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WORKING THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

HOW RUSSIA SPREADS PROPAGANDA ABOUT UKRAINE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE IMPACT OF PLATFORM RESPONSES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the Kremlin’s war on Ukraine unfolded, Russian state media and diplomatic accounts online began a deliberate, coordinated effort to spread propaganda that aims to justify or deflect blame for the violence. They continue to broadcast this propaganda around the world, including, rather intensively, in Latin America. In a region that contains both U.S. partners and friends of Moscow, public opinion about the conflict still appears to be up for grabs. An analysis of Russian state-backed content on Twitter and Facebook targeted to audiences in Latin America suggests:

- **Soon after Russia invaded Ukraine, Russian state media and diplomatic accounts began a concerted effort to push their messaging about the conflict to audiences in Latin America.** According to data collected for this paper, the proportion of all posts about Ukraine-focused topics by these accounts tripled, and engagement with posts about Ukraine – in the form of likes, comments, shares, and other reactions – increased by more than 400%. Kremlin propaganda sought to justify the invasion by asserting that there was an existential threat: Moscow argued that the Ukrainian government, led by “drug addicts and neo-Nazis,” was committing genocide against Russian-speaking people in the eastern part of the country.¹ As the war went on, Kremlin propaganda also sought to deflect blame for global food and fuel shortages: Moscow claimed that the shortages were the result of Western sanctions against Russia.
- **The policies social media platforms implement can have a clear impact on the reach of Russian state-backed content.** In the aftermath of the invasion, overall engagement in Latin America with Russian state-backed content dropped significantly on Facebook but more than doubled on

Twitter. While there are multiple possible explanations for this finding, these divergent trajectories suggest that there might be deeper lessons for platform trust and safety teams and government policymakers aiming to curb the spread of Russian state-backed content – especially as Twitter itself revisits its content moderation approach.

- **As elsewhere, the Kremlin uses influencers — primarily independent Spanish-speaking journalists — to boost the power of its messaging.** Of the top 15 most retweeted accounts in our dataset, seven are independent, Spanish-language journalists who are unaffiliated with Russian state-backed media.

Given the extent of engagement with Russian state-backed content in the region and its consequences for U.S. interests, Washington should take concrete steps to ensure it is poised to meet the challenge. To start with, it should devote additional public diplomacy resources to Latin America. This could entail equipping the U.S. Department of State to better track Russian propaganda activity there, investing in U.S. Agency for Global Media outlets targeted toward Latin American audiences, and supporting research on related themes. It should also entail facilitating best practice exchanges with independent journalists, researchers, and fact-checkers from across the hemisphere and engaging democratic governments in the region to build resilience to a shared challenge. At a tactical level, Washington should push back on Moscow’s frequent use of “whataboutism” by resisting the urge to rebut every charge and instead focus on highlighting the Kremlin’s disinformation tactics and interference activities in the region. Recognizing that liberal values are ultimately an asset, the U.S. government’s efforts to contest the information space in Latin America should

be fully transparent and aligned with democratic principles, including a basic commitment to truth. Finally, given the impact that platform policies appear to have on the spread of

Russian state-backed content, greater transparency by platforms about the nature of their policies would help policymakers chart a course forward.

INTRODUCTION

Across Latin America, Moscow has actively promoted its state media outlets online, with astounding success. Of the top five most frequently retweeted Russian state media accounts on Twitter over the past year, two were Spanish-language accounts (@ActualidadRT and @RTUltimaHora). During the same period, the Twitter account of RT en Español (@ActualidadRT) had more followers than its primary English-language account (@RT_com) and was retweeted more than twice as often. Moreover, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Spanish-language account (@mae_russia) was more frequently retweeted than its Russian-language one (@MID_rf), even though the latter tweeted more than five times as often. RT en Español had more than twice the number of Facebook followers than RT's English version.² Both RT en Español and Sputnik Mundo have been boosted by Russian diplomatic accounts on Twitter, as well as some accounts that bear hallmarks of inauthenticity.³

During the Ukraine crisis, the Russian government has put these assets to use to deflect culpability for the invasion and its effects. It has sought to (1) frame Ukrainians as Nazis and aggressors, particularly in regions where Russia has tried to consolidate power; (2) cast contrary reporting about the war as disinformation; and (3) blame Western sanctions for food and fuel shortages. Leveraging a history of complicated regional dynamics in the Western hemisphere, the Kremlin has also aimed to erode support for the West's response and its so-called falsehoods.

