that we use in the research can be understood as a smaller than sub-narrative particle in the strategic communication, a micro-narrative, as well as a more focused form of issue or policy narratives that are used to set out why a policy is needed and desirable, and how it will be achieved.⁴⁰ Charts with top messages across all media types are available in the Appendixes 1 through 6.

After applying the event-specific timeframes and keyword-defined corpus during the review, the complete sampled (Telegram) and coded datasets comprised the content pieces per event shown in Figures 12 and 13.

Case studies

Victory Day, 9 May

Classification: Russia prepared for the event

The Russian government has been heavily investing in the promotion of history as the unifying feature of Russian identity, militarising historical interpretation (as evidenced by the 2016 Russian information warfare doctrine, which implied that an assault on the Russian state's historical narrative was an assault on the very foundations of the nation), and spending billions of roubles creating historical initiatives and military history clubs, camps, and festivals.⁴¹ The cultivation of 'correct', that is, the state-supported and promoted memory of the Great Patriotic War (GPW) with its commemorative practices culminating each year on 9 May, known as Victory Day in Russia, has been the cornerstone of these policies, also sometimes referred to as an obsession, *pobedobesie* ('victory frenzy').

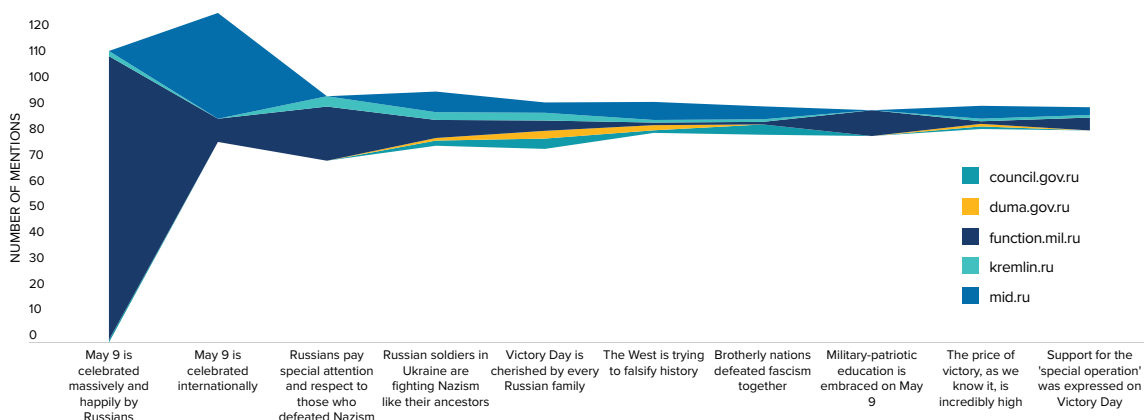
In 2014 the Russian state media and politicians conflated the Ukraine crisis and the hegemonic memory of the GPW, converting it into a test of Russianness that defined national identity through allegiance to the Kremlin's policy.⁴² After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine

in 2022, the past and present in the Russian information space became even more blurred, as the state authorities have been using this conflation, among others, to justify a stalled war effort.⁴³

We reviewed and coded a sample of approximately 10% of the posts that referred to Victory Day within the pools of Telegram channels intended for the individual audiences in the Baltic countries, Russia, and Ukraine, as well as analysing everything that was in official government communications, from 7 to 13 May 2022; for television, we used an extended timeframe of 1 to 15 May 2022. Overall, we were able to identify **32 event messages**, ranging in quantity from 1 to 157 mentions throughout the dataset.

Official communications

In official government communications (Figure 14), the Russian Ministry of Defence webpage (*function.mil.ru*) stood out in terms of the number of articles it posted on commemorating Victory Day (135 hits), as well as the share of the event message *May 9 is*



TOP 10 VICTORY DAY MESSAGES IN OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS

FIGURE 14. Top 10 Victory Day messages, official government communications

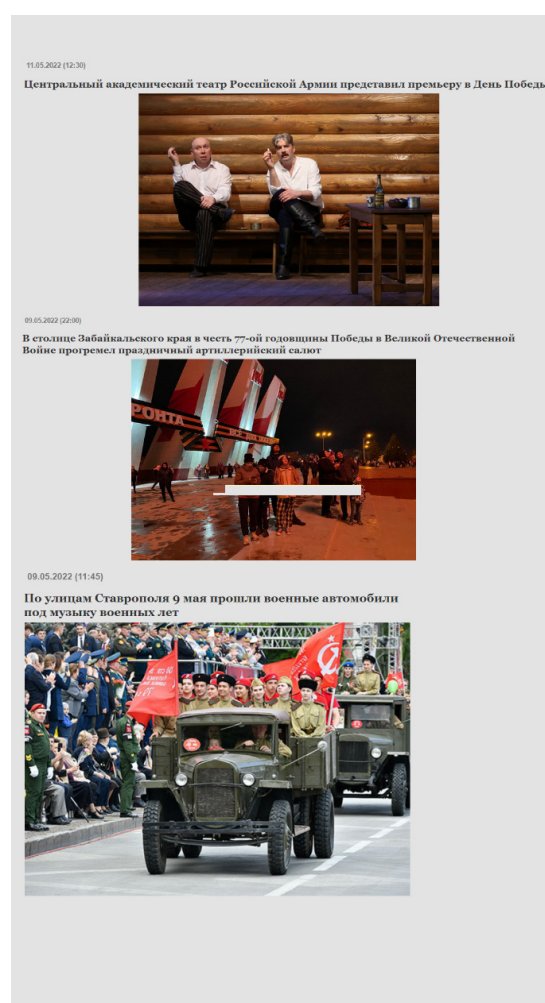
celebrated massively and happily by Russians (81.5% of the hits were labelled with this parameter).

The majority of the articles, however, were of a repetitive nature and took the form of public accountability for how the ministry found ways to commemorate the 'victory of the Soviet people', which included coverage of regional military units launching fireworks, performances by the Central Academic Theatre of the Russian Army, military sports events, motor rallies dedicated to 9 May, and so on (Screenshot 1).

The second and third most repeated event messages in relation to Victory Day on the ministry's website also correspond to templates that have long been in use and are associated with Soviet traditions: paying tribute to the veterans of the GPW (the message *Russians pay special attention and respect to those who defeated Nazism*) and carrying out activities in the realm of military-patriotic education (*Military-patriotic education is embraced on 9 May*). Even though the two messages relate to Russia's preparedness to wage war against Ukraine (as per the Alexei Navalny-related ban on insults and 'false information' against GPW veterans passed in 2021⁴⁴ and the Kremlin's launch of a new indoctrination mechanism aimed at Russian youth to make them supportive of the regime and motivated to go to war⁴⁵), the vast majority of both messages did not include direct mentions of Ukraine, just like those referring to how much and how happily Russia was celebrating Victory Day. Overall, out of the 135 coded messages from the ministry's website, only 12 mentioned either Ukraine or Kyiv in the context of the so-called 'special military operation'. These included an order by the defence minister Sergei Shoigu to allow the 'firing of artillery salutes with the involvement of military units' with a statement that falls under the message category of *Russian soldiers in Ukraine are fighting Nazism like their ancestors*:

*Today, soldiers and officers of the Russian army, fulfilling their military duty, are at the forefront of the fight against the followers of Nazism, reliably protecting the national interests of Russia during the special military operation in Ukraine.*⁴⁶

Another series of articles relating to Russia's war against Ukraine within the coverage of the ministry's webpage included those that expressed support for the 'special military operation' as it had been carried out since



SCREENSHOT 1. The Ministry of Defence website: (1) The Central Academic Theatre of the Russian Army presented a premiere on Victory Day. (2) In honour of the 77th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War, a festive artillery salute took place in the capital of the Zabaykalskiy Krai. (3) On 9 May, military vehicles paraded through the streets of Stavropol to the music of the war years.



8 мая в преддверии Дня Победы в Посольстве России в Анкаре состоялась шествие «Бессмертного полка». В турецкой столице оно проводится уже в пятый раз. Мероприятие было организовано Посольством во взаимодействии с ассоциацией Преподавателей-русистов и переводчиков г.Анкары. Несколько сотен соотечественников, сотрудников российских заграничных учреждений в Турции и членов их семей прошли с портретами своих родственников – участников Великой Отечественной войны. Собравшиеся пронесли 20-метровую Георгиевскую ленту, исполнили песни военных лет.

SCREENSHOT 2. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: 'A march of the Immortal Regiment took place in Ankara'

March 2022, for instance through initiatives involving Z and V, Russian symbols of the war, with people and/or cars lining to form the two letters.⁴⁷

In a similar vein to the Ministry of Defence webpage, most of the articles posted by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on its official website (mid.ru) were a form of accountability and formal announcements of what had been done by Russian diplomatic representations to properly commemorate Victory Day abroad. Hence, the majority shared the message that Victory Day is celebrated internationally (mentioned 41 times within 51 articles reviewed for this report), detailing events either organised by diplomatic missions abroad to mark 9 May or attended by their staff (Screenshot 2). Some of the articles included a more detailed account of how Russia was again fighting Nazism and/or efforts to induce historical amnesia:

The ambassador emphasised that today this is necessary [...] to 'take away from our country, from our Motherland, the misfortune that is again hovering over Russia. It comes from the spiritual heirs and followers of those who

*then, in 1941, came to our land to kill our people, burn our villages and cities, to deny our country, our people, the very right to exist.*⁴⁸

The official webpage of the Russian president (kremlin.ru) touted articles of how Mr Putin took part in the festivities designed to mark Victory Day 2022, including the military parade and the Immortal Regiment procession, with his speech—referring to the war against Ukraine as 'a pre-emptive strike at the aggression' of a clash with 'neo-Nazis and Banderites backed by the United States and their minions' and as 'a forced, timely and the only correct decision [...] by a sovereign, strong and independent country'⁴⁹—cited throughout international and domestic media.

Telegram

Within the Telegram posts that we labelled as having pro-Kremlin actors advocating Moscow's official strategic narratives (quoted directly or indirectly), the head of the Russian state was indeed the most cited. Overall, however, within the sample of Telegram posts we analysed in relation to Victory Day with Ukraine, Russia, and the Baltic countries as the intended audiences, the number of such quotes was low. In total, 362 post were coded, out of which 24 quoted state representatives or propaganda figures about the Victory Day. Putin was quoted in nine of those posts, three of them had primarily Russia as the intended audience, issued by the official Telegram channel of the state-run news agency RIA Novosti, which could be referred to as a window into Russian propaganda,⁵⁰ and the Pul N3 (Пул N3) Telegram channel, run by a reporter from the Kremlin's pool of journalists covering President Putin.

Notwithstanding the low number of references to Putin, the key message (Figure 15) that we found narrated to the domestic Russian audience, *Russian soldiers in Ukraine are fighting Nazism like their ancestors*, resonated with what Putin said in his Red Square Victory Day parade address:

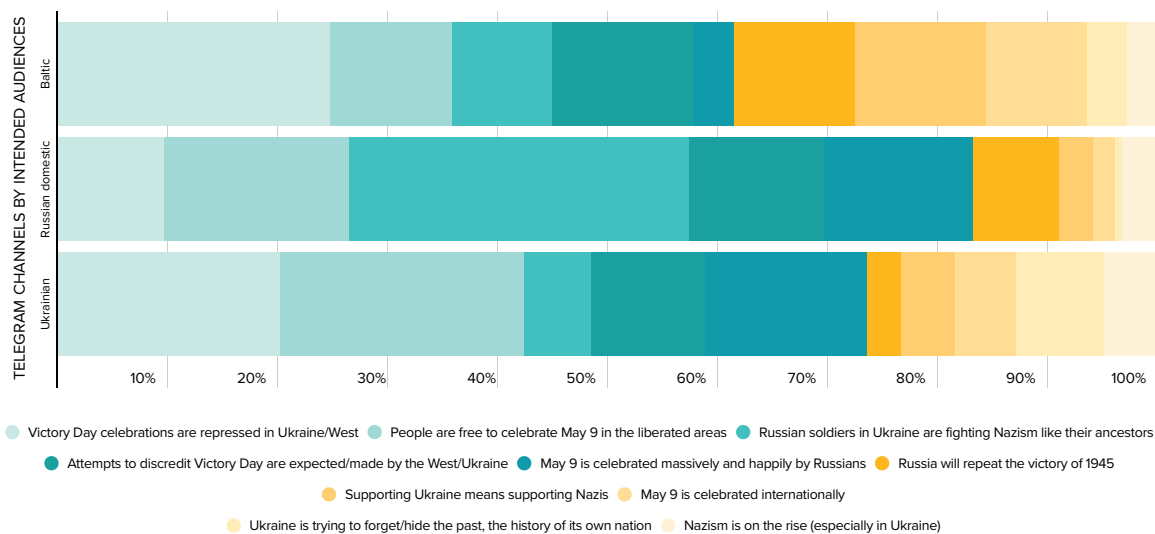


FIGURE 15. Messages about Victory Day on Telegram by intended audiences

I am addressing our Armed Forces and Donbas militia. You are fighting for our motherland, its future, so that nobody forgets the lessons of World War II, so that there is no place in the world for torturers, death squads and Nazis.⁵¹

The message builds on the templates that were already in use in the historical framing of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, collapsing temporal distance between the GPW and the contemporary war⁵² launched by Russia. The practice, also referred to as war merging, which blurs the boundaries between contemporary wars and prevailing political myths about wars of the past, is motivated by the wish to either make sense of and/or legitimise the contemporary warfare.⁵³ Thus, in the data sample we analysed containing the message *Russian soldiers in Ukraine are fighting Nazism like their ancestors*, the post that garnered the largest number of views, at more than 1.9 million, was found on the Telegram channel The World Today with ‘Yuriy Podolyaka’. Podolyaka, who later received an accolade from Putin⁵⁴ and was present at the Russian president’s meeting with milbloggers on 13 June 2023, celebrated Victory Day with his audience by posting a Soviet postcard (Screenshot 3) and saying:

Unfortunately, we are again at war. Again, with the surviving Nazis. But we are the

grandchildren of the winners, our cause is right, and therefore Victory will be ours!!!⁵⁵

Although no toponyms are mentioned, in this post the war against Ukraine is being denoted as ‘war’ in the context of the Kremlin’s ban on actually using the word to refer to what Putin has been terming the ‘special

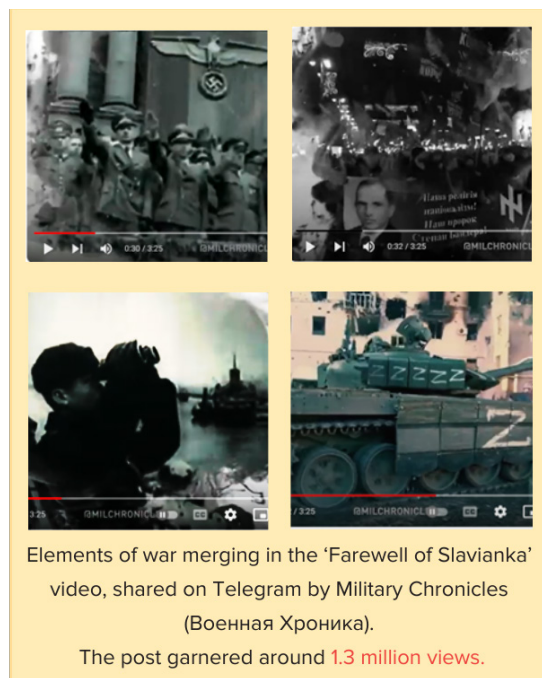


SCREENSHOT 3. Telegram channel of Yuriy Podolyaka: greetings on Victory Day, 9 May 2022

military operation',⁵⁶ as in early March 2022 the state criminalised media referring to the armed conflict as a 'war' or an 'invasion' after passing a law against 'spreading fakes' about the Russian military. Nevertheless, it comes as an example of Putinist newspeak, which calls the enemy—those fighting the occupation of Ukraine—Nazis.

The post that ranked second in terms of viewership and related to Victory Day via the message of how the Russians were currently fighting off Nazis, just as their ancestors did, followed the newspeak rules correctly. This post (which, like other messages from the *Voennaya khronika* (Military chronicles) channel, was unavailable on Telegram at the time of writing this analysis and could only be found in the web archives⁵⁷) spoke of remembering 'the feat of our ancestors in the fight against fascism and those who continue this fight during the special operation in Ukraine', alongside a video of the 'Farewell of Slavianka' (Screenshot 4), a Russian patriotic march known for being performed during the Red Square parade of 7 November 1941, after which soldiers went straight to fight in the Battle of Moscow. The video itself uses a historical framing of the events in Ukraine, interchanging screenshots of battles dating back to the GPW with those of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as well as vividly conflating the Nazis parading in Germany with the 'enemy in Ukraine'—Banderovites and neo-Nazis.

The framing of Russia's war against Ukraine via blurring the temporal boundaries and referencing the GPW has naturally increased the usage of the terms 'Nazi' and 'fascist' (however Orwellian their use was), which is especially true of the latter. The term 'fascist' to denote Ukrainians was used to a much lesser extent than 'Nazi', although the sample of posts reviewed included a forwarded post by Mardan (Sergey Klyuchenkov), a leading blogger for the Russian publication *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* and a frequent guest on the *Solov'yov Live TV* talk show, who was critical of using the term 'Nazis' when it came to Ukraine and the GPW overall:



Elements of war merging in the 'Farewell of Slavianka' video, shared on Telegram by Military Chronicles (Военная Хроника).

The post garnered around 1.3 million views.

SCREENSHOT 4. 'Farewell of Slavianka' video shared on Telegram

*Soviet history used the term 'German fascism'. The USSR defeated the 'German fascist invaders'. There was no Nazism in Soviet military literature and cinema either. [...] 'Nazis' are from the films of Tarantino and Spielberg. You don't say that in Russian. Therefore, the use of the thesis about 'denazification' and 'Ukrainian Nazism' initially looks unconvincing. [...] The Euro-Atlantic version of the history of World War II is 'Holocaust-centric' according to the definition of the historian Alexei Miller. The tragedy of the Holocaust is central to this historiography and the criminal nature of German Nazism is inseparable from the genocide of the Jewish people. Nazism according to European public opinion can be directed exclusively against Jews. And since Zelensky is a Jew, then there is nothing to talk about. You are lying all the time. Russia, just like its public ideology, should not play by someone else's rules. We will definitely be outplayed.*⁵⁸

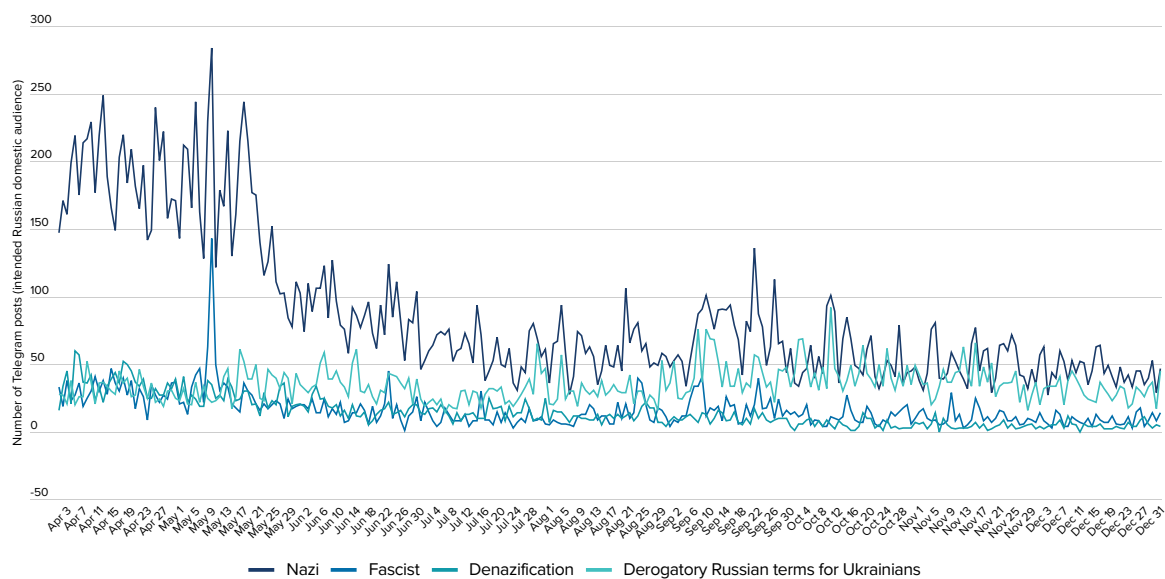


FIGURE 16. Number of Telegram posts including derivatives of the keywords ‘nazi’ / ‘fascist’ and derogatory Russian terms for Ukrainians

When we looked at the frequency of using the term ‘Nazi’ (and selected derivatives designed for Ukrainians specifically⁵⁹) in all of the Telegram posts with the intended Russian domestic audience (Figure 16), we found that it was heavily in use until the last days of May 2022, around the time Russia took control of the Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol, with its next highest on 21 September, the day Russia traded Azov fighters for a Putin ally and Putin announced the so-called ‘partial mobilisation’. The use of specifically ‘denazification’, meanwhile, having declined steadily throughout the period of the report, was outpaced by ‘fascist’ by the end of 2022. We also compared the use of selected derogatory terms used by Russians to label Ukrainians.⁶⁰ The increasing use of the latter seems to be associated with greater success on the frontlines and Ukrainian counteroffensives. The two trends—the diminishing use of ‘Nazi’ related terms and an increase in anti-Ukrainian derogative words—may be signalling a change of rhetoric from the above (linguistic desecuritisation⁶¹ against the background of the failed blitzkrieg), as well as ‘normalisation’ of the war against Ukraine at the grassroots level. This is the case with a post by Sasha Kots, a leading milblogger and *Komsomol’skaya Pravda* reporter, who both normalises and

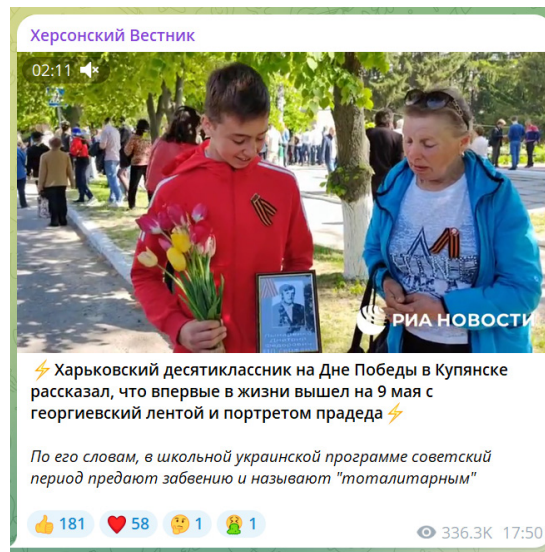
romanticises the war, thus serving the purposes of Kremlin propaganda, by giving his account of how he celebrated Victory Day:

It’s an unusual feeling when you celebrate Victory Day at a point where both the past and the present are intertwined in one time period. Where young boys fight to the death on the frontiers that their ancestors once defended. At the same time, frontline life at the front has hardly changed. Pictures of Soviet military literature with its trench truth, archetypes of real Russian heroes and the not always pleasant underbelly of terrible battles, seem to come to life before you. Here, like nowhere else, you feel what the hackneyed cliché ‘continuity of generations’ means. And what it’s like to be worthy of your ancestors.⁶²

Almost half of the messages that we reviewed in the Telegram posts with Ukraine as the intended audience were designed to show that finally, after Russian ‘liberation’, local residents were free and happy to celebrate 9 May, unlike those still living in the territories controlled by Ukraine, which, like Western

countries, repress the celebration of Victory Day (*People are free to celebrate 9 May in the liberated areas had a share of 18.2% of the total event message mentions and Victory Day celebrations are repressed in Ukraine/West, 16.7%*). For instance, a video was shared on Telegram about how a tenth-grader from Kharkiv was happy to be able to celebrate Victory Day in Kupyansk, ‘liberated’ by the Russians, and voiced complaints about how ‘the Soviet period is forgotten and called “totalitarian” in the Ukrainian school curriculum’ (Screenshot 5).⁶³ The UKR Leaks channel forwarded a post from the Russian propaganda mouthpiece abroad RT in which Mehmet Perinçek, introduced as a Turkish historian, was cited as saying that ‘not only the residents of Donbass suffered from the Kyiv regime, but also Russian-speaking Ukrainians who did not agree with the “dictatorship of neo-Nazis”’. Perinçek, a visiting professor at the Institute of Asian and African Studies of Moscow State University, and a son of Doğu Perinçek—a right-wing radical Turkish politician, leader of the Vatan party and known to be friends with an ultranationalist Russian thinker Aleksandr Dugin—came to the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine in 2022, at the invitation of the Russian Ministry of Defence, and afterwards made a series of anti-Ukrainian statements.⁶⁴ According to him, Russian speakers ‘were not allowed to celebrate Victory Day, they were not allowed to speak their native language, children in schools were forced to hate their neighbours’, and during ‘this dictatorship, people disappeared, went missing—this was all before the Russian special operation’.⁶⁵

Among the posts that garnered the largest number of views in the segment of Ukrainian Telegram we reviewed were those of Tatyana Montyan, who actively participated in the Kremlin’s attempts to build a case to justify an invasion of Ukraine by creating an illusion of mass atrocities in the Donbas region.⁶⁶ On 9 May she spoke about what had been ‘happening in eastern Ukraine’ for eight years, and how ignoring it made the Russian assault against Ukraine ‘not an easy walk’, and therefore ‘Victory Day [is] without victory’.⁶⁷ She



SCREENSHOT 5. Telegram post on the Khersonskiy Vestnik channel: ‘A tenth-grader from Kharkiv turned out on Victory Day for the first time, with a picture of his grandfather’

also scolded the ‘Russian information and ideological elite imitating patriots’ and their ‘rottenness’ for ‘huge failures on the information and ideological front’, even though ‘people are clamouring for the return of the time that united



SCREENSHOT 6. Telegram post on the #MONTYAN! channel: ‘Victory Day unites all nations of Russia, and it pisses the West off’

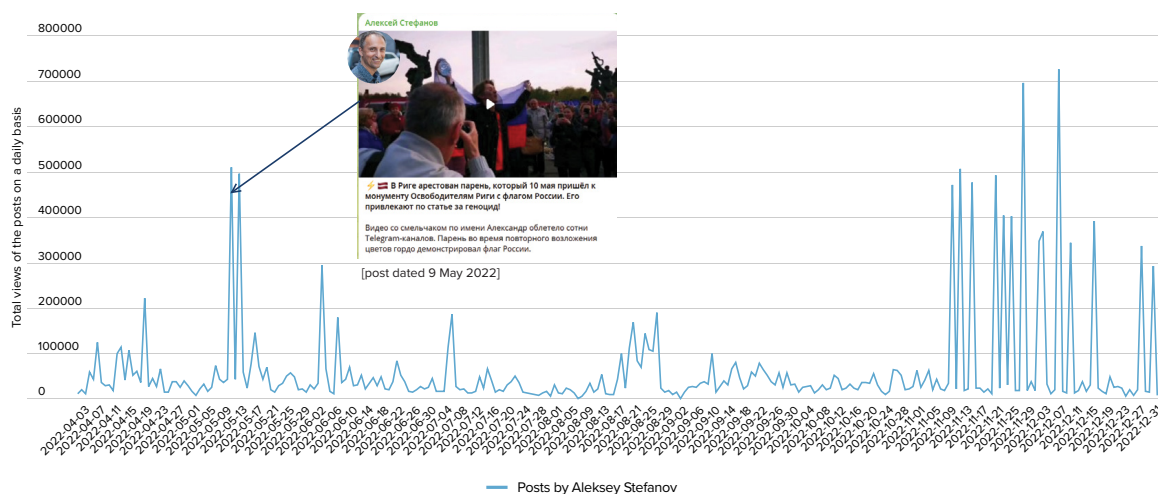


FIGURE 17. Dynamics of Telegram posts by Aleksey Stefanov

us all and gave meaning to life'.⁶⁸ Her appeal to the Soviet era as a meaningful golden age, which can be heard frequently in interviews with Russian collaborators in Ukraine conducted by the journalist Volodymyr Zolkin,⁶⁹ was repeated in other posts by Montyan on the occasion of Victory Day, such as one blaming the main Russian TV channels for broadcasting too few Soviet films on the topic on that day. She also shared a video of a Kazakh band performing the Soviet war songs 'Den' Pobedy' ('Victory Day') and 'Katyusha', saying that 'Our people are ours everywhere, and this holiday unites *all our people!*' (Screenshot 6),⁷⁰ thus adding to the message of how 'brotherly nations' won the war.

In the Telegram segment with the Baltics as the intended audiences, much revolved around the events related to the Monument to the Liberators in Riga's Victory Park, and hence the event message *Victory Day celebrations are repressed in Ukraine/the West* led in terms of mentions and views garnered. The war against Ukraine has proved to be a decolonising moment, and perhaps a game changer for Central and East European countries in their vocal countering of Russia's attempted denial of the sovereign political agency of Ukraine (and by extension, Russia's former imperial subjugates).⁷¹ As an expression of this, 9 May 2022 was designated by the Latvian Parliament

as the day of commemoration of the victims in Ukraine. The Latvian authorities issued a warning against using symbols that would show support for the Russian war against Ukraine, fenced off a part of the area around the monument, and bulldozed the flowers laid beside it early next morning, sparking protest among ardent supporters of Victory Day celebrations. The Kremlin and its supporters were quick to use news of these events;⁷² the Telegram channel of Aleksey Stefanov referred to them and was a source of amplification. Stefanov, a 'special correspondent for the Rossiya Segodnya media group, author of a Telegram channel—a source of exclusive news on the life of Russians in the Baltics', issued a post about a young man who was walking around the park wrapped in a Russian flag being arrested by Riga Municipal Police. It gained more than 400,000 views, which can be set against the journalist's several thousand subscribers. In the text of the post, along with a video, Stefanov asked:

*What is this article of the Criminal Law? 'Justification of genocide, crimes against humanity, peace and hostilities.' This is how the public demonstration of the national flag of Russia is referred to today in 'democratic' Latvia. [...] We need as many reposts as possible!! This is the genocide of the Russian-speaking inhabitants of Latvia!*⁷³

Stefanov's reporting on 9 May via Telegram clearly distinguishes among other posters, as he reached a much wider audience than his average. In the graph of how far his posts reached in terms of views gained daily in the period of our analysis (Figure 17), we can also see that his posts had a wider reach in November 2022. This was when Russia was withdrawing from Kherson and may also evidence attempts by Kremlin-aligned actors to divert attention from the frontlines into other possible areas of info-warfare. More Telegram channels designed for the Baltics also began their life in November 2022, e.g., Антифашисты Прибалтики, Русская Прибалтика, СМЕРШ Латвия ру (Baltic Antifascists, Russian Baltics, SMERSH Latvia).

The narrative *Russia holds to high moral standards* was the leading line of communication in the coverage of Victory Day in the segment of Telegram posts for all audiences combined, mostly through the sub-narrative *Victory in WWII is inseparable from every Russian's identity and is celebrated widely* (Figure 18).

As per the war merging effect, the sub-narratives claiming Russia was (again) *fighting Nazism in Ukraine* were also on top, discrediting both the state of Ukraine and its legitimate authorities. Other popular sub-narratives during the period were *Kyiv was accused of rewriting history and spreading false information about Russia*, which is in line with the general trend, as any attempts to have a vision of history different from the Kremlin's official view and that of Putin's, who assumed the role of the chief historian, are deemed to be deviation from objectivity and truth.

Television

The main narrative in the television coverage was *Russia holds to high moral standards* (sub-narrative *Victory in WWII is inseparable from every Russian's identity and is celebrated widely*), which aligned with communication on Telegram and the websites of official institutions. The coverage of Victory Day was interlaced with the current realities of the

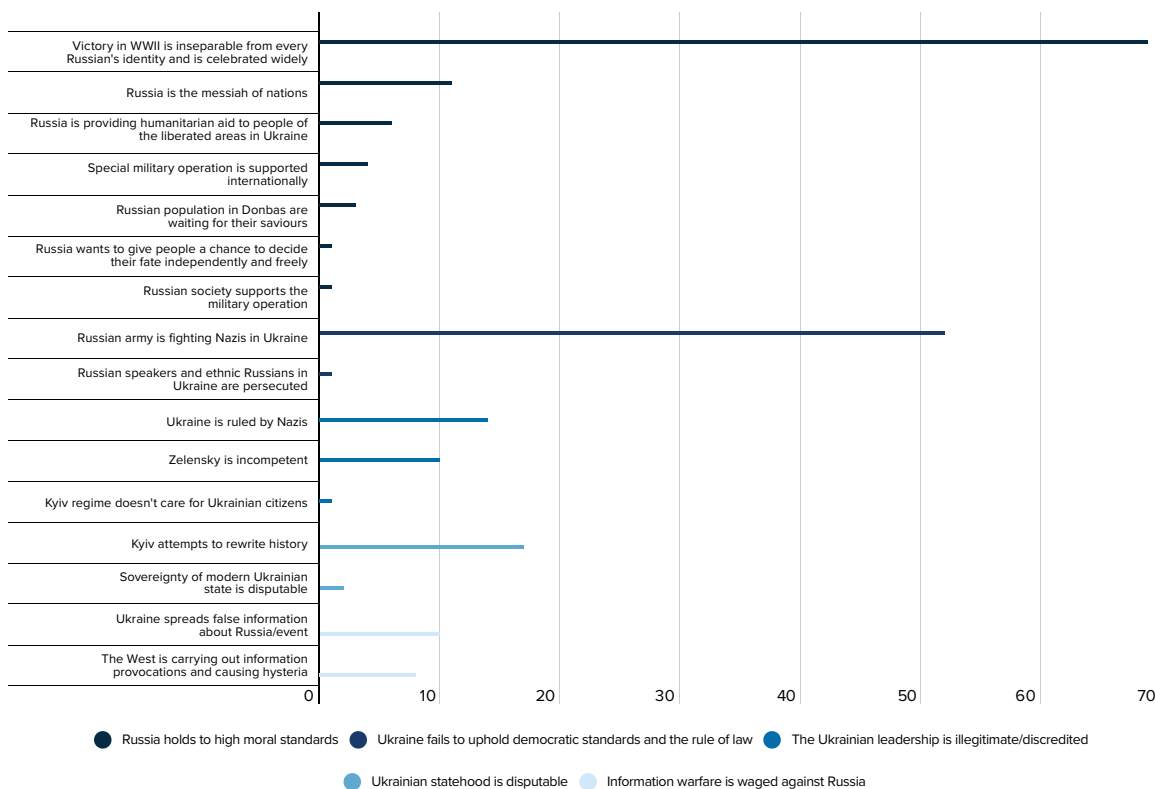


FIGURE 18. Main narratives/sub-narratives about Victory Day on Telegram (all audiences combined)

‘special military operation’, which is evidenced by the list of top messages, where *People are free to celebrate May 9 in the liberated territories* prevails (Figure 19).

Note: coverage of the events on television typically flowed in distinct stages; therefore, this logic will be applied to our discussion

Emphasis fell on the mass appeal of the event and ensuring security ‘in countries where Victory Day celebrations are banned’. However, **Victory Day was also used to portray Russia and its culture as not as isolated as the West was trying to suggest**, as ‘more than 120 countries responded positively to the request to organise the action’.⁷⁵

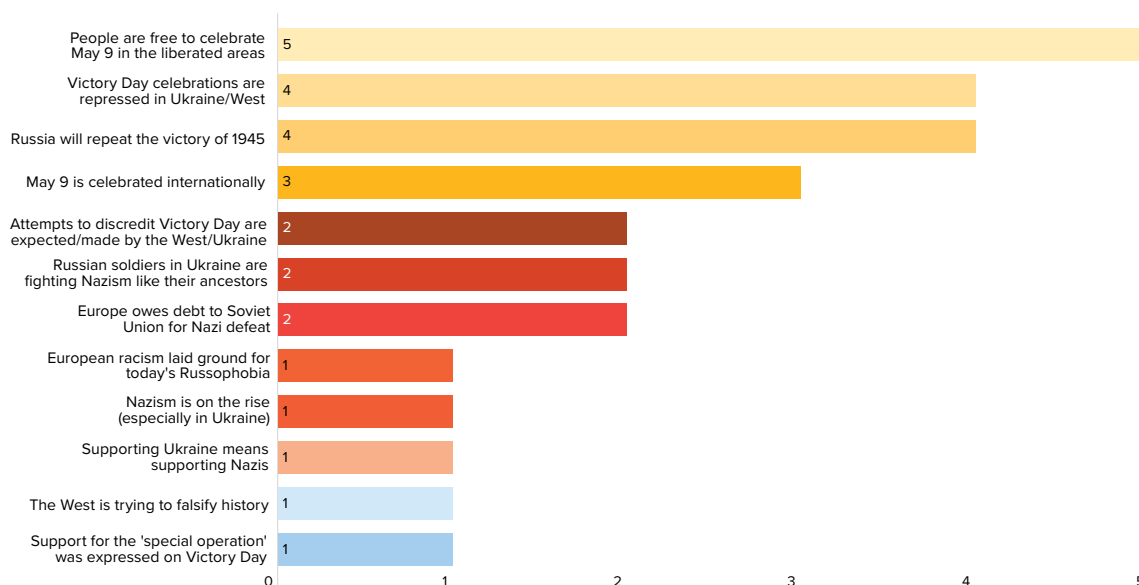


FIGURE 19. Dominant messages about Victory Day on Russian state television

of all the events mentioned in this report, apart from ‘Sanctions on Russia’ (see below).

Stage 1: Preparation

As the commemoration of the GPW was approaching, both Rossvia-1 and Pervyy Kanal took some airtime to promote their special projects dedicated to the veterans. For example, Pervyy Kanal introduced a series, *Живи и помни* (Live and remember), where each episode told the story of a GPW veteran.

The most attention was given to the **organisation of the Immortal Regiment marches** in Russia and abroad (Бессмертный полк), which is the ‘heart and soul of Victory Day’.⁷⁴ Annual events involve people carrying pictures of their loved ones who served in the Soviet army, labour sector, paramilitary organisations, and so on, and are meant to ‘immortalise’ their memory.

Notably, as the siege of Mariupol was still under way in May, a **significant amount of airtime was dedicated to reports about the Azov regiment** (Screenshot 7). Given the context of Victory Day, the narrative of Ukraine being a Nazi state is important to mention here. Victory Day provided a favourable environment to amplify such rhetoric, both audibly and visually, and reminded viewers of the necessity of the ‘special military operation’ and the heroic deeds of Russian soldiers who were carrying on the legacy of their veteran grandfathers.

Denazification is when neo-Nazis from the Azov are rotting alive in cold basements of the factory, and bodies of other Nazis are rotting at the destroyed positions. These are the same Nazis which inflicted terror on Donbas residents. [...] The war against Nazism is not an abstract thing. What the Russian army is successfully doing today is not just a slogan.



SCREENSHOT 7. A Vesti Nedeli broadcast about the Azov regiment, 1 May 2022

[...] Today, however, the concept of denazification applies not only to neo-Nazi units, but also to most of the Ukrainian army.⁷⁶

Such examples have many objectives: they are meant to create a sense of purpose for the ‘special military operation’, dehumanise the enemy, and glorify the righteous fight of the Russian army, which will finally end the suffering of people in Donbas (just as their ancestors helped to get rid of Nazis during the GPW).

Stage 2: Anticipation

In the run-up to the celebrations, both *Vesti Nedeli* and *Voskresnoe Vremya* provided information about all the necessary celebratory attributes: the parade on the Red Square, the marches of the Immortal Regiment, and paying respects at the Undying Flame memorial.

