

SPECIAL
ISSUE

G5iO

DATA | ANALYTICS | INSIGHTS

WAR IN THE DIGITAL AGE

THE RUSSIA – UKRAINE CONFLICT



June 2022



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Director's Note

There was a hope that the end of the 20 years long US war in Afghanistan would usher in an era of peace. An era driven by global introspection, awareness, and a Human Rights driven agenda. With the outbreak of war in Ukraine at the start of 2022, however, we were proven wrong.

Today, the world stands more polarized, economically weak, and at the cusp of instability triggered by uncertainty. At the core of this instability lie the tribalized global politics rooted in the 16th-17th century Machiavellian and Hobbesian worldviews - approaches that otherwise continue to define a highly complex and interconnected world driven by digital technologies even in the 21st Century. For as long as global politics continue to be shaped by such a redundant Euro/Western centric worldview and its linked interests, such wars will remain a permanent feature of our international system.

Technology and data, however, is one variable that has proven to be a useful tool to challenge both, the intellectual and political status-quo. This Special Study on the Ukraine-Russia War is a humble attempt to use extensive data to not only map the behavior of entire nations and states around the Ukraine crisis; but also, to flesh out media bias, the prevalence of disinformation and certain policy attitudes on the war from around the world. This Special Study consists of 5 in-depth studies on different facets of the war in Ukraine with easy-to-read infographs and data to aid the reader in understanding the otherwise invisible trends at play.

I wish to congratulate my team of data scientists and social scientists at G5 Internet Observatory that have spent extensive hours to produce these studies. I do hope that this adds to our collective learning, and that we may find peace in these turbulent and uncertain times.



Dr. Hussain Nadim
Director, G5iO

Team G5iO



HUSSAIN NADIM
Founder

Dr Nadim is a specialist in fostering innovation at the very intersection of the social and data sciences. Over the last decade he has been intricately involved in linking the media, academics, and policy communities with a keen focus on harnessing the power of data driven decision making.



M WAQAS JAN
Director

Waqas holds an avid interest in exploring discursive approaches to fake news and disinformation with a specific focus on regional and international geo-politics.



ABU BAKAR NAEEM
Insights Lead

Abu Bakar's work stems from unveiling patterns of polarization and bias across a diverse range of online discourses



ASRA MALIK
Senior Analyst

Asra's expertise lie in mapping evolving behaviour trends across digital places as well as their impact on prevailing socio-cultural norms and practices.



HANIA AHMED
Data Analyst

Hania's interests lie in analysing the impact of global economic trends from a political economy perspective.



AKBAR SHAHERYAR KHAN

Insights Specialist

Akbar specializes in fostering research, analysis and insights from open-source data on the South Asian region towards workable policy solutions



NOMAN KHAN
Data Scientist

Noman is a senior Data Scientist with an interest in OSINT, Natural Language Processing, Social Network Analysis and Explainable AI.



AMNA JABEEN
Lead Outreach & Advocacy

Amna excels in successfully leveraging the power of social media across the Digital Marketing, Media, and Public Relations landscapes



NUUR HASAN
Web Developer & Designer

Nuur is a web developer and designer with expertise in front end development, website management, design and web security.

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Polarization

Hashtag Wars:

A Discourse Analysis of Russia-Ukraine Conflict

Overview:

Given the ongoing Russia Ukraine conflict and its fast-evolving media discourses, we investigated some of the numbers behind two of the most popular yet opposing hashtags trending in relation to it: #IStandWithPutin and #IStandWithUkraine.

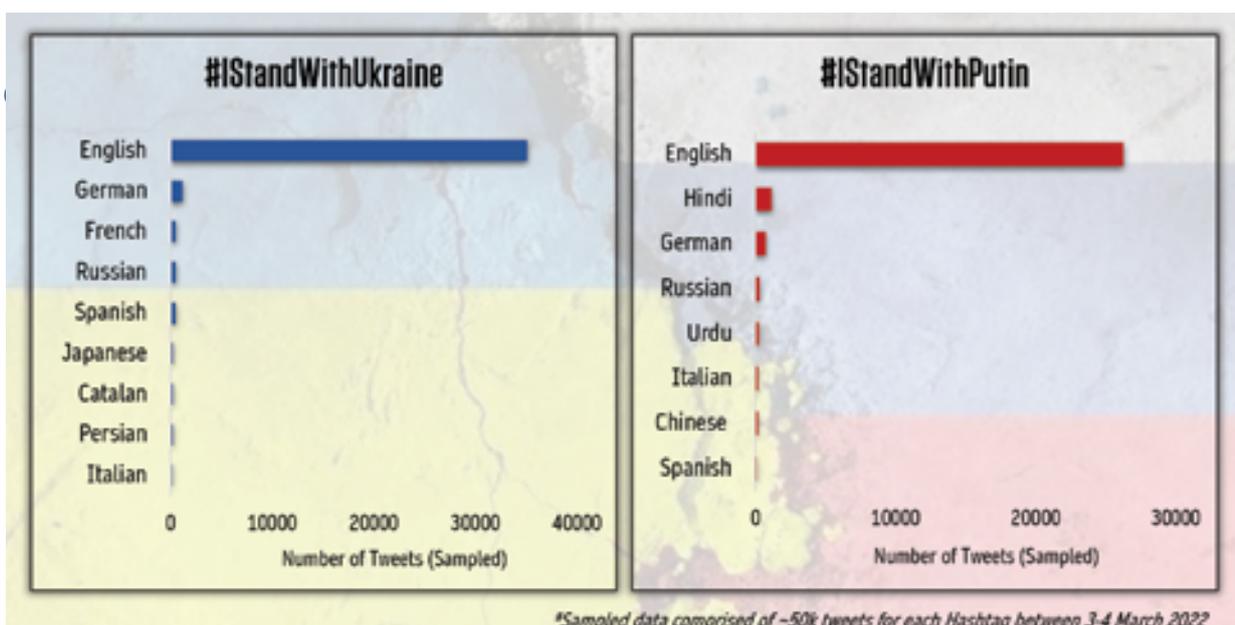
Our goal being to gauge the extent to which the current fault lines that are manifest throughout international media and politics are mirrored in the same manner across social media platforms such as Twitter.

Methodology:

Our analysis is based off data collected between 3-4 March comprising a sample of ~50k tweets for each hashtag using twitter's rest API.

Insight 1:

Since our data is based off twitter, there was little surprise that English was the dominant language used across both hashtags. However, the differences in the second and third most used languages such as Urdu and Hindi for #IStandWithPutin and German and French for #IStandwithUkraine showed one of the first inclinations of the kind of divides we were looking at within our data set.

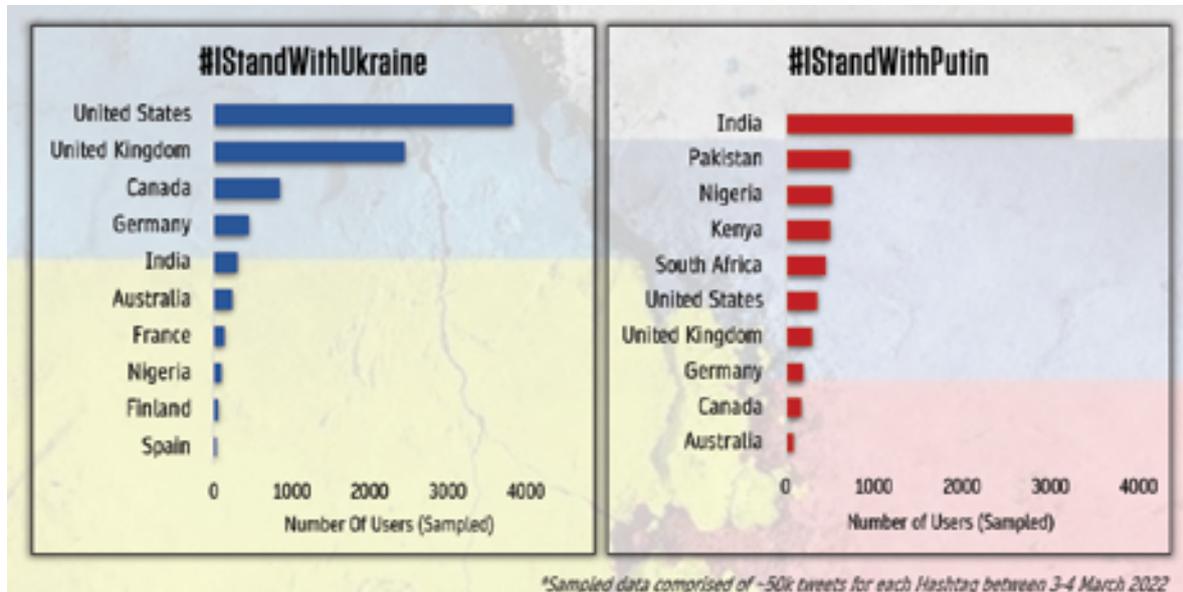


Insight 2:

These distinctions were most marked when comparing user locations data which shows a clearer difference between what is widely understood as the 'West' on one side and the 'Global South' or the 'SCO' bloc on the other.

Thus, showing how both influence operations and general Twitter conversations across the world on the current conflict was manifest in both online and offline geo-political fault lines.

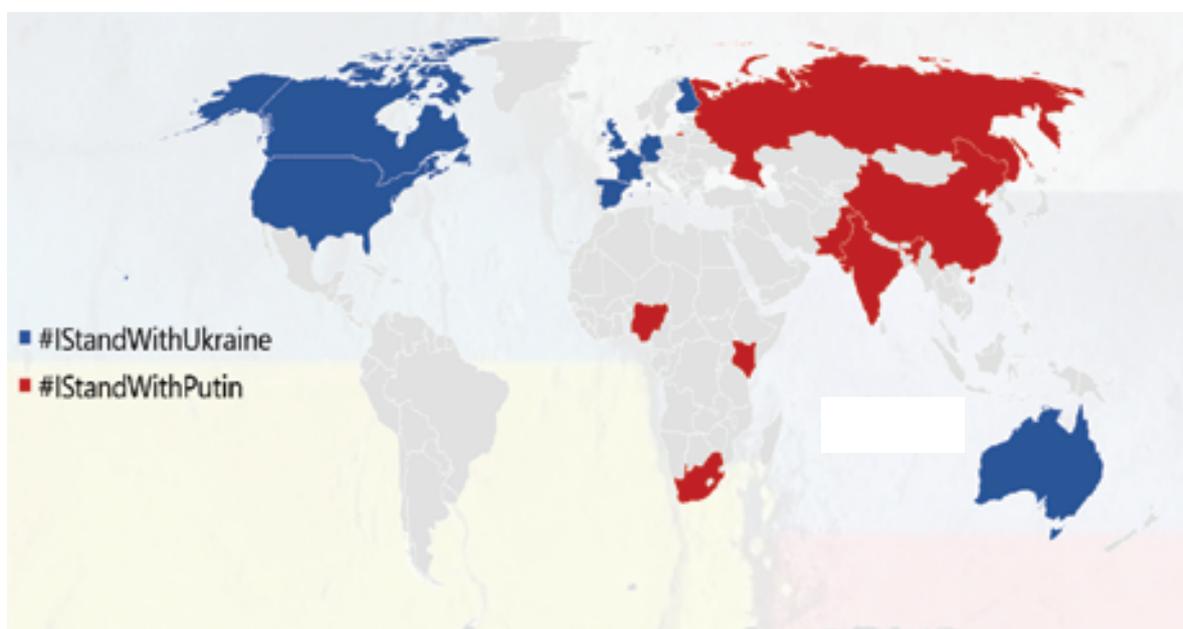
Comparing User Locations



Insight 3:

While it is worth mentioning that every state’s stance and position on this conflict has been carefully calibrated based on a broad range of interests and issues, the following plot still presents a startling glimpse of the fault lines being drawn across digital audiences and online information operations.

