

## Hybrid CoE Working Paper 13

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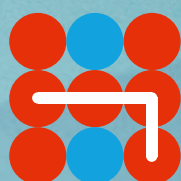
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# The Kremlin's messaging on Ukraine: Authorities and “media” hand in hand

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JAKUB KALENSKÝ



Hybrid CoE



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**Hybrid CoE Working Papers** cover work in progress: they develop and share ideas on Hybrid CoE's ongoing research/workstrand themes or analyze actors, events or concepts that are relevant from the point of view of hybrid threats. They cover a wide range of topics related to the constantly evolving security environment.

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# Introduction

The Russian military build-up along the Ukrainian borders<sup>1</sup> is being accompanied by an information offensive. This Working Paper analyzes the information flow around the undeclared Russian war in Ukraine, and its evolution in the second half of 2021.

Firstly, the “public diplomacy” element, namely the public statements by high-level representatives of the Russian government, will be examined.

Secondly, the paper will consider whether there is any quantitative data showing an increase in Russian information activities targeting Ukraine, and how the tone of the messaging has changed. Finally, the narratives of these information activities, that is, what the Russian channels are actually saying, will be examined.

1 Michael Sheldon, ‘Russia Continues to Expand Military Presence near Ukraine Border’, *medium.com/dfrlab*, 17 December 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/russia-continues-to-expand-military-presence-near-ukraine-border-c2d527f58052>. [Unless otherwise indicated, all links were last accessed on 18 January 2022.]

# The decision-makers' instructions

Ukraine has been the prime target of the Kremlin's disinformation ecosystem ever since the Maidan revolution in 2013,<sup>2</sup> and hence it is not easy to pinpoint the moment when the Russian authorities increased their information pressure against the country since then. But it seems that a new and stronger wave of information aggression began with Vladimir Putin's article *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* in July 2021.<sup>3</sup> In his article, the Russian President claims that independent Ukraine is an "anti-Russia project" constructed by "Western authors"; and that "the formation of an ethnically pure Ukrainian state, aggressive towards Russia, is comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us". Putin also blames the Kyiv authorities for the "civil war" (in fact Russia's war against Ukraine) and the 13,000 victims – people who have fallen as a result of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.<sup>4</sup>

After a few calmer months, the full campaign began in October with another attack by a high-level speaker, former President Dmitry Medvedev.<sup>5</sup> Medvedev, currently Deputy Chair of Russia's Security Council, denounced the leadership of Ukraine as "vassals" with which Moscow should not negotiate at all; and, using crude language, he reiterated the claims about Ukraine's dependence on the West, and the US in particular. The Kremlin later said that "Medvedev's article

'runs in unison' with Russia's view of the current Ukrainian government".<sup>6</sup>

The Deputy Chair of the Russian State Duma and previously a prominent propagandist for Channel One, Pyotr Tolstoy, lashed out against Ukraine in a similarly aggressive fashion a few days later. "There has been no Ukraine for a long time! Donetsk and Lugansk are Russian. And all of Ukraine will be a part of Russia, there will be no Ukraine," Tolstoy said on NTV.<sup>7</sup>

Also in October, Putin strengthened the anti-Western messaging when he said that NATO is already active in Ukraine, which he alleges is creating a threat for Russia.<sup>8</sup>

In a November speech for Russia's diplomats, Putin claimed that the West is "exacerbating the situation" by providing Kyiv with weapons and conducting provocative military exercises. The Russian leader also talked about the West constantly crossing Russia's "red lines" and about the "NATO expansion eastward", which he again portrayed as a threat to Russia. "Mr Lavrov, it is imperative to push for serious long-term guarantees that ensure Russia's security in this area."<sup>9</sup>

Two days later, Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin's *éminence grise*, who used to be responsible for Ukraine and Donbas in particular, published an article in which he claimed that constant expansion is "existential" for Russia. "Russia will continue to

2 EUvsDisinfo, 'The Kremlin's Main Target of Disinformation...', [euvsdisinfo.eu](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-kremlins-main-target-of-disinformation/), 16 December 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-kremlins-main-target-of-disinformation/>.