Reports about the Immortal Regiment events also focused on the fact that such actions had already taken place not only in Russian cities, towns, and villages, but also in Venezuela, China, Italy, Spain, and Israel.

Alongside highlighting how Victory Day was widely celebrated in the ‘sensible parts of the world’, this event also provided a convenient context to repeat the narrative of Russophobia boiling up all over the world (especially Ukraine and the West):

Victory Day has not been celebrated in Ukraine since 2015. Moreover, this time, the leadership of a number of cities and regions announced the introduction of a daily curfew for nine days on 9 May with a ban on leaving the house. In contrast, in the cities of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, which were liberated from the Banderovites, there are no such restrictions.⁷⁷

The upcoming Victory Day was again used as a pretext to mention the fact that heroic deeds of the ancestors had to be repeated and the memory of their victory was at the core of contemporary Russia. Quotes from Putin were used to solidify the historical parallel further:

To crush Nazism, to not allow it to return, is our common duty, emphasised the president, when addressing the heads of the republics of Donbas. He noted that today our troops are again fighting to liberate their native land and expressed confidence that victory will be ours just like in 1945.⁷⁸

The narrative of ‘we can do it again’⁷⁹ referring to the victory over Nazi Germany is not new in the Kremlin’s strategic communication. Historical parallels were already in use to justify the armed conflict in Donbas and could be considered as an integral part of the overarching narrative regarding Victory Day and the weaponisation of history in general:⁸⁰

*We won then, defending the very right to live for the whole country and each of us. That experience and the memory of it are at the heart of Russia's actions today.*⁸¹

This argument is heightened by showing the support of **people in 'liberated' areas of Ukraine, patiently waiting for their saviours**. One of more notable examples is the case of an old lady in a village in Kharkiv region⁸² who came out to greet Ukrainian soldiers with a Soviet flag (Screenshot 8). She was quickly turned into a symbol of Ukrainians who regret the collapse of the Soviet Union, with statues and murals being set up in her honour (including in the destroyed city of Mariupol). The canonical peasant woman, who looks like she walked out of the 1940s into the current day, once again establishes the ties between the GPW and the 'special military operation':

*A grandmother defended her own truth from Ukrainian soldiers when she went out to greet them with the red banner, having mistaken them for our unit. This week we received good news. She is alive and together with her husband has been transferred to Kharkiv. The bad news is that the **nationalists have not left her alone, they cannot accept that the grandmother's deed is known and respected far beyond Ukraine.***⁸³



Screenshot 8. The story about the grandmother with a Soviet flag aired on *Voskresnoe Vremya*, 1 May 2022

Stage 3: Reflection

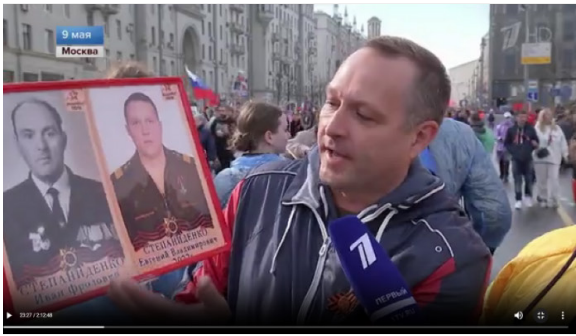
At the last stage of the communication centred on reporting Victory Day commemorative events, the amount of airtime attributed to the topic was the longest.

Putin's speech at the military parade provided a basis for connecting the GPW to the war in Ukraine and again presented the rationale for the 'special military operation'. In his speech he mentioned victims of Nazi Germany during World War II, people who died in the Trade Unions House fire in Odesa in 2014, and soldiers who died in Ukraine side by side, as if to signify that the current situation is the same as 77 years ago and Russia is facing the same tragedy:

*It was a forced, timely, and the only correct decision. The decision of a sovereign, strong independent country. I am now addressing our armed forces and the resistance of Donbas. You are fighting for your homeland, for its future. For no one is to forget the lessons of World War II. So that there is no place in the world for executioners, punishers, and Nazis. [...] We bow our heads before our fighting comrades who fell to their deaths, brave in their right to fight for Russia.*⁸⁴

Through reports about the Immortal Regiment, **9 May is also framed as a personal event for every Russian**, as many people have relatives who served and died during the GPW and on the front in Ukraine (Screenshot 9):





SCREENSHOT 9. The ‘Immortal Regiment’ marches aired on *Voskresnoe Vremya*, 15 May 2022

Here is the Stepanidenko couple with two photos of defenders against Nazism on a poster, their [grandfather, who was a] veteran, and their son, a sniper. ‘My grandfather was an artilleryman and reached Berlin. And this is my son Stepanidenko Yevgeniy Vladimirovich, his great-grandson. He died just a month ago in Ukraine, near Kharkiv, in the town of Izyum.’⁸⁵

Special attention was paid to ‘**newly liberated areas**’ which were not afraid to

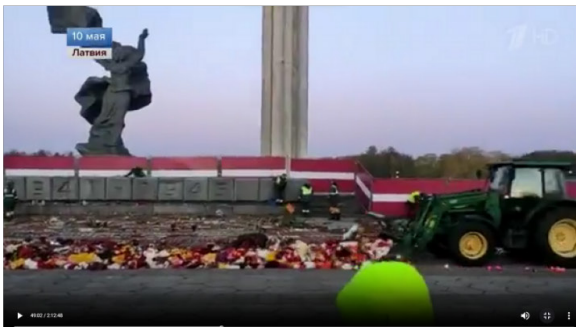
celebrate 9 May any more, with emphasis on their never being afraid again, as the new regions were ‘**with Russia forever**’ (Screenshot 10):

All these symbols of this sacred day were on the streets of Donbas and southern Ukraine this year for the first time in eight years. It was as if people breathed a sigh of relief. It is no longer scary or dangerous to remember, to be proud of the past.⁸⁶



SCREENSHOT 10. *Voskresnoe Vremya*, 15 May 2022: the headline reads ‘A right to remember. Not scared any more’

Narratives of Russophobia and the West rewriting history were present in reports about 9 May being banned. Videos of flowers being removed from the memorials dedicated to Soviet soldiers in Poland and the Baltic countries were framed in line with the Kremlin’s continuous narrative targeting its former spheres of influence: that **many have forgotten the role of the Soviet Union in ridding Europe of Nazism** (Screenshot 11).



SCREENSHOT 11. *Voskresnoe Vremya* report about flowers being removed from World War II monuments in Latvia, 15 May 2022



SCREENSHOT 12. *Voskresnoe Vremya* report framing Russophobia as the new Nazism, 15 May 2022

Notably, Russophobia is being framed as the ‘new Nazism’ (Screenshot 12):

*Under a similar slogan, Hitler went to war with the Soviet Union. He intended to take away the living space for Germans from inferior, in his opinion, races. **The idea of a superior Aryan race was very common in Western Europe, and its author was not the Führer of the Third Reich. Frenchman Joseph de Gabin in the middle of the 19th century has formulated that what is now substantiated as Russophobia.***⁸⁷

Despite the alleged active Russophobia, **both TV shows presented cases of ‘brave’ people who were not afraid to demonstrate their love for Russia in Europe** (Screenshot 13). The number of these individual cases was small, but, as is common Russian media practice, they were presented as trends (similar to the case of the grandma with the Soviet flag):

It took a lot of courage for those in Europe who

*celebrated 9 May. And they did. In Warsaw a young man laid flowers at the monument to Soviet soldiers under a hail of insults. [...] Intimidation from Russophobes was not successful against a girl, Julia, who on a street in Munich performed the Kalinka folk dance on this festive day.*⁸⁸

Whereas in most countries the phrase ‘never again’ prevails when talking about the atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust, in Russia the rhetoric of ‘We can do it again’ (‘можем повторить’) takes centre stage. A slogan that was first used in 1945 resurfaced in 2012 in the context of 9 May celebrations and has been rising in popularity ever since.⁸⁹ Hence, in the context of the war in Ukraine, it was inevitable that communication about Victory Day would be laced with narratives about the ‘special military operation’. On the television screen, the promise of ‘doing it again’ materialised and must be celebrated at scale, as heroic deeds of World War II veterans who fought Nazis are repeated by the next generation of ‘heroes’.



SCREENSHOT 13. *Voskresnoe Vremya* report about Russians celebrating Victory Day abroad, 15 May 2022

Sanctions on Russia

Classification: Russia prepared for the event

International sanctions have been imposed on Russia since 2014. The massive successive rounds of sanctions by Western countries, and some international organisations, in 2022 in response to its invasion of Ukraine aim at effectively thwarting Russia’s ability to continue its aggression. Anti-sanctions narratives strategically disseminated by the Kremlin domestically and abroad for years now have the lifting of sanctions as a long-term goal, and tensions and divisions between Western countries, diminishing Ukraine’s trust in its Western partners and hence its belief in successfully fighting against the aggressor, among others, as short-term goals. For Russia, the aim is to give the impression that ‘they’, the enemy in the West, have worse living conditions and quality of life, which is made easier by the fact that, as of 2022, almost 70% of Russians had not visited any foreign countries (and only for 8% of those who did visit a foreign country was it a Schengen zone one).⁹⁰

Russia made few changes to its economy ahead of the war against Ukraine, and

apparently did not anticipate the need to operate a wartime economy, hoping to conduct a quick decapitation attack that would result in a change of power in Kyiv and considerable territorial gains. The Kremlin was ready for a series of tougher sanctions from the West, facing a fait accompli in Ukraine, yet it did not anticipate the extent of Kyiv’s resistance or the international restrictions going as far as to end imports of hydrocarbons, withdraw businesses from Russian markets, and so on.⁹¹

Official communications

Our event message analysis of official government communications from the selected official websites of the Kremlin regime’s institutions shows that the top three messages on the issue of sanctions imposed on the country revolved around the narrative of a strong and self-sufficient Russia: the message *Russia is taking measures to mitigate the impact of sanctions* took the lead, as both council.gov.ru and duma.gov.ru gave reassurances that the institutions were countering the ‘unprecedented sanctions by the West’ in the best way possible (Figure 20). For instance, on the

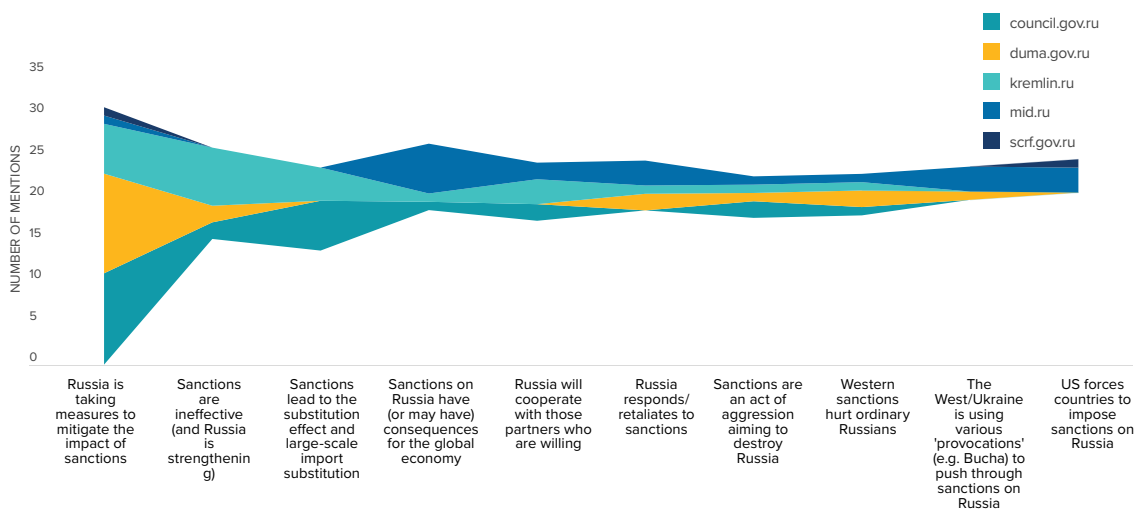


FIGURE 20. Top 10 messages about sanctions imposed on Russia, official government communications

eve of the “Russian government’s report to the State Duma” that happened on April 1, 2022, ‘the main issues related to measures in support of economic sectors, which are now being implemented in connection with unprecedented sanctions pressure, related to the situation in which today the Russian Federation is forced to build its economy in a new way, financial and credit policy, support for industries and small businesses’,⁹² were discussed.

The message that *Sanctions are ineffective (and Russia is strengthening)* was used most by the presidential website (kremlin.ru), as might be expected from the institution that maintains the image of Putin as an all-powerful strongman and the personification of Russia’s strength itself. Thus, as Russia celebrated Cosmonautics Day, Putin vowed it would continue to carry out a vigorous space programme despite Western sanctions over its invasion of Ukraine that have limited imports of key technologies, drawing an analogy between Gagarin’s first space flight in 1961 and Russia’s defiance in 2022:

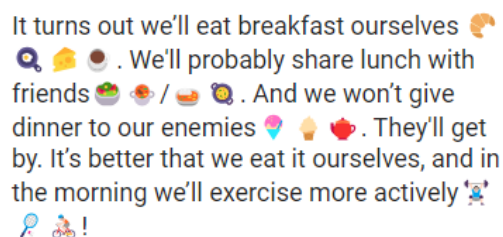
*In 1961 the Soviet Union was in complete technological isolation, and the sanctions against it were overwhelming. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union became the first country to launch an artificial earth satellite, the first man in space was a Soviet citizen, and the first space station was ours, and the first mission to the Moon was ours as well, if memory serves; the first spacewalk was done by our man, and the first woman in space was our Valentina Tereshkova, God bless her. We did all of that in conditions of complete technological isolation, and yet we achieved these incredible successes.*⁹³

The latter quote relates to the third most popular message within the segment of official government communications in our research, *Sanctions lead to the substitution effect and large-scale import substitution*, which intertwines with the storyline of Russia’s omnipotence and its ability to produce everything and

anything at will. The articles with this message ranged from Putin’s notes on how Russia’s agricultural sector, hit by sanctions in 2014, was able to make ‘huge strides’ and ‘become a high-tech sector’, exceeding the exports ‘of our weapons systems by a large margin, by US\$10 billion’,⁹⁴ to reporting on how ‘Ingushetia is actively implementing import substitution programmes, supporting local entrepreneurs, and attracting investors. In particular, the region has established the production of the main types of import-substituting products, which are sold at reasonable prices.’⁹⁵

Telegram

The aforementioned message *Sanctions lead to the substitution effect and large-scale import substitution* was not among the leading Telegram posts we reviewed, even though there were notable examples. Dmitriy Medvedev, deputy chairman of the Security Council of Russia, praised the Russian agricultural sector and its ability to overcome the



It turns out we'll eat breakfast ourselves 🍳
🍷🍔🍷. We'll probably share lunch with
friends 🍲🍷🍷. And we won't give
dinner to our enemies 🍷🍷🍷. They'll get
by. It's better that we eat it ourselves, and in
the morning we'll exercise more actively 🚴

SCREENSHOT 14. Telegram post from Dmitriy Medvedev. Note: the screenshot comes with automatic translation

pressure of sanctions imposed in 2014, claiming that currently ‘varied and tasty Russian products are quite enough to fully meet our domestic needs’ (Screenshot 14).⁹⁶

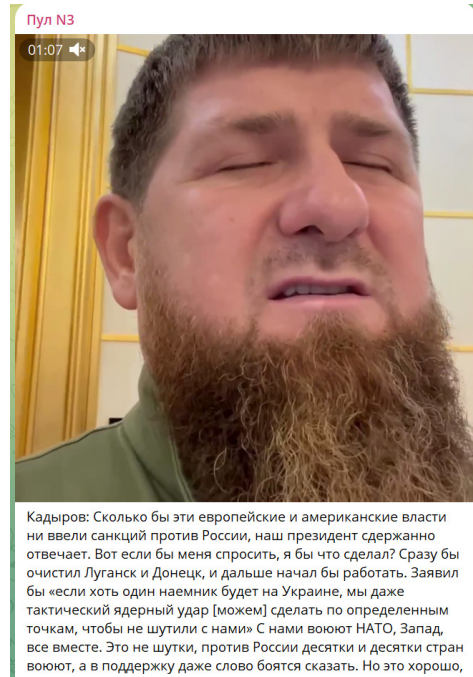
Overall, on Telegram the leading message to the intended audiences in Ukraine and Russia was the same: that the sanctions were ineffective and/or that Russia was only strengthening (Figure 21). Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, though praising Putin as ‘the great and far-sighted strategist’, referred to his reactions to

sanctions as 'restraint' (Screenshot 15):

*No matter how many sanctions these European and American authorities impose against Russia, our president responds with restraint. If you ask me, what would I do? I would immediately clear Luhansk and Donetsk, and then start working. I would declare 'If even one mercenary is in Ukraine, we can even make a tactical nuclear strike on certain points, so that they do not joke with us.' NATO, the West, all together are at war with us.*⁹⁷

When delivering the message to the Ukrainian audience, Kremlin-aligned Telegram channels more often added a twist, claiming the West was unreliable in both introducing and implementing sanctions on Russia, and thinking forward and retrospectively. Thus, it was claimed that Russia's resilience to the sanctions was profound, and the sanctions were easy to circumvent and/or beat:

Underestimating the resilience of systems leads to underestimating the impact on these systems, which prolongs the conflict. It is the prolongation of the conflict in time that is the worst scenario for Ukraine and the EU. In



SCREENSHOT 15. Telegram post from Pul N3 channel: video of Ramzan Kadyrov

Ukraine, infrastructure is being destroyed along with prospects, and in the EU, people spoiled by consumption may not be able to withstand the sanctions and start protests. The growing approval rating of Le Pen, who promises to be friends with Putin, and Macron's constant calls



FIGURE 21. Messages about sanctions on Telegram channels by intended audiences

*to the Kremlin are proof of the extreme vulnerability of European politics to energy prices.*⁹⁸

The claims that the EU was a highly unreliable partner were aggravated by hyperbolising the discord among Europeans with regard to sanctions, and Hungary was a good example to point the finger at.⁹⁹ Along with inflating the scale of disunity, the impact of the aid provided by Ukraine's partners was downplayed:

*Ukraine has not received a single fundamental sign that would demonstrate support for the country. The EU refused to accept us, NATO does not want to close the sky over Ukraine, the United States and Great Britain refuse to give security guarantees, and it was only MANPADS in terms of weapons that they gave us.*¹⁰⁰

Among the Telegram posts for the Russian intended audience, the share of messages on how Western sanctions were absurd was the highest among the intended audiences we compared. Peskov was quoted as saying that nobody 'could have imagined that sanctions against the president were possible, this is crossing the line of reasonableness, it turns out that the West is capable of any stupidity',¹⁰¹ while Solov'yov referred to those introducing the fifth EU package of sanctions on Russia as 'phenomenal idiots' subjecting 'flowers, as well as tubers and plant bulbs' to export restrictions.¹⁰² The Kremlin propaganda mouthpiece also mocked the sanctions by claiming that 'the medieval Inquisition, Soviet special troikas, and simple Stalinist-era trials' were nothing compared to the formulations for which one would be subject to EU sanctions, finding amusing such phrases as 'considered to be the "henchman" of', 'closely associated with', or 'malign influence activities'.¹⁰³

In the Baltic segment of Telegram, as we define it, the messaging was about showing that imposing sanctions on Russia bounces back at you. *Anti-Russian sanctions hurt the countries that impose them* and *Europeans suffer/protest because of the sanctions* were in the lead among the event messages.

Examples provided ranged from framing factual information about a Lithuanian firm, a leading European fertiliser producer, under threat of closing down because of the sanctions;¹⁰⁴ a Latvian enterprise, storing thousands of hazardous substances, unable to pay its service provider;¹⁰⁵ to images and videos about how life is deteriorating for Europeans because of the sanctions imposed on Russia. The latter were also abundant in posts for the intended Russian audience (Screenshot 16).

Messages in the segment of Telegram posts also demonstrate the adaptability of the Kremlin's strategic communication via incorporating new events and developments of the war into the overarching narrative structure. Thus, the discovery of mass graves in Bucha and the resistance to surrender of Mariupol defenders in Azovstal were quickly probed as stories to support conspiracy theories about certain powers being interested in escalating the armed conflict. Bucha was said to be an excuse for Ukraine to ask for more sanctions to hit Moscow (as well as for weapons, financial aid, and the like), and imposing tougher sanctions was meant to prevent the Russians from entering and exposing a NATO biolab underneath Azovstal¹⁰⁶ (Screenshot 17).

A repost by the milblogger Sladkov about a secret NATO base underneath the Azovstal plant is an example of how Russian propaganda is able to create, revamp, adapt, and recycle a story. It began life on 4 April 2022 on the Twitter (X) social media platform via a post by Pepe Escobar¹⁰⁷—a Brazilian journalist identified by the US State Department as an actor in the pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation ecosystem.¹⁰⁸ It was then updated on 8 April to include a notion of upcoming 'provocations' (the term used by the Kremlin to refer to Bucha, among others) in a post by Khraniteli i Vershiteli (*Хранители и Вершител*);¹⁰⁹ a version of this touching upon the issue of sanctions was reposted by Sladkov on 10 April,¹¹⁰ and was further amplified by Moskovskiy Komsomolets¹¹¹ and Zvezda Weekly, a part of the Zvezda media group, supervised by the Russian Ministry of Defence.¹¹² For the audiences in the West, although not

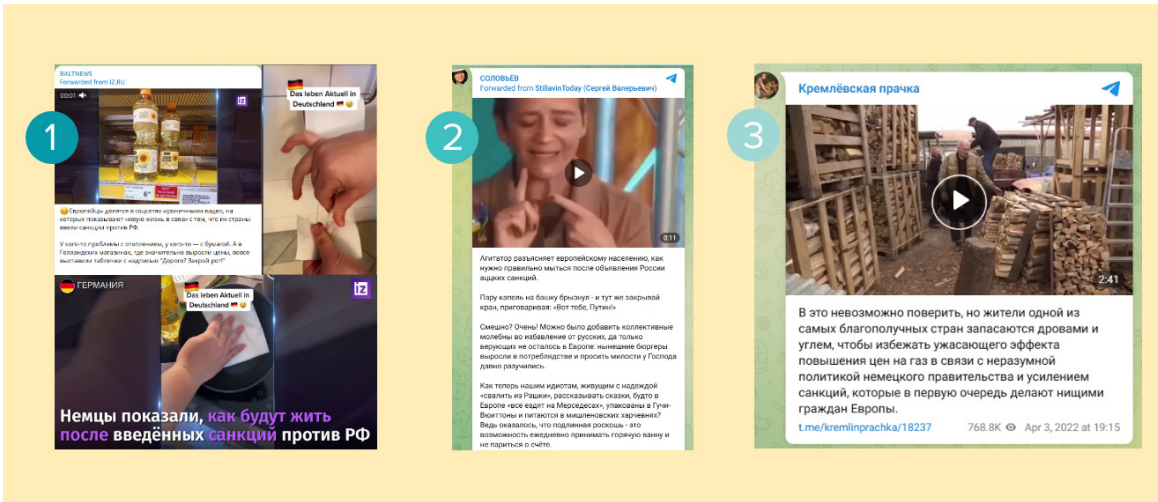
limited to them, the story of the alleged secret NATO base and a biolab was updated with images falsely attributed to a drawing of the underground base.

Overall, among the milbloggers community, sanctions were often mentioned in relation to the so-called ‘provocations’, that is, Bucha and Kramatorsk, as an analogue of those in the economic sphere of ‘NATO’s information and psychological warfare’ against Russia:

NATO has not done anything new with information and psychological warfare—why change working schemes? The ‘Bucha Massacre’ was made in haste, with mistakes,

*but that doesn't matter. The mainstream media will not delve into it; the Western viewer will eat it all up anyway. The trouble is that they are cannibals. They killed people with white armbands (everyone saw the video). [...] The main thing is information victory. Cannibals. [...] It's like with sanctions. They would have been introduced anyway.*¹¹³

On the narrative and sub-narrative level, the top five narratives we had been tracing since Russia’s preparation of the information/media landscape (official government communications and television) for the war against Ukraine in 2021 paint a picture of a strong Russia opposing the conniving West. The



SCREENSHOT 16. Examples on Telegram of the message ‘Anti-Russian sanctions hurt the countries that impose them and Europeans suffer/protest because of the sanctions.’

(1) A video, originally posted on the Izvestia Telegram channel, is designed to show how ‘the Germans will live after the sanctions imposed on Russia’. German people will from now on economise on heating, cooking oil, and toilet paper. It is also claimed that in Austrian stores, where prices have increased significantly, signs have been put up saying ‘Expensive? Shut up!’, along with a ‘slogan of Ukrainian nationalists.’ The pictures in question were taken in the Netherlands (corrected in the post forwarded by Baltnews) and the Ukrainian slogan says, ‘Glory to Ukraine’. BALTNEWS, Telegram post, 9 April 2022 <https://t.me/baltnews/11896>.

(2) Solov'yov forwarded a video with Margrethe Vestager, where she encourages people to take colder and shorter showers to diminish dependency on Putin’s regime. The post reads: ‘Funny? Very! You could add collective prayers to get rid of the Russians, but there are no believers left in Europe: today’s burghers grew up in consumerism and have long forgotten how to ask for mercy from the Lord. How do you now tell the tales that in Europe “everyone drives a Mercedes, is wrapped up in Gucci-Vuitton and eats in Michelin-starred restaurants” to our idiots, who live in hope of “getting out of Russia”?’ After all, it turned out that true luxury is the ability to take a hot bath every day without worrying about the bill.’ SolovievLive, Telegram post, 2 April 2022 <https://t.me/SolovievLive/98134>.

(3) A Kremlyovskaya prachka post reads: ‘As unbelievable as it is, residents of one of the most prosperous countries are stocking up on firewood and coal to avoid the horrific effect of higher gas prices due to unwise policies of the German government and the intensification of sanctions, which primarily impoverish the citizens of Europe.’ Kremlyovskaya prachka, Telegram post, 3 April 2022 <https://t.me/kremlinprachka/18237>.



SCREENSHOT 17. An example of a Telegram post as a unit in Kremlin disinformation and propaganda: updating, adapting and recycling. ‘There are 24 km of tunnels under the Azovstal industrial zone at a depth of 30 metres. There is also a secret NATO facility “PIT-404” and a secret NATO biological laboratory with biological weapons. All this is equipped with a bunker system with armour protection. Inside, there are about 240 foreigners, including officers from NATO, the French Legion, and the staff of the biological laboratory. The biological laboratory under the Azovstal plant in Mariupol, at the PIT-404 facility, was built and operated by Metabiota, with ties to Hunter Biden, Joe Biden’s son, Rinat Akhmetov, and Zelya [Zelensky]. The closer the Russian armed forces get to the biological laboratory, the fiercer the defence, sanctions and hysteria, threats and isolation of Russia will be.’

storytelling of Kremlin-aligned Telegram channels tracked for this report is built on the same structural framework (Figure 22). The narrative *Rusia is a strong and self-sufficient country* took the lead. Top narratives also evidence Russian propaganda’s favourite

game—playing the ‘victim card’: rising energy and food prices and problems with supplies were all the West’s fault, as it was allegedly waging info-warfare against Russia and spreading Russophobic lies.

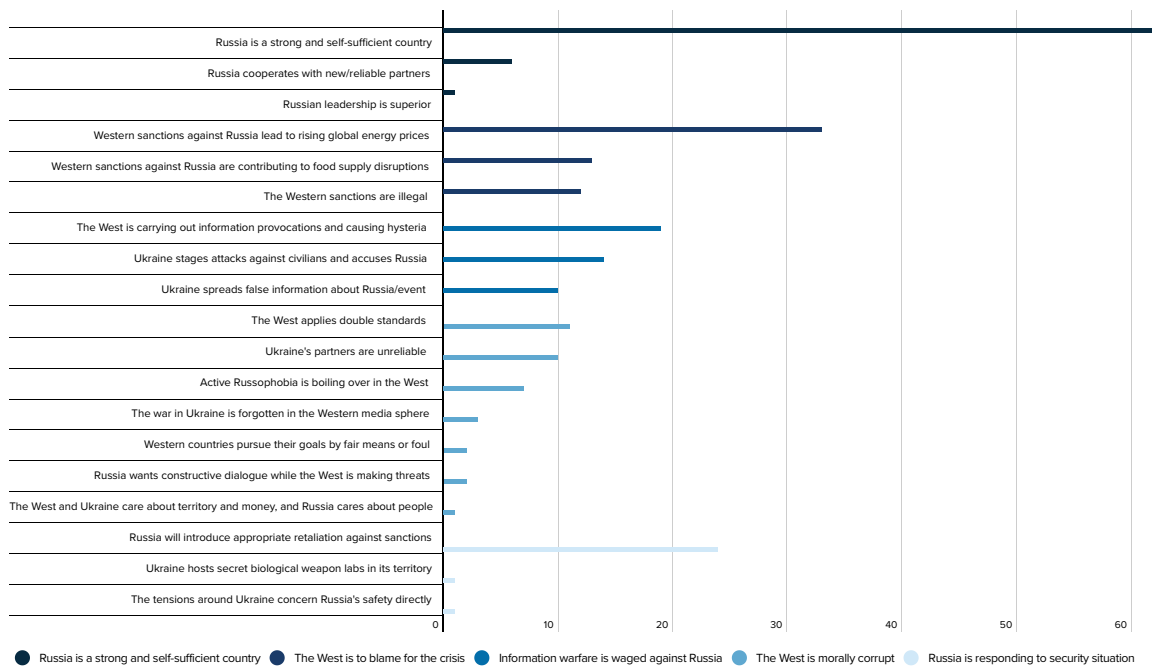


FIGURE 22. Main narratives/sub-narratives about sanctions imposed on Russia on Telegram (all audiences combined)

Television

As the topic of sanctions has been a part of the Russian information sphere for at least a decade, strategic communication to the domestic audience via television did not have any significant deviations from the norm. Therefore, there were no stages of communication distinguished in this case.

The list of the main messages (Figure 23) about the sanctions reflects the framing of this topic well. In both *Vesti Nedeli* and *Voskresnoe Vremya*, reports about Russia brilliantly coping with sanctions (e.g. the introduction of support packages for businesses) were always juxtaposed with news pieces about Western countries suffering the consequences of their poor decisions (e.g. rising energy prices).

The overarching message related to sanctions was that **Europe is ‘shooting itself in the foot’ and Russia will come out stronger**. To convey this point, both shows frequently highlighted that Europe was too dependent on Russian energy resources:

*In general, Europe has come noticeably closer to realising that all its prosperity rests on cheap energy from Russia. And no matter how painful and unpleasant this may be, it is now the only thing that keeps it from falling into the economic abyss.*¹¹⁴

Alongside this message it was often mentioned that Europe places the interests of the US above those of European citizens:

*First, they set a course to break long-term contracts with Moscow, and now they are planning to phase out Russian fuel just because it comes from Russia. Judging by the statements of some politicians, they are ready to **disregard the interests of their citizens just to please their overseas masters.***¹¹⁵

To drive home the point that Russia will be just fine, and Europeans are suffering already, reports on these topics were often placed next to each other in the TV shows. For example, a piece about a business fair in Russia would be juxtaposed with a report

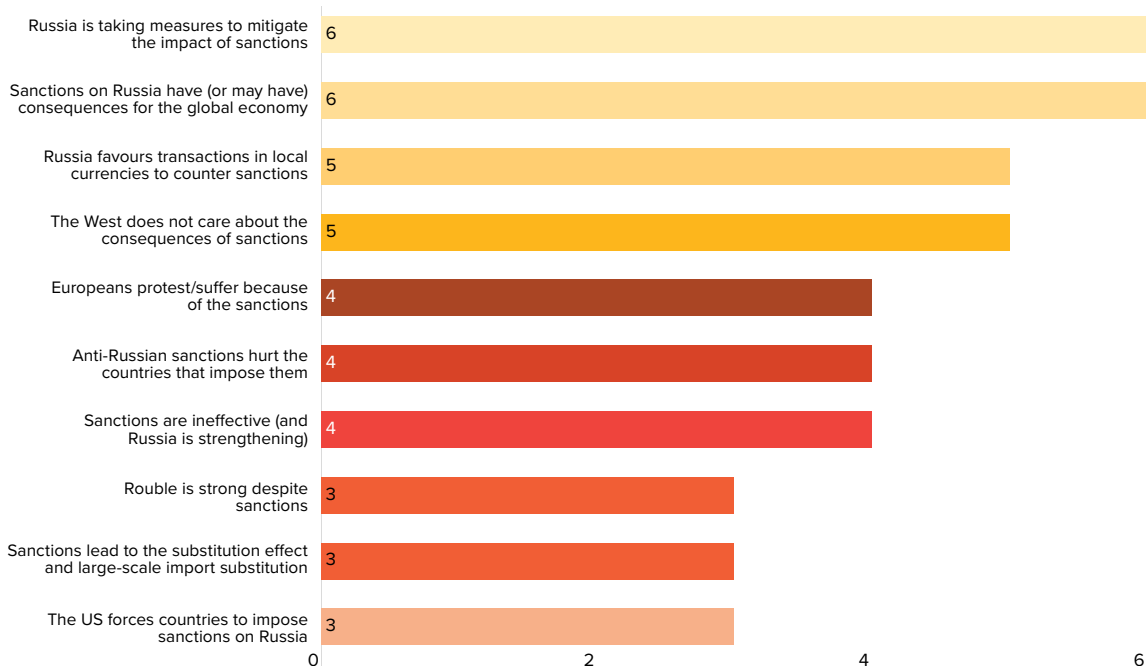


FIGURE 23. Dominant messages about sanctions on Russian state television

about increasing prices in Europe, usually with a ridiculous example, such as:

How effective are sanctions? Apparently, so much so that Germans are now discussing a photo of a supermarket in Braunschweig where bottles of vegetable oil were placed in a rack of high-end alcohol. The sellers are now making excuses. It was a joke, but oil is really scarce in the country. And the largest discount supermarket chain is also increasing the prices of sausage and butter and dairy products by an average of 30 percent.¹¹⁶

In some instances viewers were reminded that economic pressure from the West was not only an issue for modern Russia—the Soviet Union, which was a Cold War superpower, also withstood economic perils. Both shows **brought up Soviet accomplishments in space to spark pride and divert attention from bigger issues:**

In the 1960s the Soviet Union was technologically isolated. Sanctions were total, but nevertheless the Soviet Union was the first to launch an artificial satellite. The first

cosmonaut; our first space station flight to the moon was also our first spacewalk. The first woman cosmonaut. We did it all in complete isolation technologically.¹¹⁷

Sanctions were also discussed in the TV shows which did not fall into the selected timeframe. It is important in the context of the Kremlin's strategic communication to its domestic audience, as strengthening Russia's economy in the 2000s is one of the defining 'accomplishments' attributed to Vladimir Putin.¹¹⁸ And even though the forecasts for the Russian economy are bleak,¹¹⁹ state-owned television must keep up the image of the country as an industrial and technological powerhouse.