A New Cold War? – Top Trending Locations by Twitter Data



Bias



Diverging Narratives:

How Global Media Responded to the Ukraine Conflict

Overview:

Given the ongoing Russia Ukraine conflict and its fast-evolving media discourses, we investigated Twitter timelines of major world media houses to compare their reporting on the conflict. Our primary goal was to see whether there were any variations between major international media outlets and their reporting depending on where they were based.

Methodology:

Our analysis is derived from a detailed study of (A) Tweet patterns and (B) a thorough content analysis of 10 Twitter accounts of major news outlets. These were scraped from two English language media outlets each from the 'West', Russia, China, India, and the Middle East comprising a total of 32800 tweets. These were sourced using Twitter's rest API, out of which only those tweets were filtered that directly referred to the Russian Ukraine conflict. The final data set comprised roughly 7800 tweets that were posted between 20th Feb and 1st March.

A. Tweet Activity Patterns

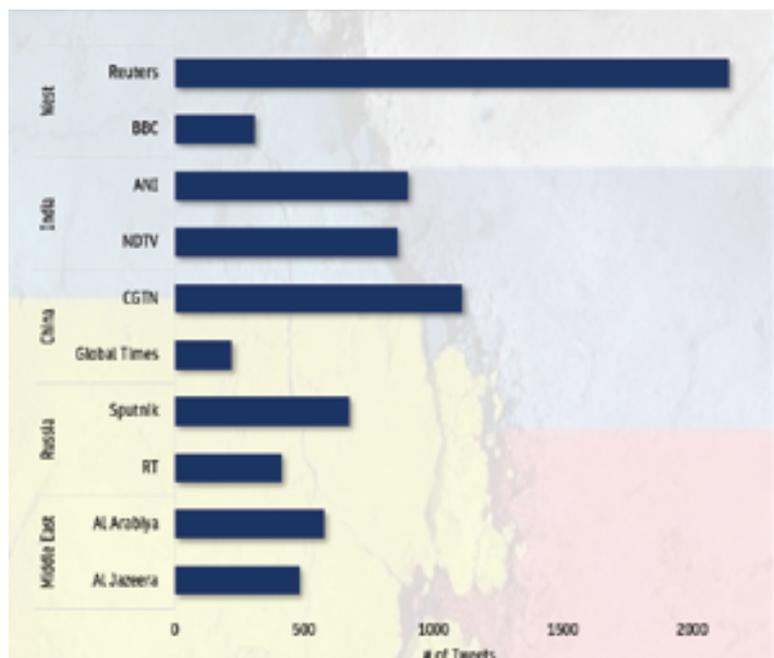
Frequency of Tweets:

Seeing how our dataset was sourced from twitter, it was already expected that total tweet volumes would be skewed more towards our sampled Western media outlets. These for instance included over 2000 tweets by Reuters which were more than double than those of the next most active networks such as the Chinese CGTN and Indian ANI outlets. Interestingly, Russia based English language networks ranked 4th in our list, just slightly above Middle Eastern based networks.

While Tweet Frequency numbers present a more

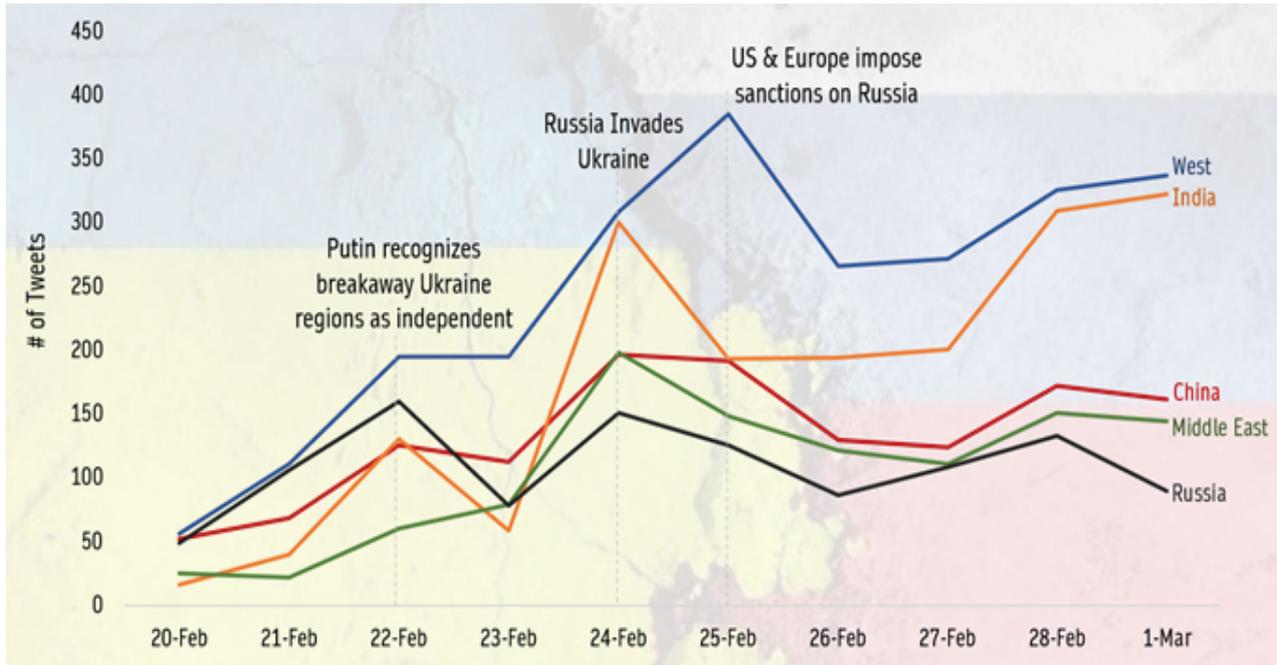
general picture of the overall 'coverage' given to the crisis, it is perhaps more interesting to see how these numbers fluctuated in comparison with one another as the crisis unfolded and escalated throughout the period analyzed.

Number of Tweets Related to Russia Ukraine Conflict



For instance, up until the recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, both Russian and Western outlets were almost neck and neck in terms of their coverage. These trends changed dramatically once Russian forces began their attack on 24th Feb, with Russian media visibly downplaying the event while Western and Indian media exhibited a dramatic increase in their tweet activity. The following days however saw coverage of the conflict in Western media diverge considerably with the rest as the US and Europe jointly imposed sanctions on Russia.

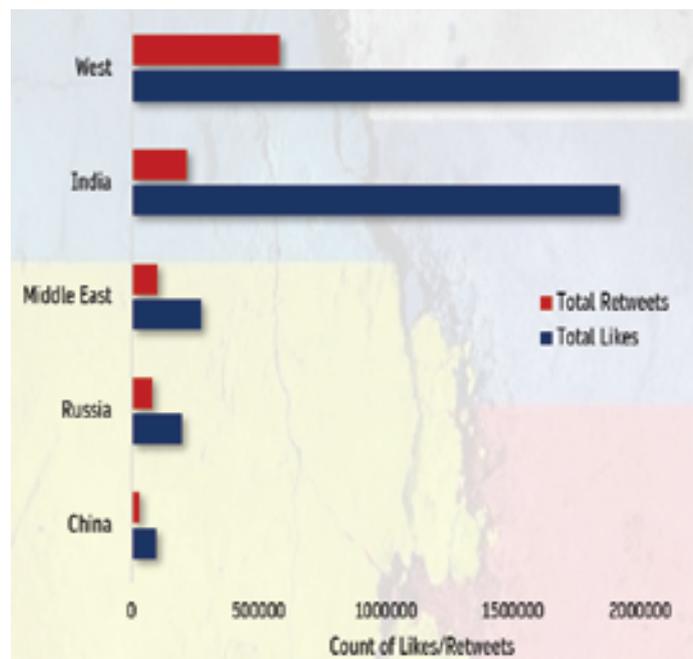
Tweet Frequency on Russia-Ukraine Conflict



User Engagement:

Comparing the above coverage with the amount of social media engagement received by each network, we saw some interesting patterns with regards to the kind of traction gained across twitter. As mentioned above, Western and Indian outlets received the most engagement owing to the sheer size of their audience on twitter. In contrast both Russian and Chinese networks saw the least amount of engagement in essence testifying to Twitter’s own limited reach and popularity as a platform within these regions.

Audience Engagement by Region

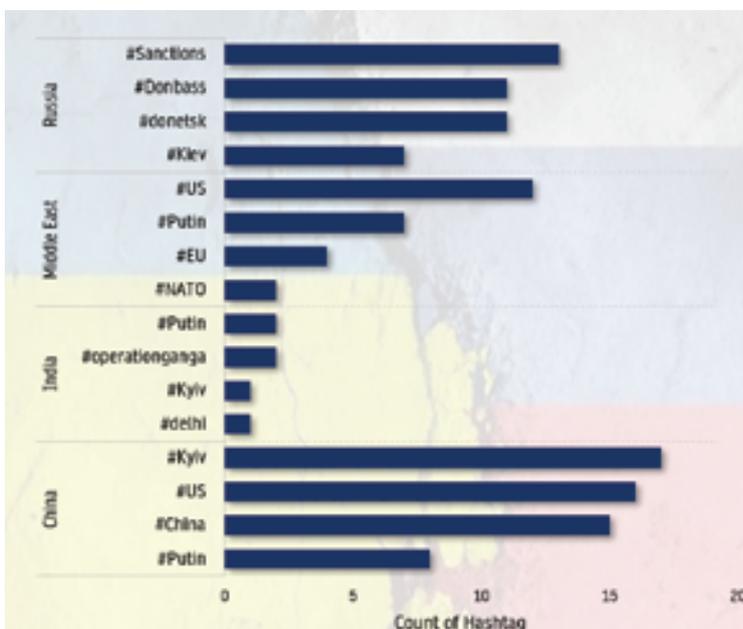


B. Tweet Content Analysis

Top Hashtags:

Taking a closer look at the content of the tweets analyzed we wanted to see what kind of wording and phrasing was used by each outlet in their coverage and whether there were any distinct patterns that stood out. This was done firstly by taking a quick look at the most frequently used hashtags by each media outlet to gauge which actors and sub-issues were emphasized the most in their coverage of the conflict. For instance, the top Hashtags used by Russian media outlets focused on #Sanctions and a greater emphasis on the breakaway regions of #Donbass and #Donetsk. In contrast, Chinese media outlets emphasized instead the direct roles played by the #US and #Putin and their impact on #Kyiv and #China. Similarly, Middle Eastern outlets allotted similar importance to not just #Putin and the #US but also to the #EU and #NATO. In contrast, Indian media focused primarily on highlighting the Indian govt's own efforts in evacuating Indian students from Ukraine as part of #Operationganga. No hashtags were used by the Reuters or BBC throughout their coverage of the conflict via their official twitter accounts.