Throughout the spring, as the Ukraine crisis advanced, the Kremlin's effort appeared to find a receptive audience. In March, five Latin American governments (Bolivia, Cuba, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela) abstained from or refused to participate in a United Nations (UN) vote condemning

President Vladimir Putin's brutal assault.⁴ In April, following reports of violations by Russian troops in the Ukrainian city Bucha, both Mexico and Brazil abstained from a resolution suspending Russia from the Human Rights Council.⁵ That month, RT en Español was the third most shared site on Twitter for Spanish-language information about Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁶ In May, Brazilian politician and now president-elect Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva claimed that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was "as responsible as Putin for the war."⁷ As Latin America expert Oliver Stuenkel has stated, "Anecdotal evidence suggests many Latin American voters believe NATO [the North Atlantic Treaty Organization] is as much responsible for the war as Russia."⁸

The reality is complicated. According to recent polling, citizens across the continent have a lower-than-average willingness to financially support Ukraine or pay higher food and gas prices as a result of sanctions.⁹ And citizens in Mexico and Peru do not favor cutting economic ties with Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰ But views of Russia on the continent are largely negative, and majorities in many countries in the region say that the United States, European Union, and NATO have done too little to assist Ukraine. These views suggest that they empathize with Ukraine's cause, even if they are unwilling to bear great burdens to support it.¹¹ They also suggest that in Latin America, public opinion about the conflict is up for grabs. Moreover, with Spanish being the fourth most spoken language in the world (and Portuguese also in the top 10), Russian state-backed narratives targeting Latin American audiences could reach broad segments of the public elsewhere.¹²

METHODOLOGY

To examine how Russia uses its vast information apparatus in Latin America to spread propaganda about the conflict in Ukraine, we compiled a list of Russian-affiliated Spanish- and Portuguese-language government accounts and media pages drew on the Spanish- and Portuguese-language accounts monitored by the Alliance for Securing Democracy's (ASD) Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard as of June 24, 2022.¹³ In addition, we included several prominent state media personalities with a regional focus on Latin America, all of whom were labeled as such by Twitter, as of the same date, and one additional consulate not listed on ASD's dashboard.¹⁴ We excluded any accounts that exclusively target Spain or Portugal (such as embassy accounts). We also identified corresponding Facebook pages, where available. In total, we assessed the content from 36 Twitter accounts and 23 Facebook pages.¹⁵

We then collected all the posts shared on these 59 accounts – using Twitter's API tool and Facebook's CrowdTangle tool – during the period from October 24, 2021, to June 24, 2022. The date range represents the four months prior to and four months after the invasion of Ukraine (launched on February 24, 2022). We only captured content that remained on Facebook and Twitter throughout this period and not content that was either removed by the user or social media platform. In total, we collected 45,865 posts from Facebook and 132,489 posts from Twitter on June 25, 2022 (a total of 178,354).¹⁶ Due to this post-hoc data collection process, our dataset likely represents an undercount of both social media posts broadly and posts about the conflict in Ukraine specifically.

Rather than code the nearly 180,000 posts manually, we relied on a dictionary of terms drawn from our qualitative knowledge of the conflict and a close monitoring of narratives prevalent in Russian state-backed discourse. These terms can be roughly classified into three categories: (1) geographic locations (for example, "kiev," "mariupol," "ukraine"); (2) key figures in the conflict (for example, "zelensky," "lukashenko," "kuleba"); and (3) key topics or recurring themes related to the conflict (for example, "sanction," "genocide," "nazi"). We developed a list of 93 unique words and, where applicable, translated them into Spanish, English, and Portuguese for a total of 173 terms.¹⁷ Figures 1 and 2 show the top 25 words and top 25-word pairings used in posts about Ukraine, respectively.