Partial mobilisation

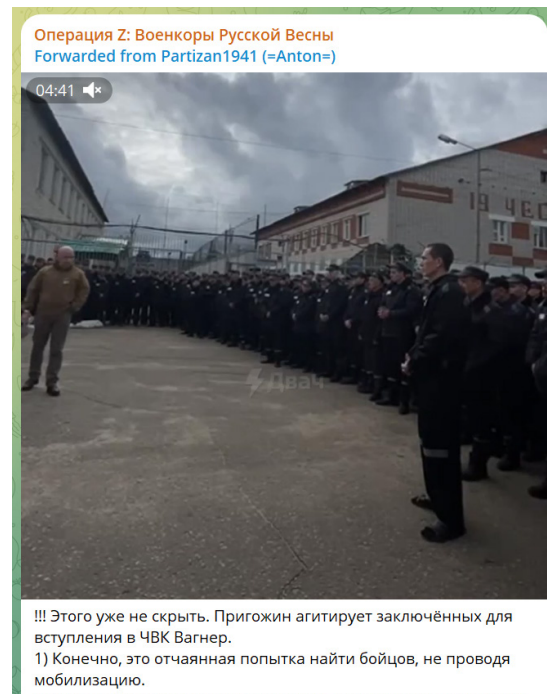
Classification: Event initiated by Russia

In mid-September 2022, the Russian Ministry of Defence confirmed the retreat in the Kharkiv region, calling it a tactical decision of ‘regrouping’ and ‘redeployment’,¹²⁰ sowing panic, disenchantment, and anger among pro-war activists, as evidenced in their Telegram channels.¹²¹

When a video of Wagner military group leader Prigozhin recruiting at a Russian prison (Screenshot 18), offering inmates freedom if they fought in Ukraine, surfaced online and on social media, the Kremlin-aligned Telegram channels we tracked for this report reacted almost unanimously positively. Some comments revolved around how great it was to redeem one’s own failings fighting for the motherland (‘The best of the worst are invited to prove themselves in the hottest areas of a special military operation—and become real heroes for their country instead of second-class citizens’¹²²), or how Wagner cared for the soldiers and those in charge of the frontline did not (‘I think that many who are at the front, would gladly go to him, but not to ... I am silent. So, there’s a real chance to serve the country and do some good not being cannon fodder’¹²³), while others were drawing historical parallels going back as far as the Roman empire or as entrenched in the historical memory as the GPW to conclude that this was a tried-and-tested method.¹²⁴ Zakhar Prilepin, a prominent pro-Kremlin writer and ardent supporter of Russia’s war in Ukraine since 2014, questioned the timing of the ‘leak’ of the video, while also praising Prigozhin for ‘educating prisoners’ about why they should fight in Ukraine, a task that had failed, according to him, on so many fronts, such as culture, education, and entertainment (in a country of ‘hundreds of thousands of adrenaline junkies who either race 500 km/h on motorcycles or jump headfirst from rooftops’, TV should broadcast the military, instead of reality shows¹²⁵). Igor

Strelkov-Girkin, however, reacted to the video by saying he had known about the recruitment by Wagner for three months and it was a ‘deeply erroneous step’, as men serving their sentences (including those for grave and especially grave crimes) were being recruited into front-line units in the absence of martial law and mobilisation.¹²⁶

On 20 September 2022 Russia’s State Duma approved an amendment to introduce the concepts of ‘mobilisation’, ‘martial law’, ‘wartime’, and ‘armed conflict’ into the country’s Criminal Code, while the lower house of the parliament approved amendments on punishment for desertion and ‘voluntary surrender’ (punishable by up to 15 years in prison as of then, along with the prospect of 10 years in jail for desertion and up to 3 years for conscientious objectors). The hastily introduced amendments, along with the prospects



SCREENSHOT 18. Telegram channel Operatsiya Z: Voenkory Russkoy Vesny’ (Operation Z: War correspondents of the Russian Spring): Yevgeniy Prigozhin recruiting at a Russian prison

of holding referendums on the annexation of the territories occupied by Russia in Ukraine, caused a wave of comments on the topic on Telegram. Neutral/factual reporting was accompanied by comments like those in a post forwarded by Rybar', which ironically related Prigozhin's video to the amendments: (a) You escape mobilisation; (b) A criminal case is applied, you get sentenced; (c) Prigozhin recruits you to Wagner—and off you got to the frontlines.¹²⁷ Vladlen Tatarsky (a propagandist, milblogger, convicted bank robber, and participant in the Russo-Ukrainian War) lamented how late the decision came ('Why wasn't this done in the spring, if not in March, or at least on May 9?'¹²⁸). Strelkov, who had no doubt that 'legal grounds for partial mobilisation are being quickly created', also expressed disenchantment that it was only after seven months ('not to count the previous eight years') that the leadership of the Russian Federation 'came to understand the "total" (until complete victory or complete defeat) nature of the war in the so-called "Ukraine" and is preparing to fight "for real"'.¹²⁹ The expectations of mobilisation aroused enthusiasm as well as criticism: the Odessa Za Pobedu (Одесса За Победу) Telegram channel designed for a Ukrainian audience ecstatically rejoiced over the upcoming mobilisation and referendums ('*Khokhlyata* [derogative for Ukrainians], get ready, we're starting to fight for real! Victory Will Be Ours, The Enemy Will Be Defeated!!!!¹³⁰'), while

milblogger Andrey Filatov raised the issue of competence in the military:

*I hope in the final text of the bill there will be a place about incompetent orders, won't there? What is the responsibility of commanders for zeroing out a battalion when reconnaissance and a frontal attack are not carried out? If there is no such responsibility, then 10 years in prison sounds better than a stupid death under enemy fire.*¹³¹

He was seconded by Voenny Osvedomitel', who expressing scepticism towards mobilisation in general, which stemmed 'from the inability of the state to train, equip, and supply hundreds of thousands of military personnel at the same time'.¹³²

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned expectations on the tracked Telegram channels, we sought to outline the framing of mobilisation in the official government communications and the social media platform segment in the days following the announcement of 'partial mobilisation' (21–28 September 2022). Our analysis of the messages emanating from the six official government communication sources shows that the authorities were trying to convince the mobilised Russians that they were taking care of them and would continue

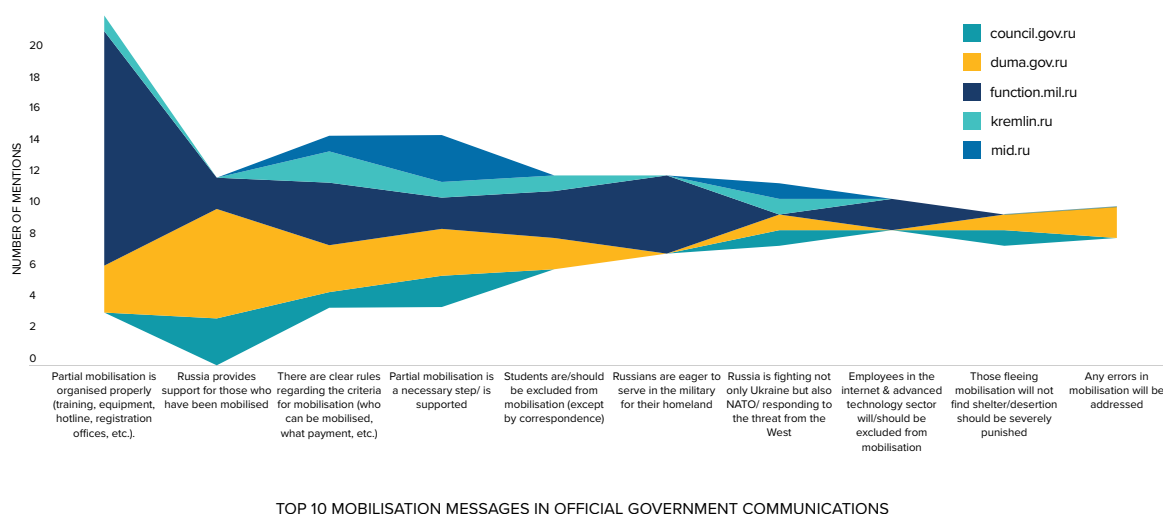
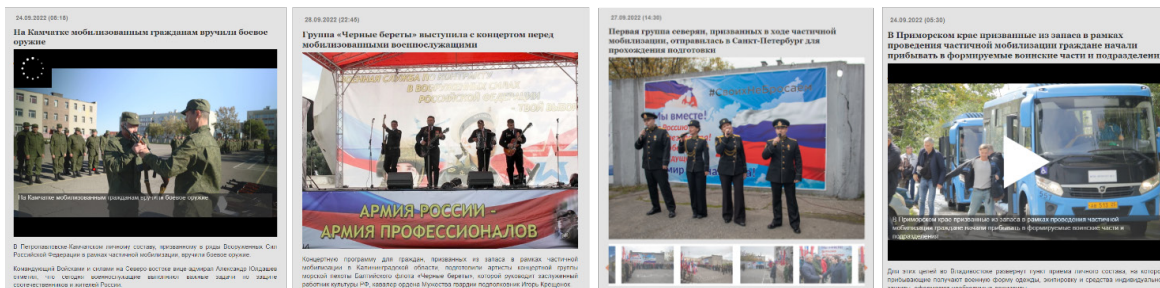


FIGURE 24. Top 10 messages about mobilisation in official government communications



SCREENSHOT 19. Articles from the Ministry of Defence website: (1) In Kamchatka, mobilised soldiers were presented with combat weapons. (2) The Black Berets band performed for mobilised servicemen. (3) The first group of northerners called up for partial mobilisation went to St Petersburg to prepare. (4) In Primorskiy Krai, those conscripted under partial mobilisation began arriving at newly formed military units and subdivisions

to do so: the Ministry of Defence was foremost in promoting the message that partial *mobilisation is organised properly*, whereas the State Duma provided reassurances that *they will be supported* by various means, for instance, by providing credit holidays (Figure 24).

On 22 September the Ministry of Defence posted an interview with Rear Admiral Vladimir Tsimlyanskiy, deputy head of the Russian General Staff's main organisation and mobilisation department, who laid out the main points on how the mobilisation should be carried out. He said that '120,000 people will be called up for military service. This is less than last autumn, however; even during a special military operation, this quantity fully satisfies the needs of the state's security forces.'¹³³ Via separate articles, the ministry stressed it did not intend to recruit students and employees in certain high-tech and finance sectors, in addition to claiming there were no movement restrictions related to the 'partial mobilisation'.¹³⁴ Otherwise, the information could be referred to as an 'information reassurance treatment'—a term coined to denote the Kremlin's carefully planned media campaign in the first months of war to 'spread positivity' in the 'traditional and online news media rather than on popular social media services like Telegram or VKontakte'. The user base on VKontakte was too young to be interested in this kind of news, and on Telegram, though people were more political, they were either part of the opposition or they were 'super patriotic', and in both cases, reassurance wasn't needed, because they were already looking for this

kind of information.¹³⁵ Thus, most of the Ministry of Defence's posts that followed the mobilisation news (Screenshot 19) were about how orderly and enthusiastically the mobilisation was being carried out to 'defend the Motherland, to crush these fascist vermin'.¹³⁶ A speech by the governor of Murmansk Oblast, Andrey Chibis, however, admitted one of the problems being faced at the time: 'I want to sincerely thank you. For not running away from the summons.'¹³⁷

Russia's Ministry of Defence said in September that 5937 Russian soldiers had been killed in combat (compared with 61,207 killed Ukrainian soldiers),¹³⁸ which wasn't really in line with what milblogger Sladkov told the viewers of his video posted on Telegram on the day that the partial mobilisation was announced. In the video he pledged support for Putin and said that 'people are needed' at the front, citing a commanding officer of a division on the frontline as saying that there were few people left alive and, if not for Kadyrovites, fully equipped, it would be hard to keep the frontline where it was in Donetsk.¹³⁹

At the onset of mobilisation, when Sergei Shoigu said 5937 Russian soldiers had been killed in the 'special military operation' and Russia needed 300,000 to continue fighting, in the Telegram channels we tracked we found 138 hits, from 73 sources, mentioning this precise number of those killed. Two of these were openly critical about the number: milblogger Sergei Kolyasnikov (Zergulio) forwarded Semyon Pegov's (WarGonzo) post, saying he 'too didn't quite understand Shoigu's



SCREENSHOT 20. Share of the posts mentioning the number of Russian soldiers killed. Only 1.5% of posts criticised or questioned the statement

statement regarding the losses¹⁴⁰, but perhaps the number excluded ‘corps of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, the Russian Guard and PMCs [private military companies]’. The post by Pegov said: ‘Shoigu: we have 5937 dead. Don’t know about Shoigu, but we have more...’¹⁴¹ The main Kremlin propaganda mouthpieces, Solov’yov¹⁴² and Simonyan, posted the number without any further comments (Screenshot 20).

Overall, the largest amount of communication critical of the ‘partial mobilisation’ in the segment of Telegram we chose to analyse was for the intended Russian domestic audience. The share of posts admitting to the fact that the mobilisation was not going smoothly amounted to 21.2% of the total number of mentions, as per two of the messages, *Various problems were noted in the process of mobilisation* and *Any errors in mobilisation will be addressed*. Only the former message, however, could be evaluated as having (slightly, if at all) negative tonality towards the process of ‘partial mobilisation’, and amounted to 12.8% of the total (Figure 25).

Yuriy Podolyaka was among the loudest voices regarding errors in the mobilisation process. However, the framing he used was borrowed from the naive monarchism ‘Good tsar, bad boyars’, where the tsar is a just and benevolent intercessor on behalf of ordinary people, whereas all failures are ascribed to officials. According to Podolyaka, military commissars were ‘framing the commander-in-chief [Putin] and the defence minister’ by hurrying to reach the target number of those mobilised without paying attention to their ‘quality’. Podolyaka said he was raising the issue so that



FIGURE 25. Messages about mobilisation on Telegram channels by intended audiences

the authorities knew what was really happening in the military commissariats, where the rules of ‘partial mobilisation’ were disregarded in multiple ways.¹⁴³ He warned the officials they should not try ‘outsmart everybody’, as mobilisation was of national importance and ‘the state, as we see, reacts very quickly to “shortcomings” on the ground. And this is how it will continue...’¹⁴⁴ A post on Rybar’ by mil-blogger Mikhail Zvinchuk warned that unless the military commissars start doing ‘quality work’ instead of unthinkingly trying to reach the target numbers, the ‘reputational costs of mobilisation due to the fault of the perpetrators will boomerang on the military-political leadership of the Russian Federation’.¹⁴⁵ Next day Readovka posted an update ‘from its sources’, that ‘the Russian Ministry of Defence held a meeting with military commissars, at which they reprimanded military commissions for handing out summonses to everyone in a row and for negligence’, and threatened them with dismissal in case the situation was repeated.¹⁴⁶

The milblogger Yevgeniy Poddubnyy, VGTRK military correspondent, although he admitted that ‘partial mobilisation, as expected, began with problems’, nevertheless softened the tone by saying that the ‘last time our country held it was during World War II. But the last time we fought like this was in 1945.’ Moreover, he was pointing fingers at voenkoms (enlistment offices):

Now we are waiting for crystallisation. We

*all must become better to win, so that we are not ashamed to look our children in the eye. Judging by the feedback I receive, not everyone in the country’s military registration and enlistment offices understands this.*¹⁴⁷

Andrey Medvedev, another journalist for VGTRK, was happy that reactions to the ‘errors of mobilisation’ (replacing rusty guns with those in good condition) proved Russia had built a civil society:

*This is civil society. Which we were trying to build for so long, and there were efforts to somehow construct it even from above. And no way. And now it takes off and builds itself, through the understanding of citizens that responsibility for the future of the country lies with them, too. And, through the perception of themselves as citizens, people. There is no need to be afraid of the truth. And don’t be afraid to admit a mistake. No one has ever died from this. On the contrary, working on mistakes makes you stronger and smarter.*¹⁴⁸

If we compare the top five messages about the ‘partial mobilisation’ in the Telegram segment with the intended Russian domestic audience, we can see that although the number of hits that mentioned clear rules relating to the mobilisation was higher than those noting various problems in it, the latter attracted

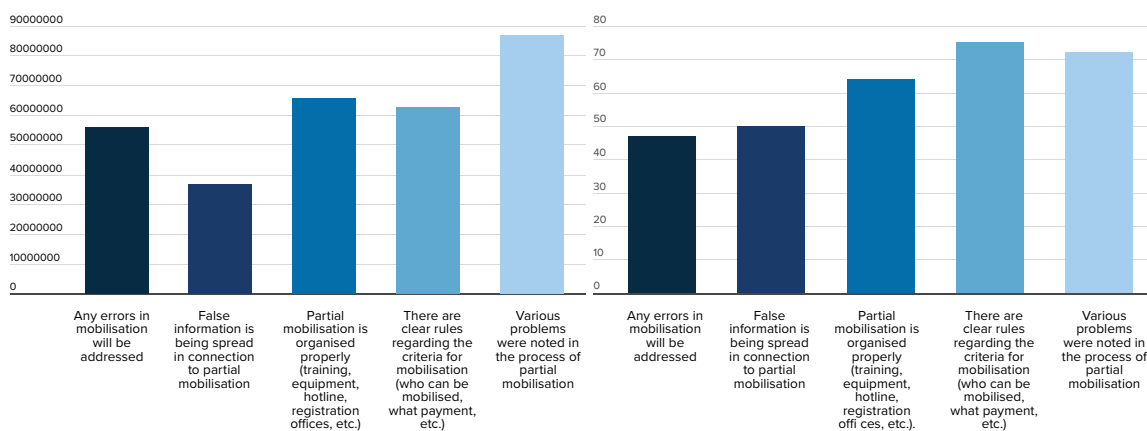
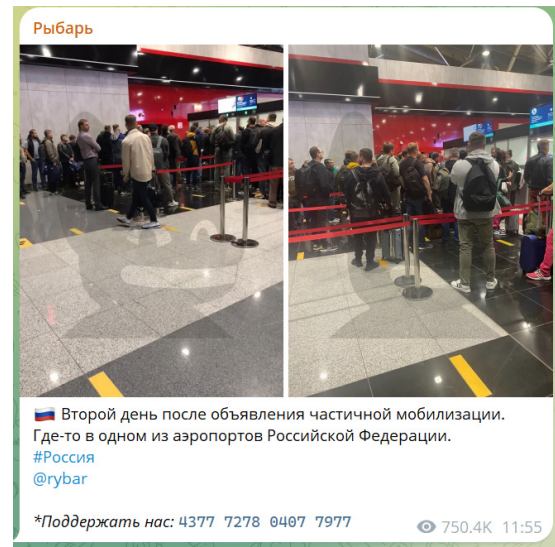


FIGURE 26. The top five messages about the ‘partial mobilisation’ in the Telegram segment (intended Russian domestic audience): number of views garnered (left) against number of mentions (right)

more interest, as evidenced by the number of message views (Figure 26).

Milblogger Sasha Kots—though he recognised the existence of the so-called 500s, or those refusing to fight (by analogy with 200s meaning dead and 300s, wounded)—spoke of how Russia needed heroic deeds by its soldiers, especially due to the soon-to-happen annexation of new territories, which would mean fighting for one’s own country’s territory: ‘now there can be no questions about whose land we are fighting for. For our own.’ Moreover, if ‘we cede even an inch, they will not stop. Neither in Donbas, nor in Crimea.’¹⁴⁹ The fate of those fleeing the war was also addressed in a post by Kadyrov_95, who referred to ‘deserters standing in the queues at the airport’ as a ‘pitiful sight’ and ‘useless people’, adding that Russia would be better off without them.¹⁵⁰ Those behind the Rybar’ Telegram channel posted a photo of people queuing in a Russian airport, without any further comment (Screenshot 21). In another post, however, it was claimed that ‘what the opponents of business-driven migration and the actual replacement of the Russian population with migrants from Central Asia could not achieve for years, representatives of the Ministry of Defence managed to achieve in four days’,¹⁵¹ thus referring to an initiative by the chair of the National Anti-corruption Committee of Russia, Kirill Kabanov, to prepare a proposal on deprivation of Russian citizenship of natives of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan who had received it in the last 10 years, but refused to do military service.¹⁵²

On Telegram with Ukrainians as the intended audience, *In response, Ukraine will/may also order mobilisation, even of students* was the main message within the sample of posts we coded for the research. When labelling the posts under this category, we also included mentions of how the practice of mass mobilisation had been employed in Ukraine long before Russia announced its ‘partial mobilisation’. Anatoliy Shariy, for instance, claimed that no one gathered to protest against mobilisation in Ukraine simply because the Ukrainian authorities would hand out summonses right



SCREENSHOT 21. Rybar’ Telegram channel: ‘Second day of mobilisation at an airport ‘somewhere in Russia’

there and mobilise the participants.¹⁵³ The most widely read post with this message (more than 2 million views) claimed that Ukraine was secretly planning to recruit everyone available, as combat reserves were running out.¹⁵⁴ The messages aimed to highlight both the hypocrisy of ‘the Kyiv regime’ and the disregard it allegedly had towards the citizens of Ukraine. These often came in pairs with another leading message we found in Telegram posts for the intended Ukrainian audience, *False information is being spread in connection with partial mobilisation*. Some of these cited ‘sources in the Office of the President’ and claimed the institution, together with MI6, was preparing anti-Russian smear campaigns by ‘highlighting the arbitrariness of officials/military commissars in the media’ and hoping for destabilisation of Russia and protests.¹⁵⁵ The President’s Office of Ukraine was also said to have allocated several million dollars to purchase entertainment/trash Telegram channels, which now rebroadcast the necessary narratives.¹⁵⁶

In the Baltic segment of the tracked Telegram channels, emphasis was on how the Baltics would not admit Russians fleeing mobilisation. Latvian Kremlin-aligned channels were the most vocal in mockingly calling this either a betrayal (‘Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics said that the country will not issue

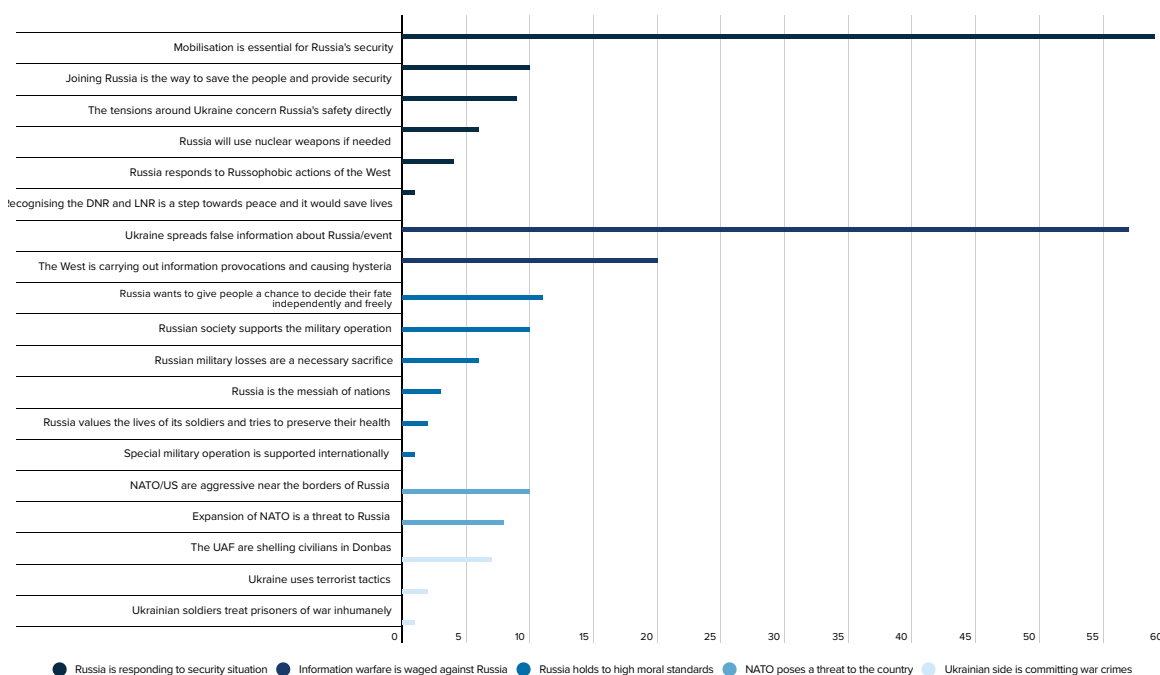


FIGURE 27. Main narratives/sub-narratives about mobilisation on Telegram, all audiences combined

humanitarian or other visas to those Russians who try to avoid mobilisation. Betrayal came from an unexpected place¹⁵⁷) or a step taken in favour of the Putin regime ('Am I the only one who has the feeling that Edgars Rinkevics has been working for the Kremlin for a long time? And coordinates his actions with Putin?¹⁵⁸).

On the narrative and sub-narrative level, the top five narratives were about Russia responding to threats to its security both per se and in the form of information warfare waged against it (Figure 27). The number of sub-narratives labelled was low, which means the concentration of strategic communication as a structure of multilevel narration was lower in the content we coded for the 'partial mobilisation'.

Television

When it comes to communication about mobilisation, television served as a trusted information source. As discussed earlier, television tends to be trusted more than social media; therefore, unsurprisingly, the message *There are clear rules regarding the criteria for*

mobilisation prevailed. The fact of there being 'clear rules' was supported by extensive coverage from conscription centres and training facilities, conveying the message *Partial mobilisation is organised properly* (Figure 28).

Communication about mobilisation unfolded in the following stages.

Stage 1: 'Important strategic decision'

When the mobilisation was announced, state television used quotes from officials to provide **reasoning for this decision**, such as protection of 'liberated areas' from 'Ukrainian diversion and terrorist groups':

*Ukrainian forces are constantly trying to find a weakness in the defence of the allied forces and to counterattack, albeit at great cost to themselves.*¹⁵⁹

Moreover, men were called to participate in a fight to defend Russia's sovereignty

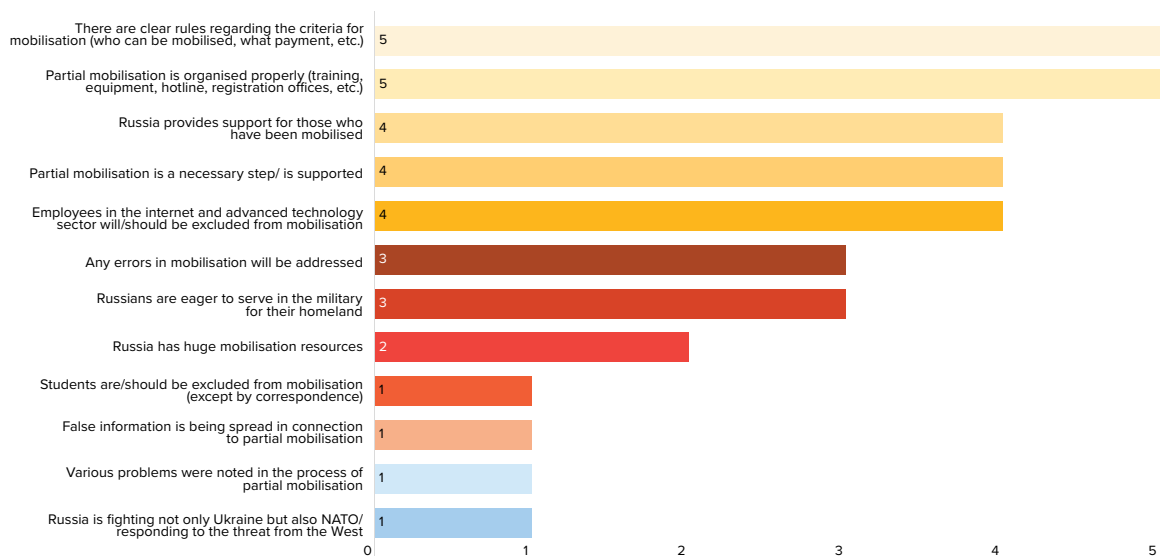


FIGURE 28. Dominant messages about mobilisation on Russian state television

and territorial integrity, and to **withstand the ‘pseudo values’ of the West**, as said by Putin himself:

*The goal of the West is to weaken, divide and ultimately destroy our country. They are already directly talking about the fact that in 1991 they were able to split the Soviet Union. And now the time has come for Russia itself to break up into a multitude of deadly warring regions and areas.*¹⁶⁰

Another significant part of the communication about the event was showing that tens



SCREENSHOT 22. *Vesti Nedeli* interview with a man who volunteered to serve in the Russian army, 25 September 2022

of thousands of volunteers answered the ‘call of motherland’. Most reports featured interviews with men coming to conscription centres, even if the mobilisation law did not apply to them (Screenshot 22):

*We were taught in the Soviet Union, we were taught well there, these skills are not forgotten. The Motherland said, ‘a machine gun is needed’, I said ‘yes’. [...] I was drafted. I came. **It’s my duty to protect the Motherland.** We were drafted, we are ready and will guard and protect you, so hold on.*¹⁶¹

Moreover, reports showed people being mobilised in ‘new’ regions, such as the occupied Crimea, and that sons of official figures did not get preferential treatment:

*The son of the head of the Republic of Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov, was also drafted as part of the partial mobilisation. [...] He says, yesterday he called me from the military recruitment centre, saying, ‘Dad, I cannot stay away from the situation. I understand the picture. I also must pay my debt to the motherland,’ even though he served in the army.*¹⁶²

Stage 2: ‘Everything is going as planned’

The next stage of the communication about mobilisation was mostly based on showing the efficiency and professionalism of the process: training the conscripts, providing them with the best equipment, and ensuring financial support. The **message about the conscription law and what it entails was again delivered directly by Putin:**

I repeat, citizens who are in the reserve and, above all, those who have served in the armed forces, have in-demand military specialties and have relevant experience are subject to conscription. Those called up for military service must undergo additional military training before being sent to units. At the same time, many questions arise during mobilisation measures, and it is necessary to correct all mistakes and prevent them in the future. Those citizens who, for example, are entitled to deferment.¹⁶³

In continuation of a trend, television coverage of the event was saturated with interviews with ordinary citizens, thus **creating a bond with the viewer and a sense of community:** if a person on the screen went to protect their homeland, so should you. At the same time, mobilisation provides a favourable context to include other narratives which are integral to the reasoning behind the ‘special military operation’: **protecting the now Russian lands (newly annexed regions of Ukraine) and fighting fascists.**¹⁶⁴



SCREENSHOT 23. *Voskresnoe Vremya* report about training new mobilised soldiers

The shows also covered public support for the mobilisation, utilising interviews with relatives of the mobilised, especially mothers:

I'm not gonna hide him, lock him up somewhere. He's a man. I have another son. He's 37 years old, he's got three kids. When the summons comes, he'll go too. Well, then, who else is going if not them? That's the way it is. Well, it's necessary, it's necessary. Everything will be fine. Russia is a huge country.¹⁶⁵

Stage 3: ‘Ordinary heroes’

In addition to communication lines established during the previous stages (providing information about the mobilisation order, eligibility for financial support), the last stage focused more on the training of the conscripts (Screenshot 23) and how they were greeted in the newly ‘liberated’ areas. The narrative of ‘своих не бросаем’ (‘We do not abandon our own’), which had been used since the



SCREENSHOT 24. *Vesti Nedeli* report about students saying goodbye to their teacher who volunteered, 9 October 2022



beginning of the invasion, was applied in the context of mobilisation:

*Grenade launchers and machine guns, sniper rifles, and assault rifles. This training ground is like a huge classroom where skills are honed. The most necessary things are now in the zone of the special military operation and the training schedule is very tight.*¹⁶⁶

Similar to the rhetoric from 2014 (the ‘Ukrainian army were fighting a civil war against “former coalminers and tractorists” from the Donbas’¹⁶⁷), in the context of partial mobilisation an image of an ordinary ‘manly man’, ‘true defender’ was created through interviews with conscripts (Screenshot 24):

*A physical education and primary military training teacher from Saratov, who made the decision to go to the front, demonstrating to his students what it is like when deeds align with words.*¹⁶⁸

Like shows the previous week, both *Vesti Nedeli* and *Voskresnoe Vremya* emphasised that all regions and republics of the Russian Federation contributed to mobilisation. For example, Ramzan Kadyrov was shown pledging to send thousands of Chechens who were ready to go to the front (Screenshot 25):

Tens of thousands are ready to go to the frontline and fight for our state. We must fulfil the order of the supreme commander-in-chief.



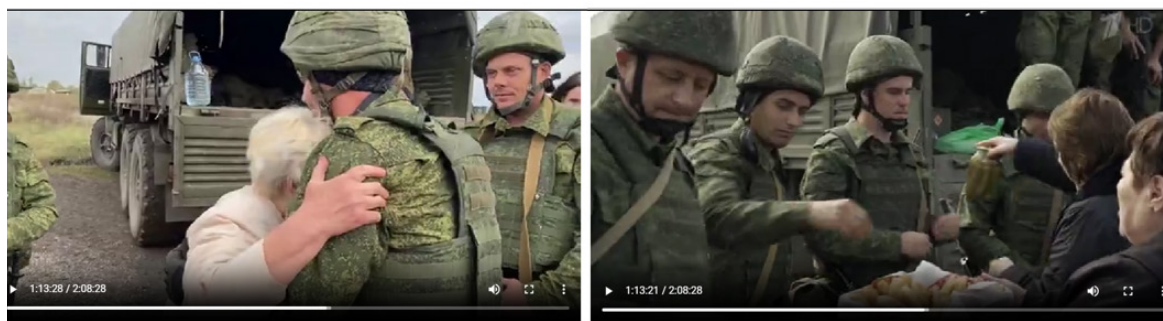
SCREENSHOT 25. *Vesti Nedeli* interview with Ramzan Kadyrov, 9 October 2022

*But he is glad, he is surprised, that we gave so much. And from all over Russia, volunteers are coming to us, and they want to serve with us, to fight together, defending the interests of our state.*¹⁶⁹

Lastly, an important point to mention is the celebration of the arrival of Russian soldiers in the ‘newly liberated’ areas and recently annexed republics. Reports featured old women bringing jars of pickles and pastries to the soldiers and hugging them (Screenshot 26), which creates a parallel with World War II imagery of the Red Army soldier being the ‘liberator’:

Correspondent: Our fighters are met by residents of the DPR [Donetsk People’s Republic] and LPR and served pickles from the cellars where they have been hiding for eight years from shelling by Ukrainian militants.

Older woman: If only you knew how much we were looking forward to seeing you! I’m



SCREENSHOT 26. *Voskresnoe Vremya* report about Donbas residents greeting Russian soldiers, 9 October 2022

*going to give you another hug, so that you feel proud here, because you are with us, you are ours. What's your name? Aleksandr? We hope that together with your boys we'll chase this fascist scum off our land. God be with us. Be careful.*¹⁷⁰

Updates about the life of mobilised soldiers were mentioned in passing by both television shows to the end of the research period. An assumption can be

made that it was done for recruitment purposes: showing that serving in the army is not only an honourable deed, but also brings financial and social benefits. Notably, on TV **there were no mentions about the massive exodus of age-appropriate men** from Russia to Georgia and other countries, fleeing the mobilisation.

Nord Stream explosions

Classification: Russia surprised by the event

Note: as there were multiple reports with versions of who was behind the Nord Stream explosions, the event was classified as ‘Russia surprised by the event’ because, even if Russia carried out the attack (and hence knew about it), people and sources that communicated about this event were surprised by it.

The explosions of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines in late September 2022, swiftly assessed to be the result of sabotage, took place against the background of the Kremlin’s sham referendums (an effort to mask a further land grab attempt in Ukraine) and the purported annexation of Ukraine’s four occupied regions. However, at the time of writing investigators had not made a formal finding of responsibility for the attacks.

Russia has had a long and sordid history of using energy as a political weapon against the Transatlantic community, and particularly Ukraine, with the Nord Stream pipelines having an important place in the attempts to undermine its democratic norms and security interests.¹⁷¹ Since the full-scale invasion of

Ukraine in 2022, the main two goals of Russia’s weaponisation have included creating divisions within the West to ‘deflect’ from support for sanctions against Russia, as well as to pressure the EU to withdraw its support for Ukraine, particularly in military and security terms.¹⁷²

Official communications

The Nord Stream explosions were first mentioned on the official government websites we tracked for the research on 29 September 2022, several days after reports of the destruction started circulating. The number of hits on the issue was low (11), with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs leading in terms of the hits produced (6). Almost all the event messages we found in the analysed official government communications were present in articles posted on mid.ru, the official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with *The US is benefiting from the destruction of Nord Stream (part of the US energy plan)* being the most widespread (Figure 29).

At a briefing on 29 September, the Foreign Ministry’s spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, gave her detailed opinion on

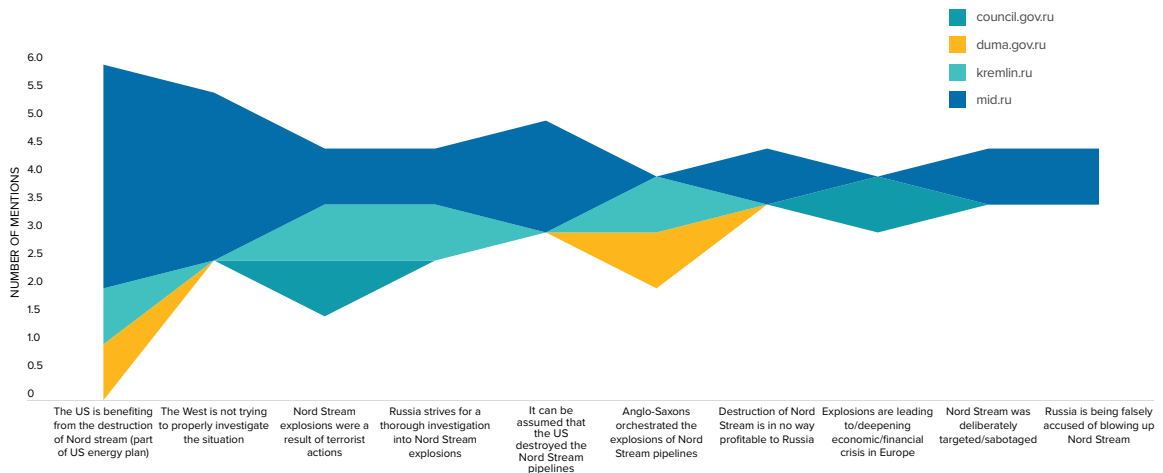
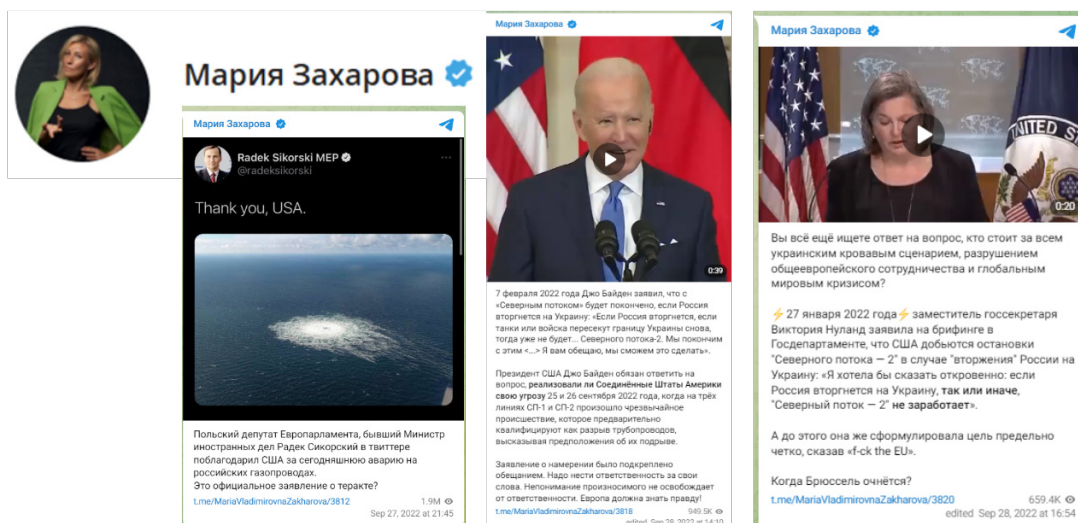


FIGURE 29. Top 10 messages about the Nord Stream explosions in official government communications



SCREENSHOT 27. Maria Zakharova's Telegram channel

what had happened to the pipelines and why. Although technically the investigation was complicated and would take a considerable amount of time, Zakharova said, 'it is enough to act as a reader of a detective story: look for the motive'. And the motive, she said, was clear: the US has long been saying that the Nord Stream pipelines are a national security threat, plus 'from the very beginning of the implementation of the Nord Stream 2 project, all its participants—both from Russia and from third countries—were subjected to unprecedented economic and political pressure from Washington'. She cited US President Joe Biden's quote dating back to 7 February 2022 ('If Russia invades—that means tanks or troops crossing the border of Ukraine—then there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it'), as well as Under Secretary Victoria Nuland ('If Russia invades Ukraine, one way or another, Nord Stream 2 will not move forward'), contrasting their words with the picture of Russia as a reliable economic partner of the EU:

Over the past decades, despite the Cold War and outbursts of seething hot hatred towards us, despite the sanctions, the hybrid war and other dirty tricks used against our country, nobody here said at any level that we wouldn't supply energy to the citizens of Europe. Never. We have always been a reliable supplier of energy to Europe. And who was it that has

*really decided to cut short the deliveries of Russian energy and rule out the very possibility of such supplies to Europe?*¹⁷³

Zakharova was highly active in commenting on the Nord Stream explosions on Telegram,¹⁷⁴ and all the main elements of her briefing on mid.ru and its video version were a compilation of her posts beforehand on the social media platform (Screenshot 27). First, she reposted a screenshot of a tweet by Radosław Sikorski¹⁷⁵ (whom she referred to as 'a vocal Americanophile, although still a Polish citizen' in her briefing), then proceeded onto the US President¹⁷⁶ and Victoria Nuland.¹⁷⁷ The latter was quoted as having sworn at the EU on 7 February 2014 and on 27 January 2022. The former, which was meant for the audiences on Telegram, was apparently transformed into a lengthier and official version on how the EU's interests have been neglected by the US.

Telegram

Overall, putting the blame on the US was the leading message within the Telegram posts intended for the Russian domestic audience: *It can be assumed that the US destroyed the Nord Stream pipelines* accounted for 23.6% of the event messages, whereas the share of *The US is benefiting from the destruction of Nord Stream* (part of the US energy plan) stood

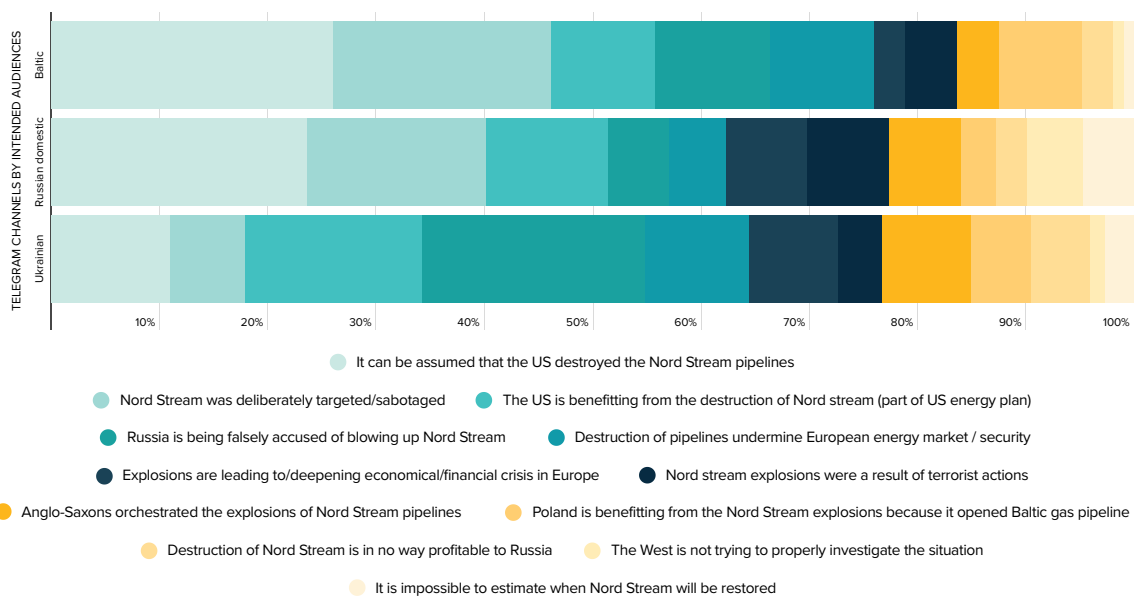


FIGURE 30. Messages about Nord Stream explosions on Telegram channels by intended audiences

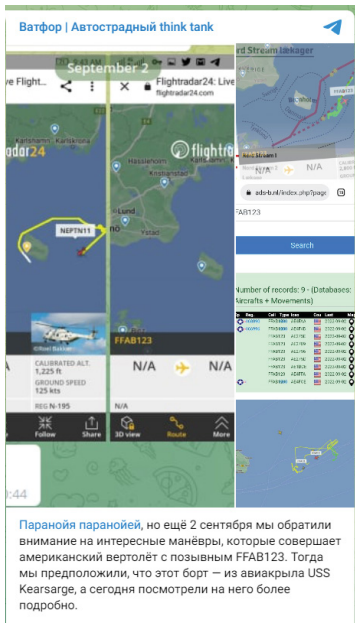
at 11.3%; together they totalled about one third of the number of mentions (Figure 30). The former message was used most frequently in combination with alleged proof of the US being behind the explosions (capability and means for an attack), whereas the latter was more about the US motives and intentions behind them (strategic willingness to carry them out).