3 Vladimir Putin, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, [kremlin.ru](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181), 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

4 In December, a Russian court confirmed what Ukrainians have been saying for years, and what Russia kept denying against all evidence – that there are Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine: Ukrinform, 'Russian Court Inadvertently Acknowledges Russia's Military Presence in Occupied Donbas – Journalist', [ukrinform.net](https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/3370089-russian-court-inadvertently-acknowledges-russian-military-presence-in-occupied-donbas-journalist.html), 16 December 2021, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/3370089-russian-court-inadvertently-acknowledges-russian-military-presence-in-occupied-donbas-journalist.html>. For further debunking of the claim that Russia is not part of the conflict in Ukraine, see e.g. EUvsDisinfo, 'Disinfo: Russia Is a Victim of Anti-Russian Rhetoric and It Is Not a Threat to Ukraine', [euvsdisinfo.eu](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/russia-is-a-victim-of-anti-russian-rhetoric-and-it-is-not-a-threat-to-ukraine), 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/russia-is-a-victim-of-anti-russian-rhetoric-and-it-is-not-a-threat-to-ukraine>.

5 Медведев, Дмитрий, 'Почему Бессмысленны Контакты С Нынешним Украинским Руководством' ['Why contacts with the current Ukrainian leadership are meaningless'], [kommersant.ru](https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5028300?from=glavnoe_1#id2123318), 11 October 2021, [https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5028300?from=glavnoe\\_1#id2123318](https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5028300?from=glavnoe_1#id2123318).

6 *The Moscow Times*, 'Russia Shouldn't Negotiate with "Vassal" Ukraine, Ex-President Medvedev Says', [themoscowtimes.com](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/10/11/russia-shouldnt-negotiate-with-vassal-ukraine-ex-president-medvedev-says-a75263), 11 October 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/10/11/russia-shouldnt-negotiate-with-vassal-ukraine-ex-president-medvedev-says-a75263>.

7 *Ukraine Today*, 'New Hysteria: Deputy Speaker of the State Duma of the Russian Federation Noted an Absurd Statement About Ukraine', [ukrainetoday.org](https://ukrainetoday.org/2021/10/19/new-hysteria-deputy-speaker-of-the-state-duma-of-the-russian-federation-noted-an-absurd-statement-about-ukraine-video/), 19 October 2021, <https://ukrainetoday.org/2021/10/19/new-hysteria-deputy-speaker-of-the-state-duma-of-the-russian-federation-noted-an-absurd-statement-about-ukraine-video/>.

8 TASS, 'Putin Speaks on Foreign Agents, His Achievements, Taliban at Valdai Club Session', [tass.com](https://tass.com/politics/1352767), 22 October 2021, <https://tass.com/politics/1352767>.

9 Vladimir Putin, Speech at the Expanded Meeting of the Foreign Ministry Board, [kremlin.ru](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67123), 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67123>.



expand not because it is good or bad, but because it is physics.”<sup>10</sup>

Days later, the Russian external intelligence service, SVR, accused the US of provoking an escalation in Ukraine, claiming that the widely reported news about Russia’s military build-up was an absolute lie. Even more worryingly, the Foreign Intelligence Service likened the situation in Ukraine to the situation in Georgia in 2008, namely before another Russian invasion of a sovereign country.<sup>11</sup>

November ended with Putin issuing another threat. He once again complained about NATO and claimed that the missile defence system in Poland and Romania posed a threat for Russia. Should a similar system appear in Ukraine, Russia would see it as crossing a “red line” and would be forced to act.<sup>12</sup> As the last NATO diplomat posted to Moscow, Robert Pszczel, summarized, Moscow essentially announced that they wanted to deprive Ukraine of the right to self-defence.<sup>13</sup>

At the beginning of December, Putin announced that Russia would seek “reliable and long-term security guarantees” from NATO not to expand eastwards, and not to deploy weapons near Russia.<sup>14</sup>

Putin also made use of the old Russophobia myth,<sup>15</sup> claiming that “Russophobia is a first step towards genocide”, adding that what is happening in Donbas “certainly looks like genocide”.<sup>16</sup> The Ukrainian anti-disinformation project StopFake

later deconstructed this accusation, showing that Russia was actually responsible for the humanitarian catastrophe that had reduced the population in Donbas by 50%.<sup>17</sup>

In mid-December, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov threatened that if NATO did not meet Russia’s demands to guarantee an end to eastward expansion, the response would be a military one.<sup>18</sup>

After months of building up tensions, Moscow announced Russia’s demands in the third week of December: apart from non-expansion of NATO eastwards, the Kremlin also wants to ban NATO from deploying troops to eastern NATO countries like Poland, the Czech Republic or the Baltic republics.<sup>19</sup> In a highly cynical statement, Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov rejected the idea that Russia should provide any guarantees in return, claiming that Russia had already provided full guarantees towards Ukraine in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.<sup>20</sup> In this memorandum, Moscow promised to respect Ukraine’s territorial integrity and not to use force against the country; Russia has been in violation of this agreement since 2014.