Top Hashtags used by Media Outlets



Textual Analysis:

A look at the most frequently used words within our dataset however allows for a deeper understanding into the varying ways in which coverage of the crisis has been framed by each outlet. For instance, the emphasis on sanctions remained a constant theme throughout our data set whilst remaining central to both Western and Chinese media outlets' coverage of the crisis.

However, while Western outlets emphasized more on the Russian 'attack' calling for 'swift' measures, Chinese outlets focused instead more on 'talks' over respecting 'border(s)'. Similarly, while Russian outlets also focused on 'sanctions' there was a greater emphasis on 'President' 'Putin' testifying to his central role, especially in relation to US President 'Biden' and 'NATO'.

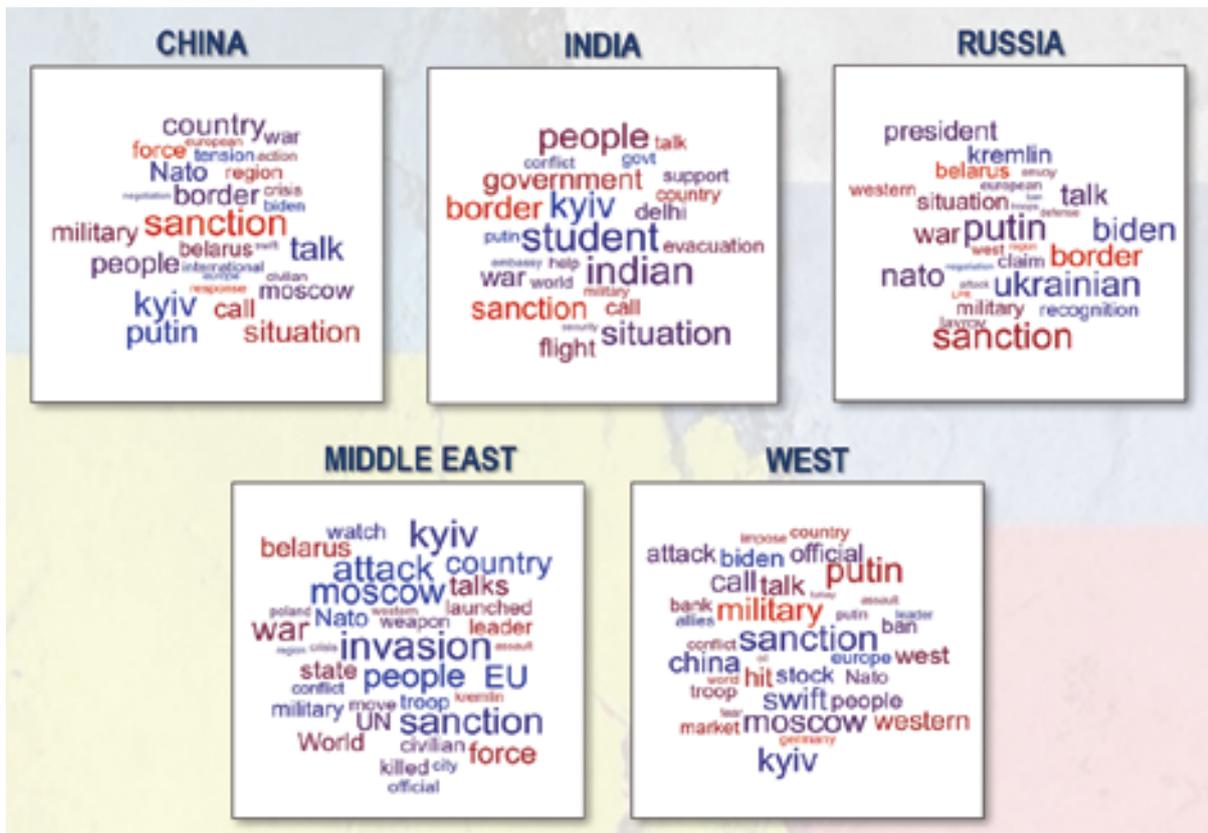
This again stands in stark contrast to Middle Eastern outlets which aimed to highlight instead the impact and effect of the 'invasion' as an 'attack'. This again stands in stark contrast to Middle Eastern outlets which aimed to highlight instead the impact and effect of the 'invasion' as an 'attack' on the 'people' without referring directly to leaders and causes.

In contrast to all of the above, Indian media on the other hand while *providing extensive coverage on the crisis did so mostly within the context of the Indian government's own efforts at evacuating and rescuing stranded 'Indian' 'students'. Their overall context and audience limited mostly to amplifying the BJP govt's prowess and prestige during ongoing state elections.



"Once Russian forces began their attack on 24th Feb, Russian media visibly downplayed the event while Western and Indian media exhibited a dramatic increase in their tweet activity. To see how these trends changed dramatically please follow the link in the QR code"

Top Phrases in context of Russia-Ukraine Conflict



Conclusion:

On the whole, the following insights were gleaned from our study:

01.

Frequency of reporting on the Ukrainian conflict saw variance in different regions based on the events unfolding. Russian media downplayed the situation once the war ensued. This was in contrast to Western Media which double downed on their reporting of the conflict especially following the imposition of sanctions

02.

Western and Indian media outlets received highest user engagement on Twitter compared to Russian and Chinese outlets. Thus, depicting how Western based social media platforms such as Twitter have become an echo chamber for Western narratives.

03.

Media outlets have either augmented or self-censored their reporting in accordance with the official state narratives of where they are based.



Ukraine Russia War:

Contextualizing the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis

Overview:

The ongoing Russia Ukraine conflict has resulted in a refugee crisis in Europe with more than 5 million Ukrainians displaced over the last two months. G5iO investigated Twitter timelines of some of the world's most influential refugee watchdogs to evaluate not only the emphasis being given to the Ukrainian crisis, but also where it stands in relation to other major refugee crises across the world.

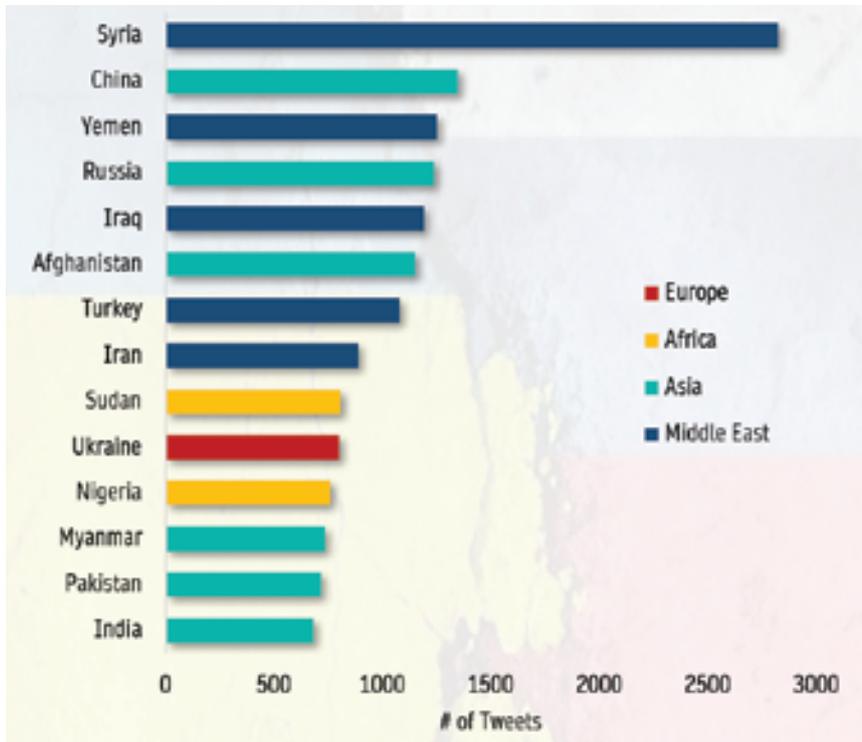
Methodology:

We scraped the Twitter timelines of four major international organizations working exclusively on relief work related to refugees. These comprised Amnesty International, UNHCR, Refugee International and Human Rights Watch containing a total of 136,800 tweets posted between January 2014 and April 2022.