Using this dictionary approach, we identified 35,725 posts about the Ukraine conflict (around 20% of all the collected posts). On average, posts flagged as sharing content about the conflict used approximately 1.4 terms in our dictionary, but a post from the Russian embassy in Chile included as much as 62 matching terms.¹⁸

FIGURE 1

Top 25 most commonly used terms in the dictionary

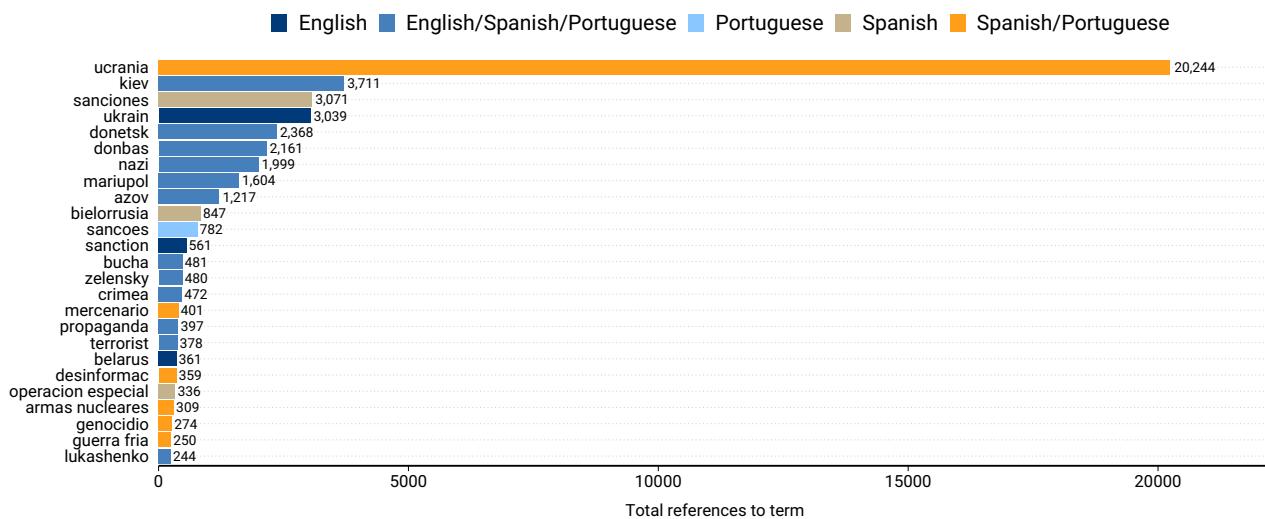
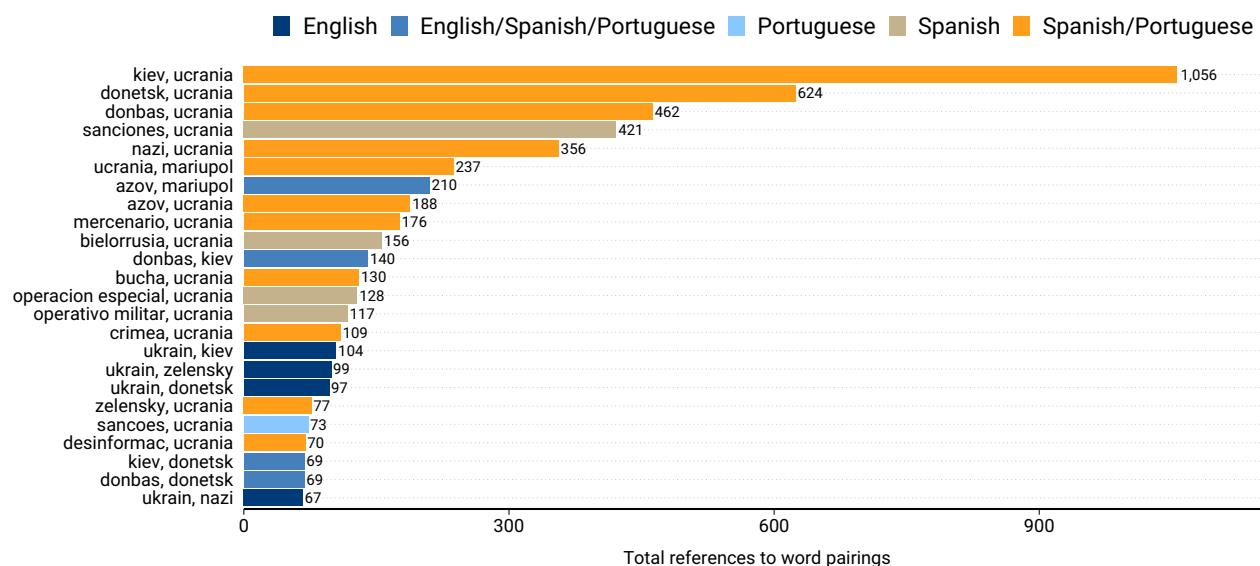