In the run-up to Christmas, the escalation continued. On 21 December, Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu claimed that “US mercenaries were preparing Ukrainian special forces and radical armed groups for ‘active hostilities’ in eastern Ukraine, and had delivered ‘an unidentified chemical component’ to the region ‘to commit

10 Сурков, Владислав, ‘Куда Делся Хаос? Распаковка Стабильности’ [‘Where has the chaos gone? Unpacking Stability’], actualcomment.ru, 20 November 2021, <https://actualcomment.ru/kuda-delsya-kaos-raspakovka-stabilnosti-2111201336.html>.

11 ‘СВРм США Провоцируют Обострение На Востоке Украины’ [‘USA provokes aggression in East Ukraine’], svr.gov.ru, 2021, <http://www.svr.gov.ru/smi/2021/11/ssha-provotsiruyut-obostrenie-na-vostoke-ukrainy.htm>.

12 Vladimir Soldatkin and Andrew Osborn, ‘Putin Warns Russia Will Act If Nato Crosses Its Red Lines in Ukraine’, reuters.com, 30 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/stocks/putin-warns-russia-will-act-if-nato-crosses-its-red-lines-ukraine-2021-11-30/>.

13 Robert Pszczel, ‘There We Go Again – Moscow Wants to Abrogate Art. 51 of the UN Charter – the Right of Self-Defence – for #Ukraine. What Next: A Demand That Neighbouring Countries Apply to Join the Russian Federation – or Else? These Threats to Ukraine and #Nato Are Reaching Unheard of Levels’, Twitter, 30 November 2021, <https://twitter.com/RobertPszczel/status/1465671851145891847>.

14 VOA, ‘Putin Demands Nato Guarantees Not to Expand Eastward’, voanews.com, 1 December 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/putin-demands-na-to-guarantees-not-to-expand-eastward-/6336106.html>.

15 EuvsDisinfo, ‘The “Russophobia” Myth: Appealing to the Lowest Feelings’, euvsdisinfo.eu, 4 July 2017, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-russophobia-myth-appealing-to-the-lowest-feelings/>.

16 BBC, ‘Russia Ukraine: Putin Compares Donbas War Zone to Genocide’, bbc.com, 10 December 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59599066>.

17 Oleksandr Zamkovi, ‘Putin Claims Genocide Is Happening in Donbas. But Real Devastation Comes from Russian Occupiers’, stopfake.org, 11 December 2021, <https://www.stopfake.org/en/putin-claims-genocide-is-happening-in-donbas-but-real-devastation-comes-from-russian-occupiers/>.

18 Similarly, the US Embassy in Kyiv: U.S. Embassy Kyiv, ‘False Accusations of Genocide Are Dangerous and Irresponsible. Russia’s Proxy Authorities in Occupied Donbas Have Committed Human Rights Abuses, Illegally Imprisoned Ukrainian Citizens, Suppressed Free Speech and Forced Ukrainians to Take Russian Passports’, Twitter, 13 December 2021, <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyKyiv/status/1470309765205176321>.

19 The Moscow Times, ‘Russia Threatens “Military Response” to Nato Expansion’, themoscowtimes.com, 13 December 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/12/13/russia-threatens-military-response-to-nato-expansion-a75800>.

20 Samantha Berkhead and Piotr Sauer, ‘Russia Issues Demands to Limit Nato’s Influence in Post-Soviet Space, Eastern Europe’, themoscowtimes.com, 20 December 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/12/17/russia-issues-demands-to-limit-natos-influence-in-post-soviet-space-eastern-europe-a75857>.