Top Countries Mentioned:

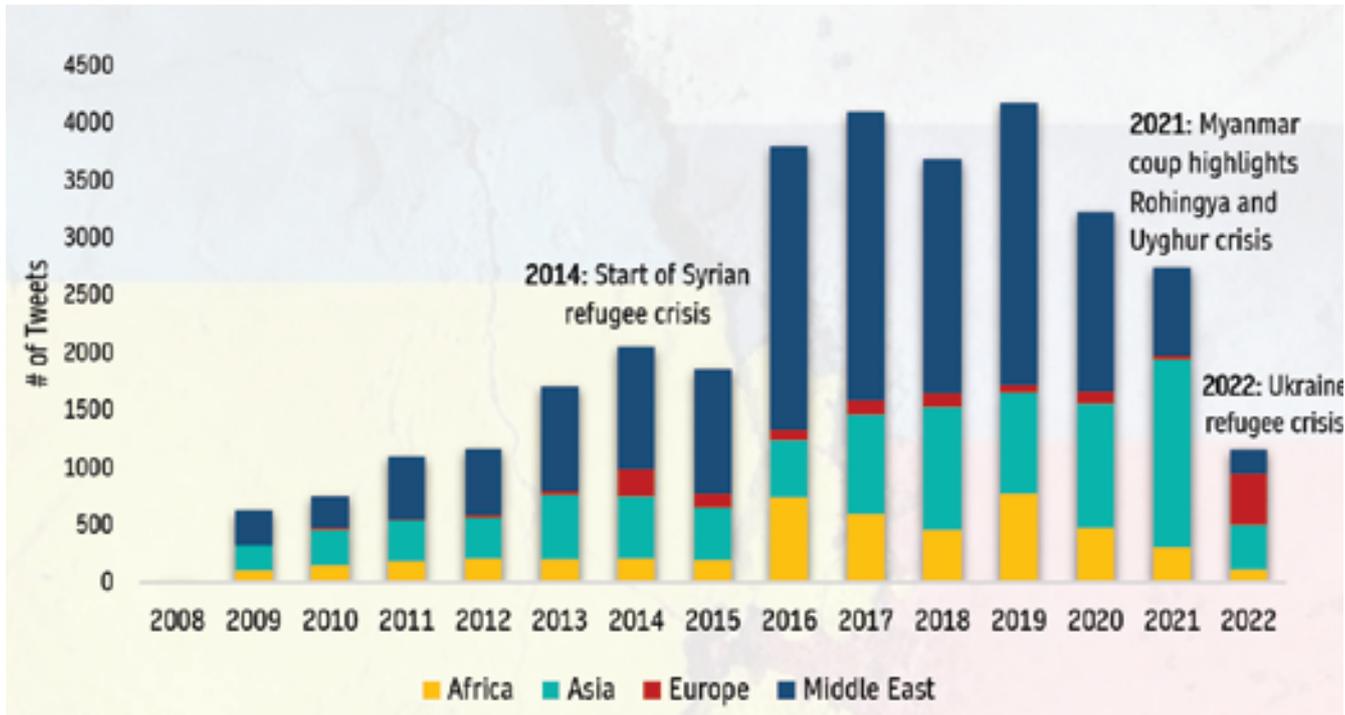
Looking at which countries were mentioned the most by these organizations, we saw that the emphasis on Ukraine is almost at par with the focus being given to the crises in Sudan and Nigeria. This however still pales in comparison to the focus on the ongoing crises in the Middle East, specifically for instance in war torn Yemen and Iraq. Apart from these countries however, we also found that there was a global security nexus which was being politicized – especially in terms of how humanitarian issues related to these countries were being framed. For instance, after Syria, China was the most mentioned country; which can be considered disproportionate owing to the magnitude of the refugee crisis in several other countries. Also, while all the countries in the below graphs were referred to in relation to worsening humanitarian conditions, not all were mentioned specifically in the context of refugees. These include countries such as Russia, Turkey, India and Pakistan where the key concerns were human rights violations and freedom of speech.

Frequency of Tweets Top Countries mentioned by Region



Plotting our data over the last 8 years, we saw that tweets related to the Middle-East refugee crisis dominated the last decade followed by Asia and Africa. However, as shown in the graph, the online discourse related to refugee crisis is going through a shift where the focus on the Middle-East is being replaced by Europe and Asia indicating a major shift in global politics and war locations. In 2022, the Ukrainian refugee crisis received the most attention even surpassing the Afghanistan and Rohingya refugee crises (Asia) which shows a shift towards a more Eurocentric refugee discourse.

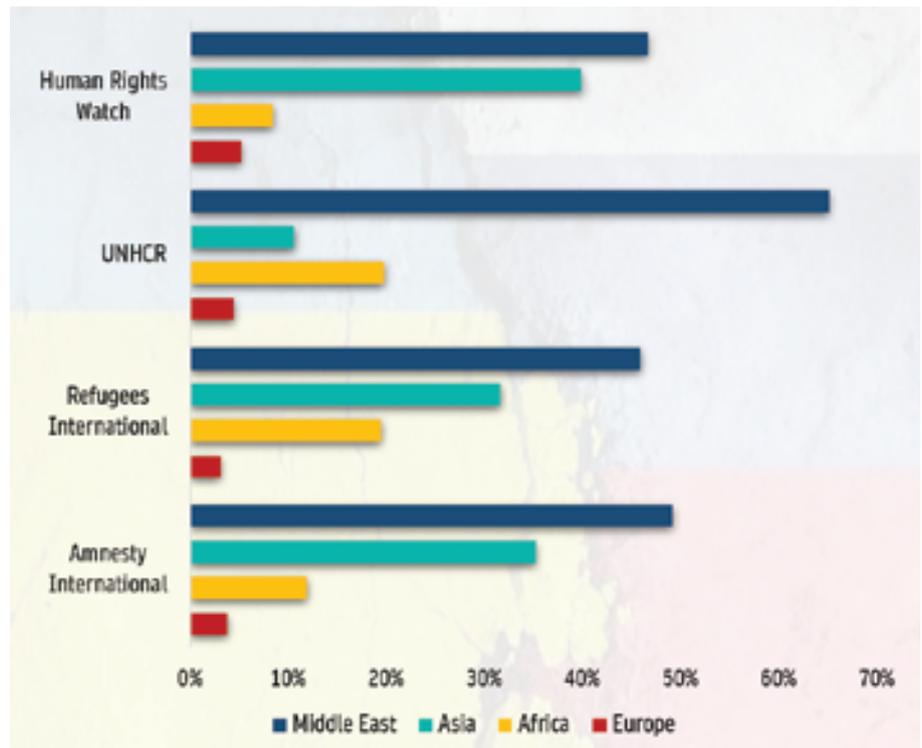
Frequency of Tweets by Region



Region wise tweets by Organization

Region-Wise Tweets:

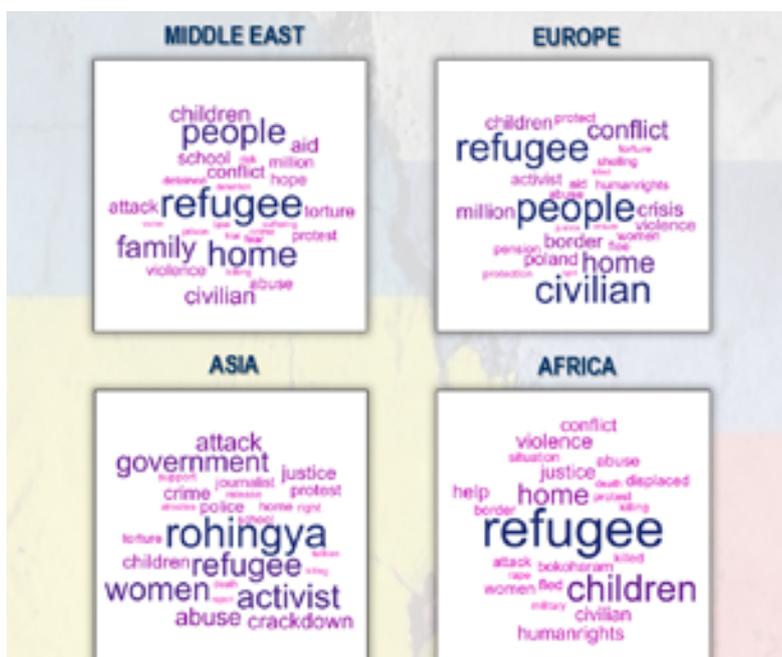
All four organizations in our dataset talked about the Middle -Eastern refugee crisis more than others mainly because it is a persistent crisis spanning over a decade. However, it is worth mentioning that the Ukraine refugee crisis is gaining a notable mention in their tweets indicating a shift towards a European -centric discourse on refugees.



Narrative Through Word Clouds:

Perhaps the most interesting insight to have emerged from our dataset, however, is the different ways in which each region has been framed as part of the overall discourse on refugees. Based on a computer-generated text analysis of the most frequently used words in reference to the above-mentioned countries and regions, we see a marked difference in how refugees from Asia, Middle East & Africa are mentioned and portrayed in comparison to those from Europe.

Top Used Keywords by Region



For instance, while references to 'home', 'conflict' and 'refugee(s)' may appear as common across all regions, it's the varying emphasis given to them that points to an inherent selective bias. This is evident in how the varying prominence of words like 'home', 'people' and 'civilians' when referring to European refugees stands in marked contrast to the greater emphasis being laid on 'abuse', torture and government (or lack thereof) when referring to

countries in the Middle East, Asia and Africa. In Africa, the most effected countries by refugee crisis such as Sudan and Nigeria were mentioned in the context of terrorist activities such as 'boko Haram', 'rape', 'women' and children. Similarly, the discourse related to refugee crisis in Asia was also linked to 'women', 'government', 'justice', 'crackdowns' etc. In contrast, the refugee crisis in Europe was talked about in terms of 'human rights', 'protection', 'aid', 'children', 'border' which shows how the refugee crisis in Ukraine is seen through a more humanized and Eurocentric lens especially when compared to other global refugee crises.

Conclusion:

On the whole, the following insights were gleaned from our study:

01.

The Middle-Eastern refugee crisis has dominated the global refugee discourse in the last decade with a key focus on Syria.

02.

The global discourse on refugees has seen a marked shift towards Europe after the emergence of the Ukraine refugee crisis.

03.

The Ukrainian Refugee crisis has been given more attention than Afghanistan and other refugee crises in 2022 especially in terms of how it has been framed and presented within overall global discourse.



4389.9

2184.9

1482

Official perspectives on the Russian–Ukrainian war: A Timeline

7340.3

Overview:

G5iO conducted a discourse analysis of Twitter timelines (spanning ten years) of foreign offices of key stakeholders' countries on the Russian–Ukrainian war to provide context to the ongoing conflict. The primary goal was to identify and analyze the evolving perspectives of key officials on this decade long conflict.