FIGURE 2

Top 25 most commonly used word pairings in the dictionary



This classification procedure was much more efficient than hand coding, but we recognized that it may have generated both false positives (misclassifying something as about Ukraine, when it is not) and false negatives (misclassifying something as not about Ukraine, when it is). We therefore randomly sampled 200 posts classified as “not about the Ukraine conflict” and 200 posts classified as “about the Ukraine conflict” and had a researcher unaware of the initial evaluation hand code their classifications. We then examined and adjusted or removed keywords that regularly produced false positives or false negatives. For example, the term “nato” initially returned matches with words like “eliminatorio” (“qualifying”) and “asesinato” (“murder”) due to the fact that the characters “nato” appear in the character string of both words. As a result, we adjusted this term to ensure that it would only trigger a match if the string “nato” was identified in a post both at the beginning of the word and without additional characters after the “o.”

We then resampled 500 posts classified as sharing content related to the Ukraine conflict based on our key terms and manually coded them to reassess the quality of our keyword dictionary. Of the 500 posts manually reviewed, 36 were coded as false positives. The terms “nazi,” “terrorista” (terrorist), “bielorrusia” (Belarus), and “ataque aereo” (air strike) were the only terms to generate more than two false positives, and they accounted for 42% of all false positives. Based on this sample, the overall false positive rate was 7.2%. Given this error rate, the total post numbers referenced in this paper are approximate, assuming a potential for false positives at a rate similar to what we found in this random sample.