One of the first posts to blame the US for the destruction of the pipelines among the Telegram channels we tracked was a repost by Yulia Vityazeva, who shared a text by Aleksei Leonkov, presented as a Russian military expert and a frequent guest on Russian state television. He hinted that three US vessels that could carry SDV (SEAL Delivery Vehicle) or LDUV (Large Displacement Unmanned Undersea Vehicle) were spotted in the Baltic Sea in August and September 2022, and also claimed that the ‘Americans are obsessed with “holes”,’ as evidenced by the story of a hole in the International Space Station.¹⁷⁸ ZeRada, in the meantime, claimed that ‘US intelligence warned Germany of an attack on gas pipelines several weeks in advance. It was after this information that Scholz’s office began to actively work on his “Arab tour”!’, referring to the German chancellor’s tour of the Gulf states on the eve of the explosions.¹⁷⁹

Andrey Medvedev, a member of the Moscow City Duma and formerly a VGTRK employee, was among those to repost¹⁸⁰ claims that have become widespread ‘proof’ of US involvement in the sabotage.¹⁸¹ a post by the Vatfor | Avtostradnyy (Ватфор | Автострадный) Think Tank Telegram channel¹⁸² alleged that an American helicopter with the call sign FFAB123 flew along the Nord Stream 2 route or even between the points where the accident occurred on 2 September 2022 (Figure 31). The post garnered 2 million views and was shared a total of more than 28,000 times, in 108 channels and 282 groups. Some of the channels forwarded or mentioned the post several times (Solov’yov did so twice, on 28 September and 13 October).

Within the sample of Telegram posts on the Nord Stream explosions we coded to find the main micro-narrative constructs we refer to as the event messages in this report, anti-US blame-apportioning messages echoed the general flow of Telegram posts within the dataset we used, evidencing their persistent and widespread character.

Within the dynamics of the messages in the week after the explosions, Poland was among those to be blamed for the alleged diversion at the same time as the US; this was



Post by VaforiAvtostradny think tank shared more than **28,000 times**.
 The top 15 Telegram channels that shared it included Kremlin propaganda heavyweights Soloviyov, Rybar, Voyna s Feykami, etc.

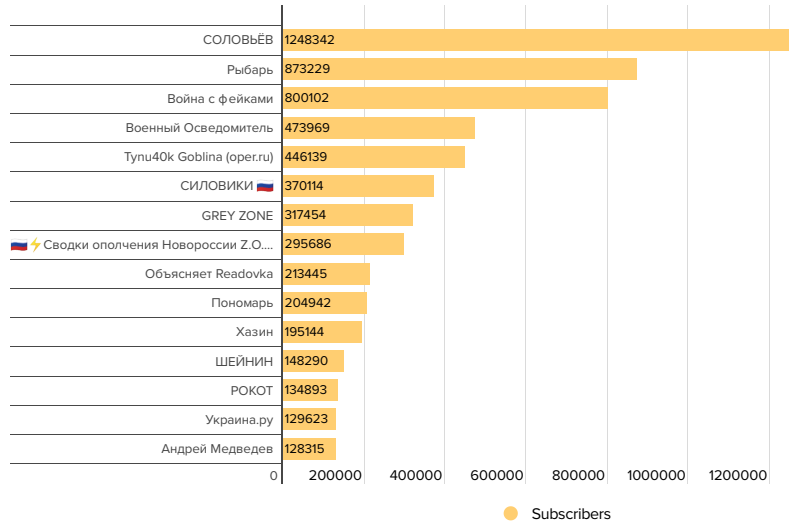


FIGURE 31. Top 15 Telegram channels sharing a post allegedly presenting proof of US involvement in the Nord Stream explosions, ranked by subscribers

aided by the widely amplified quote by Radosław Sikorski and as part of a wider concept applied to Warsaw and, to an even greater extent, to Washington (Figure 32). For years, the Kremlin has been voicing the omnipotence of Russia and the impotence of Central Eastern European countries, such as the Baltic countries and Poland. Ukraine has been frequently denied the right to sovereignty at all, as evidenced by Putin’s speeches, in particular on the unity of the two nations and the pre-invasion speech on the artificiality of the Ukrainian state. By putting the blame on the US and, for the most part of the content, giving the role of

benefactors and not implementors of the attack to Poland and Ukraine, pro-Kremlin voices were again denying their right to sovereign decisions, implying only the US was strong enough to dare to opt for the explosions. Thus, Kremlyovskaya prachka (Кремлёвская прачка) suggested:

Only the United States and its colony are interested in the act. Ukraine is becoming the only option for the transit of Russian gas to the EU, without which the EU economy is doomed. Thus, the importance of this territory

- It can be assumed that the US destroyed the Nord Stream pipelines
- The US is benefiting from the destruction of Nord Stream (part of the US energy plan)
- Anglo-Saxons orchestrated the explosions of Nord Stream pipelines
- Poland is benefiting from the Nord Stream explosions because it opened Baltic gas pipeline
- The West is to blame for the destruction of Nord Stream pipelines
- Ukraine is benefiting from Nord Stream explosions because main gas pipelines now run through its territory
- NATO countries have the capacity to sabotage Nord Stream pipelines

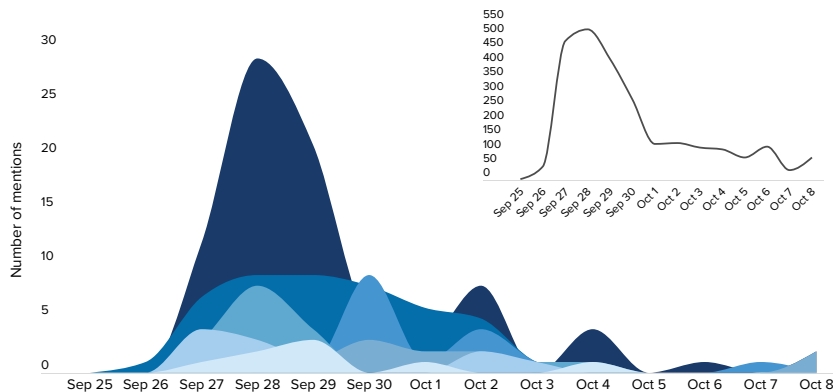


FIGURE 32. Dynamics of Telegram messages about Nord Stream explosions that assign the blame to different parties

*increases, and this allows the dictation of their terms to both European bureaucrats and Russia. The United States can now dictate the price of its liquefied gas to the EU, because an alternative is not even technically foreseeable in the medium term: deliveries through Ukraine are too risky due to the SMO, and Nord Stream is out for a long time. It is clear that of the two accomplices, only the United States has the military-technical ability to commit such a crime.*¹⁸³

On 30 September the number of posts claiming that *Anglo-Saxons orchestrated the Nord Stream* explosions peaked, as in his speech that day before signing the decree to annex Ukraine’s partially occupied territories Vladimir Putin blamed ‘the Anglo-Saxons’ for carrying out the attacks that damaged the Nord Stream gas pipelines (Figure 33):

*But the Anglo-Saxons believe sanctions are no longer enough and now they have turned to subversion. It seems incredible but it is a fact—by causing explosions on Nord Stream’s international gas pipelines passing along the bottom of the Baltic Sea, they have actually embarked on the destruction of Europe’s entire energy infrastructure.*¹⁸⁴

Putin’s words were amplified via posts on the channels we tracked, mostly by sharing

excerpts from his speech, yet the peak was quick to both rise and subside. Prior to Putin’s speech, Yuriy Podolyaka posted a video where he mentioned Anglo-Saxons as opposed to Europe, but he put the blame for the Nord Stream explosions and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on the US individually. Europe needed to return its capital leak to the US and agree with Russia on renewing cooperation.¹⁸⁵

Blaming Anglo-Saxons may be a project directed at foreign audiences, by promoting the image of Putin as the anti-colonialist and appealing to the Global South foremost. With vast funding, it is based on strengthening anti-Western sentiment, promoting ideas of pernicious Anglo-Saxons, colonial oppression, and so forth, trying to make Russia look like the only country resisting the colonial intentions of the West¹⁸⁶ and fighting a just war against Ukraine.

On 26 September the Ukrainian Kremlin-tied Telegram channel ZeRada was pondering what had happened to the pipelines, claiming it might have been a diversion or ‘the Germans might have pumped the technical gas out of the pipe for themselves. But this is more of a conspiracy theory. This cannot be done quietly.’¹⁸⁷ Both Russia and the US were suggested as benefactors of the explosions, yet the aim of the text seems to have been to promote another message with these words: ‘Last night, someone “hammered a nail into the coffin” of EU industry’ and ‘no matter who is guilty, the

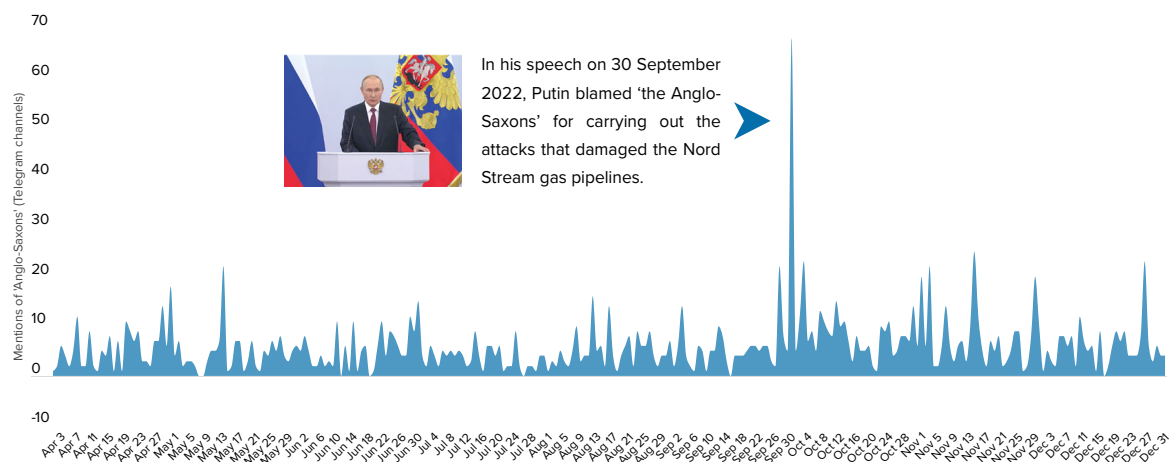
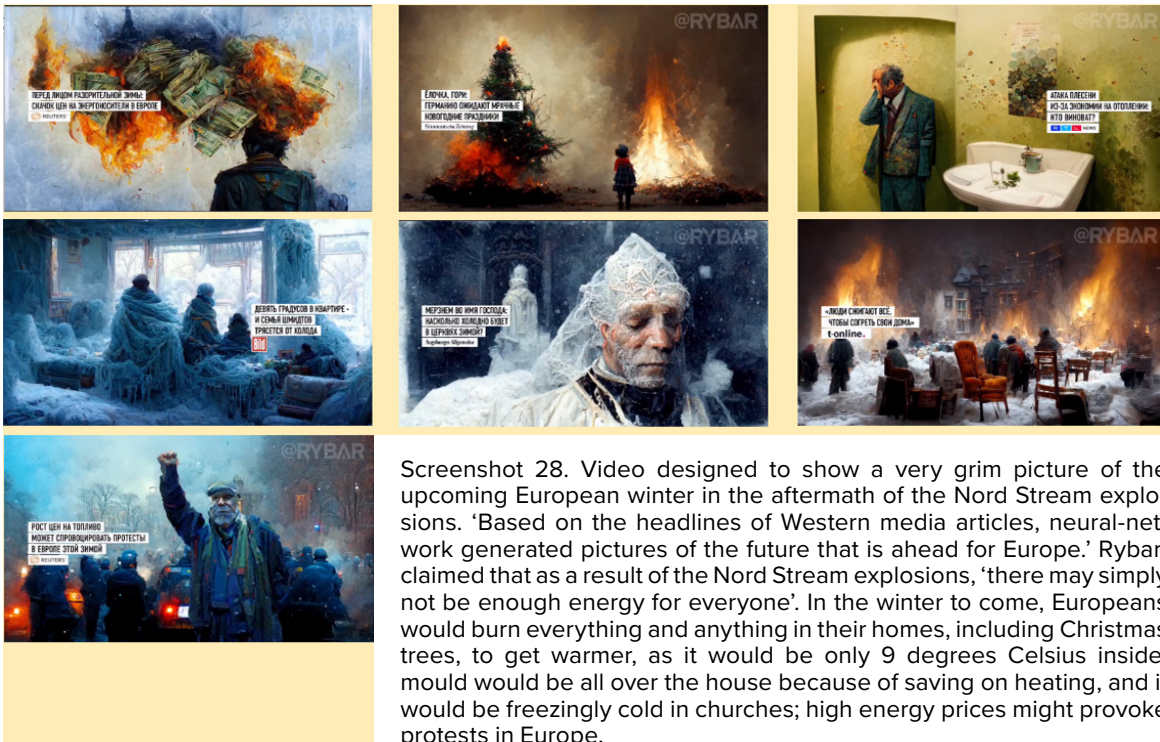


FIGURE 33. Dynamics of mentions of ‘Anglo-Saxons’ on Telegram



Screenshot 28. Video designed to show a very grim picture of the upcoming European winter in the aftermath of the Nord Stream explosions. 'Based on the headlines of Western media articles, neural-network generated pictures of the future that is ahead for Europe.' Rybar' claimed that as a result of the Nord Stream explosions, 'there may simply not be enough energy for everyone'. In the winter to come, Europeans would burn everything and anything in their homes, including Christmas trees, to get warmer, as it would be only 9 degrees Celsius inside; mould would be all over the house because of saving on heating, and it would be freezingly cold in churches; high energy prices might provoke protests in Europe.

European Union is now in trouble in winter! Two days later ZeRada spread the message of a deepening EU crisis, aimed at denigrating the union in the eyes of the Ukrainian audience, by claiming it was 'objectively difficult to think of a better demonstration of Europe's helplessness. The day before yesterday, European businesses were given a clear signal—it's time to move out of the EU.'¹⁸⁸

On a similar note the Prigozhin-affiliated Release the Kraken (Выпускайте Кракена!) mocked the EU and Germany in particular, claiming that 'It turns out that Gazprom is now sponsoring not only eternal flames in honour of the USSR's victory over Nazism, but also a couple of eternal geysers in honour of the West's victory over its own economy.'¹⁸⁹ A video entitled 'Winter is near: Europe's cold future' summed it all up for this message, painting a picture of decline:

When (and if) the population begins to seriously experience physical inconvenience amid the energy crisis, many will begin to literally fight for their survival. Among other things, this implies a serious deterioration in the crime

*situation, which is already far from ideal in Europe. The described forecast risks will come true with almost 90% probability: largely due to the suicidal policies of European leaders in general and due to the serious damage to Nord Stream in particular.*¹⁹⁰

The grim picture was graphically covered on television, just as continued scaremongering of the war in Ukraine entering a new stage—a global war involving nuclear weapons, total destruction of infrastructure, and all-embracing terror. On Telegram the theme was expressed through several posts. Legitimnyy warned the explosions opened a Pandora's box and unleashed a global infrastructure war:

Tankers, barges, and bulk carriers will randomly explode. Terrorist attacks on oil and gas platforms in international waters [will be going on]. Planes [will] disappear and crash (everything is simpler here, Ukraine has now sold a lot of weapons on the illegal market, and even more so MANPADS, which will soon surface).

It was also claimed that famine in 2023 would be ‘a more realistic story’:

*After all, everyone knows that Americans own almost all agricultural transnational corporations. Moreover, they are now promoting larvae as food, and the best thing is to force people to switch to this, because of the need to at least eat something.*¹⁹¹

To counter the voices in the media and social networks that were out of the Kremlin’s control, there was a need to promote the storyline that *Russia is being falsely accused of blowing up Nord Stream*, which was the leading message in the sample that we coded in the Telegram segment with Ukrainians as the intended audience. Western/Ukrainian media and the audience were being mocked for saying and/or believing that Russia could have blown up the pipes: ‘Now the most stubborn Nazis are all over the airwaves discussing that it was Russia that blew up its gas pipelines. Nobody is saying that it could have simply turned them off.’¹⁹² Tatyana Montyan claimed

that, ‘although the United States with the Britons and their Eastern European puppies have already appointed the culprit, you don’t need to be Sherlock Holmes to understand who exactly this sabotage will bring the biggest dividends to’,¹⁹³ putting the blame on Volodymyr Zelensky, who was not only ‘deranged’ and hence capable of the diversion, but who would also be ‘understood and forgiven’ as a ‘hero of democratic world’.

On the narrative and sub-narrative level, *Western countries pursue their goals by fair means or foul* topped the list, as a large proportion of the Kremlin-aligned Telegram channels’ content placed the blame for the Nord Stream explosions on the US, claiming it was benefiting most from the situation (Figure 34). Russia was portrayed as on a par with the US in terms of global power and influence, as contrasted to Europe, hence we categorised such mentions under *Russia is a strong and self-sufficient country*, whose side Europe should have chosen to ensure an economically secure future.

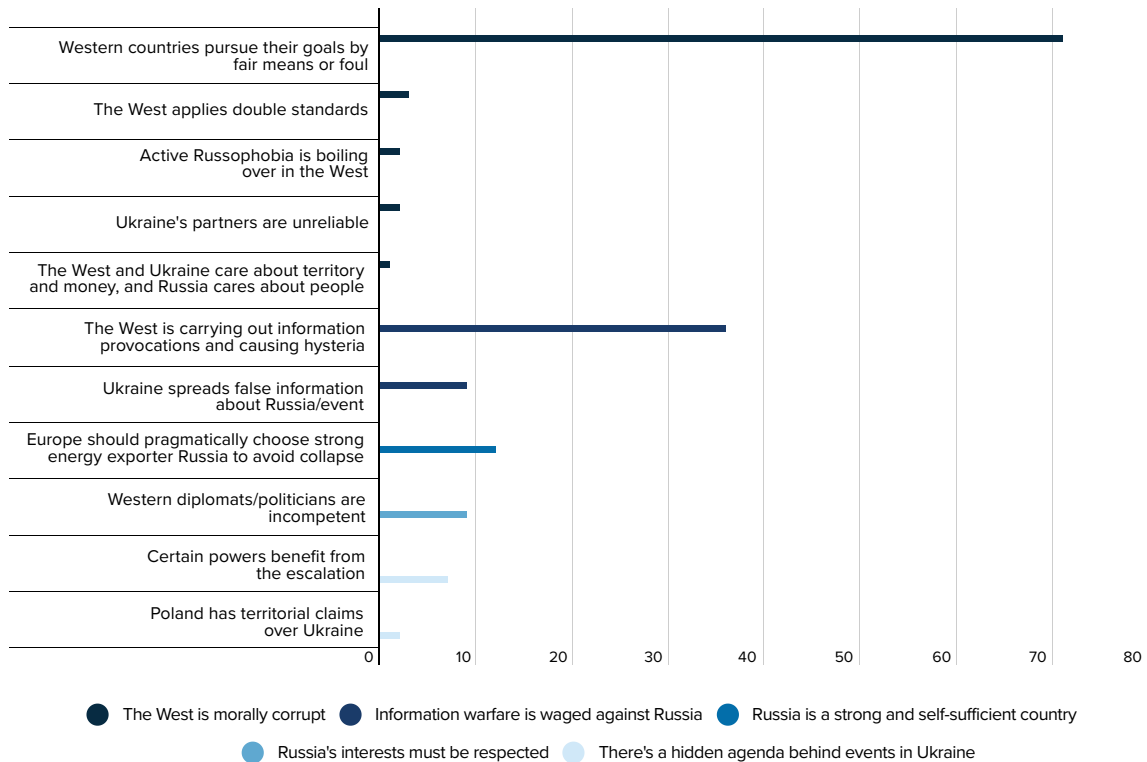


FIGURE 34. Main narratives/sub-narratives about the Nord Stream explosions on Telegram (all audiences combined)

Television

Television coverage of the explosions was based on framing the event as yet another instance of the West scapegoating Russia. The issue of attribution became central to the communication about this event from the beginning. Even though there was no evidence about who was behind the attack, presenters of *Vesti Nedeli* and *Voskresnoe Vremya* (unsurprisingly so) instantly placed the blame on ‘Anglo-Saxons’ (the US specifically) and provided reasons why this attack was beneficial (Figure 35).

Stage 1: ‘Attribution’

The Nord Stream gas pipeline explosions were quickly condemned as an act of **international terrorism** which was most likely orchestrated by the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ (Screenshot 29):

*Not just sabotage, but an act of international terrorism. This is what Vladimir Putin called the attack on the Russian gas pipelines of the Nord Stream system. According to the president, the Anglo-Saxons have actually started to destroy the European energy structure.*¹⁹⁴

As proof that the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ had the means to do it, *Vesti Nedeli* showed a report about a special unit of military divers in the



SCREENSHOT 29. *Vesti Nedeli*, 2 October 2022: the headline reads ‘International terrorism’

British army and alleged that this was how the operation was carried out (Screenshot 30).

Both shows emphasised the fact that this ‘diversion’ was especially beneficial to the US, which ‘always planned to sever the gas ties between Europe and Russia’ so it could profit.¹⁹⁵ **Another beneficiary of the explosions, as presented by Russian state television, was Ukraine, which would remain the only supplier of Russian gas to Western Europe.**¹⁹⁶

Notably, *Vesti Nedeli* added a philosophical element to the event with a 10-minute interview with Aleksandr Dugin, a far-right political thinker (dubbed by some as ‘Putin’s brain’). The basic idea he presented was that the **Nord Stream explosions are a sign of a civilisational battle between the West and Russia, in which Russia has to fight to preserve its sovereignty:**

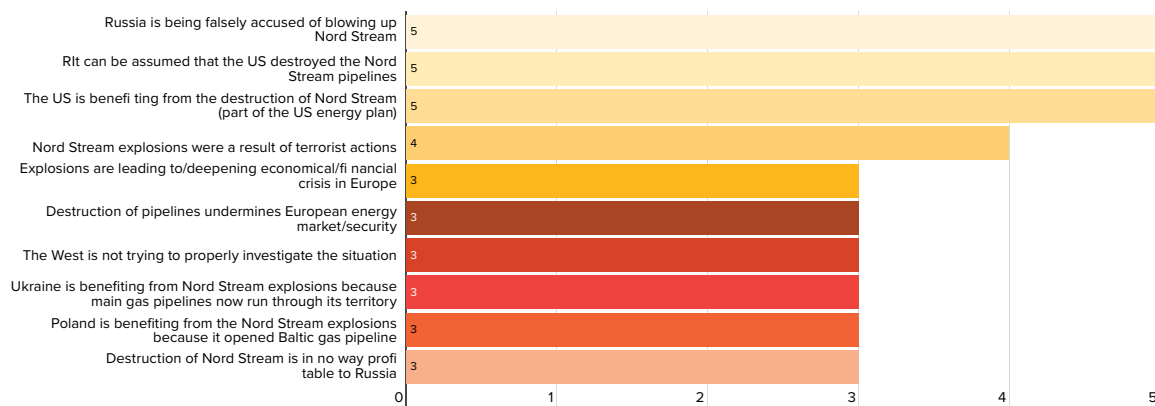
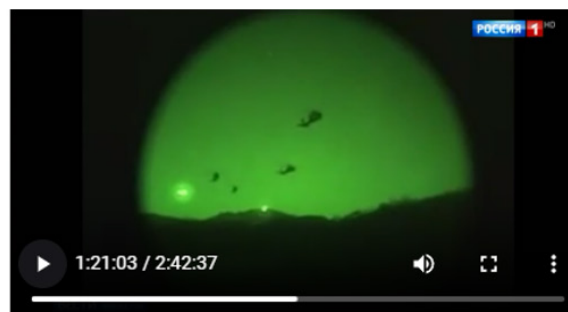
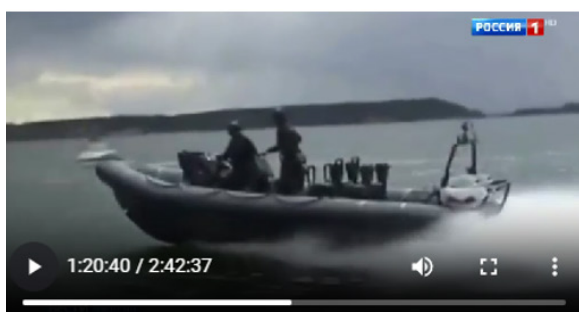


FIGURE 35. Dominant messages about the Nord Stream explosions on Russian state television



SCREENSHOT 30. *Vesti Nedeli* report about a special British divers' division that would have the capability to carry out the Nord Stream explosions, 2 October 2022

*But what does it mean for Russia to be geopolitically sovereign? Russia will be sovereign if Ukraine is either allied to it or included in it. [...] This is about the fate of humanity, and this time it is serious.*¹⁹⁷

To double down on the perceived 'threat from the West', Dugin painted a picture of the West as a 'civilisation of evil':

*A drug addict [i.e., Zelensky] and an out-of-his-mind senile old man, talking with spirits [Biden]. It's a facade. Behind it is the iron power of Anglo-Saxon and NATO civilisation, the West, liberalism, globalism. [...] But most importantly, in their world there is no place for us. We must realise that we are simply condemned by them.*¹⁹⁸

Stage 2: 'Russia against the world'

The narrative of the Nord Stream explosions being part of a 'civilisational battle' continued in *Vesti Nedeli*, quoting Joe Biden that 'for the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis, the world is facing nuclear war'. This quote was used to start a broad discussion about the possibility of a 'nuclear Armageddon', as if posing a question for their audience: since the West has the capability and audacity to blow up Nord Stream, who is to say that it will not use a nuclear weapon?

To keep up the narrative of a 'besieged

fortress', which is at the core of Putin's ideology, *Vesti Nedeli* used a quote of his from 2019 that there was no concept of 'preventive strikes' in Russia:

*Yes, in this situation, we are kind of waiting for someone to use nuclear weapons against us, but we do nothing ourselves. Yes, but then the aggressor must still know that retribution is inevitable, that they will be destroyed, and that we, the victims of aggression, will go to paradise as martyrs, while they will just die.*¹⁹⁹

The message that 'the Anglo-Saxons' do not care what happens, blame Russia at any chance they get, and just look for profit everywhere was placed at the centre of communication about Nord Stream:

*Americans don't care, they're across the ocean, they'll watch it all on TV. It's different for Europe. But that's not all. The topic of punishing Russia will come up. [...] This is the game that the British and Americans are playing now.*²⁰⁰

The narrative of 'shifting the blame onto Russia' was also used when talking about the investigation of the explosions, which, according to *Vesti Nedeli*, Sweden was hindering on purpose. At the same time, 'Western double standards' were brought up again, with the West being accused of not following the rules it set itself:

The Swedes are demonstrating Stockholm

*syndrome by closing down the area where the Nord Stream gas pipeline explosions took place. **It seems that the Swedes are in league with the terrorists.** At least, no one is in a hurry to investigate acts of international terrorism. On the contrary, the perpetrators have been given time to liquidate the evidence. [...] Everything suggests that it is not that there is no international law left, but any of the rules that the West is so fond of referring to [...]. No, you can blow up gas pipelines and blame everything on the Russians.*²⁰¹

Stage 3: Consequences

As the Kerch Bridge explosion attracted most attention at the beginning of October, communication about Nord Stream decreased and mostly centred on the consequences for Europe:

*Europeans have suffered especially, as they have never realised that the USA is not their brother or friend, but a rival in a big geopolitical game and a competitor in world markets. Europe's energy infrastructure is being destroyed, and they pretend not to know who is doing it. In this case I mean, of course, sabotage on the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines. There is no doubt about it. This is an act of international terrorism aimed at undermining the energy security of an entire continent.*²⁰²

The Kremlin's media has been crafting its rhetoric about supplies of Russian gas to Europe for decades now, since the beginning of the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. The debate around the pipeline has always been

controversial and contested, but in its communication the Kremlin always presents European countries as irrational for refusing cheap gas and deliberately sabotaging their economy. The explosion event was no different:

*Sweden announced the completion of preliminary evidence collection but refused to share the data with the Germans and Danes because of special confidentiality. Germany and Denmark have decided to investigate on their own. **As they joke online, they will also try to make up the word 'Russia' out of three letters [USA], and then compare who did it better.** And there are no options here. Putin proposes to allow the remaining flow of Nord Stream 2's 27.5 billion cubic metres per year. That's salvation. But the German economy minister either does not hear him, or does not understand him, or deliberately misleads his compatriots.*²⁰³

Lastly, both shows portrayed the 'European struggle and failure' to find alternatives, for which the **European citizens are paying a price:**

*Berlin, however, continued to splurge on weapons for Ukraine and persist in its sanctions pressure on Russia. And business and the economy, the citizens of the Federal Republic, are paying for this mistake, because it has negative economic consequences for the eurozone as a whole and for the Federal Republic in particular. Apparently, few people take its interests into account. Otherwise, Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 would not have been undermined.*²⁰⁴

Kerch Bridge explosion

Classification: Russia surprised by the event

On 26 July 2023, more than nine months after the explosion that badly damaged the bridge linking the Russian-occupied Crimean Peninsula with Russia, the SSU claimed responsibility for the attack. The Crimean Bridge, officially known as the Kerch Strait Bridge, carries heavy significance for the Kremlin, both logistically and symbolically, as a key conduit for military and civilian supplies and as an assertion of Kremlin control of the peninsula it annexed back in 2014. Boasted to be the safest bridge around the globe, it came under fire on 8 October 2022, a day after Putin's birthday.

Official communications

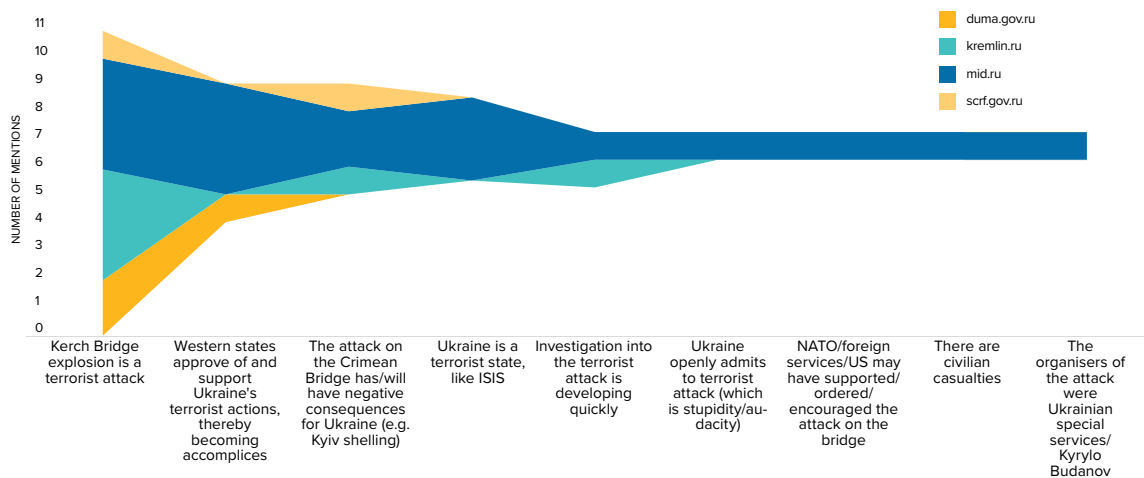
The official presidential website (kremlin.ru) was the first to react to the blast on the bridge, reporting on Putin's order to set up a government commission to 'investigate the incident and eliminate the aftermath as soon as possible'.²⁰⁵ The next day, at a meeting with the chairman of the Investigative Committee, Aleksandr Bastrykin, Putin said that there was

'no doubt that it was a terrorist act aimed at destroying critical civilian infrastructure of the Russian Federation' and that 'Ukraine's special services were the initiators, performers and masterminds'.²⁰⁶ Overall, the leading message of the official sources we tracked was to state that what had happened was in fact a terrorist attack, and it was the task of the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to spread a wider variety of messages about the Kerch Bridge explosion through statements at international events and briefings (Figure 36).

Putin was the most outspoken on 10 October, after Russia had attacked Ukraine with a wave of 84 cruise missiles and 24 suicide drones, hitting 14 regions of Ukraine, with the capital Kyiv being the most targeted. Claiming that Kyiv 'put itself on the same level as international terrorist groups, and with the most odious of those', the Russian president said it was 'simply no longer possible to leave crimes of this kind without retaliation'.²⁰⁷

Telegram

Expectations of retaliation, judging by the reactions on the Telegram channels we

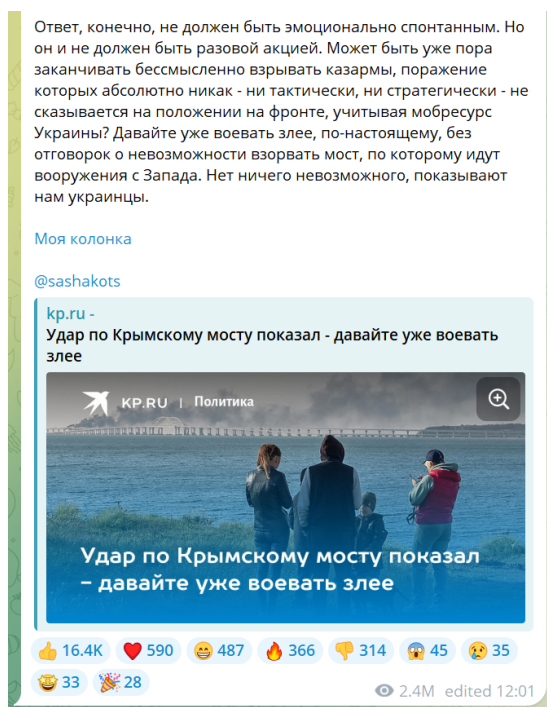


TOP 10 KERCH BRIDGE EXPLOSION MESSAGES IN OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS

FIGURE 36. Top 10 messages about the Kerch Bridge explosion in official government communications

tracked for the research, were high from the moment news about the explosion broke. Yuriy Podolyaka said he wanted Ukraine to be plunged into darkness in the upcoming days, with bridges across the Dnipro blown: enough of being “humanists” who for 7 months have not wanted to strike at the critical infrastructure of the Kyiv regime’—Moscow needed to follow in the footsteps of the ‘Kyiv regime, which is waging a war to the fullest and not giving a damn about anything.’²⁰⁸

Yuriy Kotenok (Telegram channel Военкор Котенок) said he was expecting a crushing answer from Moscow, not out of ‘revenge, but as punishment and in terms of our viability as a state responding to terrorist attacks.’²⁰⁹ The RIA Novosti Telegram account cited officials as saying that there’s ‘no doubt that the Russian Federation will give [Ukraine] an adequate, conscious, and possibly asymmetric response to the emergency on the Crimean Bridge’, as Ukraine had basically declared a ‘war without rules’.²¹⁰



SCREENSHOT 31. Post on Sasha Kots’s Telegram channel urging more aggressive fighting after the Kerch Bridge explosion

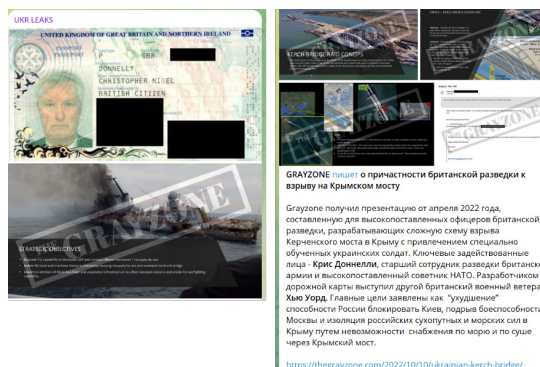
The milblogger Sasha Kots (Screenshot 31) called for

Ukraine [to be pushed] into the 18th century, without meaningless reflection on how this will affect the civilian population. Bridges, dams, thermal power plants, traction railway stations and other critical infrastructure. Kyiv is hollowing it out methodically and without moral torment. We always have some kind of chivalrous excuses. They shouldn’t exist in principle if we want to win.’²¹¹

Kremlyovskaya prachka went a step further and claimed the explosion of the Crimean Bridge ‘created a legal pretext for the use of nuclear weapons against the Kyiv regime’, as envisaged in the Fundamentals of the State Nuclear Deterrence Policy as of 10 June 2020. The people behind the channel, however, shifted the blame onto the US:

Thus, the US intrigue to implement its long-standing plan is developing—to unleash a continental nuclear war in Europe, aimed at destroying or critically weakening two state entities competing with Washington—the EU and the Russian Federation.’²¹²

UKR Leaks (Screenshot 32), meanwhile, shared claims by the Grayzone, an American far-left news website, that it had revealed a ‘secret British intelligence plot to blow up



SCREENSHOT 32. UKR Leaks post on Telegram claiming British intelligence was involved in the Kerch Bridge explosion

Crimea's Kerch Bridge', through internal documents and correspondence it had obtained.²¹³ The text (also amplified by RT214), maintaining a pro-Kremlin editorial line, suggested the plan was 'drafted at the request of Chris Donnelly, a senior British army intelligence operative and veteran high-ranking NATO advisor'.

Overall, in terms of the Telegram channels with the Russian domestic intended audience, the messages that were the most widespread were those that basically stripped Ukraine of sovereignty in decision-making, for being too irrelevant in the international arena, and claimed that foreign secret services and the like were to blame for the explosion (Figure 37). Solov'yov raged at how

*On 24 February they were afraid to stick their noses out into the street. Now they are taking pictures on the streets of Kyiv against the backdrop of a poster with the burning Crimean Bridge. The West applauds Ukrainian terrorists. It is obvious that NATO command took part in the development of this sabotage. [...] This whole 'game of humanism' is perceived as weakness and is only a reason to mock us.*²¹⁵

In general, the most widespread messages on Telegram within the three segments as per the intended audiences were highly diverse. Some of this variation might have

stemmed from differences in the characteristics of the Kremlin-aligned channels in the selected datasets—for instance, in the Baltics it is fringe media that promotes Kremlin narratives, whereas in Russia official messages are inseparable from the mainstream media. This, however, does not neglect the differences in conveying the Kerch Bridge related messages to the various audiences.