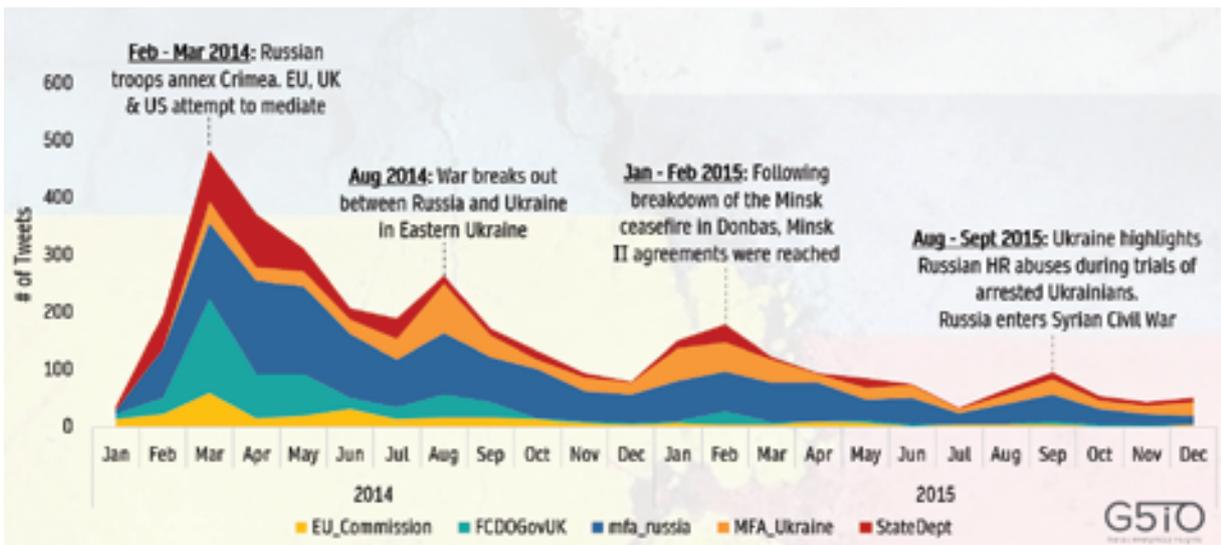
Methodology:

Our analysis is derived from a detailed study of (A) Tweet patterns and (B) a thorough content analysis of 5 Twitter accounts belonging to Russia, the US, the UK, Ukraine, and the EU comprising a total of 96582 tweets. These were sourced using Twitter's rest API, out of which only those tweets were filtered that directly referred to the Russian Ukraine conflict. The final data set comprised roughly 5890 tweets that were posted between 1st January 2014 and 21st March 2022. We have categorized our Analysis into three phases. Phase 1 is from 2014–15 when Russia annexed Crimea, creating a permanent discord between the two countries. Phase 2 is from 2016–to 20 which is a frozen period during the Trump Presidency. No major violent clashes happened between the two countries during this period. Phase 3 is from 2021–to 22 when tensions between the two countries rose to all-time building up to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24th February.

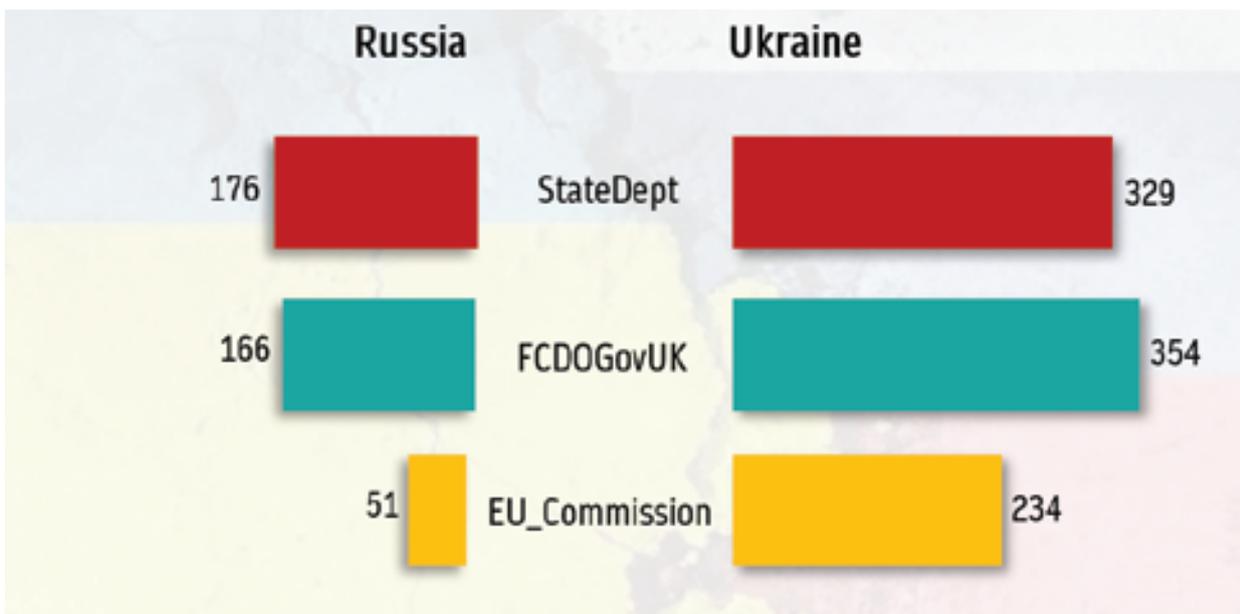
Phase 1:

Annexation of Crimea by Russia was the major event that kicked off the conflict between the two countries. The US, the UK and the EU expressed their support for Ukraine. The following graph shows that State Department was the most active twitter handle during the conflict followed by Ukraine foreign ministry. Count of tweets shows that Western countries focused more on Ukraine during this phase of conflict, State Department being the most active and EU commission being the least active.

Number of Tweets referring to Russia/Ukraine 2014-2015



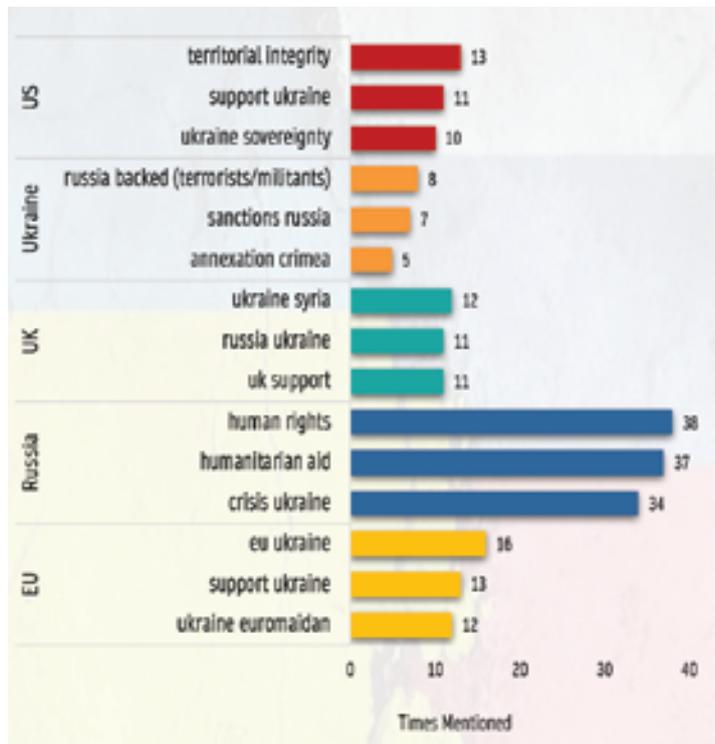
Comparing Official Tweets on Russia & Ukraine 2014-2015



An Analysis of top phrases of key officials during this period shows that the US focused on supporting Ukraine during the conflict with a focus on 'territorial integrity'. UK official stance was to support Ukraine during the crisis while comparing Russia's actions in Ukraine with those in Syria. Ukraine accused

Russia of backing terrorists/militants and urged international community to impose sanctions on Russia. EU gave a measured response ensuring its support to Ukraine. Russian officials focused on humanitarian aid, human rights while discussing the 'crisis' in Ukraine.