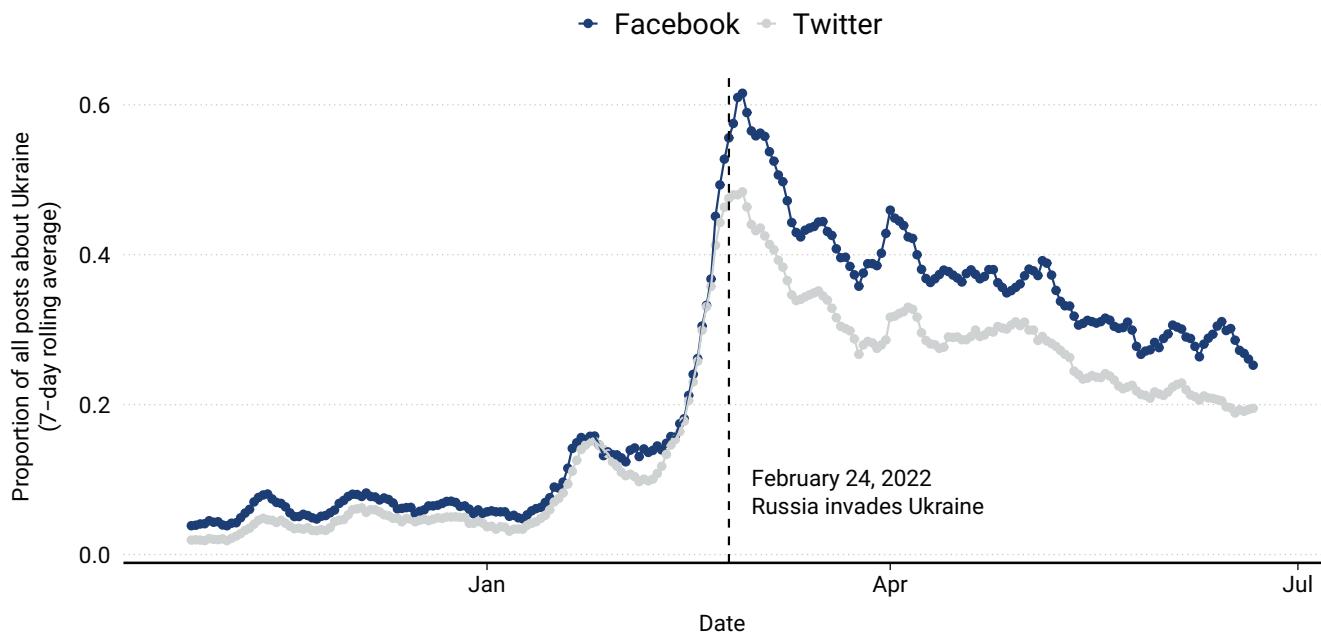
DATA ANALYSIS

For the eight-month period, we found that approximately 20% of all 178,354 posts collected were related to the conflict in Ukraine. Prior to the invasion, when Ukraine-focused content made up approximately 10% of all posts, the content primarily focused on allegations of Ukrainian aggression in the Donbas and warnings about potential confrontation with NATO.¹⁹ As figure 3 demonstrates, after Russian

forces launched an unprecedented attack on targets across Ukraine, content from Russian media, pundits, and political figures about Ukraine tripled, reaching approximately 50% of all posts in the week following the invasion and 30% percent of all posts in subsequent months.²⁰ While content about Ukraine has not returned to pre-war levels, it has steadily declined since this peak.

FIGURE 3

Following the invasion, the proportion of all posts about Ukraine-focused topics tripled



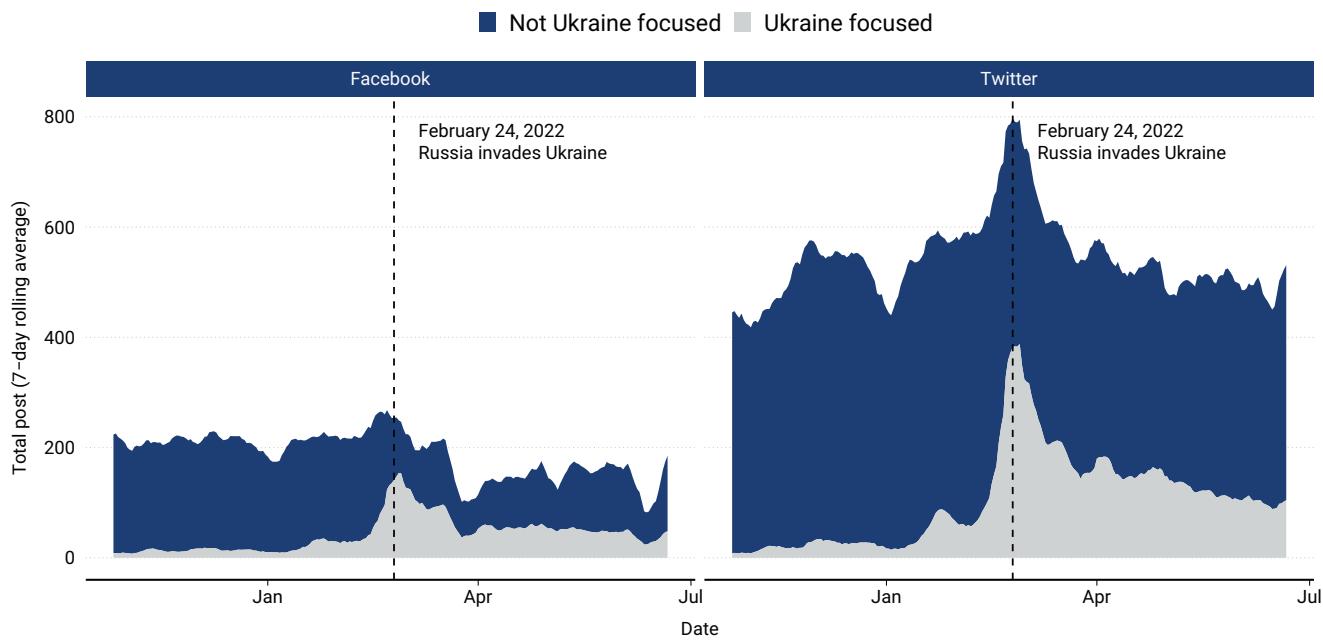
Notes: Author calculations, using data from Twitter's API and Facebook's CrowdTangle.