20 Interfax.ru, ‘В Мид Рф Сочи Неуместными Требования Сша О “Неких Мероприятиях” На Ее Территории’ [The Russian Foreign Ministry considered inappropriate US demands for “certain events” on its territory], interfax.ru, 18 December 2021, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/810178>.

provocations”<sup>21</sup> As highlighted by Eliot Higgins from the investigative group Bellingcat,<sup>22</sup> the Kremlin is simply recycling the same disinformation campaign that they conducted in Syria.<sup>23</sup>

By the end of December, the Russian MFA stated that Kyiv was planning to kill innocent Ukrainians with NATO weapons.<sup>24</sup>

To sum up, the Kremlin tried to spread the following messages to strengthen the “besieged fortress” syndrome, and justify any future aggression as merely a defensive, reactive measure.

- That the victim of Russian aggression (i.e. Ukraine) is actually the aggressor.
- That Russia is in conflict with the collective West / NATO / US, who are just using Ukraine as an anti-Russian project.
- That it is NATO, a defensive alliance, that is threatening Russia with invasion, and not Russia (which, according to some statements, is not building up its military presence along the Ukrainian border at all but, if it is, it is only a defensive measure).

21 David M. Herszenhorn, ‘Russia Claims Us Mercenaries Plan Chemical Attack in Ukraine’, *politico.eu*, 21 December 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-us-mercenaries-plan-chemical-attack-ukraine/>.

22 Eliot Higgins, ‘So Lazy They’re Recycling Lies They Used in Syria’, Twitter, 21 December 2021, <https://twitter.com/EliotHiggins/status/1473253344374407170>.

23 Bellingcat Investigation Team, ‘Chemical Weapons and Absurdity: The Disinformation Campaign against the White Helmets’, *bellingcat.com*, 18 December 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/12/18/chemical-weapons-and-absurdity-the-disinformation-campaign-against-the-white-helmets/>.

24 РИА Новости, ‘Киев Будет Расстреливать Мирное Население Из Оружия Нато, Заявила Захарова’ [‘Kiev will shoot civilians with NATO weapons, Zakharova said’] *ria.ru*, 30 December 2021, <https://ria.ru/20211230/ukraina-1766159130.html>.

# The extent and tone of Russian information activities

According to a source from the US administration quoted by the *Washington Post* at the beginning of December, the Russian media and proxies had started spreading content denigrating Ukraine and NATO to pin the blame for a potential military escalation on Ukraine in the previous month.<sup>25</sup> The Ukrainian anti-disinformation project StopFake arrived at a similar conclusion: “Russian propagandists have intensified the ‘militarization of Ukraine’ narrative particularly since the end of October.”<sup>26</sup> Despite this, it is not easy to find publicly available evidence that would indicate a conclusive quantitative increase in the Russian disinformation campaign.

The EU’s EUvsDisinfo project maintains the only publicly available database of pro-Kremlin disinformation messages.<sup>27</sup> But the database is more indicative than exhaustive, as it monitors some of the main channels of disinformation, but not all of them. Surprisingly, the number of mentions of the word “Ukraine” decreased in recent months – from 142 mentions in June 2021, to just 47 in November. Likewise, the search for the words “war” and “conflict” did not show any significant increase.

The Ukrainian Texty project runs an algorithmic monitoring of Russian websites.<sup>28</sup> Here, the search for some of the keywords already showed a sharp increase during the last two months or so of 2021:

## КРИЗИС

← НА ГОЛОВНУ

Висота стовпчика показує % матеріалів з групи сайтів за день, які містять пошуковий запит «кризис»



### MONITORING OF THE WORD “КРИЗИС” (CRISIS) DURING THE PERIOD 1.1.2021–26.12.2021.

Sources: Russian channels for Ukraine (pink) and Major Russian websites (grey). The percentage indicates how many materials from a given group of sources spread the given keyword per day.

25 Shane Harris and Paul Sonne, ‘Russia Planning Massive Military Offensive against Ukraine Involving 175,000 Troops, U.S. Intelligence Warns’, *washingtonpost.com*, 3 December 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/03/98a3760e-546b-11ec-8769-2f4ecdf7a2ad\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/03/98a3760e-546b-11ec-8769-2f4ecdf7a2ad_story.html).