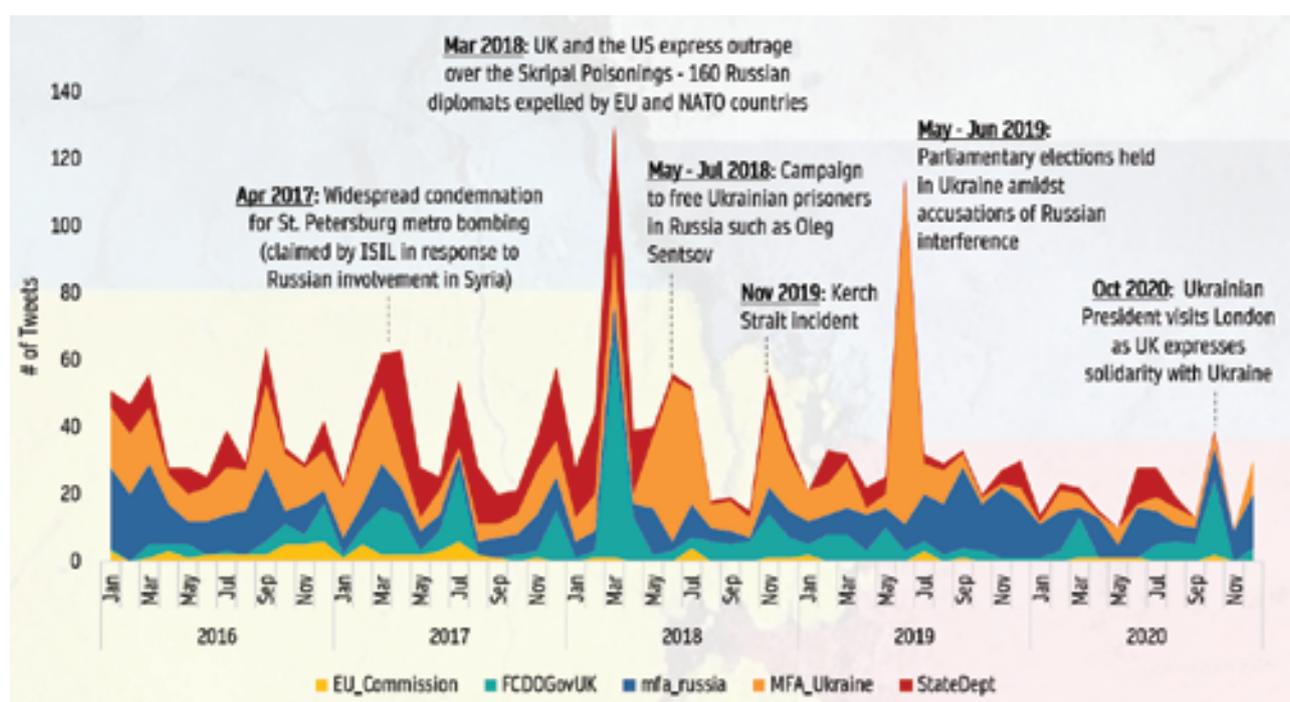
Top Hashtags used by Media Outlets



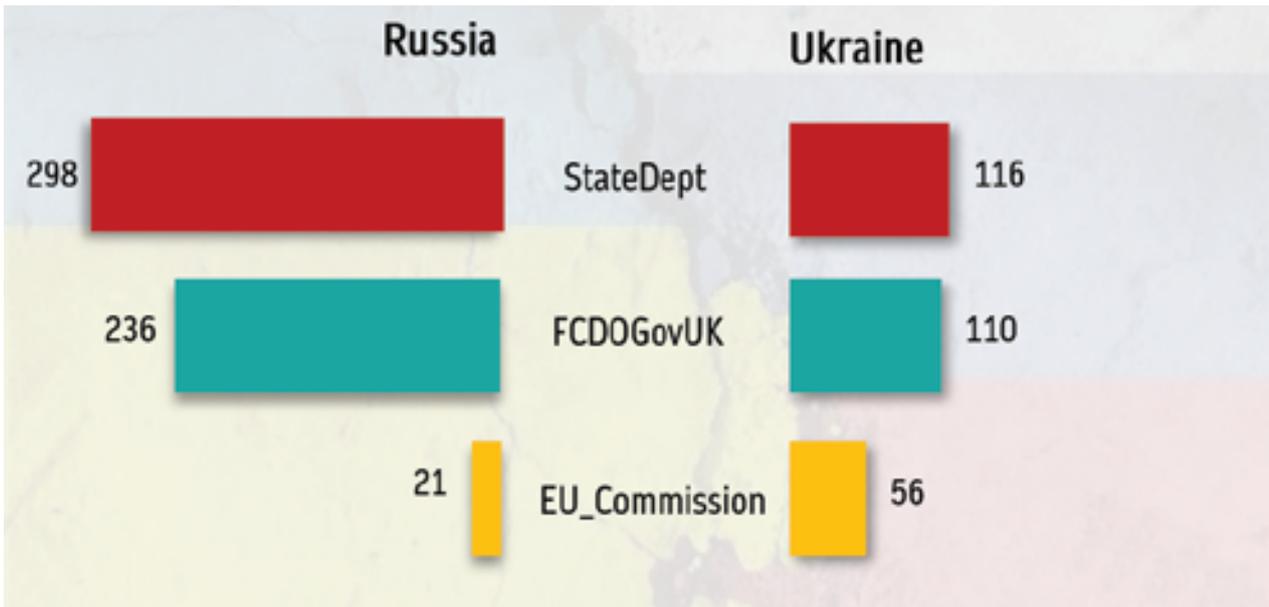
Phase 2:

Phase 2 was a frozen period in the Russian Ukrainian conflict marked by sporadic events that sparked tensions between Russia and the Western countries. The period also saw the Salisbury poisoning incident resulting in the expulsion of Russian diplomats from the UK and the US. Ukraine also accused Russia of interfering in its electoral process. This period saw the worsening of relations between Russia and the EU especially the UK which reaffirmed its support for Ukraine. There is a marked difference in the number of tweets related to Russia and Ukraine where the focus of the Western countries shifted more towards Russia as compared to Phase 1.

Number of Tweets Referring to Russia/Ukraine 2016-2020

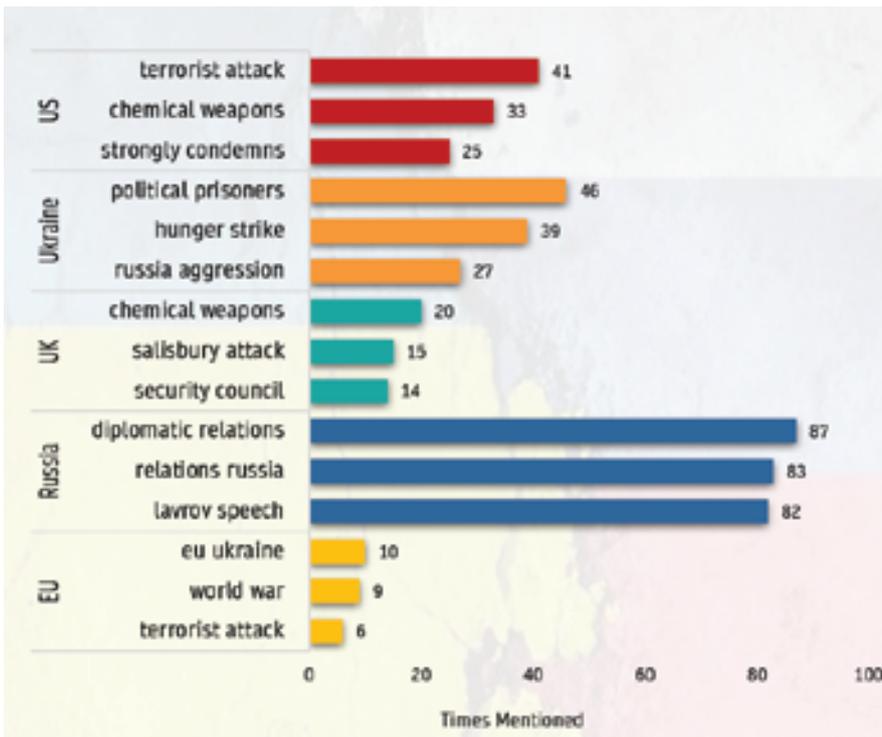


Comparing Official Tweets on Russia & Ukraine 2016–2020



An Analysis of top phrases of key officials during phase 2 shows that the US and the UK showed major concern over the use of chemical weapons by Russia in Syria and expressed concern that it can be repeated in Ukraine as well. EU talked about the prospects of World war over this crisis and talked about NATO as a deterrent against Russian aggression. Ukraine officials focused on the conflict highlighting the plight of the political prisoners, hunger strikes and continued Russian aggression after its occupation of Crimea. Russian officials, however, didn't directly talk about the conflict rather push the narratives of diplomatic relations and maintaining foreign affairs.

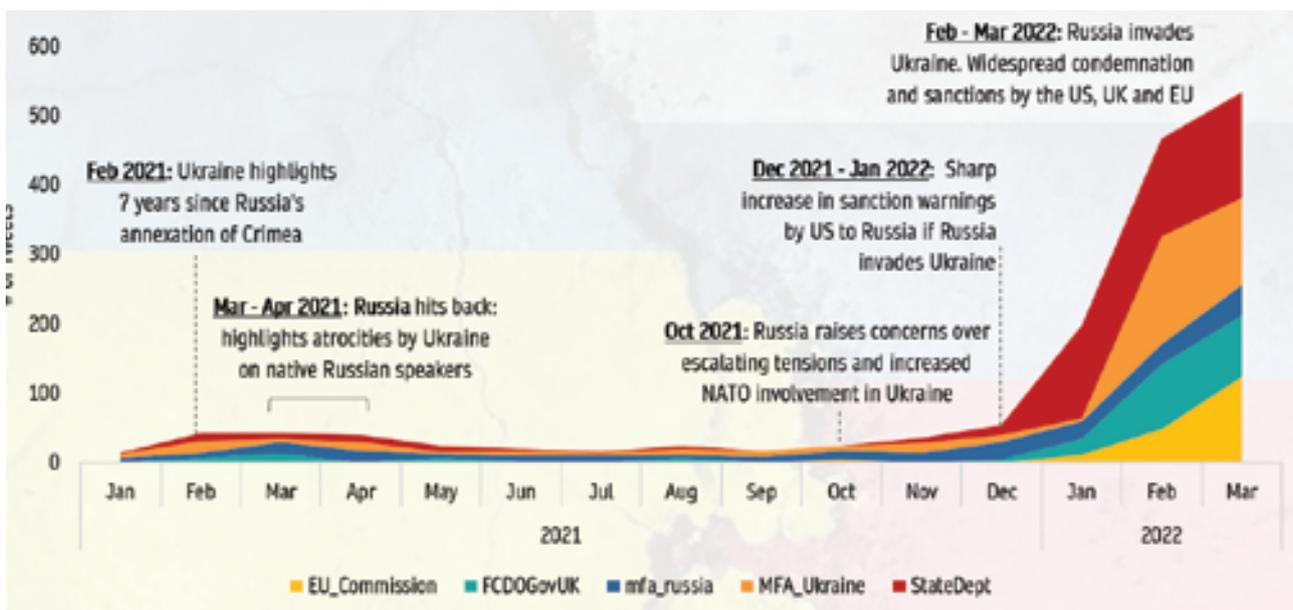
Top 3 Tweeted Bigrams 2016–2020



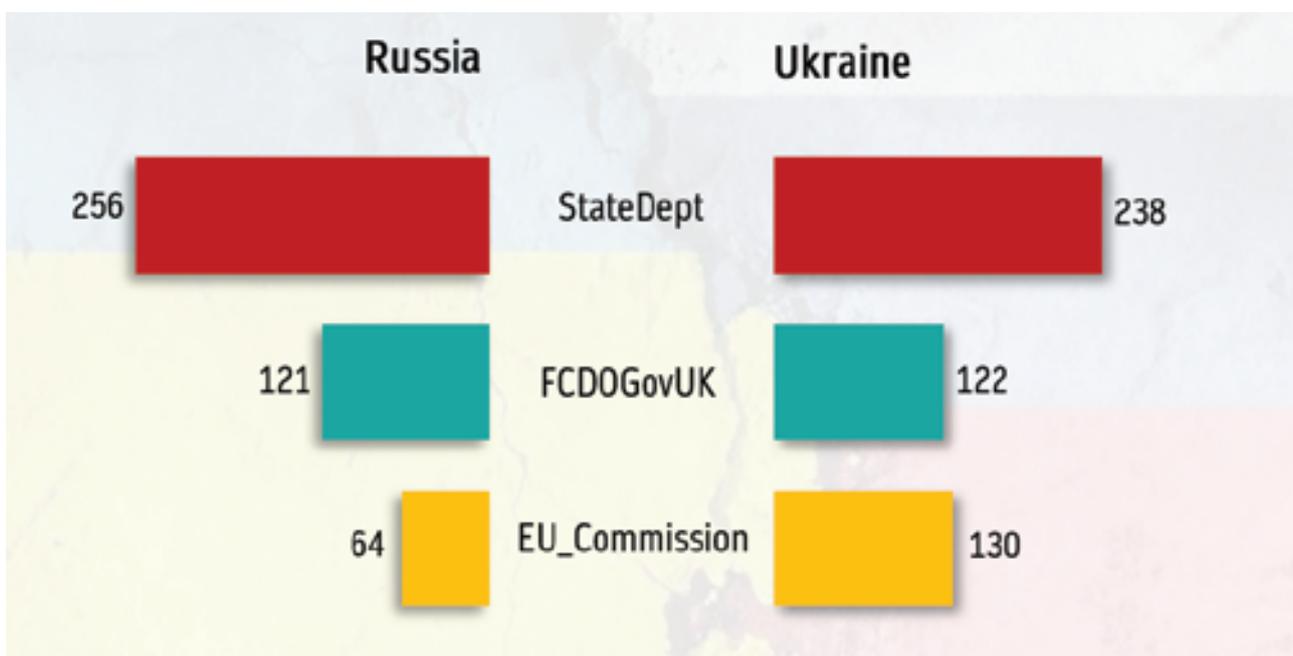
Phase 3:

The year 2021 saw tensions rising between Russia and Ukraine, where both countries condemned each other for poorly treating their minorities. The year also saw a buildup of Western blocks against Russia and a probability of Ukraine joining NATO. The end of 2021 saw increased tensions with the heightened possibility of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which was later realized on 24th Feb 2021. State Department and the Ukrainian foreign ministry were most vocal during this invasion. In this phase, the number of tweets referring to Russia and Ukraine was almost equal to the number of Western countries.