In general, throughout the eight-month period, the total number of posts produced by Russian state-backed accounts remained steady on Twitter and fluctuated on Facebook. However, we identified a clear spike in the total volume of Russian state-backed content on both platforms in the immediate lead up to and right after the invasion (see figure 4). The spike on Twitter was more pronounced than it was on Facebook, and following the peak, Facebook content fluctuated more dramatically over time, with a sharp, initial drop-off in mid-March. This

fluctuation can primarily be tied to one account, ActualidadRT, which registered a 42% decline in new content after the conflict began. During this period, the Russian government and associated media outlets sought to justify the invasion by asserting that there was an existential threat; Moscow argued that the Ukrainian government, led by “drug-addicts and neo-Nazis,” was committing genocide against Russian-speaking people in the eastern part of the country.²¹ The Kremlin used this narrative to frame the invasion as both necessary and appropriate.

FIGURE 4

Throughout the eight-month period, Twitter posts by Russian state-backed accounts outnumbered Facebook posts 3-to-1, with Ukraine-related content on both platforms spiking right after the invasion



Notes: Author calculations, using data from Twitter’s API and Facebook’s CrowdTangle.

Figure 4 also shows that the Russian government and associated media outlets in Latin America posted more frequently on Twitter than on Facebook, despite Twitter's relative lack of popularity across the region.²² On average, Russian state-affiliated accounts posted 188 times a day on Facebook (approximately 8 times per account, per day) and 543 times on Twitter (approximately 15 times per account, per day). There are several possible reasons for this. For example, Facebook posts tended to be more than three times as long as Twitter posts, due in part to Twitter's character limits. Facebook posts also tend to be less ephemeral. On average, nearly four tweets were required to reach the engagement level of a single Facebook post. The fact that the Russian government posted more frequently on the less popular platform could reflect an effort to increase engagement on Twitter or differences between the two platforms. Additionally, due to Twitter's low character limit, many more tweets may be required to share the same amount of text content as a single Facebook post. And the fleeting nature of Tweets – which rely heavily on freshness and recency to generate widespread exposure – might make it advantageous to post more frequently than might be the case on Facebook.