In the posts we labelled from Telegram channels categorised as intended for the Ukrainian audience, the message *Western partners (will) turn away from Ukraine over terrorist acts/are not satisfied with Ukraine's behaviour* was much more prominent than in the other segments, receiving the highest share of mentions compared to the Russian domestic and Baltic intended audiences. Legitimnyy said:

*Our source reports that the West did not appreciate the hype of Ukrainian officials and the entire public sector on the case of the terrorist explosion of the Crimean Bridge. 'Idiots from Bankovaya Street', who formed the opinion among the masses that this terrorist attack was definitely the work of Ukraine, were scolded.*²¹⁶

Rezident posted in a similar vein, claiming the West was irritated by the explosion on the Crimean Bridge, as it was 'trying to

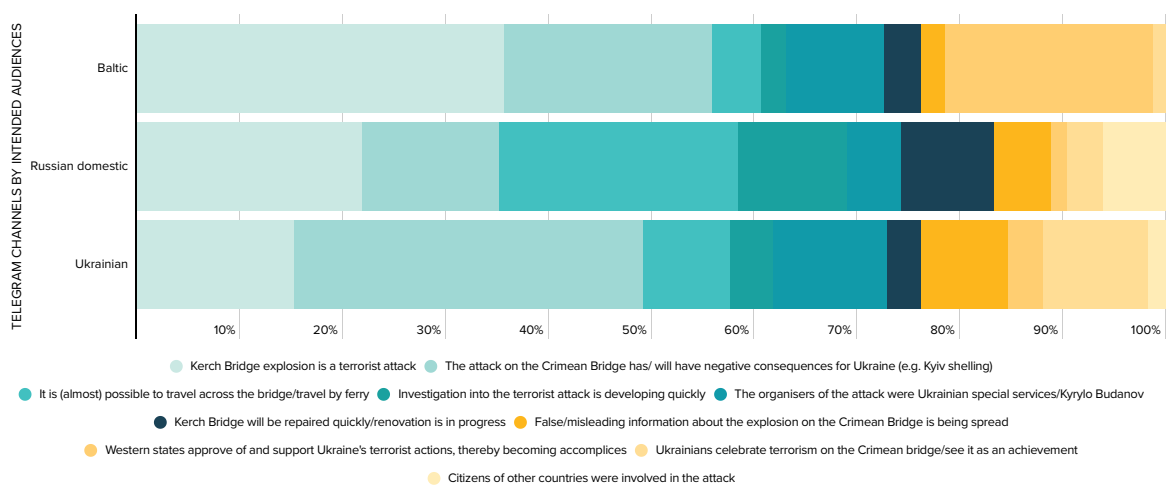


FIGURE 37. Messages about the Kerch Bridge explosion on Telegram channels by intended audiences

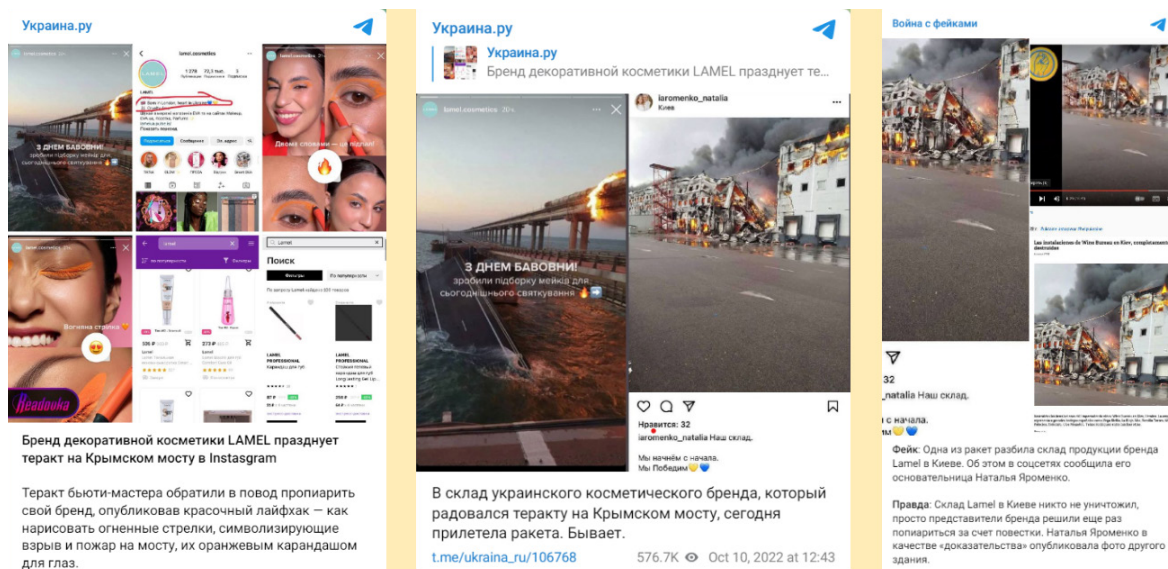
prevent the war from spreading beyond the borders of Ukraine’, while Zelensky’s office was continuously making erroneous steps, such as the ‘unsuccessful application to NATO, then a statement about a preventive nuclear strike.’²¹⁷ Kartel claimed that Zelensky and his people were doing themselves a disservice by carrying out attacks such as car explosion of Aleksander Dugin’s daughter Darya Dugina and the Kerch Bridge, since ‘nobody likes terrorists’, which were a totally different thing from the ‘war and missile attacks that lead to casualties among civilians’, like the hundreds of episodes the US had in the Middle East, Libya, and Yugoslavia.²¹⁸

In the segment of Telegram channels with the Baltic countries as intended audiences, the share of the message *Western states approve of and support Ukraine’s terrorist actions, thereby becoming accomplices* was considerably greater than in the other two segments (amounting to about one fifth of all messages mentions in the segment). The Sprats in exile I Latvian News channel, for example, blamed

politicians in Eastern Europe for their ‘brutal inclinations’ and adopting ‘Ukro-thinking’: ‘The head of the Estonian Foreign Ministry with undisguised gloating named the authors of the explosion on the Crimean Bridge. In Poland, politicians said that this was “a balm for their hearts.”’²¹⁹

Among the posts we coded with Ukrainians as the intended audience, the large share of the message *The attack on the Crimean Bridge has/will have negative consequences for Ukraine* (e.g. Kyiv shelling), at 33.9%, was aimed at deterring the Ukrainian side from bold moves and ‘escalation’, as well as showing that the country’s authorities were incompetent in their political and military decisions. Legitimnyy claimed that the

Russian strikes on the strategic infrastructure of Ukraine may not just be a ‘response’ to the terrorist attack on the Crimean Bridge, but preparation for a large-scale offensive campaign. [...] At the same time, the Ukrainian



SCREENSHOT 33. Telegram posts about an attack on a warehouse of a Ukrainian brand that ‘celebrated’ the Kerch Bridge explosion. (1) Cosmetics brand LAMEL celebrates the terrorist act on Crimean Bridge on their Instagram. The beauty-masters turned this attack into a PR moment and published a colourful lifehack – how to create a flame design using their eyeliner, which would symbolise the explosion and fire on the bridge. (2) The warehouse of a Ukrainian cosmetics brand that yesterday was so happy about the terrorist act on Crimean bridge was hit by a missile. Happens. (3) Fake: one of the missiles hit a warehouse of Lamel in Kyiv. It was announced on social media by the founder Natalya Yaromenko. Truth: Nobody destroyed the Lamel warehouse, just the heads of the brand decided once again to use today’s context for PR. Natalya Yaromenko published a picture of other building as “proof”.

*Armed Forces continue to strike at adjacent Russian territories (Belgorod, Kursk, etc.). [...] Zelensky now completely rejects any negotiations, demanding that the General Staff continues to move forward.*²²⁰

A post by the Kremlin-aligned Ukraina.ru Telegram channel purported to show what happens to those happy about the explosion of the Crimea Bridge (Screenshot 33). It provided a photo of the Lamel cosmetics brand warehouse it said was destroyed after the Russians hit Ukraine on 10 October,²²¹ after the brand's account allegedly celebrated the Kerch Bridge explosion as Bavovna Day.²²² The news was, however, termed 'fake' by War on Fakes, known for pseudo fact-checking as a tool of Kremlin disinformation and propaganda.²²³

Only a low number of hits (9 out of 584 content pieces labelled for the event) were critical towards the safety of the Kerch Bridge,



SCREENSHOT 34. Post on Anatoliy Shariy's Telegram channel on how unprotected the Kerch Bridge was

using the message *Safety devices/rules on the bridge were not used/respected*. These included a note by Voennyi Osvedomitel' on how

*More than 12 billion rubbles were spent on the security of the Crimean Bridge and its adjacent territories by the Department of Private Security of the Ministry of Transport. In fact, safety was reduced to an inspection of a trailer by a traffic police officer.*²²⁴

Anatoliy Shariy posted a video of how one could 'easily pass through the Crimean Bridge without being inspected. [Just] turn to the left' (Screenshot 34).²²⁵ He was criticising not only the safety of the bridge, but also how the Kremlin's vast media resources and officials had covered the story. Ol'ga Shariy also shared a video criticising, for instance, Maria Zakharova, for being unable to twist the story as Zelensky's press office does. They were seconded by Igor Girkin-Strelkov, who presented a 'List of phrases recommended for state-patriotic journalists when describing the situation with the Crimean Bridge (as part of free humanitarian assistance from the presidential administration)'. These included suggestions for the 'patriotic journalists' to say:

'What nonsense! We'll repair it in 2 days! If they continue blowing it up, we'll repair it at least every day! They don't have explosives. Stop blowing things up all the time!'

'So what, they blew it up? October is coming to an end; the whole country has already managed to relax in Crimea! By next season everything will be better than before!'

*'Don't be nervous! One was blown up—let's build a second one next to it—exactly the same.—They'll get tired of blowing things up!'*²²⁶

With regard to the narratives and sub-narratives we found in the content pieces

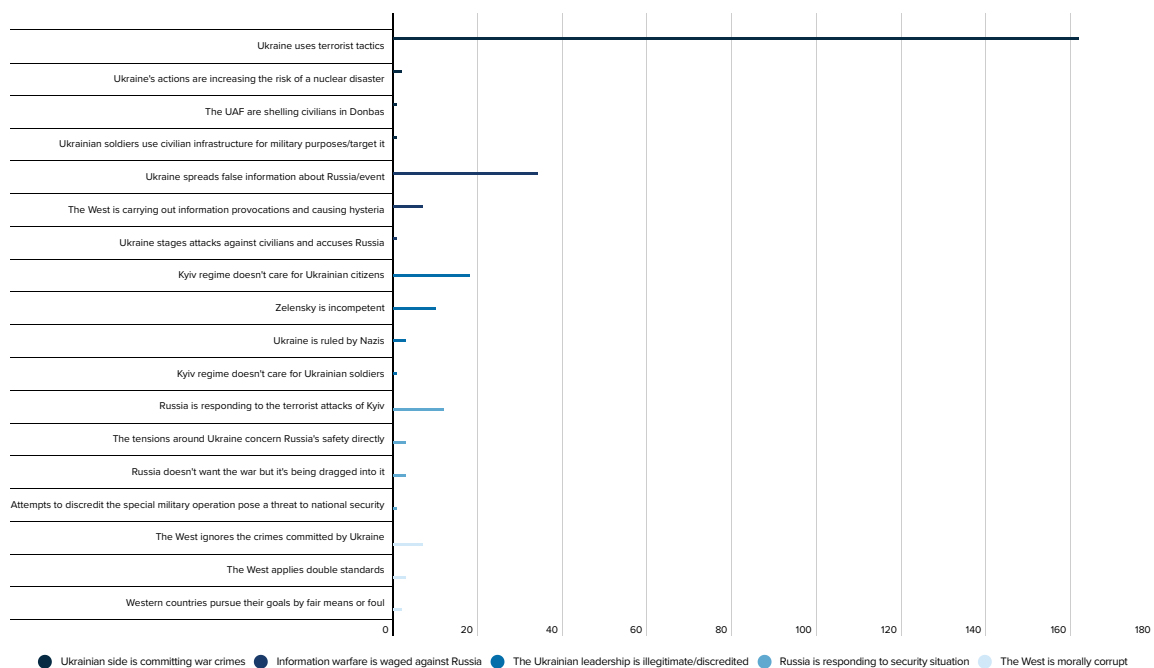


FIGURE 38. Main narratives/sub-narratives on Telegram about the Kerch Bridge explosion (all audiences combined)

covering the Kerch Bridge explosion, Ukraine was presented as a country resorting to terrorist tactics, as was evident in the list of messages within the Telegram (Figure 38) and official communication datasets. The country was also portrayed as waging an information war against Russia, along with its terror attack, whereas the West was most often ignoring the crimes committed by Ukraine, while Russia had to defend itself.

Television

In the case of the Kerch Bridge explosion, television served as an amplifier of official communications. Representatives of government institutions were quoted directly, to establish two main messages: that *The Kerch Bridge explosion is a terrorist attack and that the bridge will be repaired quickly/renovation is already in progress* (Figure 39). **No criticism towards the state for failing to prevent the attack was allowed on the television screen;** instead, all attention was directed at the 'swift' investigation, naming the perpetrators, and ensuring that ordinary citizens who used the

Kerch Bridge daily suffered as little inconvenience as possible.

Communication about the event unfolded in **three stages**. Both *Vesti Nedeli* and *Voskresnoe Vremya* established recurring lines of communication related to this event: **investigation, restoration, and consequences**.

Stage 1: 'Everything is under control'

The Kerch Bridge attack could be considered as an objective failure of the Russian special services who did not prevent the incident. However, Russian state television used an array of communicative measures to divert attention from this fact.

From the very beginning, **Putin was placed at the forefront of the communications**, with reports about the explosion focusing on the president being involved personally and the relevant institutions (e.g. the Investigative Committee) reporting directly to him (Screenshot 35).

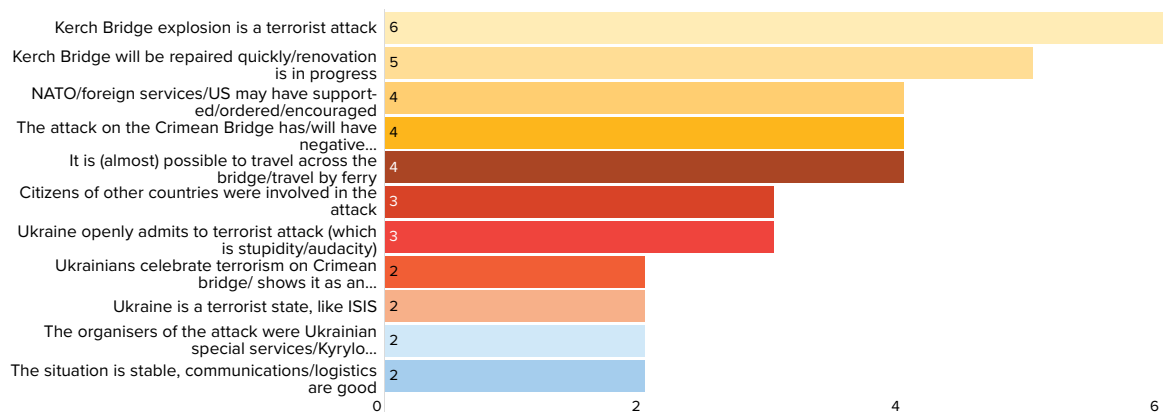


FIGURE 39. Dominant messages about the Kerch Bridge explosion on Russian state television

Every piece of information given out that related to the investigation underlined the fact that this was a terrorist act, again portraying Ukraine as a terrorist state: for example, the special edition stamp released by the Ukrainian postal service was framed as **glorification of terrorism in the whole country**: ‘The Ukrainian Post has promised to issue this stamp in the usual format in an edition of 7 million copies’ (Screenshot 36).²²⁷

Another important point made in the early communication about the Kerch Bridge

*and fraud. The criminal logic has bound the NATO regimes together. The very regimes that support blatant Ukrainian terrorism.*²²⁹

Details about the investigation were presented alongside **information about restored traffic** and aid being given to those affected by the explosion (Screenshot 37). Besides very technical information, emphasis was put on the **strength of the Russian spirit**: in times of crisis, people stuck together; ordinary citizens came to help stranded travellers.



SCREENSHOT 35. Vesti Nedeli, 9 October 2022: the headline reads ‘Report’



SCREENSHOT 36. Vesti Nedeli report about the postage stamp dedicated to the Kerch Bridge explosion, 9 October 2022

explosion as a terrorist attack was the **involvement of foreign countries** (especially NATO members) and Kyiv’s ‘foreign curators’ not being able to keep it under control:

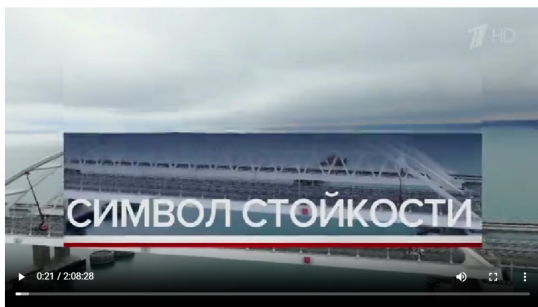
*A terrorist state led by a psychopath. The Kyiv regime, designed by the West to be tame, is out of its control.*²²⁸

Murder, sabotage, destruction, provocations,

Lastly, it was important to stress from the very beginning that the bridge was not just a building, but a **symbol of Russia** (Screenshot 38): ‘For those Ukrainians fleeing the Zelensky regime, the Crimean Bridge is the road of life that leads from Russian Crimea to Big Russia, which treats Ukrainians, unlike the West does, as a brotherly nation.’²³⁰ This quote is one of the better examples of how well crafted and



SCREENSHOT 37. *Vesti Nedeli* report about local people helping at the site of the Kerch Bridge attack, 9 October 2022



SCREENSHOT 38. *Voskresnoe Vremya*, 9 October 2022: the headline reads ‘Symbol of resilience’

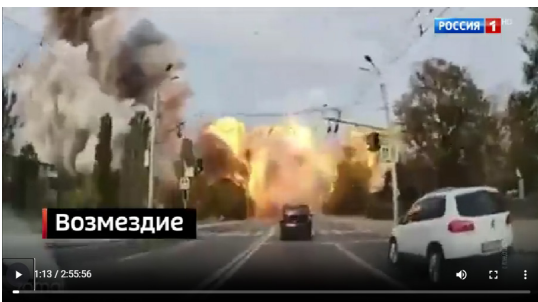
polished the Kremlin’s strategic communications are. As it had to react quickly to the news of the bridge explosion, it had to rely on tried-and-tested messaging. Here *Voskresnoe Vremya* **strung together at least five messages in one sentence**: (1) Ukraine is a hostile regime; (2) Russia plays the role of the saviour; (3) The West is morally corrupt; (4) Russia and Ukraine are brotherly nations; (5) Crimea belongs to Russia.

Stage 2: ‘Retaliation’

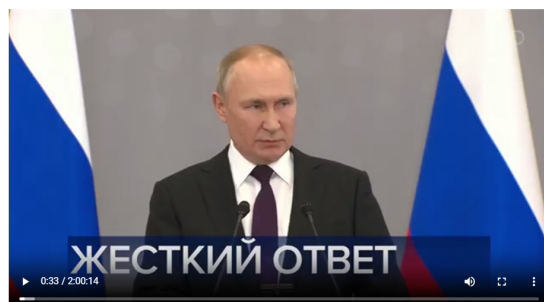
At this stage, attention shifted to Ukraine ‘paying the price’ for the Kerch Bridge explosion, as was promised. Strikes against Ukraine’s critical infrastructure were presented as ‘attacks of retribution’ which could not have been avoided, as Putin himself said (Screenshots 39 and 40):

*Since Monday morning, the Russian military has been conducting powerful air strikes on key Ukrainian infrastructure, immediately labelled in the press as retaliation strikes [...]. At a meeting of the Russian Security Council on Monday, President Vladimir Putin said that it was impossible to leave the terrorist attack on the Crimean Bridge unanswered.*²³¹

Details about the results of the infrastructure strikes were provided multiple times by both shows, followed by comments from presenters that Russia had repeatedly warned about harsh retaliation and now **Ukraine must**



SCREENSHOT 39. *Voskresnoe Vremya*, 16 October 2022: the headline reads ‘Retaliation’



SCREENSHOT 40. *Voskresnoe Vremya*, 16 October 2022: the headline reads ‘Tough answer’

face the consequences of the decisions made by the government in Kyiv:

*It is the **authorities in Kyiv who are clearly working to bid farewell to Ukrainian statehood.** They have done and continue to do everything to ensure that Ukraine as a sovereign country no longer exists. And the terrorist attack on the Crimean Bridge is among a series of these suicidal actions on their part.*²³²

At this stage, both TV shows built on the lines of communication established during stage 1. Viewers were provided with more details into the investigation, including the **name of the 'main organiser' of the attack**, head of the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, Kirill Budanov. Moreover, to reinforce the feeling of security for its audience, *Vesti Nedeli* provided a detailed report on 'other terrorist attacks which were prevented by our services' (Screenshot 41).



SCREENSHOT 41. *Voskresnoe Vremya*, 16 October 2022: the headline reads 'Pushback against terror'

The investigation also uncovered **ties to foreign countries**. Insinuations were also made about Ukraine using the humanitarian corridor established for the Black Sea grain deal (as a 'goodwill gesture' on Russia's part) to plan other attacks:

*One of the main questions today is how explosives from Odesa got to Bulgaria and then to Georgia and so on. There is reason to believe that Kyiv took advantage of Russia's goodwill in presenting a humanitarian sea corridor for the export of Ukrainian grain.*²³³

Stage 3: 'Doubling down'

At this stage the fact of the explosion on the Kerch Bridge moved into the background and was mentioned alongside information about the 'retaliation strikes' against Ukraine and other 'provocations' planned by Kyiv.

To further drum up the communication line of **Ukraine as a terrorist aggressor**, alongside information about the investigation of the Kerch Bridge explosion, **details of 'other potential attacks' were provided by both shows. Those mostly focused on accusations of the so-called dirty bomb being built in Ukraine and alleged plans of Ukrainian intelligence to carry out an 'anti-Russian provocation' at Nova Kakhovka dam.**²³⁴

Such messages served the purpose of demonising the enemy and were used in conjunction with the narratives of Ukraine being a Nazi regime and a terrorist state:

*Neo-Nazis are openly using terrorist methods of sabotage at life-support facilities and assassination attempts on representatives of local authorities. Like their ideological predecessors, the Banderovites, Hitler's accomplices, they are trying to create a bandit underground and are sending sabotage groups into our territory. It was Ukrainian special services that organised the explosion on the Crimean Bridge.*²³⁵

The **'retaliation strikes' were presented as successful and effective**, as they plunged Ukraine into chaos and darkness, and made 'Zelensky act hysterically' (Screenshot 42). Emphasis was placed on the Ukrainian authorities lying and censoring their own citizens:

They lie constantly, both to their citizens and to their overseas masters. In reality, the damage to critical infrastructure is much more serious. And citizens are strictly forbidden, under threat of criminal prosecution, to photograph and post images of the consequences

*of Russian retaliatory strikes online. The fear of imminent disaster throws Zelensky into a state of hysteria.*²³⁶

The Kerch Bridge appeared on state television again on 5 December 2022, with



SCREENSHOT 42. *Voskresnoe Vremya* report about Ukraine drowning in darkness, 23 October 2022

reports highlighting how quickly the bridge was restored (Screenshot 43). As a testament to a job well done, even Putin himself took a drive behind the wheel of a black Mercedes (with camera crew on the back seat, of course).²³⁷



SCREENSHOT 43. *Voskresnoe Vremya* report about Putin driving over the newly repaired Kerch Bridge, 5 December 2022

Annexation referendums

Classification: Event initiated by Russia

On 28 September 2022 the Russian authorities officially announced that the overwhelming majority of those eligible took part and voted for annexation in four of Ukraine's occupied regions, with the lowest 'yes' vote allegedly above 87% in the Kherson region and as high as 99.2% in the Kremlin's puppet para-state Donetsk. The voting was widely seen in Ukraine and the West as a cynical sham and an effort to cover the Russian land grab, which was condemned by major international organisations such as the UN.²³⁸

The fraudulent character of the so-called 'referendums' was evidenced by a wide array of sham practices in the conduct of the vote, ranging from the absence of prepared voter registers or data on how many inhabitants remained in the temporarily occupied territories, multiple ballots being cast by the same people, forced voting on behalf of absentees, to raw intimidation by armed Russian soldiers standing near ballot boxes.²³⁹ And how was this spectacle served to the audiences at home and in Ukraine, and in the Baltic countries?

Official communications

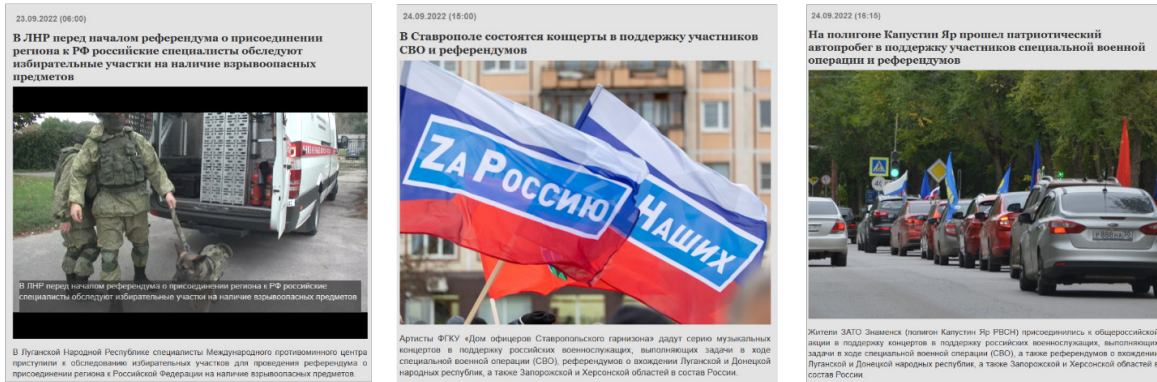
In the week preceding the official announcement of the alleged 'voting' results, official government communications in the sources we tracked for the research revolved around Putin's 21 September announcement of the so-called 'partial mobilisation' and the simultaneous promise to 'do everything necessary to create safe conditions' to hold referendums—as decided by 'the parliaments of the Donbass people's republics and the military-civilian administrations of the Kherson and Zaporozhye regions', so that 'people can express their will'—and to support 'the choice of future made by the majority of people'.²⁴⁰ 'We know that the majority of people living in

the territories liberated from the neo-Nazis, and these are primarily the historical lands of Novorossiia, do not want to live under the yoke of the neo-Nazi regime,' Putin said, adding that Russia had no 'moral right to let our kith and kin be torn to pieces by butchers'. Putin's speech was echoed by that of Speaker of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation Valentina Matvienko, on the occasion of the Russian Security Council's 529th meeting:

The fact that people came up with such an initiative speaks of their deep spiritual connection with our country, of the fact that they have remained faithful to their values, faith, native Russian culture, and their peaceful and secure future only as part of Russia. This people's initiative is the most striking indicator of the collapse of the policy of Kyiv and the West to create the 'anti-Russia' project.²⁴¹

Another peak of articles within the official segment we tracked was noted on 23 September, with the onset of the sham referendums. The chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin was quoted as per his post on Telegram where he condemned the EU for ignoring the genocide in Donbas for eight years and said Russia would support the willingness of the voters to become part of the Russian Federation.²⁴² The Ministry of Defence website boasted how sappers checked both the polling station premises and the territory adjacent to them in Luhansk (Screenshot 44),²⁴³ and for the next several days reported on how 'patriotic events' were being held in support of the special military operation and the referendums.

On its website Russia's Foreign Ministry was actively promoting the message *Referendums comply with international law (including foreign observers)*, the leading message within the segment overall (Figure 40).

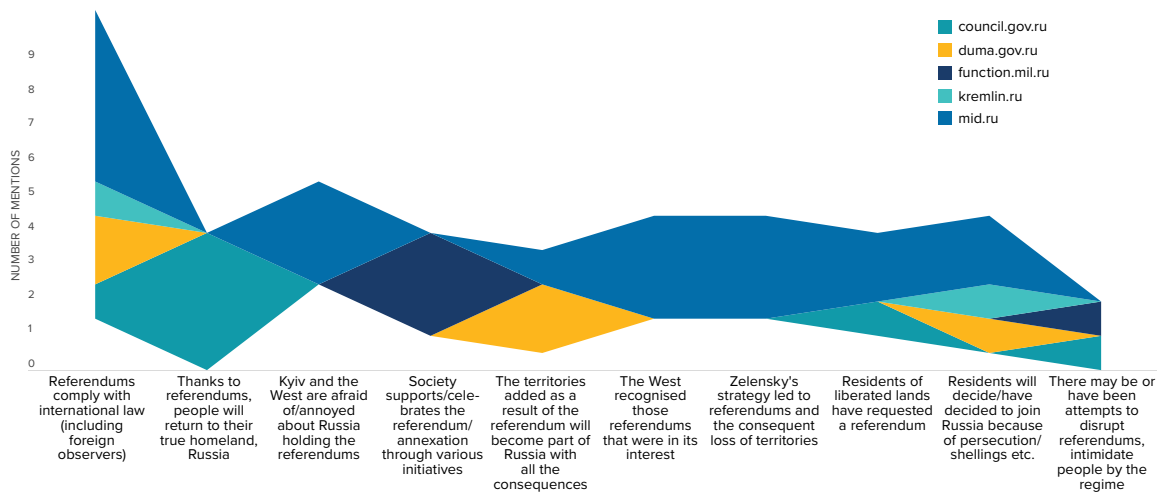


SCREENSHOT 44. Ministry of Defence website on 23 and 24 of September 2022: (1) In the LPR, before the start of the referendum, Russian specialists inspect the polling station for explosives. (2) Concerts were held in Stavropol to support the referendums and special military operation. (3) A patriotic motor rally was held at the Kapustin Yar range to support participants of the special military operation and the referendums

Lengthy speeches and briefings by the minister Sergey Lavrov or the spokesperson Maria Zakharova represented the essence of the Kremlin’s communications superstructure and were packed with strategic narratives, and the institution led in terms of the messages included in their communications.

In his speech at a news conference following the High-Level Week of the 77th Session of the UN General Assembly, Lavrov wove together the right to self-determination for the ‘liberated parts’ of Ukraine with blame-shifting onto Zelensky, who, according to the diplomat,

‘initiated the process that made the life of ethnic Russians in Ukraine unbearable, and eventually led to the announcement of referendums on joining the Russian Federation in these regions and republics’. He also denigrated the EU as an ‘authoritarian, rigid, dictatorial entity’ which applied double standards, and, together with the US, accelerated Russophobic tendencies, trying to pull ‘the whole world towards their ugly policy’, along with packing Ukraine with deadly weapons.²⁴⁴



TOP 10 REFERENDUM MESSAGES IN OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS

FIGURE 40. Top 10 messages about the referendums in official government communications

Telegram

The list of leading event messages within the sample of Telegram posts we coded was the most evenly distributed among all the events covered by the analysis, which may evidence a high level of uniformity and prioritisation of the main vectors of storytelling about the so-called referendums (Figure 41). In the week prior to the official announcement of the results of the ‘votes’, the largest number of messages among all the intended audiences was *Residents of the referendum areas support annexation to Russia*.

The post that garnered the largest number of views, at 4 million, was one of Dmitry Medvedev’s: ‘The referendums are over. The results are obvious. Welcome home to Russia!’²⁴⁵ In another post, which was viewed 2.9 million times, Medvedev commented on the speech by Putin and concluded: ‘Referendums will take place, and the Donbas republics and other territories will be accepted into Russia.’²⁴⁶

Among the posts that led in terms of views, there was also a post by Yuriy Podolyaka. Like other posts on Telegram, it used the turnout numbers to represent those voting ‘yes’:

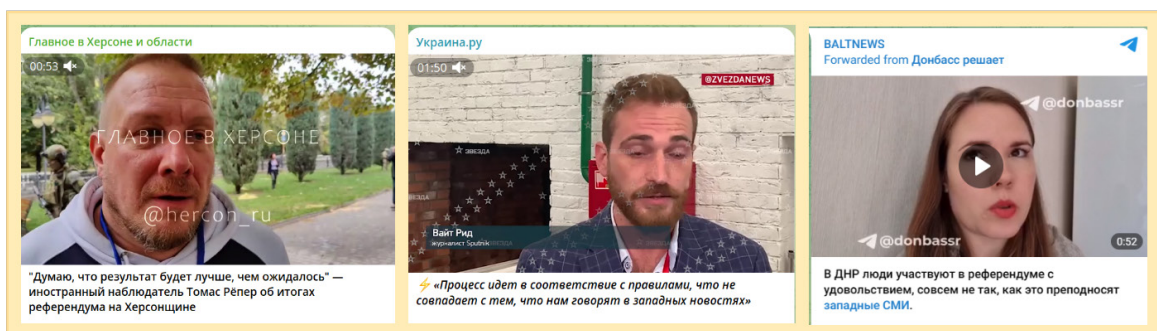
*Results of the 4th day of the referendum: In the DPR, the turnout over four days was 86.89%; in the LPR, 83.61%; in the Zaporizhzhia region, 66.43%; in the Kherson region, 63.58%. Therefore, by the end of the week, Russia will grow with new territories. And this is already inevitable, and that is why Blinken, and the maddened Frau Baerbock, are hysterical today.*²⁴⁷

Podolyaka also praised Moscow for ‘playing unconventionally’, for example by opting for mobile polling stations instead of relying on stationary ones, concluding that ‘Moscow starts unconventionally and WINS.’

The message *In the referendums people want and are happy to decide their fate* ranked second, and was the most widespread in terms of the number of mentions and the share among all message mentions (16.5%) in the posts with Ukraine as the intended audience. In a video posted by Khersonskiy Vestnik, a Kherson official of the occupying forces urged local residents to come to the polling stations and ‘vote for peace and order, noting that Kherson is Russia’.²⁴⁸ In another



FIGURE 41. Messages about the annexation referendums on Telegram channels, by intended audiences



SCREENSHOT 45. Foreign voices of Russian propaganda on Telegram: long-standing Kremlin mouthpieces are presented as international observers at the sham referendums

video a resident of Luhansk said that he was voting in ‘the referendum to unite with Russia’, claiming that he had waited eight years for it to happen.²⁴⁹ ‘We hope that after the referendum life will be much better than it was before. A bright future awaits us,’ another resident of Kherson was shown to have said.²⁵⁰

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has been increasingly using people it presents as ‘Western journalists’ as the Kremlin’s propaganda and disinformation agents to cover ongoing events in the country (Screenshot 45). During the referendums, their role was to secure the illusion of the voting being held in line with international regulations, in an open and transparent manner, as well as to amplify the message of how happy the residents of the referendum areas were to participate in the events. For the most part, these ‘referendum observers’ were long-time stooges of the Kremlin tasked with legitimising yet another lie by the Kremlin.²⁵¹ They included Thomas Röper, ‘who calls himself a German journalist’; a fluent Russian speaker, he has lived in Russia for more than 20 years and is the author of a book about Putin.²⁵² As editor-in-chief of a pro-Russian news website in German *Anti-Spiegel*, Röper claims that the Hamburg-based weekly *Der Spiegel* is an ‘assault weapon of democracy and NATO’, criticises the newspaper’s negative reporting on Russia, and ‘is interested in protecting the Kremlin’s reputation’.²⁵³ Röper was present in Kherson and claimed that he was himself surprised at how Kherson was not in fact the most sceptical about joining Russia: ‘the referendum

is almost a festivity. People were walking in groups, cheerful and happy.’²⁵⁴

Wyatt Reed, a journalist at the Russian state-owned news agency Sputnik covering Latin America and the US, was also among the referendum-friendly faces legitimising the Kremlin’s sham referendums.²⁵⁵ ‘The process is handled in line with regulations, which is against what we hear in the Western media,’ he said, adding that when he was in Moscow, Crimea, and Kherson, ‘he saw the willingness of people to be with the authorities that can satisfy their basic needs: warmth, a job, and food’.²⁵⁶ Alina Lipp, a frequent guest on Russian TV shows, including *Solov’ov Live*, and radio stations, is one of the most productive content creators aimed at the German audience.²⁵⁷ With a long history of spreading Kremlin propaganda related to Crimea, she was also presented to Baltic audiences via *Baltnews* as a German journalist. ‘In the DPR, people participate in the referendum with pleasure, not at all in the way it is presented by the Western media,’ Lipp echoed her colleague Kremlin propagandists from abroad, adding that people were lining up in rows to vote, being ‘eager to become part of Russia. Their joy is not fake.’²⁵⁸ Lipp also played the role of expert on German issues when she commented on a speech by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, who said that the sham referendums were ‘an attempt to give a veneer of legitimacy to a blatant land-grab’ and were preceded by reports about the ‘torture, rape and murder of men and women’, deportations, and forced adoptions of children.²⁵⁹ In response Lipp referred to the speech as a

'prime example of brainwashing in the German media' and 'a brazen lie'.²⁶⁰

Compared to the combined array of the most promoted messages, the lists of event messages for each of the intended audiences differed. For both the Russian domestic audience and the Baltic audience, the message *False information is being spread in connection with the referendum* ranked higher than on the combined list. The Russian-oriented *War on Fakes*, for instance, 'debunked' claims by a Ukrainian media outlet that the voting was unlawful, and that Russia had bussed people into Melitopol to vote as locals.