26 Oksana Polulakh, ‘Kyiv Attacks, the West Incites: Russian Propagandists on the Donbas Escalation’, *stopfake.org*, 2 December 2021, <https://www.stopfake.org/en/kyiv-attacks-the-west-incites-russian-propagandists-on-the-donbas-escalation/>.

27 See <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>.

28 For details about Texty’s methodology, see <https://topic-radar.texty.org/#/>.

## ВТОРЖЕНИЕ

← НА ГОЛОВНУ

Висота стовпчика показує % матеріалів з групи сайтів за день, які містять пошуковий запит «вторжение»



### MONITORING OF THE WORD “ВТОРЖЕНИЕ” (INVASION) DURING THE PERIOD 1.1.2021–26.12.2021.

Sources: Russian channels for Ukraine (pink) and Major Russian websites (grey). The percentage indicates how many materials from a given group of sources spread the given keyword per day.

In Texty’s monitoring, there was also a significant increase in the recent period when searching for “red lines” or “escalation”. On the other hand, searches for “war”, “provocation”, or “Donbas” returned similar results throughout the whole of 2021. The search for “escalation” showed a higher increase during the time of the spring military build-up, and less so in the final weeks of the year; the search for “aggression” revealed a minor increase during the last weeks of 2021, similar to that in spring.

The Czech company Semantic Visions monitors big data on the internet. According to their analysis of 19 million items with Russia’s “.ru” domain, the negative sentiment in the Russian media culminated at the beginning of December and has been on the decrease since then.<sup>29</sup>

Moving from traditional media to social media, Mythos Labs focused on analyzing the data related to Russian military activity on Twitter.<sup>30</sup> One of

their findings pointed to a dramatic increase in activity: “Accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda tweeted about Ukraine 213 times a day on average in November, compared to just 6 times a day in the period between January and November. This represents a 3,334% increase in daily activity.” Despite the impressive number, it is important to bear in mind that the dataset is relatively small: 58 accounts identified as a coordinated network spreading pro-Russian disinformation.

The next question is whether the level of hostility has increased in the Kremlin’s disinformation ecosystem. Although the answers might be subjective, they seem to run in unison.

Apart from the dashboard shown above, Texty also produces regular disinformation monitoring.<sup>31</sup> “The tone clearly changed. It got more aggressive and much more focused on the military conflict and US, NATO,” says Peter Bodner from Texty

29 Marc Champion, ‘Russia’s State Media Is Curbing Its Hostile Coverage of Ukraine’, *bloomberg.com*, 10 January 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-10/russia-s-state-media-is-curbing-its-hostile-coverage-of-ukraine>.

30 For the whole report and further reading e.g. on the methodology, see Mythos Labs, ‘Analyzing Twitter Disinformation/Propaganda Related to Russian Aggression against Ukraine’, *mythoslabs.org*, 9 December 2021, <https://mythoslabs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Analyzing-Twitter-Disinformation-Propaganda-Related-to-Russian-Aggression-Against-Ukraine.pdf>.

31 See e.g. Texty, ‘Presidential Talks and Attacks on Zelensky. Disinformation Monitor #109’, *texty.org.ua*, 17 December 2021, <https://texty.org.ua/articles/105167/disinfomonitoring-109-eng/>.

about a qualitative change in the recent pro-Kremlin disinformation.<sup>32</sup>

Yevhen Fedchenko from StopFake concurs: “The level of attention in Russian media towards Ukraine has definitely increased. And it is not just the quantity of time in the TV shows, but also the quality – the speakers on Russian TV are not talking just about invading Donbas or invading the whole of Ukraine, but it is already also Europe, and Ukraine is just the starting point.”<sup>33</sup>

Quotations from popular Russian TV shows seem to confirm this evaluation. “[W]hy should we stop at Ukraine? Why not solve all of our problems at once?”. [Russian TV propagandist Vladimir] Soloviev argued that since it’s unlikely that the major world powers would resort to nuclear war, Russia can move forward with achieving its objectives undeterred: ‘If we have to end up behind the

Iron Curtain, why not collect some more lands and peoples first?’” wrote Julia Davis at the end of November, a journalist who regularly covers the main Russian TV shows.<sup>34</sup> A month later, she found that the already aggressive rhetoric had escalated even further: “Russian state TV is increasingly hysterical in its forecasts of an upcoming war, warning domestic audiences that the conflict could even become nuclear.”<sup>35</sup>

Some sources show that the amount of content targeting Ukraine increased, while in other sources, it is hard to find conclusive evidence. According to the monitoring by Semantic Visions, the volume of negative messages peaked at the beginning of December and has been decreasing since then. As for the tone of the messages, it seems that the level of hostility has increased since autumn.