Number of Tweets Referring to Russia/Ukraine 2021-2022

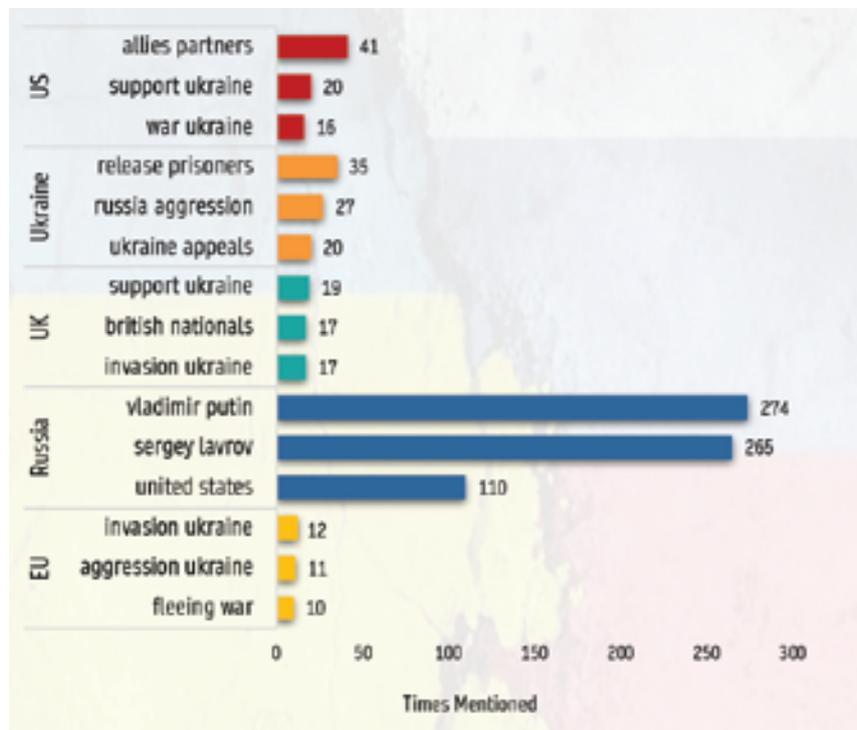


Comparing Official Tweets on Russia & Ukraine 2021-2022



During Phase 3, officials of the Western countries expressed condemnation over the invasion of Ukraine and talked about allies' partnerships, refugees and providing aid to Ukraine. The UK also expressed concern over the safety of British nationals during the war. Ukraine officials mostly talked about Russian aggressions and 'appeals' to the international community for a political solution to the situation. Russian officials once again didn't talk directly about the conflict but masked their narrative around the personalities of Vladimir Putin and Lavrov.

Top 3 Tweeted Bigrams 2021-2022





Fake News

Propaganda Wars:

Media Framing of Fake News in the Russian-Ukraine Conflict

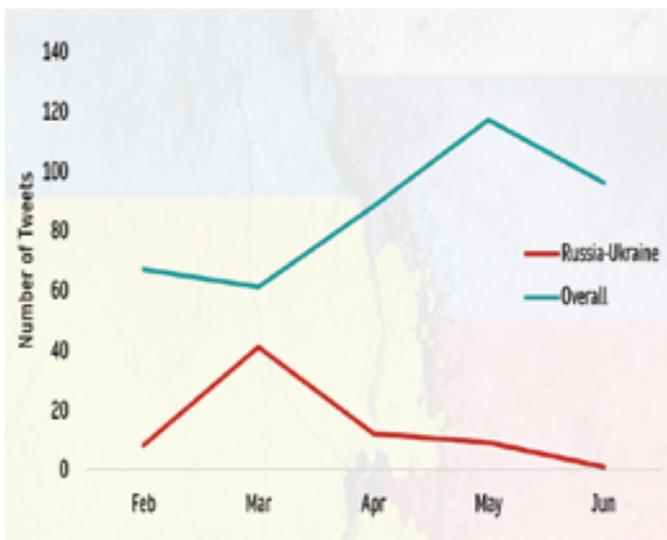
Overview:

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has dominated the global digital and social media spaces since February and has redefined how info wars are being waged worldwide. Since its start, it stands as one of the most relevant examples of hybrid warfare today. For example, data from the Paris-based fact-check platform, AFP Fact Check, shows that Ukraine was the top mentioned country in AFP Fact Check in the last few months owing to a surge of Disinformation and fake news related to the country. Moreover, reporting on the Russia-Ukraine conflict having peaked in March 2022 has since shown a steady decline.

To gauge the incidence and proliferation of fake news in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, we looked at how international media covered Fake News and Disinformation throughout this conflict. Our study shows that media reporting on fake news remained highly selective and divided worldwide. In essence, it demonstrates how fake news has become a narrative tool to discredit, obfuscate, and selectively leverage information asymmetry and fog of war in line with geopolitical narratives.

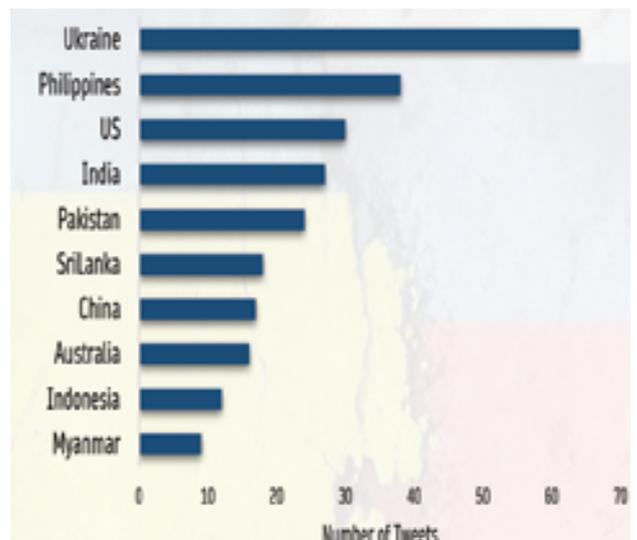
Frequency of Fake News Reporting by AFP Fact Check

(Feb-June 2022)



AFP Fact Check - Top Countries Mentioned in Fake New Report

(Feb-June 2022)



Methodology:

We scraped 268 articles focusing specifically on their source and the overall tilt of their headlines using the 'Web Harvey' software. These were based on 20+ pages of google search results (across five separate locations) against the search phrase "Russian Ukraine Conflict Fake News."

We then categorized these headlines as either pro-Russian, pro-Ukraine, or Neutral. We then classified these news articles based on the country of origin of their publishers to see whether there were any patterns worth mapping as to where fake news was being reported the most regarding this conflict. Since we used Google as our primary data source, the data does not include articles from key Russian media agencies such as RT and Sputnik due to censorship in place by Google.

Media Coverage of Fake News Related to the Conflict

The following graph shows how different media outlets reported on fake news and Disinformation in the Ukraine-Russia conflict. First, we saw media reports criticizing Russia for running fake news factories, accusing the Russian government of using fake news as a propaganda tool to justify its war and related narratives. On the other hand, we also saw pro-Russian reporting, covering Russian claims that 'the West' was running a smear campaign against Russia and reporting on initiatives taken by the Russian side to curb the proliferation of fake news.

Sample Headlines of Fake News Reports



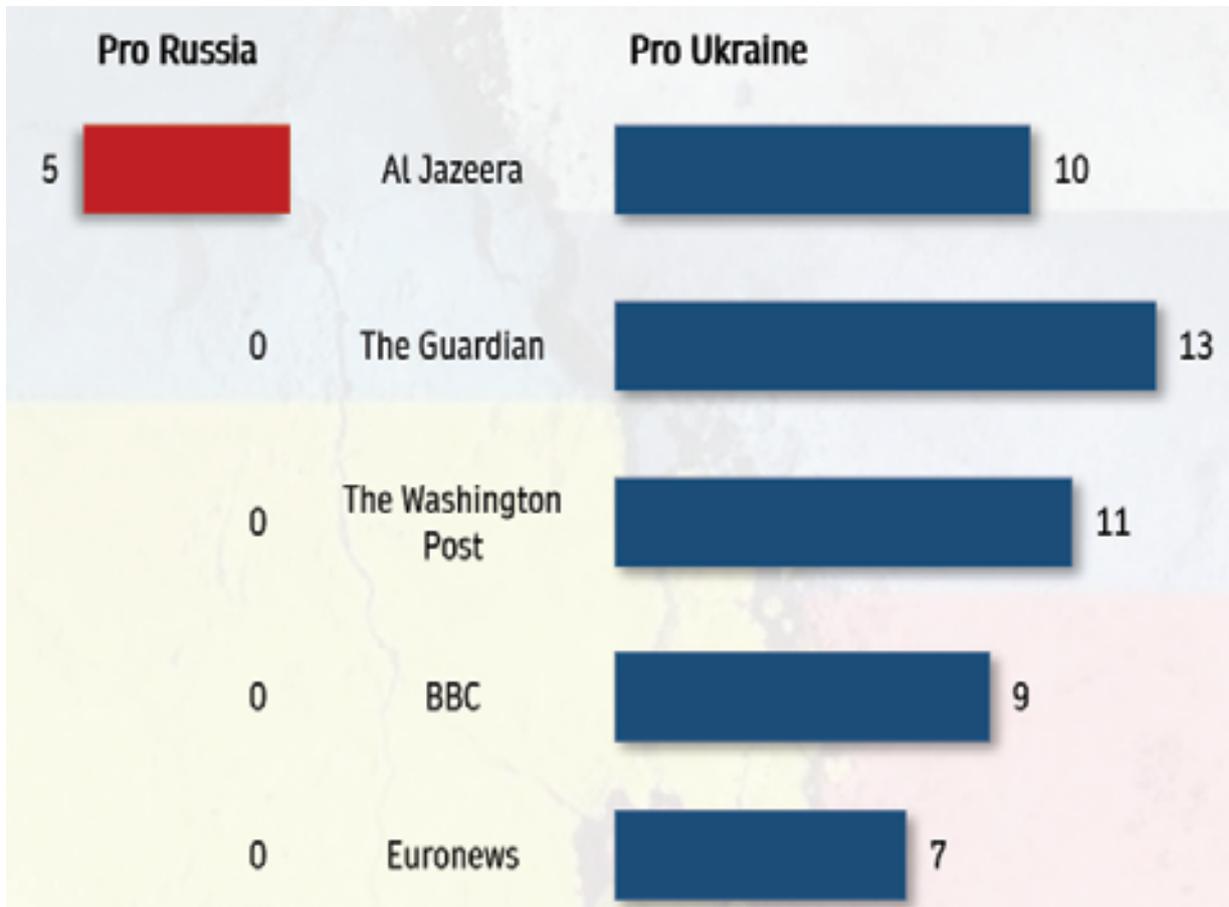
Finally, neutral reporting covered the spread of Disinformation in the ongoing war without blaming either side. Instead, the news focused on how various actors use different methods and platforms to spread fake news and how it can be spotted and stopped.