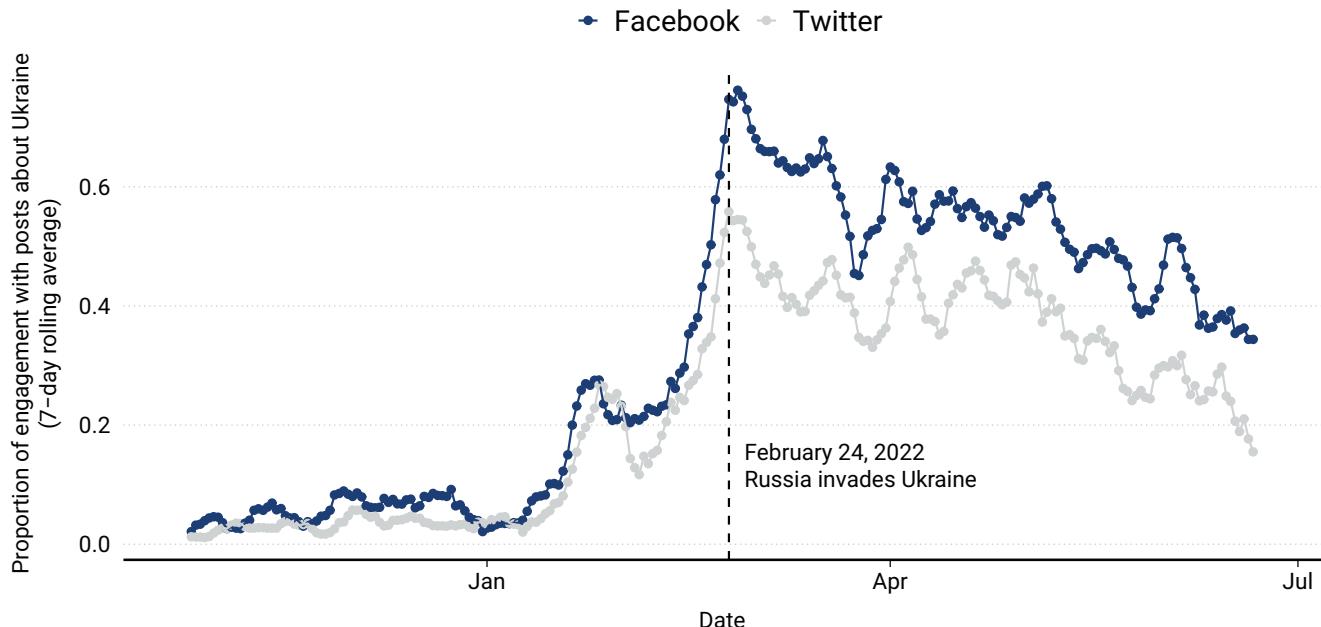
Although Russian government and associated media outlets generated more content on Twitter, Facebook posts on average garnered significantly more engagements from users across both platforms. On Twitter, we count total engagements as the sum of likes, retweets, comments, and quote tweets. On Facebook, we sum likes, shares, comments, and other reactions (for example, wow, haha, love, cares, and angry). Clear positive engagements – including likes and retweets on Twitter and shares, likes, and other positive reactions (loves, cares, and wow) on Facebook – accounted for approximately 90% of all engagements across the collected posts. This suggests that users overwhelmingly supported the posted content, as opposed to pushing back against, or mocking, it.

Across the period of analysis, Facebook posts generated nearly four times as many engagements as Twitter posts. Posts about Ukraine generated more engagements than other content across both platforms. On Facebook, a post about Ukraine averaged 49% more engagements than a post about another topic; on Twitter, a post about Ukraine averaged 88% more engagements. Thus, throughout the eight-month period, users were significantly more likely to engage with content about Ukraine than other topics, regardless of the platform.

Given the higher user engagement with content about Ukraine, it is unsurprising that the engagement spiked at the same time as the amount of content about Ukraine spiked. Prior to Russia's invasion, 11% of all engagements on average were with Ukraine-focused content; after the invasion, that number more than quadrupled to 45%. As the conflict progressed, despite an overall decline in engagement, content tied to the war continued to generate a high proportion of this engagement (see figure 5).

FIGURE 5

Right after the invasion, engagement with posts about Ukraine increased by more than 400%



Notes: Author calculations, using data from Twitter's API and Facebook's CrowdTangle.