32 In an interview with the author of this paper.

33 In an interview with the author of this paper.

34 Julia Davis, ‘The Russian Public Is Being Primed for Another of Putin’s Wars’, *thedailybeast.com*, 24 November 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/will-putin-invade-ukraine-russians-are-being-told-to-get-used-to-the-idea>.

35 Julia Davis, ‘Russian Citizens Are Now Being Prepped for Nuclear War’, *thedailybeast.com*, 21 December 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/russian-citizens-are-now-being-prepped-for-nuclear-war>.

# The narratives of pro-Kremlin disinformation

Having looked at the quantity and tone of the messages in the pro-Kremlin disinformation ecosystem, this paper will now examine the content of the messaging. The analysis aims to find out whether the messaging of the “media” controlled and influenced by the Kremlin mirrors the messaging of the official Kremlin representatives described above.

The Ukrainian Detektor Media project analyzed 70,000 posts on various social media.<sup>36</sup> They found that the pro-Kremlin sources diverged from the military narratives towards messaging about domestic unrest and Ukraine’s internal difficulties. They also identified that in the world of pro-Kremlin media, it is not just Ukraine, but rather the collective West that is provoking Russia, constantly pushing the narrative about external governance over Ukraine. Another line of messaging tried to discredit Ukraine’s efforts to counter the Kremlin’s aggression in the country.

The aforementioned Mythos Labs identified the following key narratives:

- 1) The US is pressuring Ukraine to launch an offensive in Donbas.
- 2) Ukraine is acting aggressively and is preparing a military offensive.
- 3) Ukraine is committing war crimes against civilians in Donbas.

- 4) NATO expansion poses a threat to Russia, and joining NATO would be a mistake for Ukraine.<sup>37</sup>

The EU’s monitoring found similar narratives in the ecosystem of traditional media: they denied the existence of military deployments, but if there were any deployments, this was due to aggression from Ukraine / US / NATO, and because Russia is encircled by hostile forces.<sup>38</sup>

Oleksandra Tsekhanovska<sup>39</sup> of the Ukraine Crisis Media Center<sup>40</sup> arrived at similar conclusions. “According to our manual monitoring, with regard to the escalation and possible intervention, there are several key narratives:

- 1) Ukraine is an aggressor state and is preparing to launch an offensive operation.
- 2) NATO is pushing Ukraine towards escalation (as it views Ukraine as an anti-Russian political project).
- 3) Western partners will abandon Ukraine and it will not be able to stand up to Russia.”

Most of these narratives are in line with the messaging of the politicians and other Russian representatives described in the first part of this paper.

36 On the methodology and the full study, see Ilyuk, Ksenia, ‘Will There Be a Russian Offensive? Analysis of the Kremlin’s Tactics in the Ukrainian Segment of Social Media’, *detector.media*, 15 December 2021, <https://detector.media/monitoring/article/194825/2021-12-15-will-there-be-a-russian-offensive-analysis-of-the-kremlins-tactics-in-the-ukrainian-segment-of-social-media/>.

37 Mythos Labs, ‘Analyzing Twitter Disinformation/Propaganda Related to Russian Aggression against Ukraine’, *mythoslabs.org*, 9 December 2021, <https://mythoslabs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Analyzing-Twitter-Disinformation-Propaganda-Related-to-Russian-Aggression-Against-Ukraine.pdf>.

38 EUvsDisinfo, ‘Behind the Smokescreen of Kremlin Lies Lurk the Russian Military Deployments’, *euvsdisinfo.eu*, 9 December 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/behind-the-smokescreen-of-kremlin-lies-lurk-the-russian-military-deployments/>.