In the kinds of messages that we found in the posts intended for the Ukrainian audience, there were three that were more prominent than in the other two Telegram segments: *Referendums might lead to an escalation of the conflict, Ukraine stands to lose a lot as a result of the referendums*, and *The West stops at declarations of non-recognition of the referendums*. In the case of the message about actions of the West, Rezydent claimed that 'MI6 transmitted intelligence to the Office of the President and the General Staff that the Kremlin has agreed on several targets in Ukraine for strikes with tactical nuclear weapons' after the referendums,²⁶¹ that MI6 had intelligence data on the Kremlin-approved list of targets for Ukraine's energy infrastructure,²⁶² and that there was no possibility of peace talks with Moscow after the referendums, as 'the stakes have been raised and it is necessary to wage a war of destruction'.²⁶³ In a similar manner, ZeRada said that 'Somehow the West is too actively preparing us for the consequences of a nuclear strike. The same thing happened before the invasion on 24 February' (Screenshot 46).²⁶⁴

The message *Ukraine stands to lose a lot as a result of the referendums* was more common in the Telegram channels we marked as those intended for Ukraine, as designed to 'prove' how incompetent the country's authorities were to let the referendums happen and sow/increase distrust of them:



SCREENSHOT 46. Post on the ZeRada Telegram channel about Western preparations for a nuclear strike

*In 3–4 weeks, Ukraine will irrevocably lose vast territories and 5 million people (this is exactly the number of people living in these territories). All this could have been avoided if someone had thought strategically and simply kept promises and fulfilled the Minsk agreements. There would be no devastation, deaths, crisis, poverty, etc.*²⁶⁵

As far as the leading narratives and sub-narratives are concerned, the referendum posts and articles we coded especially promoted the idea of a *morally strong Russia* through several sub-narratives (Figure 42). These

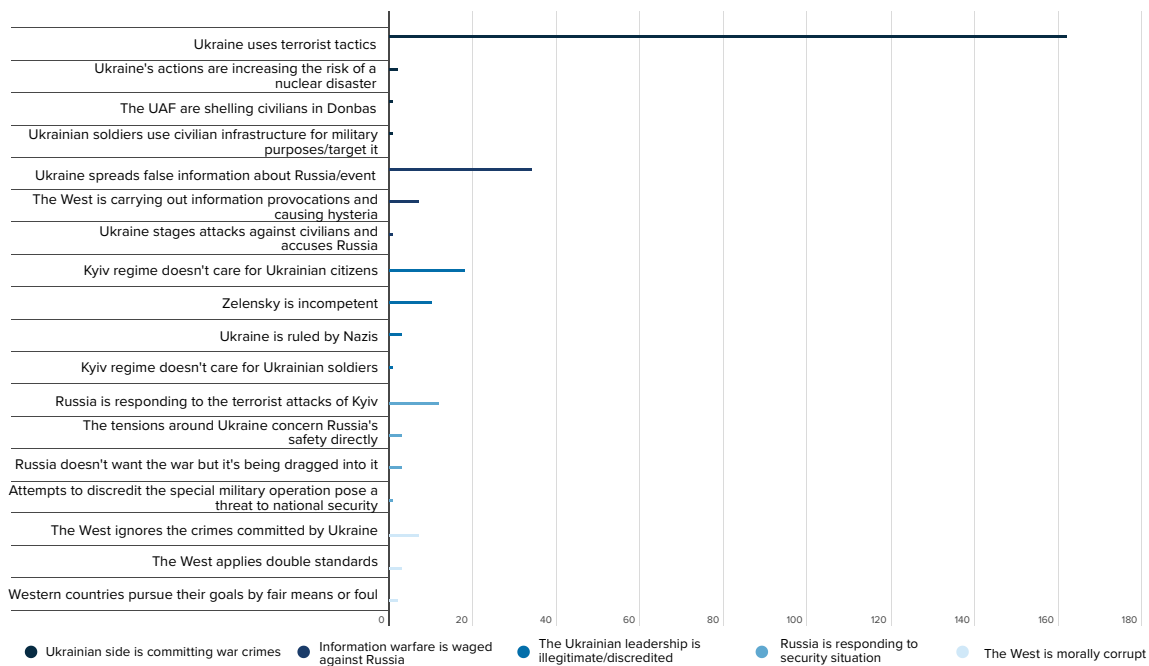


FIGURE 42. Main narratives/sub-narratives about the annexation referendums on Telegram, all audiences combined

claimed that Russia was ready to give the residents of the referendum areas the chance to freely decide their fate, which they in turn were taking happily and were eagerly waiting for ‘Mother Russia’ to come to them (we used a sub-narrative from the pre-invasion period we tracked previously). As per Putin’s speeches, Russia was also portrayed as *defending itself and its people*, as the Ukrainian side was allegedly committing atrocities, both in the moment and in the past. The sub-narrative *Russia respects and the exercises the right of people to self-determination* was the most pronounced single storyline on this level of abstraction.

Television

Television coverage about the so-called ‘referendums’ had a single aim: to create an image of wide support and legitimacy. Both *Vesti Nedeli* and *Voskresnoe Vremya* emphasised the numbers in all four occupied regions of Ukraine where voting took place. However, the reports were not meant to provide dry statistics and information about the results: they were meant to create an emotion of unity. The

top message, *Residents of the referendum areas support annexation to Russia*, was conveyed through multiple interviews: from grandmas at polling stations, thanking Russia for saving them, to soldiers on the frontlines, saying that they were proud to defend their Russian birthland (Figure 43).

Stage 1: ‘Voting for a brighter future’

Coverage at this stage was heavily based on interviews with people coming to the polling stations, talking with representatives of the electoral authorities and the international observers present (Screenshot 47). The aim was to create an impression that **referendums are valid and legitimate**:

In the DPR, there are 129 international observers, watching over the process of the voting. ‘We saw many children with parents walking in the streets. So, it is absurd to claim that people are being forced to come out to vote at gunpoint.’²⁶⁶

Snippets from interviews with voters also provided an emotional angle (Screenshot 48) and further solidified the narrative that had appeared at the beginning of the invasion—that people in **Donbas were suffering for eight years and now Russia is finally saving them:**

Voter: I will go, and she will. We will all go.

*Correspondent: This little boy's parents have already chosen his future. They don't want their son's toys to be shell fragments. Pavlik is a child of war. A child who has never known peace. He is eight, he was born just in 2014.*²⁶⁷

*The city in which Nazis from Azov had been walking around with torches and portraits of Bandera for eight years. Mariupol was liberated from the oppression of neo-fascists only recently, in spring. Today, the inhabitants of **Mariupol, who have suffered so many trials and grief, go to the polling stations, vote, and smile again.***²⁶⁸

The same message was strengthened by another prevalent narrative, delivered by Putin himself, about **Russia's moral superiority and duty to protect its people:**



SCREENSHOT 47. *Vesti Nedeli* report about international observers present at the referendums, 25 September 2022

*We cannot, we have no moral right to hand over our loved ones to the executioners. We cannot but respond to their sincere desire to determine their own fate and the decision about their future, which will be taken by the majority of the inhabitants of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions.*²⁶⁹

The narrative of Ukraine being a Nazi and terrorist state was also employed in the context of the referendums; reporting attempts to **'prevent people from expressing their will'** also played into the same narrative:

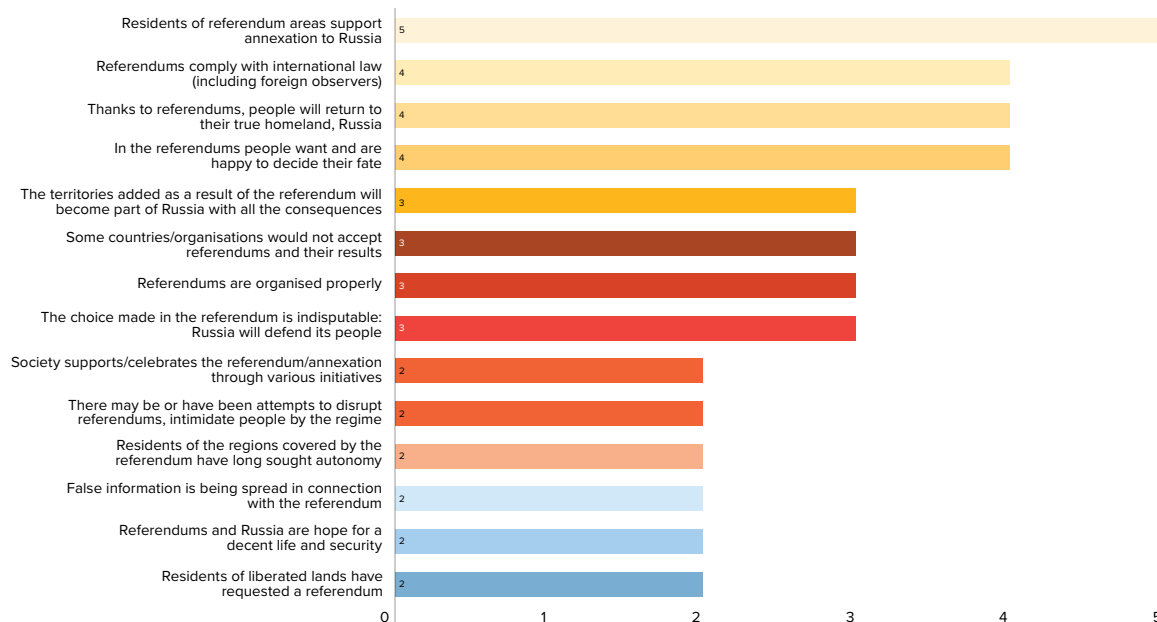


FIGURE 43. Dominant messages about the referendums on Russian state television



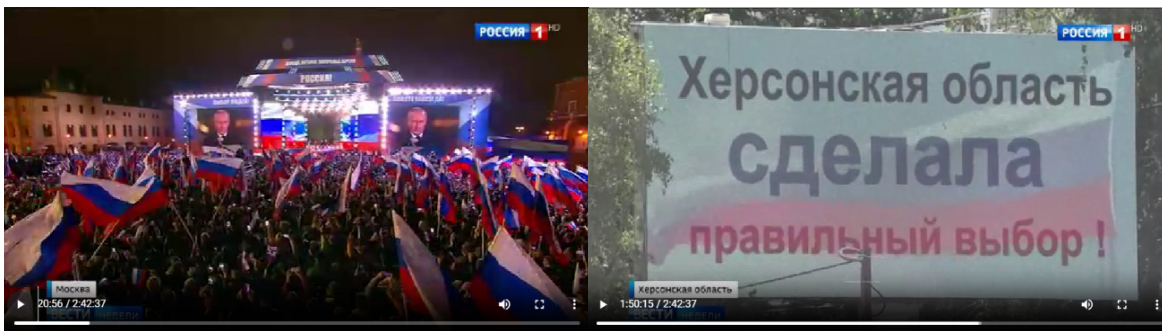
SCREENSHOT 48. *Voskresnoe Vremya* reports about people going to vote, 25 September 2022

*The Ukrainian regime, which has finally embarked on the path of terror, is shooting at the streets of Donetsk, Makeyevka and Horlivka from large-calibre howitzers and is trying to intimidate the inhabitants of the republic without seeming to understand the main point. Very soon, they will have to answer for all the atrocities committed not only in Donbas. Now, when **there is an opportunity to make a choice between good and evil, between war and peace, between civilisation and barbarism**, I think that everyone will make the right choice, despite the incessant shelling by Ukrainian fighters.²⁷⁰*

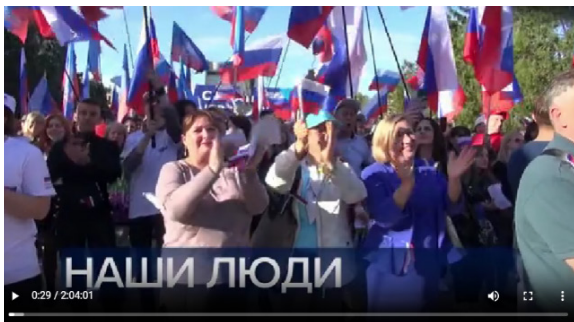
Stage 2: ‘Historical injustice restored’

Communication about referendums at this stage can be signified by one message: **‘Russia is here forever’**. It was repeated by Putin, presenters, and reporters on the TV shows, and appeared on posters in the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions. Such grandiose rhetoric effectively conveyed the **inevitability and historical significance of the referendums** (Screenshot 49).

It also portrayed the **referendums as something beneficial for Russia** (Screenshot 50), as the nation became greater and stronger, and would withstand the constant threat of



SCREENSHOT 49. *Vesti Nedeli*: the poster reads ‘Kherson oblast made the right choice’, 2 October 2022



SCREENSHOT 50. *Voskresnoe Vremya*: the headline reads ‘Our people’, 2 October 2022



the West. With such messaging, Ukraine was again denied statehood, and **Russia was presented as a morally superior country** which was willing to provide the people of Donbas with their right to self-determination. In the usual fashion, the message was delivered by Putin himself:

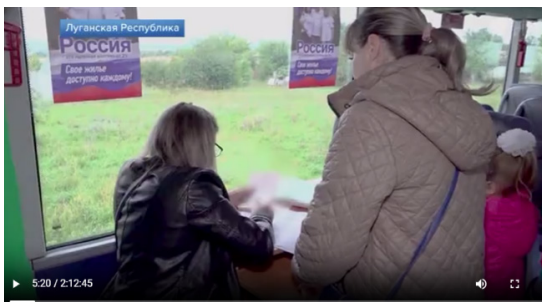
*It was **Russia that created modern Ukraine by transferring to it significant territories, historical territories of Russia itself, together with a population that no one asked about where and how people wanted to live. [...] And only now modern Russia has given people living in the Luhansk People’s Republic, in the Donetsk Republic, in Zaporizhzhia, in Kherson, the right to choose. People went out to vote***

*and made this choice. To be with their historical homeland, with Russia.*²⁷¹

The narrative of saviours was supplemented by interviews with **grateful people from the ‘reunited’ regions** (Screenshot 51):

Correspondent: People are really afraid. They are afraid of their defenders, i.e., the Ukrainian defenders. The inhabitants of the region were not intimidated. People were queuing up at polling stations, and no one was hiding their emotions that it was time to go.

*Voter: Once again, **thank you very much to Vladimir Vladimirovich and all of Russia, all the people for accepting us, we are very grateful to you.***²⁷²



SCREENSHOT 51. *Voskresnoe Vremya* report about grateful people casting their vote, 25 September 2022

At this stage, reactions from Western countries were featured in TV shows and were framed as **‘hysteria’, as Western elites** applied double standards when deciding who deserved the right to self-determination and who did not. Both *Vesti Nedeli* and *Voskresnoe Vremya* resorted to **whataboutism and brought up the case of Kosovo**:

*The loudest critics of the referendums [...] were once in the forefront of the supporters of Kosovo’s independence, and at that time they argued that the territory had the right to secede from the Serbian state. [...] When asked what the difference is, the West invariably gives the same hypocritical answer—Kosovo is different.*²⁷³

Notably, when discussing the international reaction to the referendums and the double standards applied by the West, Vesti Nedeli used a quote from Putin, **comparing Russophobia to racism**:

*Western elites remain what they always were. The colonisers, who discriminate, divide peoples into first and second class. We have never accepted and will never accept such political nationalism and racism. And what if not racism is Russophobia?*²⁷⁴

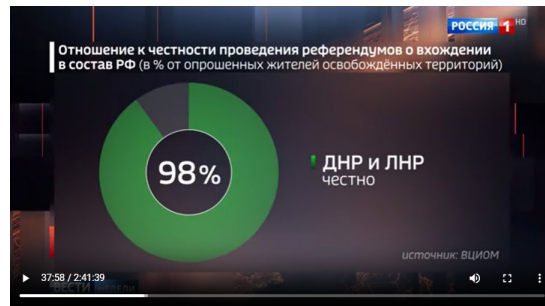
Lastly, the reaction of Ukraine (its application for fast-tracked accession to NATO) was ridiculed as irrational and hysterical:

*Incidentally, Europe, as expected, does not recognise the reunification of the four regions with Russia. This is understandable. Kyiv is reacting all the more hysterically. In response, Zelensky found nothing else but to declare that Ukraine will join NATO under an accelerated procedure.*²⁷⁵

Stage 3: ‘No turning back’

At the last stage, communication about the referendums was pushed into the background by other significant events, such as the Kerch Bridge and Nord Stream explosions. However, results of the referendum were still mentioned in dedicated reports as final and not open to any discussion:

*Together with Russia. An absolutely transparent result and not subject to any doubt. The Donbas, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions are ours and there is no question about it.*²⁷⁶



SCREENSHOT 52. Vesti Nedeli reports statistics about voters perceiving the referendums as ‘fair’, 9 October 2022

The significance and transparency of the referendums was also mentioned in reports about Putin signing constitutional laws accepting the four new regions into the Russian Federation (Screenshot 52):

*A fresh VCIOM poll on voting in referendums is interesting. When asked, do you think the referendum was generally fair, without serious violations or falsification, or unfair, 98% of respondents in the DPR and LPR answered definitely fair or rather fair. In Zaporizhzhia Oblast, 93%, and in Kherson Oblast the elections were called fair by 90% of respondents.*²⁷⁷

Demonopolising power while preserving control: understanding Russia’s ‘communication regime’

Our previous report on the Kremlin’s communications strategy before and immediately after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine already discussed the paradox between increasing control and demonopolisation of power in the media space.²⁷⁸ On the one hand, it suggested that the official media is fully controlled by the Kremlin as its ‘domestic messaging priorities are generally communicated from the power vertical to television channels via regular memos known variously as *temniks* (темники) or *metodičkas* (методички)’.²⁷⁹ On the other hand, it also observed ‘a de-monopolisation of power among the new group of Telegram influencers/“switchers” and their increased independence’ from the Kremlin’s official narratives.²⁸⁰

A similar picture can be seen in this report. While both the official media and Telegram channels speak more or less the same language (narrative-wise), a more

nuanced analysis of their messaging suggests a completely different type of relations with the Kremlin, especially when the realities on the ground surprise the officials in Moscow.

Building on the analysis begun in the previous report, it is essential to focus on Russia’s strategy in the media space: does the Kremlin truly control it? To answer this question, it is important to examine the relations of both (official media and Telegram channels) with the Kremlin and the role they play in Russia’s hybrid media space. Moreover, following the conclusion of the previous report that the relationship between the Kremlin and media actors ‘does not necessarily conform to a hypothesised optimal system in which the latter is used to massage public opinion towards supporting decisions made by the former’,²⁸¹ these relations must be looked at through the conceptual prism of the Russian understanding of communications.

Establishing control over the official media—losing audience

From the very beginning of his political life, Putin well understood the importance of the media as a political tool. Therefore, almost immediately after he came to power, Putin went on to establish an ‘informational vertical’—‘a one-way communication “from the top down”, which made it possible to shape the agendas, create themes, problems and opinions, and thus manipulate public opinion’.²⁸²

During the last twenty years, this ‘information vertical’ was set up through three main methods. The first was directed towards consolidation of control over the key TV channels. After orchestrating the economic collapse of the independent opposition-supporting channel

NTV, forcing its owner Vladimir Gusinskiy into exile,²⁸³ the Kremlin has led a systemic process towards consolidating control through acquiring and merging key media outlets. By 2018 the vast majority of Russia’s media channels were combined into three media holding companies controlled by the state: CJSC National Media Group (main asset is Channel One), Gazprom-Media Holding (combines assets in all segments of the media market: television, radio, print, film, etc.), and the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK; main asset is Rossiya-1). By 2019 only Dozhd’ TV out of the ten most cited and thus most influential TV channels was independent.²⁸⁴ Following its closure in March 2022 in response to its

coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin achieved full control over the main media channels in Russia.²⁸⁵

The second method was ‘developing a pool of journalists, political analysts, and news anchors who would be advancing the Kremlin-defined political agenda’.²⁸⁶ In other words, the Kremlin understood that control over the media space requires not only the ownership of the media outlets, but also control over the content. This was achieved through two principal ways. The first was proactive agenda-setting instructions prepared by the Kremlin and distributed among journalists working in state-owned media—‘a collection of political events taking place during the week that says exactly how these topics should be covered and exactly how they must be accentuated’.²⁸⁷ The second was nourishing Kremlin-compliant media superstars, such as Vladimir Solov’yov, Andrey Kondrashev, and many others.²⁸⁸

The third method of establishing and maintaining the Kremlin’s top-down control of Russia’s media space was legislative. Following large-scale protests in Moscow’s Bolotnaya Square in 2012, the Kremlin adopted numerous laws that ‘facilitate mass censorship and blanket surveillance, introduce non-transparent content-blocking procedures and endanger the security and confidentiality of people’s communications online’.²⁸⁹ The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 offered an excellent opportunity for the Kremlin to take its legislation even further, by blocking access to Facebook and major foreign news outlets, enacting a law intended to punish anyone spreading what would be considered by the Kremlin as ‘false information’ and ‘fake news’, and criminalising any independent reporting about the war

on Ukraine that falls outside the pro-Kremlin narratives.²⁹⁰

This 20-year-old multi-method process of establishing the desired ‘informational vertical’—with its state ownership structures, multiple pro-Kremlin mouthpieces across Russia’s media space, and draconian legislative framework—culminated in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This top-down control of Russia’s official media, however, came at a price. The Kremlin’s decision to completely exclude opinions which did not fully comply with those prescribed by the government content resulted in fewer people watching official channels. According to polls, in the first six months of the war, television viewership dropped by 21%.²⁹¹ Audiences began ‘migrating’ from Russian federal television to other media, primarily to the social media platform Telegram. Between February and March 2022, 13 million new Russian users joined Telegram, with its daily audience in Russia growing from 25 million people in January 2022 to 41.5 million people in July. Many of these new users joined the platform primarily for news content. For instance, in August 2022 alone, two of the five most popular Russia-based search topics on Telegram was ‘news’ (*‘novosti’*).²⁹² In other words, the establishment of full control over the official media has led to a loss of audience. As indicated in our previous report, in Russian official communications ‘pro-Kremlin messaging appeared to simply react to developments (or, more precisely, reacted to the reactions to Russia’s actions), as opposed to pre-emptively anticipating them’.²⁹³ The Russian public lost interest in the slow to react, inflexible, and highly controlled media, seeking more attractive and entertaining content elsewhere.

Demonopolising power on Telegram—maintaining flexibility

An analysis of many popular Russian Telegram news channels shows that while they maintain a strong pro-war (and generally pro-Kremlin) stance, their content is far more diverse than narratives disseminated by official Russian media channels.²⁹⁴ Unlike TV audiences, audiences on Telegram (i.e., the social network platform) expect flexible, fast-paced, and adaptable content. The administrators of these channels cannot simply follow the Kremlin's official narratives, which lack dynamism and flexibility due to the established top-down control. Waiting for the official narrative would mean losing audience share (exactly what happened to the official TV channels), and, therefore, Russian Telegram channels have been generating content with increasing independence from the official Russian narratives.²⁹⁵

This demonopolisation of power in the media space does not necessarily imply that the administrators of these Telegram channels enjoy freedom of speech and act

independently from the Kremlin. The opposite is true, as many of these media actors 'received a certain level of support from the Russian authorities', as getting access to Russian forces on the ground or other materials rendered their channels more valuable to their audiences.²⁹⁶ The level of their independence has been directly related to the level of availability of official narratives to follow. In other words, the Telegram channels tend to follow the Kremlin's narratives about a particular story or event if they are well prepared in advance. However, if they must wait for an official narrative from above, they push their own interpretations to fill the void and keep their audiences engaged.

This tendency was already demonstrated in our previous report through qualitative analysis of Telegram channel messaging during the Battle of Antonov Airport, Hostomel/Gostomel, the occupation of the city of Kherson, and the discovery of atrocities in Bucha.²⁹⁷ Using the quantitative data gathered for the case studies

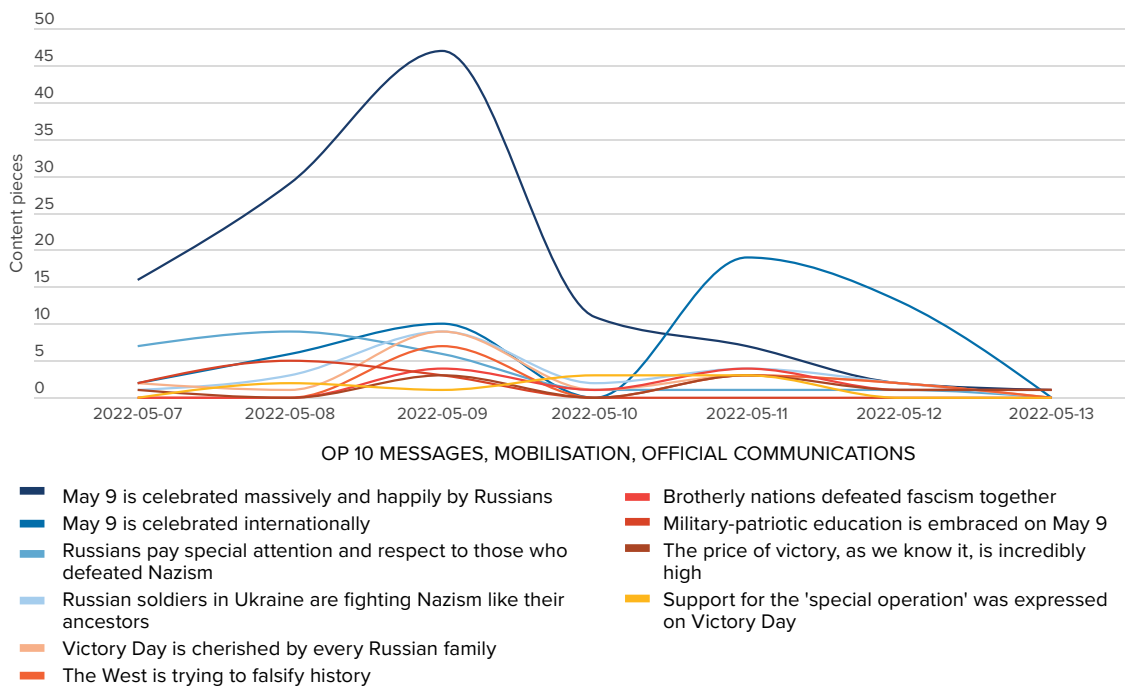


FIGURE 44. Dynamics of main messages about Victory Day, official government communications

analysed in the present report, it is possible to build on these initial qualitative observations about the way in which Telegram channels operate ‘independently in the context of a rapidly evolving, contested online environment’, developing and adapting their narratives ‘without Moscow’s pre-authorisation’.²⁹⁸

For example, the case of Victory Day, an event that occurs annually, allowing both the Kremlin and Telegram administrators to prepare their narratives in advance, shows a great deal of similarity between official Russian communications and the narratives promoted on Telegram channels.

In the days before and immediately after 9 May, the narratives promoted by both official communications and Telegram channels centred on ‘happy and massive celebrations’ in Russia and different alternations of narrative that make connections between the war in Ukraine and the historical memory of fighting Nazism during World War II (echoing the Kremlin’s narrative of ‘denazification’). The only significant discrepancy was between

how the narrative of international celebration was promoted by the official communications and Telegram channels. However, this can be easily explained by the fact that most of the Telegram bloggers focus on the war in Ukraine and (unlike official communications) are less concerned with Russia’s international image.

The case of mobilisation shows a slightly different picture (Figures 46 and 47). On the one hand, this event was initiated by the Kremlin and was preceded by a long debate about the possibility of mobilisation, which allowed time to coordinate general narratives between official communications and Telegram administrators. On the other hand, the haste in which the mobilisation was introduced, following the retreat from the Kharkiv region, left little time for proper synchronisation of messages (as was in the case of Victory Day).

While both the official communications and the Telegram channels disseminated more or less the same narratives during the week following the mobilisation announcement, the weight and the timing of each narrative differed

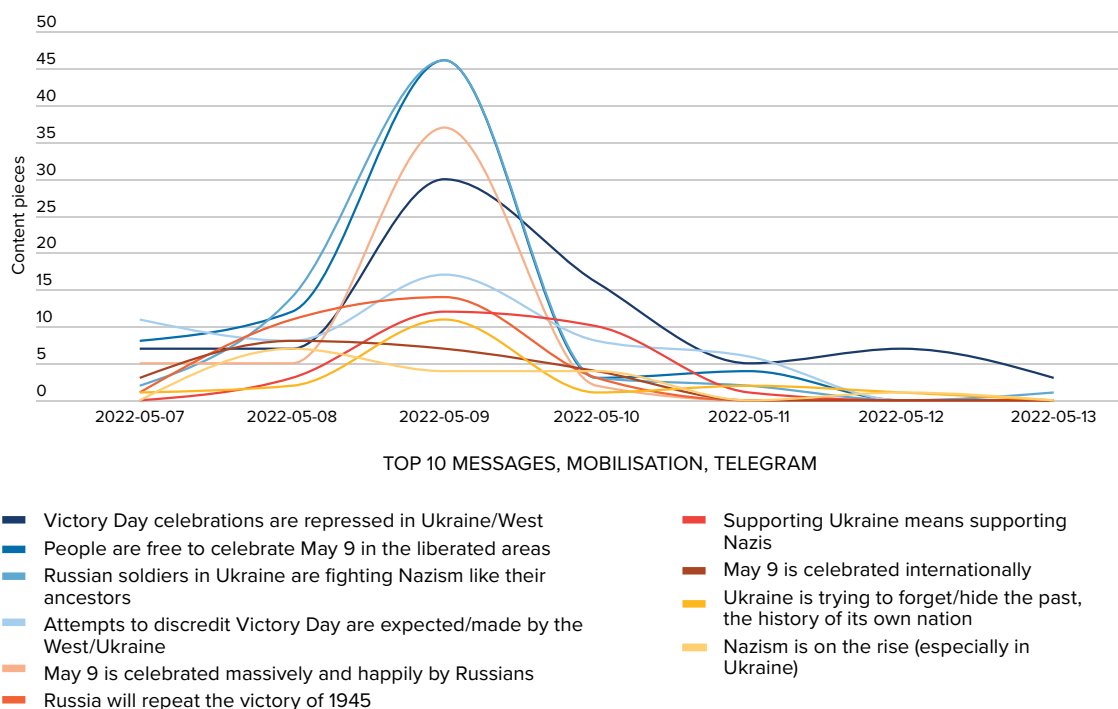


FIGURE 45. Dynamics of main messages about Victory Day, Telegram

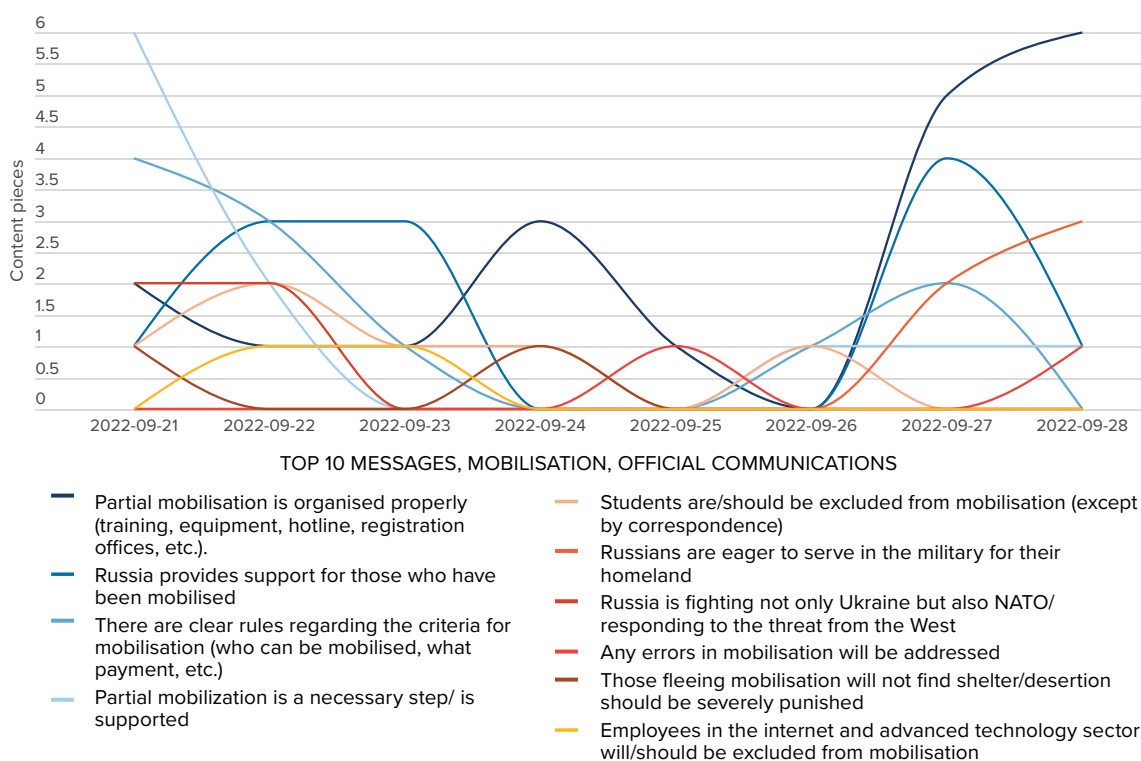


FIGURE 46. Dynamics of main messages about mobilisation, official government communications

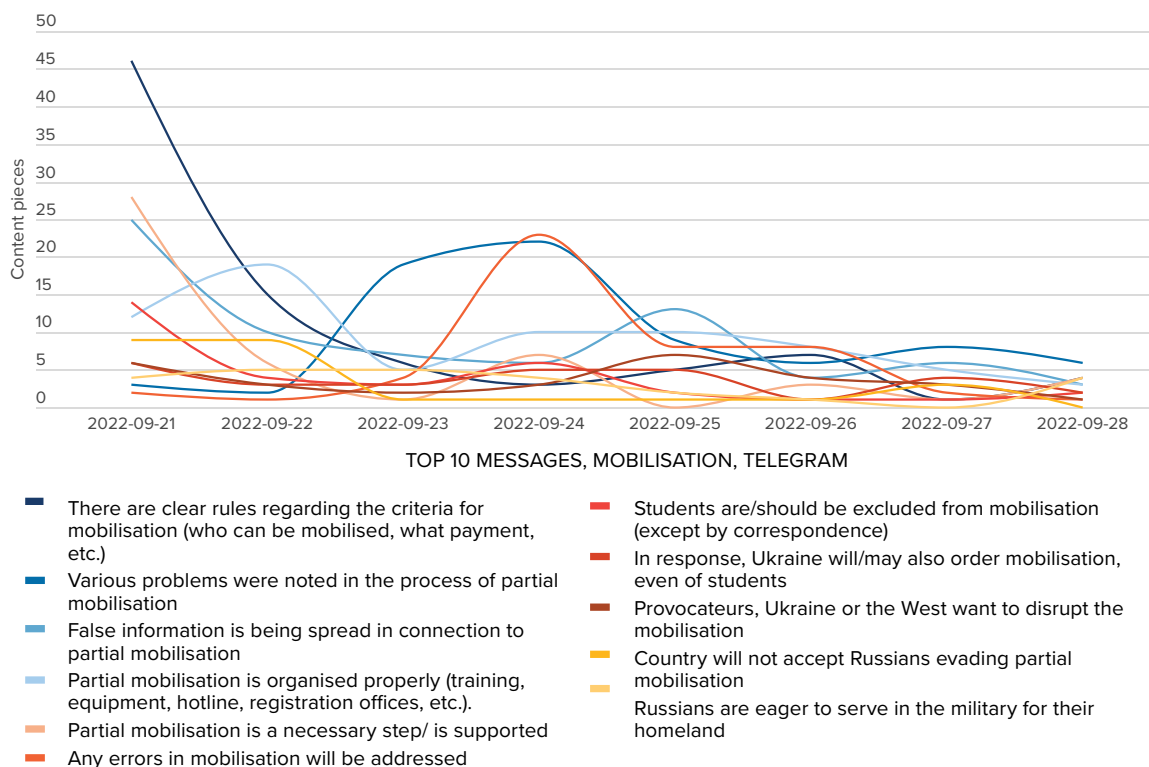


FIGURE 47. Dynamics of main messages about mobilisation, Telegram

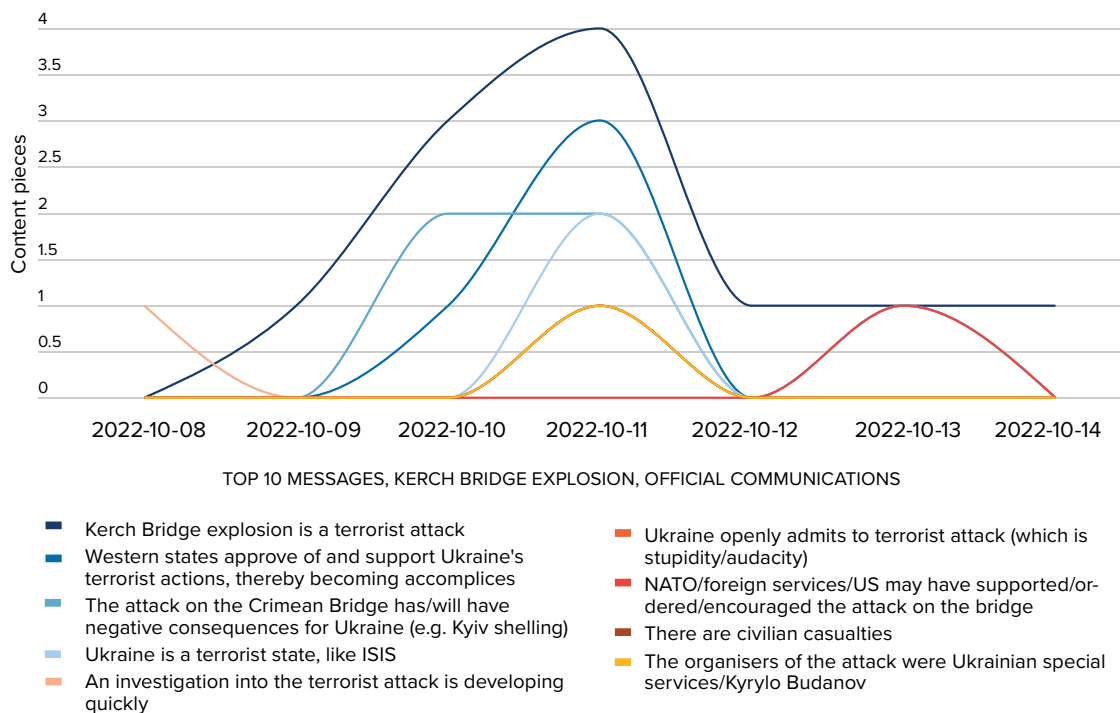


FIGURE 48. Dynamics of main messages about the Kerch Bridge explosion, official government communications

significantly. The fact that the issue of possible mobilisation had been discussed for weeks (if not months) before 20 September 2022 allowed a great deal of correlation in the narratives. However, it seems that the announcement came as a surprise to the Telegram bloggers, leading them to react with prepared narratives, but without a clear story (and orders) to follow.

Unlike the case of Victory Day (which was well prepared in advance) and the case of mobilisation (which was initiated by the Kremlin, though was still surprising), the case of the Kerch Bridge explosion was a complete surprise to both the Kremlin and the Telegram administrators (Figures 48 and 49). The tightly controlled Russian official media is generally slow to react to any unprepared events, as all narratives must be pre-approved and disseminated top-down. Therefore, in the context of a rapidly evolving situation on the ground, the Telegram channels had to develop and adapt their own narratives independently.

Like many other events that surprised the Kremlin (e.g. the exposure of atrocities in Bucha),²⁹⁹ the Telegram channels were to the fore in terms of narrative generation about the Kerch Bridge explosion, with the official communications stepping in later, picking and choosing what suited their purposes. Most of the top narratives disseminated in Russian official communications in the days following the attack on the bridge were created independently by Telegram bloggers on the day of the attack.