Content Analysis of Reporting on Fake News:

A content analysis of our data set shows that the majority of the reporting on fake news focused on state-led propaganda during the conflict in which "statemedia," "statenews," and "Russianofficials" were primarily held responsible for disseminating fake news. This narrative was built around blaming Russia for running a coordinated

disinformation campaign alongside its military operations, such as criticism of the Russian government's decision to block social media websites like Facebook to curb the proliferation of fake news. In addition, there were several reports on the "Russian military" committing "warcrimes" in Ukraine,

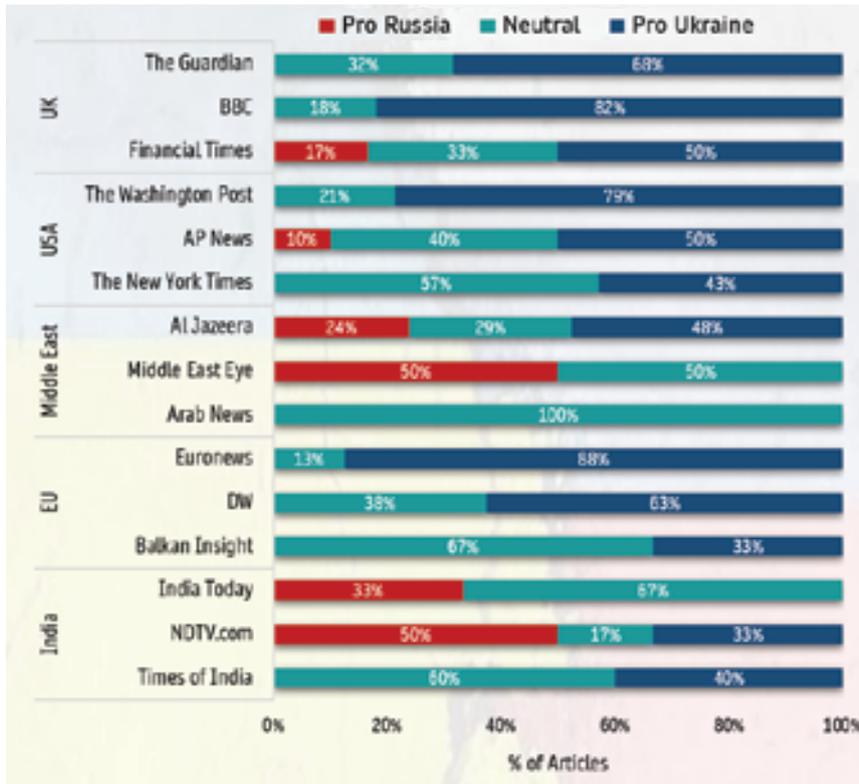
Fake News Coverage by Top Media Outlets



How different media houses framed fake news based on their country of origin

The following graph shows top news sources categorized by their country of origin. UK and US media networks have been the most active in reporting fake news, albeit with a more pro-Ukrainian lens. In contrast, the Middle East and India were more balanced in reporting fake news as they gave space to certain Pro – Russian narratives. EU news sources were the most partisan as they only highlighted how Russians spearheaded disinformation propaganda as a war tool against Ukraine. In contrast, Indian media networks have taken a more neutral and pro-Russian stance reporting on the surge of fake news in the ongoing conflict without blaming either side for the spread of Disinformation.

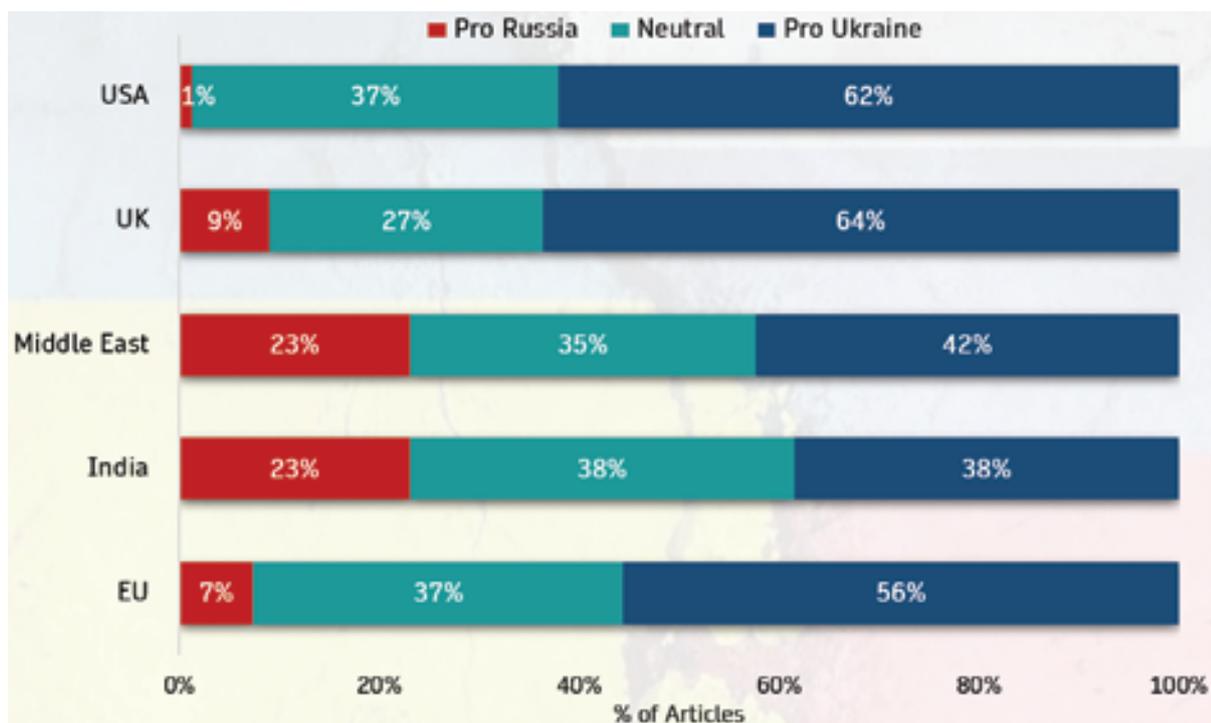
Country wise coverage of Fake News



Mapping Fake News and Media Bias by World Regions

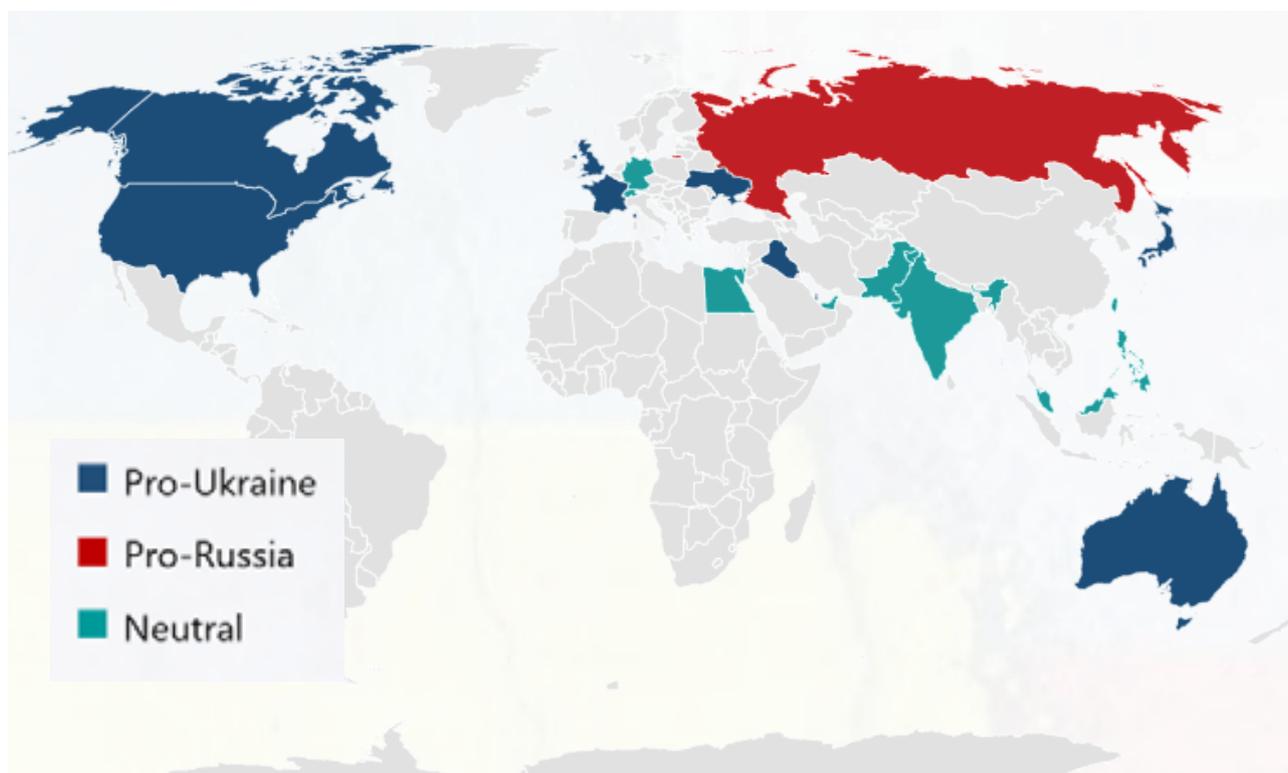
The following graph shows how each of the above-mentioned media outlets has favored either a neutral, pro-Russian, or pro-Ukrainian stance in their overall coverage of this conflict based on their country of origin – especially in their selective coverage of Fake News.

Framing Fake News by Region



Taking a broader view of how the world's major media networks have specifically covered the issue of Fake News throughout this conflict, there is an evident and polarizing divide reflective of the world's changing geopolitical fault lines. The graph below reflects not only a New Cold War, but also the pervasive polarization between the developed and underdeveloped world.

Mapping Fake News by World Regions



Conclusion:

01.

Reporting on fake news has itself become a war over narratives in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict

02.

The report shows a clear bias in how fake news has been reported, blaming either Russia or the West for the propagation of Disinformation

03.

Overall, the reporting on Fake news has been primarily Western-centric- as major media and digital platforms (such as Google) have censored Russian media outlets.

04.

There has been little effort to identify and curb fake news by international media outlets; instead, fake news itself has been securitized as an agenda tool to blame and run narratives against the opposite side.

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