39 In an interview with the author of this paper.

40 See <https://uacrisis.org/en/>.

# Conclusion

At the time of writing, it is not possible to state with any confidence whether or not a renewed Russian invasion of Ukraine is going to happen.<sup>41</sup> However, a few observations can be made:

- The messaging of the highest Kremlin representatives and of the Russian “media” seems to run in unison. After the “opening shot” in the shape of Putin’s article in July, the level of hostility and aggression in the pro-Kremlin disinformation universe increased sharply after the end of October / beginning of November, both in the “public diplomacy” domain and in the “media” landscape. The accumulation of statements by the highest Russian authorities, and the fact that they seem to serve the same strategic purpose, just like the key narratives in the media, also seems to indicate that there is at least some level of organization vis-à-vis the current communication campaign.
- The content of the messages aims to shape the information environment in a way that portrays Russia as a victim of the aggressive West / US / NATO, where Ukraine is just being used as a tool against Russia. It appears that at least in Russia, this message finds fertile ground: 39% of Russians see the probability of a war between Russia and Ukraine as either very high or certain; and 50% blame the US and NATO allies for the escalation, not the country that is actually amassing thousands of soldiers on the border.<sup>42</sup>
- Although the campaign started out by targeting Ukraine, it soon became clear both in the “media” ecosystem and in the “public diplomacy” statements that the Kremlin’s aim is more grandiose and concerns the whole security order in

the Euro-Atlantic space. Thus, it is in fact Russia that is using Ukraine and the aggression against Ukrainians as a tool for other goals.

In drawing these conclusions, it should be noted that there is a lot we do not know. Future research could usefully address three gaps in our knowledge, specifically:

- Despite the gravity of the situation and despite years of expert warnings that we need better data on disinformation campaigns,<sup>43</sup> it is not very easy to find publicly available material that would provide irrefutable and conclusive evidence about the waves of pro-Kremlin disinformation. It would be highly useful to know, for example, how the amount of airtime devoted to Ukraine or to the conflict with the West evolved on the major Russian TV shows; or how the number of mentions of certain keywords evolved in the whole pro-Russian disinformation ecosystem, not just in some segments of it.
- It would also be useful to see data (e.g. regular polls on the shifts in public opinion) showing the effect of the Kremlin’s messaging on audiences in the Euro-Atlantic space, to be able to find out how many people buy into the Kremlin’s messaging portraying Russia as a victim of the aggressive West.
- It is not easy to draw an unambiguous conclusion about the purpose of these disinformation campaigns. Similarly close attention was already being paid towards Ukraine by the pro-Kremlin information ecosystem in the spring, and it was not followed by more significant activities in the kinetic domain – but that does not mean that it will also be the case with the current

41 Anton Troianovski, ‘Putin’s Next Move on Ukraine Is a Mystery. Just the Way He Likes It’, *nytimes.com*, 11 January 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/world/europe/putin-ukraine-russia.html>.

42 Левада-Центр, ‘Обострение в Донбассе’ [‘Aggravation in Donbas’], 14 December 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/12/14/obostrenie-v-donbasse/>.

43 Jakub Kalenský and Roland Freudenstein, ‘The EU’s Action Plan against Disinformation: Good First Step, Now We Need a Follow-Up’, *disinfoportal.org*, 2018, <http://web.archive.org/web/20201013230210/https://disinfoportal.org/the-eus-action-plan-against-disinformation-good-first-step-now-we-need-a-follow-up/>.

propaganda wave. As announced by the MFA, Putin wants to “keep the West on its toes”,<sup>44</sup> which is definitely happening. Indeed, this may be the only solid conclusion that can be drawn

about the purpose of the most recent dis-information wave: the Kremlin wants to engage the West in a nervous guessing game about Russia’s next steps.

<sup>44</sup> MFA Russia, ‘#Zakharova: 220 years ago - in 1802 - @mfa\_russia was created. The President instructed us to keep the West... “on its toes”... “electrified”. 220 (i.e. voltage) is fitting in this context. Our partners (the West) will have to get used to the new rules #Mfa220’, Twitter, 13 January 2022, [https://twitter.com/mfa\\_russia/status/1481614232110223371?s=20](https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1481614232110223371?s=20).

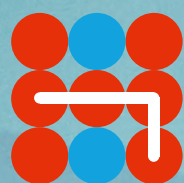


### **Author**

**Jakub Kalenský** works as a Senior Fellow in the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), where he focuses on Russian disinformation campaigns and the countermeasures against them. Previously, he worked in the European Union's East StratCom Task Force, where he founded the EUvsDisinfo campaign.







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