This demonopolisation of power implies that a significant part of Russia's hybrid media system content deviates in some way from the official Russian narratives, and that the Kremlin is not fully in control of that information. In some cases (when there is time to coordinate and prepare) Telegram channels simply stylise and adapt official narratives. In others (when the events on the ground surprise the officials in the Kremlin, allowing no time for coordination), they feel free to generate their own narratives

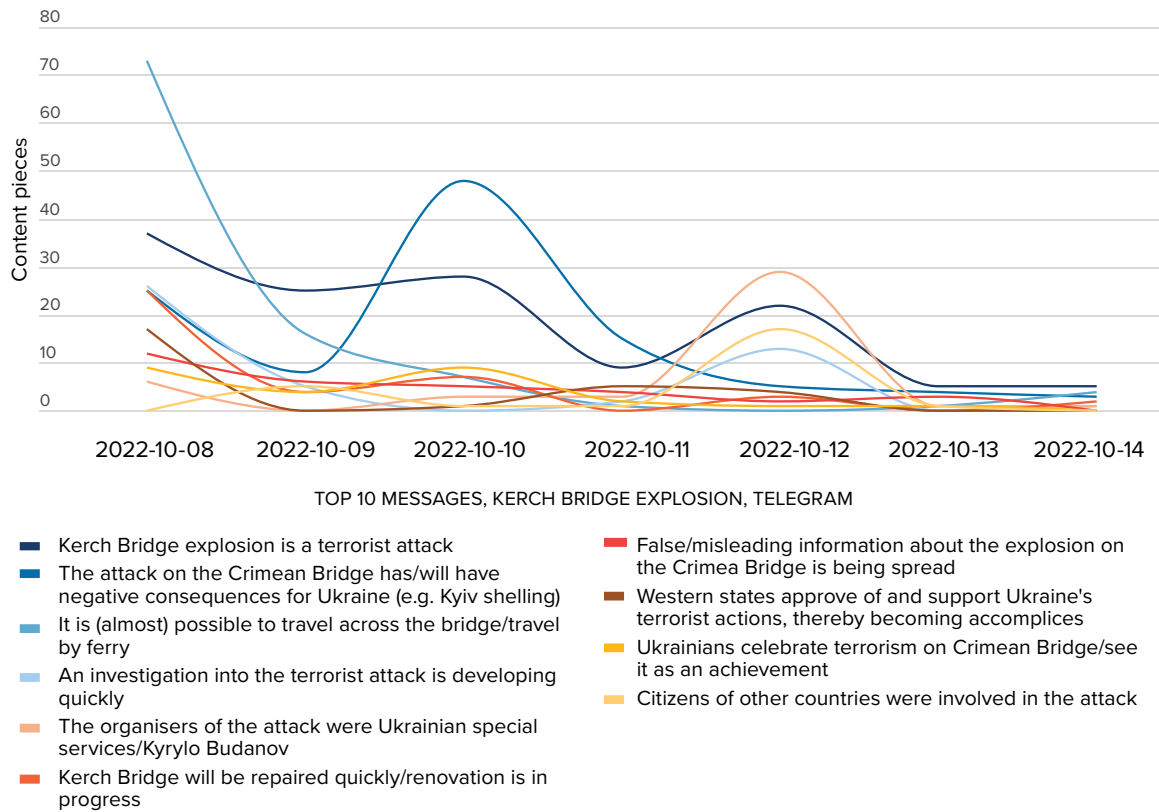


FIGURE 49. Dynamics of main messages about the Kerch Bridge explosion, Telegram

and stories. While this flexible and adaptive approach has served the Kremlin well on many occasions during this war, it points towards a paradox of the Kremlin's monopolisation of power over the official media alongside the

demonopolisation of power among Telegram channels, raising the question of what the true extent of the Kremlin's control over Russia's hybrid media system is.

Conclusion: Russia's 'communication regime' to preserve control

During the last decade, the Russian military has surprised the West too many times—the swift success of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the generally effective support of Bashar al-Assad in 2015, or the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, despite the failure to gain a quick victory.³⁰⁰ One of the reasons for these miscalculations was the attempt to interpret Russia's strategy through the prism of Western concepts. 'Utilizing Western terms and concepts to define the Russian approach to warfare', argues Dima Adamsky, 'may result in inaccurate analysis of Russian modus operandi.'³⁰¹ In the same vein, Timothy Thomas states that 'simply overlapping Western concepts on Russian thinking doesn't always work. If evolving foreign concepts are not understood from their local context, then the West will always be chasing after outliers without understanding where they fit in Russia's overall theoretical and planning process.'³⁰² Therefore, in an attempt to understand the Kremlin's strategy in the media space, it is important to examine it not through Western concepts of communications, but through Russian indigenous frameworks and ideas.

In 2021 the Kremlin—aware of the limitations to exercising control in the contemporary era of digital technologies and social networks, which have led to the monopolisation of power in the media space—established the National Research Institute for the Development of Communications (Natsional'nyy Issledovatel'skiy Institut Razvitiya Kommunikatsiy) under the supervision of several former KGB/FSB high-level officials.³⁰³ One of the main frameworks developed and promoted by the institute has been the concept of the 'communication regime'—a 'controlled (with varying degrees of controllability), institutionalised (with varying degrees of institutionalisation), conventional (with varying

degrees of conventionality) system of norms, rules, principles, traditions, structures and actors regulating information and communication processes'.³⁰⁴ According to Valentina Komleva, the deputy research director of the institute, the 'communication regime' regulates all communication interactions between government, media, and the people. One of its most important characteristics is its ability to 'consolidate society and government regarding historically established norms and traditions regulating communications, regardless of the level of their expression in law'.³⁰⁵

In other words, trying to answer the question about the level of control the Kremlin has over Russia's hybrid media system through the Western 'ladder of control' (from full control to no control, i.e., free and independent media) can be misleading, giving rise to paradoxical findings, as discussed above. After all, Russians themselves suggest that the 'communication regime' has 'varying degrees of controllability' that depend on 'conditions, principles, norms and rules, created with the aim of streamlining and regulating communications and information in the social system'.³⁰⁶ Therefore, the question should not be about the Kremlin's control over the media system, but about its control over these conditions, principles, norms and rules, as well as 'sanctions for non-compliance with them'.³⁰⁷

This leads us to an important insight into Russian media strategy that is balanced between the tightly controlled official media and the fairly independent Telegram media system. This balance is an outcome of the indigenous Russian conceptual framework of the 'communication regime', in which different parts enjoy different levels of controllability and institutionalisation, due to Russia's particular historically established norms and traditions

that govern communications between the state, media, and people. The orchestrated demonopolisation of power does not necessarily imply the independence of Telegram administrators, as their communications are still governed by conditions, principles, norms, and rules which are controlled by the Kremlin. The Kremlin's decision to give more flexibility and independence to some actors on Telegram is highly calculated, both in terms of the scale of the flexibility and the nature of the

actors. Moreover, the conditions, principles, norms, and rules of selective law enforcement in Russia have established well-known (though flexible) rules of engagement within Russia's 'communication regime', when all the media actors know that they might have a long leash, but there are grim consequences for extending it too far.

Endnotes

- 1 For example: Neville Bolt et al., *Kremlin Communication Strategy for Russian Audiences: Before and After the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2023).
- 2 Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, 'Informational autocrats', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33, no. 4 (2019): 100–127.
- 3 Natalya Kovaleva, 'Russian information space, Russian scholarship, and Kremlin controls', *Defence Strategic Communications* 4 (2018): 133–172.
- 4 Ofer Fridman, 'Macro-perspective: strategy without design', in Bolt et al., *Kremlin Communications Strategy*, 34.
- 5 LRT, 'LRT tyrimas. Lietuvos „penktoji kolona“: Rusijos propagandą platina šeimos gynėjai, sektos ir knygy apie Staliną leidėjai', lrt.lt, 24 May 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 6 For example: Martha Stolze, *Information Laundering via Baltnews on Telegram: How Russian State-Sponsored Media Evade Sanctions and Narrate the War* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2022); Nika Aleksejeva, 'Pro-Kremlin Telegram channels try to convince Latvians their government is “fascist”', Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), 20 January 2023. [Accessed 20 January 2024]; Nika Aleksejeva and Sayyara Mammadova, 'Networks of pro-Kremlin Telegram channels spread disinformation at a global scale', Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), 1 March 2023.
- 7 Delfi, 'В Латвии задержан пророссийский блогер Кирилл Федоров (Alconafter) [Pro-Russian blogger Kirill Fedorov (Alconafter) detained in Latvia]', *Delfi Latvia*, 22 March 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 8 Aleksey Stefanov, *Telegram post*, 30 June 2022 [in Russian]. [Accessed 20 January 2024]. All Telegram posts cited below are in Russian unless otherwise stated.
- 9 Delfi, 'Блогер Федоров оштрафован на 12 400 евро за оправдание совершенных армией РФ в Украине преступлений [Blogger Fedorov fined 12,400 euros for justifying crimes committed by the Russian army in Ukraine]', *Delfi Latvia*, 9 March 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 10 'Интервью блогера из Латвии “Кирилла Фёдорова” о пытках в латвийской тюрьме! | криминальная Латвия', *Криминальная Латвия X Channel*, [Interview with Latvian blogger 'Kirill Fedorov' about torture in Latvian prison! | Criminal Latvia X Channel], *YouTube*, 20 March 2023. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 11 Stolze, *Information Laundering*.
- 12 Nika Aleksejeva, 'Baltnews Latvia's audience size decreased after domain suspension', *DFR Lab, Medium*, 22 January 2020 [Accessed 20 January 2024]; Propastop, 'Victory—the Internet Foundation imposed a restriction on Rossija Segodnya's domains', 3 July 2020. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 13 TechSoup, *Disinformation and Civil Society Regional Mapping Reports: Baltic Region*, September 2023, 6 [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 14 Anastasija Tatarenko, 'Kremlin's propaganda in our pockets: how disinformation thrives on Telegram', *Re:Baltica*, 20 July 2023. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 15 Latvian Public Broadcaster, Ģirts Zvirbulis, 'Former Rīga councilor could go to prison for Russian war support', *LSM*, 5 September 2023. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 16 Aleksejeva and Mammadova, 'Networks of pro-Kremlin Telegram channels'; Matīss Arnicāns, 'De facto' (Latvian Television), 'LTV's De Facto looks at “Baltic anti-fascist” case', *LSM*, 19 June 2023. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 17 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*, 15 November 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 18 Ukraine, Security Service, 'Joint statement on the protection of Ukraine's information space from

- Russian hostile telegram channels*, 15 July 2022 [in Ukrainian].
- 19 Ukraine, Security Service, '*SBU exposes Russian agent network*', 1 February 2021.
 - 20 Ksenya Ilyuk, Yevgen Sapolivich and Ira Ryaboshtan, '*"Now we will live to the fullest!": how and why Russia has created a Telegram channels network for the occupied territories of Ukraine*', *Detector Media*, 5 May 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
 - 21 As part of the analysis of pro-Russian channels on Telegram, the social platform's content from selected lists of channels (of Russian and Ukrainian origin) was collected using a Python script that utilised the Telegram API. Subsequently, we created the graphs using Gephi software to visualise connections between the original sources of the messages and the channels that shared the content. In the visualisations, the size of the nodes reflects the number of shares made by a particular channel. A larger size indicates a higher volume of shared content from other channels, highlighting channels that serve as amplifiers for other sources and contribute to the dissemination of content. The direction of connections is indicated by arrows, originating from channels that have published the original content and pointing to channels that shared it. The colour of the nodes reflects modularity, which is a process of grouping entities, such as Telegram channels, based on their 'similarity'. The Gephi algorithm was used to cluster channels based on their mutual connections. As a result, the visualisation identifies clusters of channels that are strongly interconnected with each other.
 - 22 Detector Media, '*"Rogulestan", "Nazis" and "brainless authorities": what messages did the "Ukrainian" blogger with a million followers Anatoliy Shariy share during the year of the great war*', *Detector Media*, 20 March 2023. [in Ukrainian; accessed 20 January 2024].
 - 23 Ukraine, Security Service, '*SBU serves notice of suspicion to pro-Kremlin propagandist Montyan*', 10 February 2023 [in Ukrainian].
 - 24 *Security Council on Ukraine | United Nations (17 Feb 2022)*, United Nations, *YouTube*, 17 February 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
 - 25 Ksenya Ilyuk and Ira Ryaboshtan, '*A "Telegram empire" run by Russian intelligence during the big war*', *Detector Media*, 20 June 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
 - 26 European Union External Action, '*1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: Towards a Framework for Networked Defence*', February 2023.
 - 27 TGStat, '*Rating of Telegram channels*'. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
 - 28 Institute for the Study of War, '*Ukraine conflict updates, 2022*'.
 - 29 Grigoriy Manucharian, '*The "Goebbels method": RIA Novosti as window into Russian propaganda*', *Geopolitical Monitor*, 27 July 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
 - 30 US Department of State, '*Faces of Kremlin propaganda: Vladimir Solovyov*', 31 March 2022.
 - 31 The Bell, '*Russia's pro-war bloggers become a serious threat to the Kremlin*', *The Bell*, 14 September 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
 - 32 Russian Federation, Presidential Office, '*Meeting with war correspondents*', 13 June 2023 [in Russian].
 - 33 Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, George Barros, and Mason Clark, '*Russian offensive campaign assessment, June 13, 2023*', *Institute for the Study of War*, 13 June 2023. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
 - 34 Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, Nicole Wolkov, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan, '*Russian offensive campaign assessment, November 16, 2023*', *Institute for the Study of War*, 16 November 2023. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
 - 35 WarGonzo, '*Telegram post*', 14 October 2022.
 - 36 Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan, '*Russian offensive campaign assessment, October 5, 2022*', *Institute for the Study of War*, 5 October 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
 - 37 GlagoL, '*The court in Moscow has arrested the administrators of several Telegram channels*', *Rambler*, 10 August 2022 [in Russian]. [Accessed

20 January 2024].

- 38** Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, *'Strategic narrative: a new means to understand soft power'*, *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no.1 (2014): 78.
- 39** Irina Khaldarova Grigor, 'Strategic narratives of the Ukraine conflict projected for domestic and international audiences by Russian TV channels', *Media and the Ukraine Crisis: Hybrid Practices and Narratives of Conflict* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 123–138.
- 40** Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *'Strategic Narrative: 21st Century Diplomatic Statecraft / Narrativa estratégica: el arte de la diplomacia en el siglo XXI'*, *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior* 113 (2018).
- 41** Jade McGlynn, *'Constructing memory alliances: how Russia uses history to bolster its influence and undermine rivals abroad'*, in *The Diversity of Russia's Military Power: Five Perspectives*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 1 September 2020, 23–31.
- 42** Jade McGlynn, *'Historical framing of the Ukraine Crisis through the Great Patriotic War: performativity, cultural consciousness and shared remembering'*, *Memory Studies* 13, no. 6, 27 September 2018.
- 43** Benjamin Tromly, *'The Great Patriotic War and the specter of internal betrayal'*, *Riddle*, 23 May 2023. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 44** AFP, *'Russia bans insults against WWII veterans'*, *Moscow Times*, 17 March 2021 [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 45** PONARS Eurasia channel, *'Military-Patriotic education in Russia'*, YouTube, 16 August 2023.
- 46** Russian Federation, Ministry of Defence, *'Russian Defence Minister congratulates servicemen and veterans on Victory Day'*, 9 May 2022 [in Russian].
- 47** Russian Federation, Ministry of Defence, *'Volsk cadets held an athletics cup in honour of Victory Day'*, 8 May 2022 [in Russian].
- 48** Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *'A march of the Immortal Regiment took place in Ankara'*, 11 May 2022 [in Russian].
- 49** Russian Federation, Presidential Office, *'Victory Parade on the Red Square'*, 9 May 2022 [in Russian].
- 50** Manucharian, 'The "Goebbels Method"'.
- 51** Reuters, *'Putin speaks at Victory Day parade on Moscow's Red Square'*, Reuters, 9 May 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024]
- 52** McGlynn, 'Historical framing', 1073.
- 53** Håvard Bækken, *'Merging the Great Patriotic War and Russian warfare in Ukraine: a case-study of Russian military patriotic clubs in 2022'*, *Political Research Exchange* 5, no. 1, 31 October 2023.
- 54** RBC, *'Putin announced his gratitude to Goblin and Yuri Podolyak'*, RBC, 27 February 2023 [in Russian] [Accessed 20 January 2024]; Russian Federation, *Order of the President of the Russian Federation 'On Encouragement' N° 59-пп*, 27 February 2023.
- 55** Yuriy Podolyaka, *Telegram post*, 9 May 2022.
- 56** Free Russia, *'No to war: new prohibited words'*, 24 March 2022.
- 57** Voennaya Khronika, *Telegram post*, 9 May 2022.
- 58** Ibid.
- 59** Keywords such as: нацис* OR нациз* OR нацык* OR неонаци* OR укронацис* OR укронациз*.
- 60** Keywords such as: хохол* OR хохл* OR укрон* OR укросук* OR укросволоч* OR уссаин* OR усаин* OR Усраин* OR укры OR УкРуин*.
- 61** Matvej Dubianskij, *'"De-nazification is an absolute must": Moscow's narrative in Ukraine'*, *Global Risk Insights*, 25 July 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 62** Kotsnews, *Telegram post*, 9 May 2022.
- 63** Khersonskiy Vestnik, *Telegram post*, 9 May 2022.
- 64** Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group, *'The Kremlin's shady horses: Dogu Perincek, claims occupied territory of Ukraine belong to Russia'*, *Ukraine Crisis Media Center*, 12 September 2023.

- [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 65 UKR Leaks, *Telegram post*, 12 May 2022.
- 66 Max Kovalov, ‘*Commentary: Putin ready to kill Ukrainians to remind them of his “love and affection”*’, *Post and Courier*, 21 February 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 67 #MONTYANI!, *Telegram post*, 9 May 2022.
- 68 #MONTYANI!, *Telegram post*, 11 May 2022.
- 69 Volodymir Zolkin channel, ‘*English setting us against Russia, to j.*y and dem0kratnyia #col-laborants @dmytrokarpenko*’, *YouTube*, 24 November 2023.
- 70 #MONTYANI!, *Telegram post*, 9 May 2022.
- 71 Maria Mälksoo, ‘*The postcolonial moment in Russia’s war against Ukraine*’, *Journal of Genocide Research* 25, nos. 3–4 (2023).
- 72 Meduza, ‘*Russia supporters in Riga staged a protest after officials bulldozed flowers left at a WWII monument*’, *Meduza*, 11 May 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 73 Russkie.org, ‘*Experts*’ [in Russian].
- 74 *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 1 May 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 01:51:20].
- 75 Ibid.
- 76 *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on Rossiya-1 on 1 May 2022 [Timestamp 02:09:20].
- 77 *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on Rossiya-1 on 8 May 2022 [Timestamp 02:26:14].
- 78 *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 8 May 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 01:55:02].
- 79 EUvsDisinfo, ‘*Victory Day, 9 May in the past in the USSR and Russia*’, *EUvsDisinfo*, 8 May 2023 [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 80 Taras Kuzio, ‘*Putin weaponizes history with new textbook justifying Ukraine invasion*’, *Atlantic Council*, 22 August 2023. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 81 *Vesti Nedeli*, 8 May 2022 [Timestamp 00:02:42].
- 82 Sofia Bettiza and Svyatoslav Khomenko, ‘*Babushka Z: the woman who became a Russian propaganda icon*’, *BBC*, 15 June 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 83 *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 1 May 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 00:49:14].
- 84 *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 15 May 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 00:08:25].
- 85 Ibid. [Timestamp 00:23:18].
- 86 Ibid. [Timestamp 00:26:13].
- 87 Ibid. [Timestamp 00:52:31].
- 88 Ibid. [Timestamp 01:02:22].
- 89 Meduza, ‘*Who came up with the slogan “We can do it again” and why?*’, *Meduza*, 9 May 2022 [in Russian]. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 90 TASS, ‘*VCIOM: 23% of Russians surveyed have travelled to other countries in the last five years*’, TASS, 20 September 2022 [in Russian] [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 91 Kalev Stoicescu, Mykola Nazarov, Kier Giles and Matthew Johnson, *How Russia Went to War: The Kremlin’s Preparations for Its Aggression Against Ukraine* (International Centre for Defence and Security, 2023), 11. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 92 Russian Federation, State Duma, ‘*State Duma deputies met with Minister of Economic Development Maxim Reshetnikov*’, 1 April 2022 [in Russian].
- 93 Russian Federation, Presidential Office, ‘*Conversation with Vostochnyy Cosmodrome employees*’, 12 April 2022 [in Russian].
- 94 Ibid.
- 95 Russian Federation, Federation Council, ‘*M. Barakhoev: Ingushetia pays special attention to the organisation of children’s summer holidays*’, 7 April 2022 [in Russian].
- 96 Dmitriy Medvedev, *Telegram post*, 1 April 2022.
- 97 Pul N3, *Telegram post*, 11 April 2022.
- 98 ZeRada, *Telegram post*, 9 April 2022.

- 99 Legitimnyy, *Telegram post*, 7 April 2022.
- 100 Rezydent, *Telegram post*, 4 April 2022.
- 101 Ria Novosti, *Telegram post*, 3 April 2022.
- 102 SolovievLive, *Telegram post*, 12 April 2022.
- 103 SolovievLive, *Telegram post*, 9 April 2022.
- 104 Ekspertai.eu, *Telegram post*, 10 April 2022 [in Lithuanian].
- 105 BALTNEWS, *Telegram post*, 10 April 2022.
- 106 Mariam Talakhadze, '*Conspiracy about the existence of hidden NATO bio-laboratory under the "Azovstal" factory*', *Myth Detector*, 14 April 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 107 Pepe Escobar, *Twitter post*, 4 April 2022.
- 108 US Department of State, *GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem*, August 2020.
- 109 Khraniteli i Vershiteli, *Telegram post*, 8 April 2022.
- 110 Sladkov+, *Telegram post*, 10 April 2022.
- 111 Mk.ru, '*Military correspondent Sladkov: someone important and secret is sitting at Azovstal*', *Mk.ru*, 10 April 2022 [in Russian] [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 112 Aleksandr Ivanov, '*Not only torture chambers are hidden in Azovstal's dungeons*', *Zvezda*, 11 April 2022 [in Russian] [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 113 Poddubnyy |ZIO|V| edition, *Telegram post*, 4 April 2022.
- 114 *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on Rossiya-1 on 3 April 2022 [Timestamp 00:41:15].
- 115 Ibid. [Timestamp 00:26:14].
- 116 *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 10 April 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 01:09:35].
- 117 *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 17 April 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 00:59:29].
- 118 Ben Aris and Ivan Tkachev for bne IntelliNews, '*Long read: 20 years of Russia's economy under Putin, in numbers*', *Moscow Times*, 19 August 2019 [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 119 Statista, '*Russia: real gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate from 2018 to 2028*'.
- 120 Russian Federation, Ministry of Defence, '*Statement by the official representative of the Russian Ministry of Defence*', 10 September 2022.
- 121 Tatiana Stanovaya, '*Kharkiv retreat: what will military losses mean for Russia's domestic politics?*', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 19 September 2022 [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 122 Operativnye svodki, *Telegram post*, 14 September 2022.
- 123 Anastasiya Kashevarova, *Telegram post*, 14 September 2022.
- 124 Operatsiya Z: Voenkory Russkoy Vesny, *Telegram post*, 14 September 2022.
- 125 Zakhar Prilepin, *Telegram post*, 14 September 2022.
- 126 Strelkov Igor' Ivanovich, *Telegram post*, 15 September 2022.
- 127 Rybar', *Telegram post*, 20 September 2022.
- 128 Vladlen Tatarskiy, *Telegram post*, 20 September 2022.
- 129 Strelkov Igor' Ivanovich, *Telegram post*, 20 September 2022.
- 130 Odessa Za Pobedu!, *Telegram post*, 20 September 2022.
- 131 Reporter Filatov, *Telegram post*, 20 September 2022.
- 132 Voenny Osvedomitel', *Telegram post*, 20 September 2022.
- 133 Russian Federation, Ministry of Defence, '*Theses of the speech on partial mobilisation by the representative of the Main Organisation and Mobilisation Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Rear Admiral Vladimir Tsimlyanskiy*', 22 September 2022 [in Russian].

- 134** Russian Federation, Ministry of Defence, '*Statement of the Russian Ministry of Defence*', 26 September 2022 [in Russian].
- 135** Meduza, '*Toxic positivity: desperate to convince citizens the war won't change their daily lives, the Russian authorities are flooding the airwaves with "positive" news stories*', Meduza, 20 April 2022 [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 136** Russian Federation, Ministry of Defence, '*In Kamchatka, mobilised citizens were presented with combat weapons*', 24 September 2022 [in Russian].
- 137** Russian Federation, Ministry of Defence, '*The first group of northerners called up during partial mobilisation went to St Petersburg for training*', 27 September 2022 [in Russian].
- 138** Dmitriy Petrov, '*Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu gave some explanations about partial mobilisation*', *Pervyy Kanal*, 21 September 2022 [in Russian] [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 139** Sladkov+, *Telegram post*, 21 September 2022.
- 140** ZERGULIO, *Telegram post*, 21 September 2022.
- 141** WarGonzo, *Telegram post*, 21 September 2022.
- 142** SolovievLive, *Telegram post*, 21 September 2022.
- 143** Mir segodnya s 'Yuriy Podolyaka', *Telegram post*, 23 September 2022.
- 144** Mir segodnya s 'Yuriy Podolyaka', *Telegram post*, 24 September 2022.
- 145** Rybar', *Telegram post*, 23 September 2022.
- 146** Readovka, *Telegram post*, 24 September 2022.
- 147** Poddubnyy IZIOVI edition, *Telegram post*, 24 September 2022.
- 148** Andrey Medvedev, *Telegram post*, 24 September 2022.
- 149** Kotsnews, *Telegram post*, 21 September 2022.
- 150** Kadyrov_95, *Telegram post*, 24 September 2022.
- 151** Rybar', *Telegram post*, 24 September 2022.
- 152** Kirill Kabanov, *Telegram post*, 22 September 2022.
- 153** Anatoly Shariy, *Telegram post*, 22 September 2022.
- 154** Legitimnyy, *Telegram post*, 27 September 2022.
- 155** Rezydent, *Telegram post*, 25 September 2022.
- 156** Rezydent, *Telegram post*, 26 September 2022.
- 157** BALTNEWS, *Telegram post*, 21 September 2022.
- 158** Litovets RUBIT PRAVDUI, *Telegram post*, 22 September 2022.
- 159** *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 25 September 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 00:20:25].
- 160** Ibid. [Timestamp 00:25:39].
- 161** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 25 September 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 00:18:57].
- 162** *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 25 September 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 00:27:49].
- 163** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 2 October 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 00:56:00].
- 164** *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 2 October 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 01:01:07].
- 165** Ibid. [Timestamp 01:03:28].
- 166** *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 9 October 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 01:04:02].
- 167** Dr Vlad Mykhnenko, '*Expert comment: Putin's war—how did we get here? ...Ukraine 2014*', *University of Oxford*, 15 March 2022. [Accessed on 20 January 2024].
- 168** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 9 October 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 00:44:02].
- 169** Ibid. [Timestamp 01:56:11].
- 170** *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 9 October 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 01:13:15].
- 171** Margarita Balmaceda, Daniel Fried, Hanna Hopko, Kristine Berzina, and Benjamin Schmitt, '*Europe's gas crisis and Russian energy politics: experts*

- respond*', *Harvard University Ukrainian Research Institute*, 1 November 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 172** Marc Ozawa, *'Total, global, hybrid war'*, *War Changes Everything: Russia after Ukraine* (NATO Defence College, 2023), 5–16.
- 173** Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *'Briefing by M.V. Zakharova, official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Moscow'*, 29 September 2022 [in Russian].
- 174** Nika Aleksejeva, *'Russian War Report: Putin illegally annexes Ukrainian territory'*, *Atlantic Council*, 30 September 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 175** Mariya Zakharova, *Telegram post*, 27 September 2022.
- 176** Mariya Zakharova, *Telegram post*, 28 September 2022.
- 177** Mariya Zakharova, *Telegram post*, 28 September 2022.
- 178** Yuliya Vityazeva, *Telegram post*, 27 September 2022.
- 179** ZeRada, *Telegram post*, 27 September 2022.
- 180** Andrey Medvedev, *Telegram post*, 27 September 2022.
- 181** Joscha Weber, *'No proof of US sabotage of Nord Stream pipeline'*, *DW*, 30 September 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 182** Vatfor, *Telegram post*, 27 September 2022.
- 183** Kremlyovskaya prachka, *Telegram post*, 28 September 2022.
- 184** Russian Federation, Presidential Office, *'Signing of agreements on the admission of the DPR, LPR, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions to Russia'*, 30 September 2022 [in Russian].
- 185** Mir segodnya s 'Yuriy Podolyaka', *Telegram post*, 28 September 2022.
- 186** Meduza, *'Putin, the anti-colonialist: the Kremlin's new model of Russian "soft power" will fuel anti-Western resentment in Southern Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia'*, *Meduza*, 11 November 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 187** ZeRada, *Telegram post*, 26 September 2022.
- 188** ZeRada, *Telegram post*, 28 September 2022.
- 189** Vypuskayte Krakenal!, *Telegram post*, 28 September 2022.
- 190** Rybar', *Telegram post*, 7 October 2022.
- 191** Legitimnyy, *Telegram post*, 29 September 2022.
- 192** Zerada, *Telegram Post*, 27 September 2022.
- 193** #MONTYANI!, *Telegram post*, 26 September 2022.
- 194** *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 2 October 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 01:30:29].
- 195** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 2 October 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 01:24:25].
- 196** Ibid. [Timestamp 01:26:09].
- 197** Ibid. [Timestamp 01:12:29].
- 198** Ibid. [Timestamp 01:13:38].
- 199** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 9 October 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 01:00:12].
- 200** Ibid. [Timestamp 01:04:09].
- 201** Ibid. [Timestamp 00:55:30].
- 202** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 16 October 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 01:02:08].
- 203** Ibid. [Timestamp 01:09:04].
- 204** *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 16 October 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 01:16:33].
- 205** Russian Federation, Presidential Office, *'Orders in connection with the emergency on the Crimean Bridge'*, 8 October 2022 [in Russian].
- 206** Russian Federation, Presidential Office, *'Meeting with Alexander Bastrykin, chairman of the Investigative Committee'*, 9 October 2022 [in Russian].

- 207** Russian Federation, Presidential Office, *'Meeting with the permanent members of the Security Council'*, 10 October 2022 [in Russian].
- 208** Mir segodnya s 'Yuriy Podolyaka', *Telegram post*, 8 October 2022.
- 209** Voenkor Kotenok, *Telegram post*, 8 October 2022.
- 210** RIA Novosti, *Telegram post*, 8 October 2022.
- 211** Kotsnews, *Telegram post*, 8 October 2022.
- 212** Kremlyovskaya prachka, *Telegram post*, 8 October 2022.
- 213** UKR Leaks, *Telegram post*, 11 October 2022.
- 214** RT, *'UK intelligence plotted Crimean Bridge bombing—The Grayzone'*, RT, 11 October 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 215** SolovievLive, *Telegram post*, 8 October 2022.
- 216** Legitimnyy, *Telegram post*, 8 October 2022.
- 217** Rezydent, *Telegram post*, 8 October 2022.
- 218** Kartel', *Telegram post*, 12 October 2022.
- 219** Shproty v izgnanii | Novosti Latvii, *Telegram post*, 8 October 2022.
- 220** Legitimnyy, *Telegram post*, 10 October 2022.
- 221** Ukraina.ru, *Telegram post*, 10 October 2022.
- 222** Ukraina.ru, *Telegram post*, 9 October 2022.
- 223** Voyna s feykami, *Telegram post*, 10 October 2022.
- 224** Voennyi Osvedomitel', *Telegram post*, 8 October 2022.
- 225** Anatoliy Shariy, *Telegram post*, 8 October 2022.
- 226** Strelkov Igor' Ivanovich, *Telegram post*, 8 October 2022.
- 227** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 9 October 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 00:15:41].
- 228** *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 9 October 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 00:01:06].
- 229** Ibid. [Timestamp 00:22:12].
- 230** Ibid. [Timestamp 00:22:41].
- 231** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 16 October 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 00:17:50].
- 232** *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 16 October 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 00:21:23].
- 233** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 16 October 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 00:29:00].
- 234** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 23 October 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 00:46:55].
- 235** Ibid. [Timestamp 00:08:33].
- 236** Ibid. [Timestamp 00:49:36].
- 237** *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 11 December 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 00:04:32].
- 238** The United Nations Office at Geneva, *'Ukraine: UN General Assembly demands Russia reverse course on "attempted illegal annexation"*, 12 October 2022.
- 239** Centre for Eastern Studies, *'Sham Russian "referendums" in Ukraine'*, OSW, 28 September 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 240** Russian Federation, Presidential Office, *'Address by the President of the Russian Federation'*, 21 September 2022.
- 241** Russian Federation, Security Council, *'529th meeting of the Council of the Federation'*, 28 September 2022 [in Russian].
- 242** Russian Federation, State Duma, *'State Duma speaker urged Donbas residents to calmly make their choice in the referendum'*, 23 September 2022 [in Russian].
- 243** Russian Federation, Ministry of Defence, *'In the LPR before the referendum on the region's accession to Russia, Russian specialists will inspect polling stations for explosive objects'*, 23 September 2022 [in Russian].
- 244** Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *'Press Conference of the Minister of Foreign Affairs'*, 23 September 2022 [in Russian].

Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov on the results of the High-Level Week of the 77th Session of the UN General Assembly, New York, 24 September 2022', 25 September 2022 [in Russian].

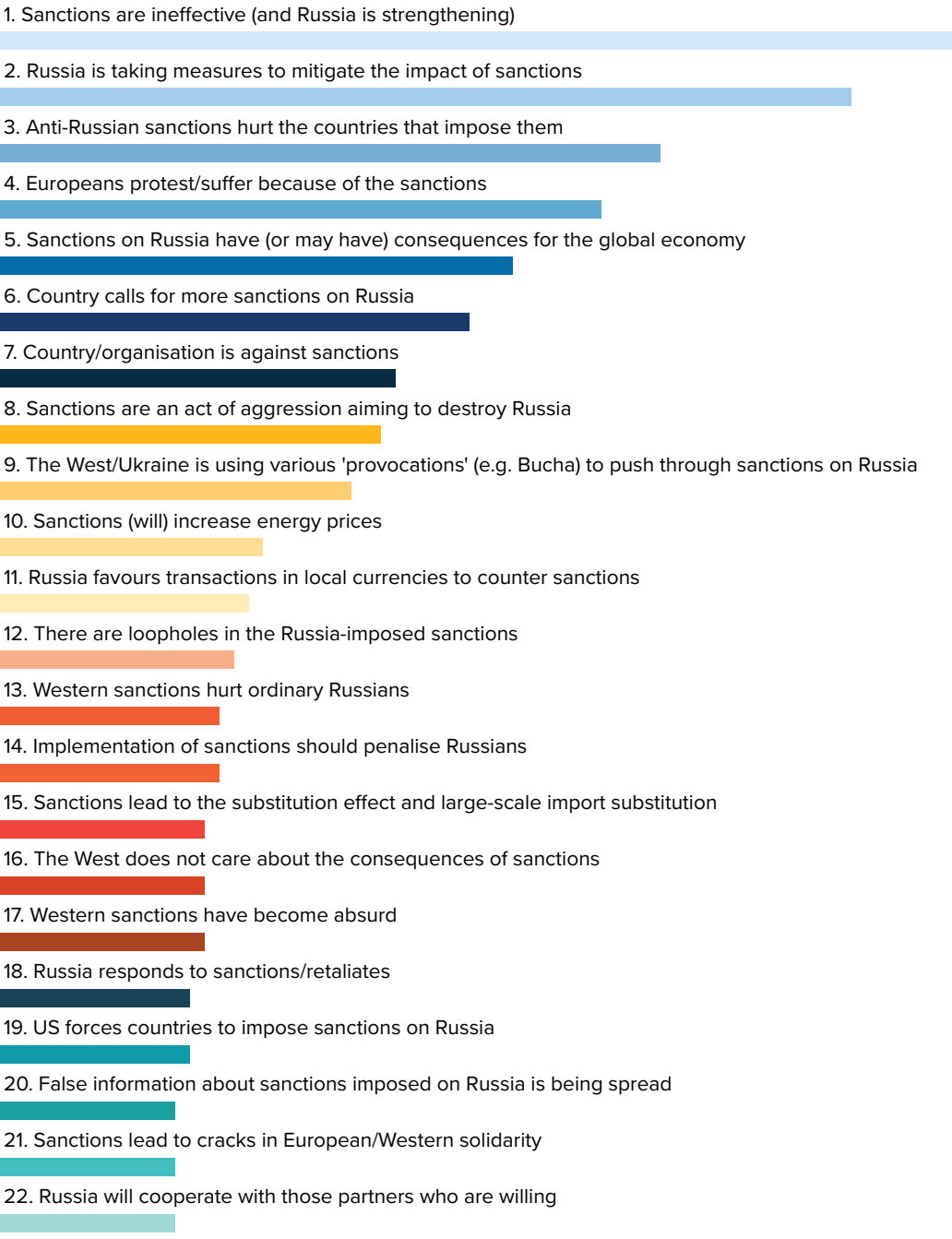
- 245** Dmitriy Medvedev, *Telegram post*, 27 September 2022.
- 246** Dmitriy Medvedev, *Telegram post*, 22 September 2022.
- 247** Mir segodnya s 'Yuriy Podolyaka', *Telegram post*, 26 September 2022.
- 248** Khersonskiy Vestnik, *Telegram post*, 23 September 2022.
- 249** Lugan'media, *Telegram post*, 22 September 2022.
- 250** Glavnoe v Khersone i oblasti, *Telegram post*, 23 September 2022.
- 251** Instytut Masovoi Informatsii, '*Foreign "journalists" with ties to RF were among the "international observers" at the sham referendum—list*', 26 September 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 252** Roman Petrenko, '*International observers at the "referendums" turn out to be Putin lovers and propagandists*', *Ukrainska Pravda*, 26 September 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 253** GRASS, '*The Kremlin's "unbiased Western journalists"—new instrument for propaganda promotion*', *Grass Fact Check*, 22 September 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 254** Glavnoe v Khersone i oblasti, *Telegram post*, 27 September 2022.
- 255** European Platform for Democratic Elections, *List of Politically Biased Election Observers*.
- 256** Ukraina.ru, *Telegram post*, 26 September 2022.
- 257** Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security, '*Foreign voices of the Russian propaganda*', *Spravdi*, 15 February 2023.
- 258** BALTNEWS, *Telegram post*, 25 September 2022.
- 259** Federal Republic of Germany, '*Federal Foreign Office, Speech by Foreign Minister Annalena*

Baerbock at the side event Cooperation for Accountability in Ukraine at the UN General Assembly', 23 September 2022.

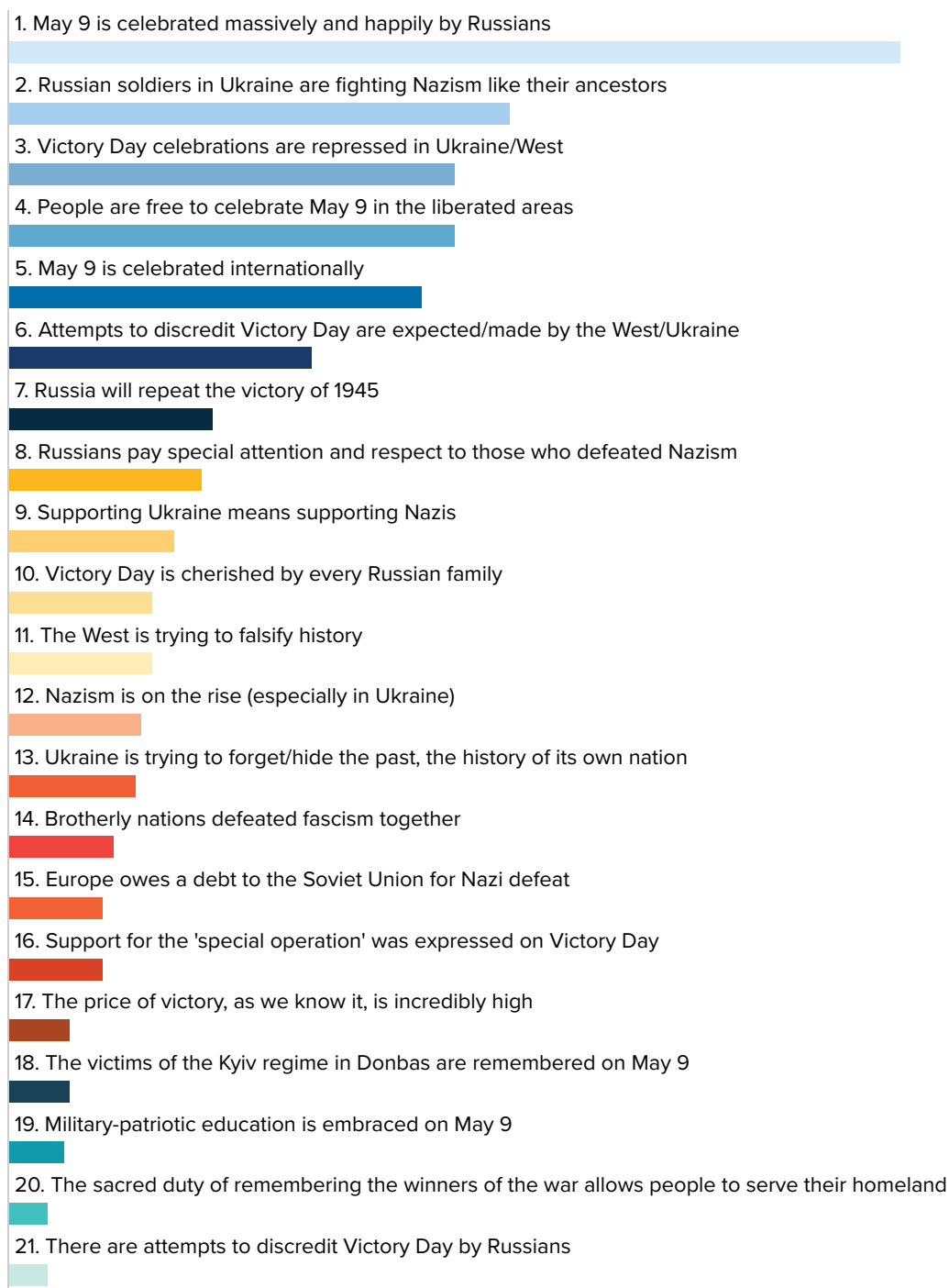
- 260** UKR Leaks, *Telegram post*, 26 September 2022.
- 261** Rezident, *Telegram post*, 24 September 2022.
- 262** Rezident, *Telegram post*, 23 September 2022.
- 263** Rezident, *Telegram post*, 21 September 2022.
- 264** ZeRada, *Telegram post*, 25 September 2022.
- 265** Legitimnyy, *Telegram post*, 21 September 2022.
- 266** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 25 September 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 00:09:42].
- 267** *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 25 September 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 00:12:39].
- 268** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 25 September 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 00:10:02].
- 269** Ibid. [Timestamp 00:03:12].
- 270** Ibid. [Timestamp 00:07:35].
- 271** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 2 October 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 00:03:26].
- 272** Ibid. [Timestamp 01:47:52].
- 273** *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 2 October 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 00:35:13].
- 274** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 2 October 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 00:16:31].
- 275** Ibid. [Timestamp 01:31:39].
- 276** *Voskresnoe Vremya*, aired on 9 October 2022 on Pervyy Kanal [Timestamp 00:00:35].
- 277** *Vesti Nedeli*, aired on 9 October 2022 on Rossiya-1 [Timestamp 00:37:51].
- 278** Bolt et al., *Kremlin Communications Strategy*.
- 279** Ibid., 118.
- 280** Ibid., 31.
- 281** Ibid., 119.

- 282** Olga Khvoctunova and Ekaterina Voinova, 'Media changes in Russia: threats, challenges and prospects', in *Perspectives to the Media in Russia: 'Western' Interests and Russian Developments*, ed. Elena Vartanova, Hannu Nieminen and Minna-Mari Salminen (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, Aleksanteri Institute, 2009), 189.
- 283** Ibid., 189–190.
- 284** Andrey Kuzichkin and Monika Hanley, *Russian Media Landscape Structures, Mechanisms, and Technologies of Information Operations* (Riga: NATO StratCom CoE, 2021), 14–18.
- 285** AFP, '[Russia blocks 2 independent media sites over war coverage](#)', *Moscow Times*, 1 March 2022. [Accessed 20 January 2024].
- 286** Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 135.
- 287** Nataliya Rostova, 'Posobie dlya bednykh mysl'iu' [Guidance for poor in thought], *Novaya Gazeta*, 24 February 2005; Sharafutdinova, *Red Mirror*, 136–137.
- 288** Kuzichkin and Hanley, *Russian Media Landscape Structures*, 14–25.
- 289** Human Rights Watch, '[Russia: growing Internet isolation, control, censorship](#)', 18 June 2020. [Accessed 1 January 2024].
- 290** Anton Troianovski and Valeriya Safronova, '[Russia takes censorship to new extremes, stifling war coverage](#)', *New York Times*, 4 March 2022.
- 291** Guilia Carbonaro, 'Russian TV viewing figures falling amid coverage of Ukraine invasion', *Newsweek*, 24 August 2022 <https://www.newsweek.com/russian-tv-viewing-figures-falling-amid-coverage-ukraine-invasion-1736404> [Accessed 1 January 2024].
- 292** Eto Buziashvili, '[What Russia reads on Telegram](#)', *Medium*, 21 October 2022. [Accessed 1 January 2024].
- 293** Bolt et al., *Kremlin Communications Strategy*, 116.
- 294** Sam Farbman, 'Telegram, "Milbloggers" and the Russian State', *Survival* 65, no. 3 (2023): 107–128.
- 295** Bolt et al., *Kremlin Communications Strategy*, 23–31.
- 296** Ibid., 31.
- 297** Ibid., 23–31.
- 298** Ibid., 31.
- 299** Ibid., 29–31.
- 300** Ofer Fridman, 'On the "Gerasimov Doctrine": why the West fails to beat Russia to the punch', *Prism* 8, no. 2 (2019): 99–112; Seth G. Jones and Philip G. Wasielewski, '[Russia's possible invasion of Ukraine](#)', *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 13 January 2022. [Accessed 1 January 2024].
- 301** Dima Adamsky, 'Cross-domain coercion: the current Russian art of strategy', *Proliferation Papers* 54 (2015): 21.
- 302** Timothy Thomas, 'The evolution of Russian military thought: integrating hybrid, new-generation, and new-type thinking', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29, no. 4 (2016): 574.
- 303** See '[Supervisory Board](#)' on the official website of the National Research Institute for the Development of Communications [in Russian]. [Accessed 1 January 2024].
- 304** Valentina Komleva, ed., *Communication Regimes of Neighbouring Countries: Rating of Friendliness—2022* (Moscow: Natsional'nyy Issledovatel'skiy Institut Razvitiya Kommunikatsiy, 2023), 9.
- 305** Valentina Komleva, 'Stranovoy kommunikatsionnyy rezhim kak sotsial'no-politicheskiy fenomen' [Country communication regime as a sociopolitical phenomenon], *Rossiia i Mir: Nauchnyy Dialog* 1, no. 1 (2021): 23.
- 306** Ibid., 14.
- 307** Ibid.

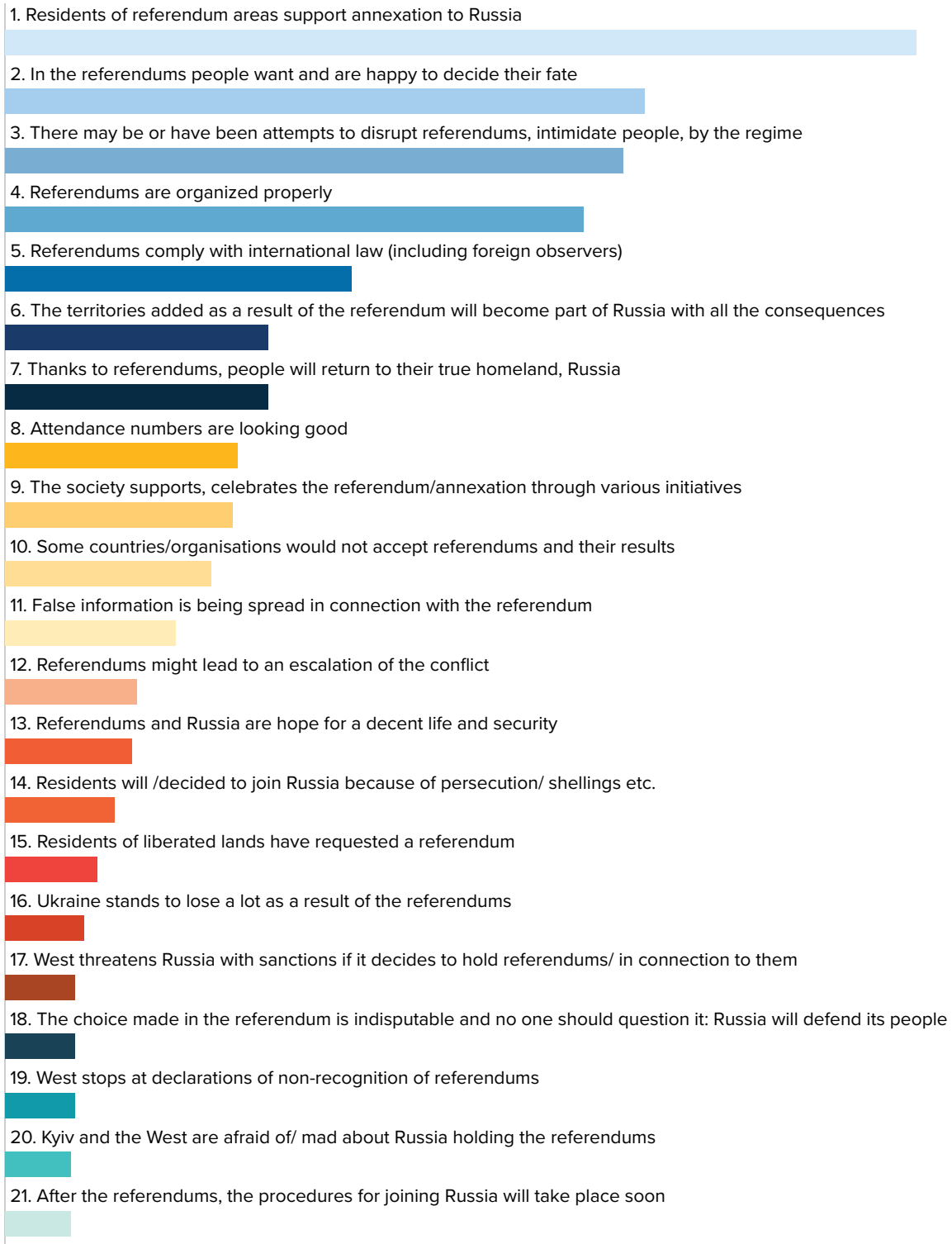
Appendix 1: Top messages about sanctions on Russia, all media types



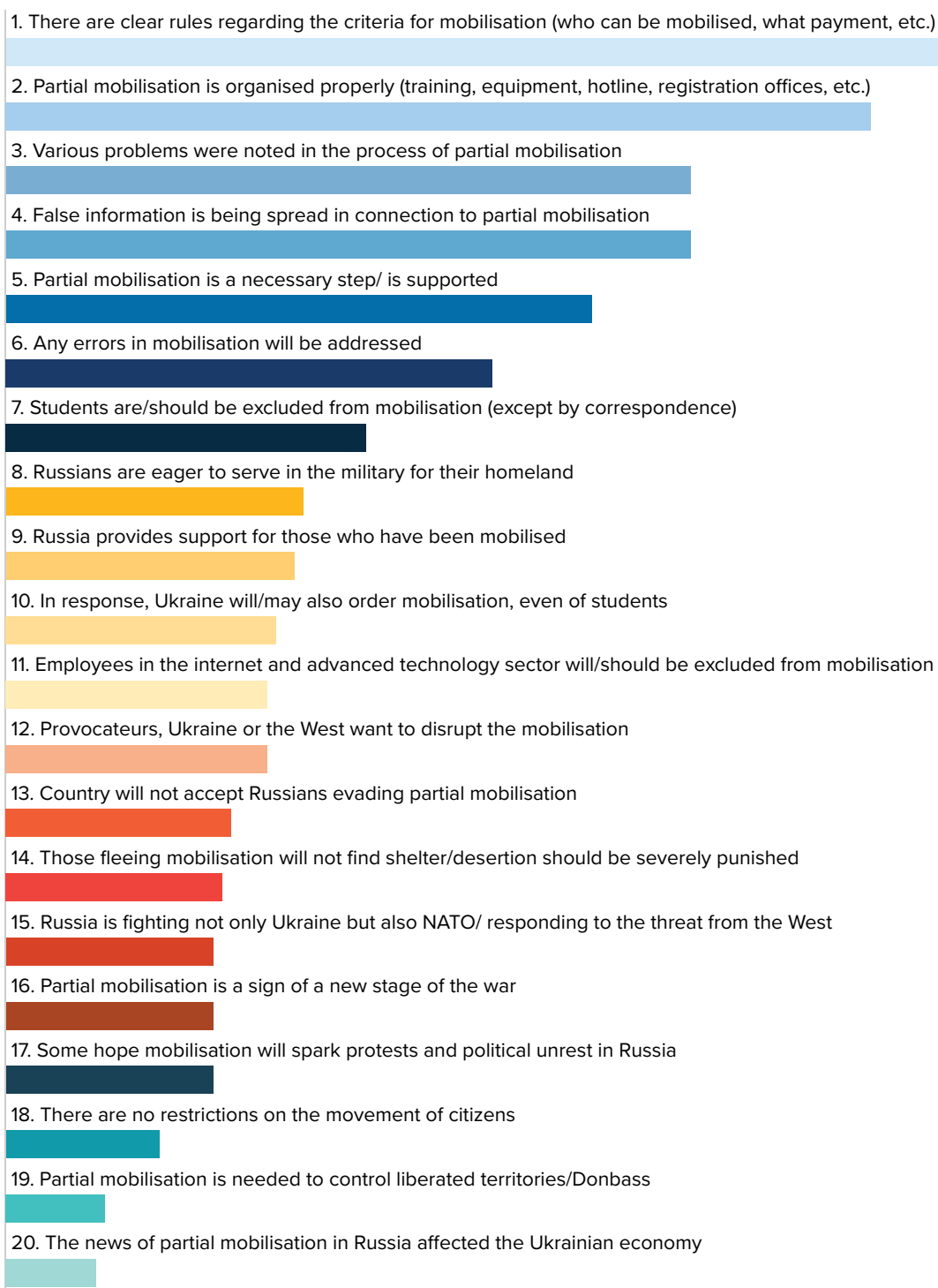
Appendix 2: Top messages about 9 May, Victory Day, all media types



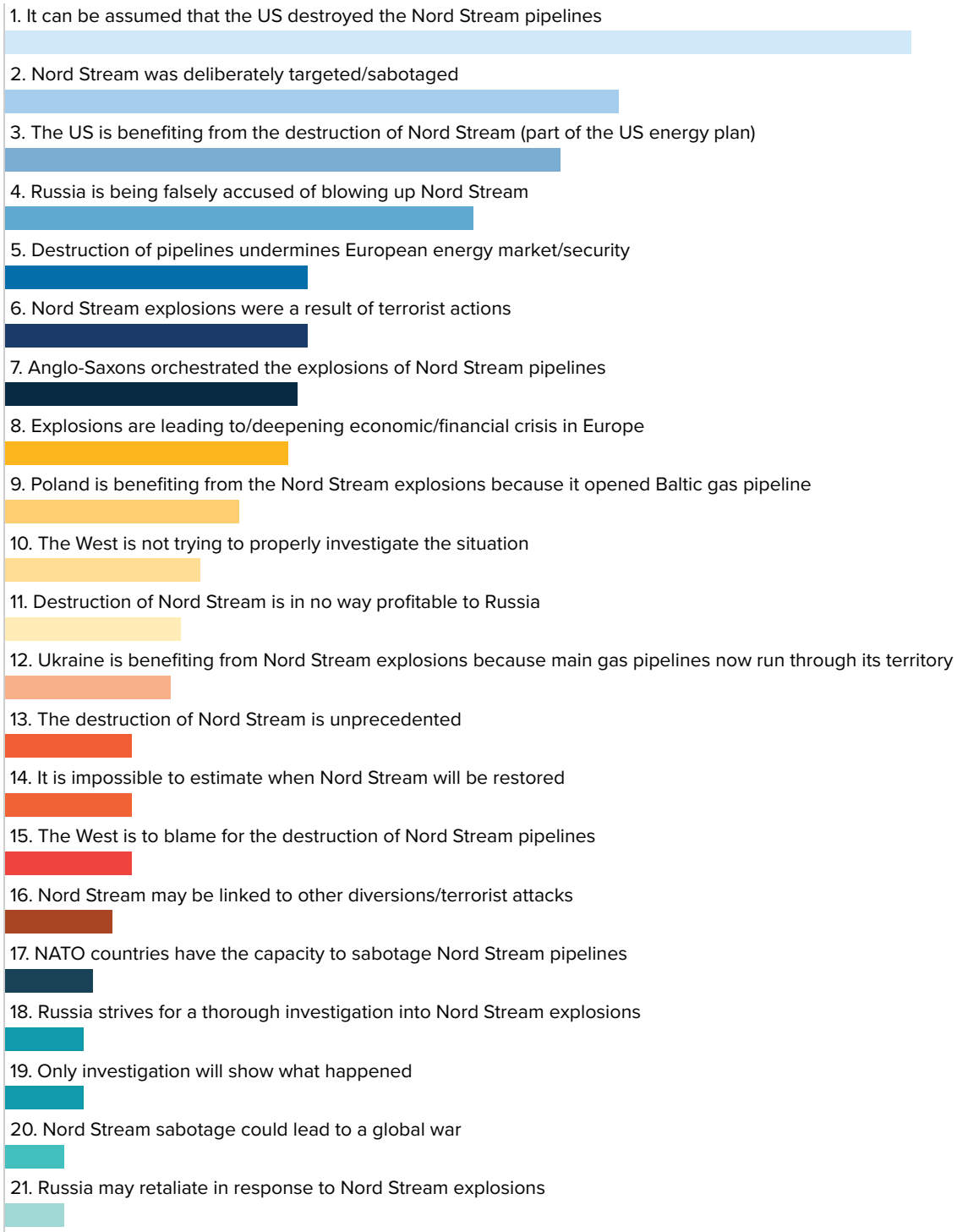
Appendix 3: Top messages about the annexation referendums, all media types



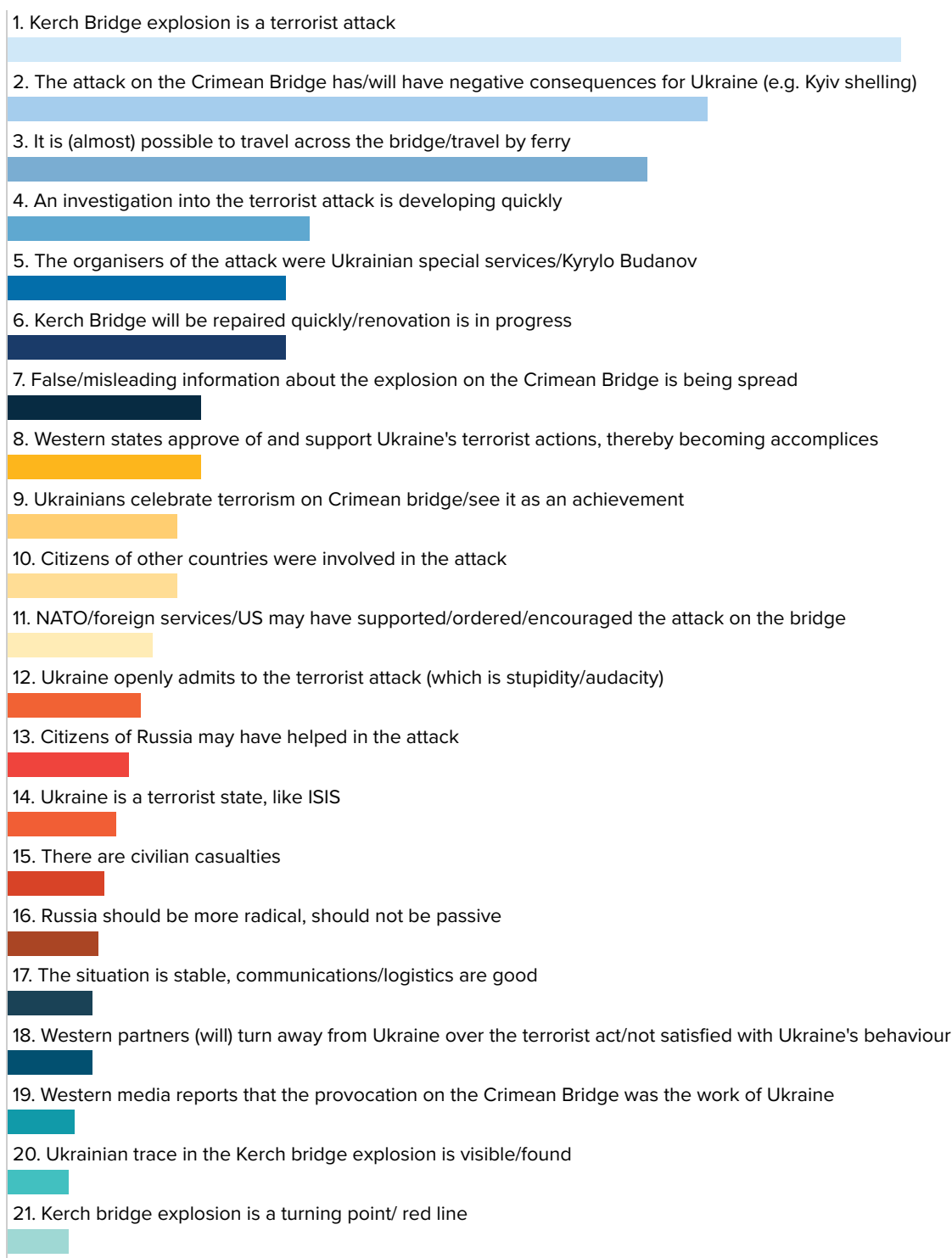
Appendix 4: Top messages about partial mobilisation, all media types



Appendix 5: Top messages about the Nord Stream explosions, all media types



Appendix 6: Top messages about the Kerch Bridge explosion, all media types



Appendix 7: List of dedicated Telegram channels participating in Russian information warfare

Channel name	Notes
Colonelcassad	Boris Rozhin conducts active pro-Putin propaganda and actively promotes the war on Colonel Cassad's LiveJournal and Telegram channels. Supports the Kremlin's policy regarding the war in Ukraine. Since 2014 has been head of the editorial office of the Golos information and analytical centre in Sevastopol. Covers events in Donbas and Ukraine. Since 2015 has also been actively writing about events in Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, and other regions. A master of the International Chess Federation. Sanctioned by Ukraine for spreading war propaganda.
GREY ZONE	Channel linked to Russian PMCs (Wagner). Most of the messages are anonymous; moderators are unknown.
Kadyrov_95	Since the launch of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the channel of Ramzan Kadyrov, head of Russia's Chechen Republic, has been among the most followed political channels on Telegram in the country by number of subscribers. From around 60,000 subscribers in late February, the number went up to more than 3 million by the end of 2022.
Kotsnews Voenkor of 'Komsomol'skaya Pravda' Aleksandr Kots (Kotsnews Вoenkop 'Комсомольской правды' Александр Коц)	Aleksander Kots is a war correspondent from the <i>Komsomol'skaya Pravda newspaper</i> , where he has worked since 1999. Reported from Kosovo, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Nagorno Karabakh, and Ukraine. Placed under EU sanctions after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Appointed as a 'trusted person' by Putin. These will be campaigning during the presidential elections and can sometimes act on Putin's behalf.
Murado	Murad Gadzhiev, senior correspondent at RT. Covered the Syrian Civil War for RT, including the Russian intervention, as one of the few international journalists reporting from Syria. Sanctioned by Ukraine for spreading disinformation.
Readovka	Channel whose subscriber base reached 1 million in April 2022; in the top 10 of the most cited channels in Russia (as ranked by TGStat). Receives instructions with regard to disinformation about the war of aggression against Ukraine in support of the Kremlin's propaganda it publishes from ANO Dialog, a Russian non-profit organisation created by the Moscow Department of Information and Technology in 2019 and closely linked to the presidential administration.
REVERSE SIDE OF THE MEDAL	Wagner-affiliated channel. The project 'Reverse Side of the Medal' was started by Maksim Fomin (a.k.a. Vladlen Tatarskiy) and his friend ' Admin '. The Insignia of RSOTM became a defining symbol of 'army subculture' in Russia.

Voenkor Kotenok Z (Военкор Котенок Z)	Channel of Russian milblogger Yuriy Kotenok, previously head of the Media and Public Affairs Section at the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies. In October 2015 awarded the medal in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Republic of South Ossetia by the self-proclaimed head of the unrecognised state of South Ossetia, Leonid Tibilov, whose activities are controlled by the Russian special services. Kotenok was commissioned by the Kremlin to cover the first and second wars in Chechnya, Georgia, South Ossetia, and Donbas.
WarGonzo	Semyon Pegov gained prominence as a war correspondent for his work at Life.ru. Since 2017 has been running the WarGonzo Telegram channel. It has been covering the fighting in Ukraine since the beginning of Russia's invasion. Pegov is sanctioned by the EU, Ukraine, and Switzerland for spreading war propaganda. Appointed as a 'trusted person' by Putin. These will be campaigning during the presidential elections and can sometimes act on Putin's behalf.
Zapiski Veterana (ЗАПИСКИ ВЕТЕРАНА)	Pro-war channel ('Notes of a Veteran') among the most often referred to on developments on the Russo-Ukrainian frontlines. Some claim the channel is run by Aleksey Kargapoltsev, one of the organisers of the attack on the Ukrainian Donetsk international airport back in 2014, who was awarded the 'For Courage' medal and the 'Donbas Volunteer' badge etc. He is also the head of the Belgorod Union of Veterans.
Aleksandr Khodakovskiy (Александр Ходаковский)	Aleksandr Khodakovskiy is a military and political figure of the self-proclaimed DPR. Active participant of military actions in Donbas since 2014. Since March 2022 has taken part in Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the east of the country. On 30 March 2023 was appointed deputy head of the Main Directorate of the Rosgvardiya for the so-called DPR. Sanctioned by the US, EU, Canada, UK, Australia, Japan, and Ukraine.
Anastasiya Kashevarova RU (Анастасия Кашеварова RU)	Russian milblogger Anastasiya Kashevarova was deputy editor-in-chief of the <i>Izvestia</i> newspaper in 2011–2014 and founded the Daily Storm, known for regularly publishing materials in support of the policies of Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov. In 2019–2020 Kashevarova served as an aide for State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin. She has ties with the Russian ultranationalist and right-wing populist political party the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia.
Balitskiy Yevgeniy (Балицкий Евгений)	Channel of Yevgeniy Balitskiy, a former people's deputy in two convocations of Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada. Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Balitskiy was appointed so-called representative of the main council of the Zaporizhzhia region's military-civil administration. On 30 September 2022 Balitskiy and the other three pro-Russian occupation heads attended the ceremony in Moscow during which Putin formally announced the annexation of the Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts.

Vladimir Rogov (Владимир Рогов)	Channel of Vladimir Rogov, member of the collaborationist military-civilian administration for the Russian-occupied areas of Zaporizhzhia Oblast, and founder of We Are Together with Russia, which was actively involved in the preparation of the annexation referendums held in four occupied regions of Ukraine. As of 2023, chairman of the Commission of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation on sovereignty, patriotic projects, and support for veterans; co-chairman of the Coordination Council for the Integration of New Regions.
Vladimir Sal'do (Владимир Сальдо)	Channel of Vladimir Sal'do serving as the acting governor of the collaborationist annexed Kherson Oblast in Russian-occupied Ukraine as of October 2022 (previously, head of the Kherson military-civilian administration). Member of the ruling party United Russia; prior to the invasion, served three terms as mayor of Kherson from 2002 to 2012, and later as a people's deputy in the Verkhovna Rada, representing the pro-Russian Party of Regions.
Vladlen Tatarskiy (Владлен Татарский)	Maksim Fomin, Russian milblogger. Participant of the war in Donbas on the side of pro-Russian forces, reporting from the front in Ukraine. Shared extreme ultranationalist views. From autumn 2022 began actively criticising the Russian Ministry of Defence after a series of failures on the frontline. Was sanctioned by Ukraine for spreading war propaganda. Died after an explosion in a cafe in St Petersburg in April 2023.
Voenkor I Z I Lisitsyn ZOV-TV (Военкор I Z I Лисицын ZOV-TV)	Channel of Luhansk-born Yevgeniy Lisitsyn, a military correspondent for the propaganda news agency ANNA News. In 2014 he sided with the Russian separatist forces and later was appointed advisor to the prosecutor general of the self-declared LPR.
Voenkor Kul'ko (Военкор Кулько)	Dmitriy Kul'ko, correspondent from Pervyy Kanal, where he started his journalistic career in 2013 as a war correspondent reporting from Ukraine.
Voenkor Yarem (Военкор Ярем)	Channel of Aleksandr Yaremchuk, a 'war correspondent' of RIA FAN, a part of the Patriot Media Group, a Russian media organisation whose board of trustees was headed by the late Yevgeniy Prigozhin (RIA FAN was shut down after the Prigozhin mutiny in 2023). Yaremchuk covered the Wagner PMC storming Bakhmut, with some of the news appearing first on his Telegram channel.
Voennaya khronika (Военная хроника)	In mid 2022 the Voennaya khronika ('Military Chronicles') Telegram channel was a top-30 Russian-language channel in terms of subscribership and the average number of views per post (original content only: posts containing reposts of messages from other channels excluded). The channel, sometimes introduced as run by Russian military correspondents, is often cited as a source of information on the developments on the frontlines.

Voenny Osvedomitel' (Военный Осведомитель)	'Military Informant' is an anonymous channel known for criticising how the Russian Ministry of Defence handles the so-called 'special military operation' against Ukraine.
Release the Kraken! (Выпускайте Кракена!)	Release the Kraken was linked to Prigozhin's social media network. It is thought to have been administered by three employees of Patriot Media, who were arrested in August 2022 after searches carried out in the offices of Patriot Media Group and RIA FAN. The arrested were suspected of fraud and possibly, according to other Prigozhin-linked channels, of treason.
Dva mayora (Два майора)	'Two Majors' has no verified administrators and is still running anonymously. It was rumoured to be run by high-ranking border service officers in Crimea, speculation supported by Kremlin-aligned propagandist Anatoliy Shariy. Known for criticising the Russian command during the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region.
DMITRIY ZIMENKIN (ДМИТРИЙ ЗИМЕНКИН)	Dmitriy Zimenkin, correspondent from Izvestia and Ren-TV. Sanctioned by Ukraine for spreading war propaganda.
Irina KuksenkoVa (Ирина КуксенкоVa)	Irina Kuksenkova, war correspondent from Pervyy Kanal. Worked in war and armed conflict zones in Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. Sanctioned by Ukraine for spreading war propaganda.
KATRUSYA (КАТРУСЯ)	Yekaterina Agranovich. Media manager, author of the KATRUSYA channel, and producer of 'patriotic videos'. According to pro-Kremlin outlet Ukraina.ru, for eight years has been waging war for the Russian world.
Кепка Prigozhina (Кепка Пригожина)	Channel that was part of Prigozhin's social media network and served to post the late Russian warlord's responses to inquiries from various media, both traditional online and social, with the majority in audio format. The name of the channel may refer to photos of Prigozhin in a hat (Кепка Prigozhina means 'Prigozhin's hat' in Russian) entering a café that was used by his media conglomerate in an information operation campaign against anti-corruption attorney Lyubov' Sobol, an ally of the late Aleksey Navalny.
Mir segodnya s 'Yuriy Podolyaka' (Мир сегодня с 'Юрий Подоляка')	Yuriy Podolyaka, blogger. Has channels on Telegram and YouTube. Gained prominence in 2022 after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Sanctioned by Ukraine and Canada for spreading war propaganda.
Nam pishut iz Yaniny. (Нам пишут из Янины.)	Popular channel run by Andrey Morozov, better known by his nickname Fighting Cat Murz. Since the end of 2022 has posted regular criticism of the actions of the official military leadership and demanded that measures be taken as soon as possible to prevent defeat in the war. In spring 2023 began talking about the possibility of defeat of Russian forces because of failure to properly learn from mistakes.

<p>Narodnaya militsiya DNR (Народная милиция ДНР)</p>	<p>Official Telegram channel of the People’s Militia of the so-called DPR, a Russian-backed proxy militia from Donetsk. The militia was affiliated with the self-declared DPR during the war in Donbas (2014–2022), the first stage of the Russo-Ukrainian War. It then supported the Russian Armed Forces against the Ukrainian Armed Forces during the 2022 Russian invasion. In September 2022 Russia annexed the DPR and LPR, integrating the paramilitary into its armed forces in 2023.</p>
<p>Nastoyashchiy polkovnik Vitaliy Kiselev (Настоящий полковник Виталий Киселев)</p>	<p>Official Telegram channel of Vitaliy Kiselev, former deputy to the self-styled interior minister of the self-proclaimed Russian-backed LPR. Kiselev (call sign Kommunist), also a former second KPU (Communist Party of Ukraine) secretary in the Kamennobrodskii district of Luhansk city, was deputy commander of Moscow-backed LPR separatist forces in February 2015. As part of internal power struggles in the so-called LPR, was arrested and sentenced to more than 12 years for allegedly organising a coup, but was eventually freed in 2017. Kiselev is often cited by major Russian media, such as TASS, and is a frequent guest on the Solov’yov Live talk show.</p>
<p>Neofitsial’nyy Bezsonov (Неофициальный Безсонов)</p>	<p>Official Telegram channel of Daniil Bezsonov (real name Ruslan Baklan, call sign Goodwin), former deputy commander of the internal troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the self-declared, Kremlin-backed DPR. For more than four years since October 2019, served as deputy minister of information of the so-called DPR. Fought for Russian proxy forces in Donbas; participated in the battle for Slovyansk with the brigade commanded by GRU operative Igor’ Strelkov (Girkin) in 2014.</p>
<p>Poddubnyy ZIO V edition (Поддубный ZIO V edition)</p>	<p>Yevgeniy Poddubnyy, war correspondent on television channels belonging to VGTRK media holding (Rossiya-1, Rossiya-24) since 2011. Has worked in Israel and the Gaza Strip, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt, Lebanon, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Syria, Ukraine, and elsewhere. Frequently described as one of the Kremlin’s ‘main’/‘lead’ propagandists and has received multiple state awards for his activity. Sanctioned by the UK, Australia, Canada, Ukraine, and the EU.</p>
<p>Pozyvnoy Bryus (Позывной Брюс)</p>	<p>Channel of Aleksandr Simonov (call sign Bruce), previously a military correspondent for RIA FAN. Can be classified as part of the Prigozhin and Wagner Group social media empire, namely the RIA FAN-related account in the network of ‘military reporters’ who largely reported on Wagner activities (like Voenkor Yarem).</p>
<p>PriZrak Novorossii (ПриЗрак Новороссии)</p>	<p>Channel run by Vladimir Grubnik, former doctor, and activist of the anti-Maidan ‘Odesa underground’. Engaged in humanitarian activities. In 2023 became a member of the Angry Patriots Club, Russian nationalist organisation founded by Igor Strelkov (Girkin) in spring 2023. Its members support Russia’s invasion of Ukraine but criticise the policies of the Russian authorities.</p>

Pushilin D.V. (Пушилин Д.В.)	The channel of Denis Pushilin, Moscow-installed acting leader of the Russian-controlled parts of Ukraine's Donetsk region. With a colourful background involving participation in a massive Ponzi scheme, in May 2014 Pushilin became head of the self-proclaimed DPR. Stated that he did not envision the latter becoming an independent state, preferring to join a renewed Russian Empire instead. In December 2021 became a member of the Russian ruling party United Russia, whose chairman Dmitry Medvedev personally handed him the party ticket.
Reporter Filatov (Репортер Filatov)	Andrey Filatov, RT war correspondent. Has reported from Luhansk and Donetsk since 2014; previously worked in Syria. Organised multiple fundraising campaigns for the Russian army.
Reporter Rudenko Vru (Репортёр Руденко Vru)	Andrey Rudnenko, war correspondent on television channels belonging to the VGTRK media holding (Rossiya-1, Rossiya-24). Ex-military. Accredited to work in the so-called DPR since 2014. Sanctioned by Ukraine for spreading war propaganda.
RODION_MIROSHNIK (РОДИОН_МИРОШНИК)	Channel of Rodion Miroshnik, formerly press secretary of Viktor Yanukovich, leader of the Party of Regions of Ukraine (2005–2006). From 2015 to 2022, representative of the self-proclaimed LPR within the Trilateral Contact Group. In May 2022 appointed ambassador of the LPR to the Russian Federation. Regular participant in Vladimir Solov'yov's talk show and the 60 Minut programme on the Rossiya-1 TV channel.
Ruskiy OpolcheneZ (Ruskiy Legion) (Русский Ополченец (Русский Легион))	Official channel of the Legion of Russia, Ruskiy Legion (BARS-13), a Russian irregular armed formation (BARS: Combat Army Reserve of the Country; Боевой Армейский Резерв Страны, БАРС, in Russian).
Ruskiy Tarantas" (Русский тарантасъ)	Dmitriy Steshyn, Komsomol'skaya Pravda correspondent. Has worked in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, South Ossetia, and the North Caucasus. Since 2014 has been covering the war in Donbas. Has associations with nationalist movements in Russia.
Rybar' (Рыбарь)	Channel created by a former employee of the press service of the Russian Ministry of Defence Mikhail Zvinchuk together with Moscow programmer Denis Shchukin. The authors of the channel were revealed by The Bell journalists in July 2022, before which the creators had remained anonymous. In an interview with the RTVI TV channel in 2022, Zvinchuk said that about 40 permanent employees worked on the channel and the monthly budget was 4 million roubles. On 20 December 2022, by order of Putin, Zvinchuk was included in the working group on mobilisation. Sanctioned by the EU and Ukraine.
Svideteli Bayraktara (Свидетели Байрактара)	The Svideteli Bayraktara ('Witnesses of Bayraktar') channel is run by RIA Novosti military correspondents Aleksandr Kharchenko and Sergey Shilov. In 2015 they produced a video documentary Eclipse of the Caliph on the war in Syria. In 2023 they released another 'documentary' on Ukraine, about the storming of Bakhmut by the Wagner PMC.

<p>Sladkov+ (Сладков+)</p>	<p>Aleksandr Sladkov, war correspondent on television channels belonging to the VGTRK media holding (Rossiya-1, Rossiya-24). Senior lieutenant of the RF Armed Forces. In 2022 became a member of the working group on mobilisation under the Russian president. Appointed as a 'trusted person' by Putin. Sladkov is sanctioned by the EU, Switzerland, and Ukraine.</p>
<p>Starshe Eddy (Старше Эдды)</p>	<p>Channel, according to The Bell, run by war blogger German Kulikovskiy, little known outside Telegram, who has accompanied Russian forces in the Kharkiv region throughout the war. In the days leading up to the war, he was one of only a few bloggers who announced the 'special operation' in advance.</p>
<p>Strelkov Igor' Ivanovich #KRP (Стрелков Игорь Иванович #КРП)</p>	<p>Igor' Strelkov (Girkin), ex-FSB operative. Sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment in the Netherlands for the destruction of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 and the murder of the 298 people on board. Actively involved in starting the military actions in Donbas in 2014 and later in the politics of the DPR. Frequently criticises the leadership of the DPR and LPR, as well as Russia's policy towards Ukraine. On 21 July 2023 was arrested in Russia on extremism charges. Sanctioned by the EU, the US, Canada, Japan, Australia, Switzerland, New Zealand, Liechtenstein, and Norway.</p>
<p>SOLOV'YOV LIVE (СОЛОВЬЁВ)</p>	<p>Channel of Vladimir Solov'yov, Russia's so-called 'chief propagandist'. Since 2010 has served the Kremlin as a prominent radio and television presenter for the state-owned VGTRK. In 2022 Putin awarded Solov'yov with the 'For Merit to the Fatherland' order.</p>