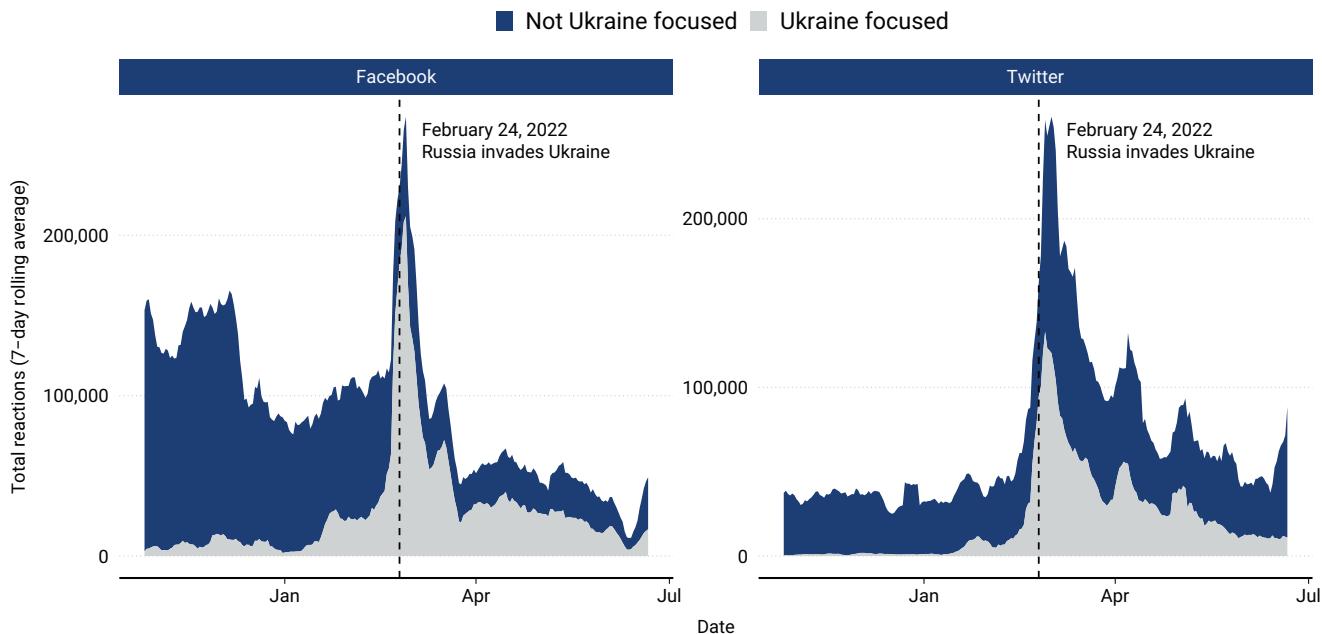
PLATFORM POLICIES MATTER: DIFFERENT APPROACHES PRODUCED DIFFERENT RESULTS

Engagement with Ukraine-related content as a proportion of total engagement with Russian state-backed accounts has trended in parallel on both Twitter and Facebook (see figure 5). However, what is particularly striking is the precipitous decline in overall engagement with content across Facebook, even though the total number of posts did not decline in parallel (see figure 6). In the lead up to the invasion,

Facebook posts by Russian state media and diplomats targeting Latin America generated on average 117,588 engagements per day. Twitter posts generated a third of that amount, at 40,543 per day, despite there being nearly three times as many posts on Twitter. Yet after a significant spike in engagement in the days immediately following the invasion, engagement rapidly dropped below pre-conflict levels on Facebook and remained well above pre-conflict levels on Twitter. After the invasion, Facebook posts averaged 58% of their pre-conflict total compared to more than a 200% increase on Twitter.²³

FIGURE 6

Both Twitter and Facebook saw an exponential increase in engagement with posts about Ukraine immediately following the invasion



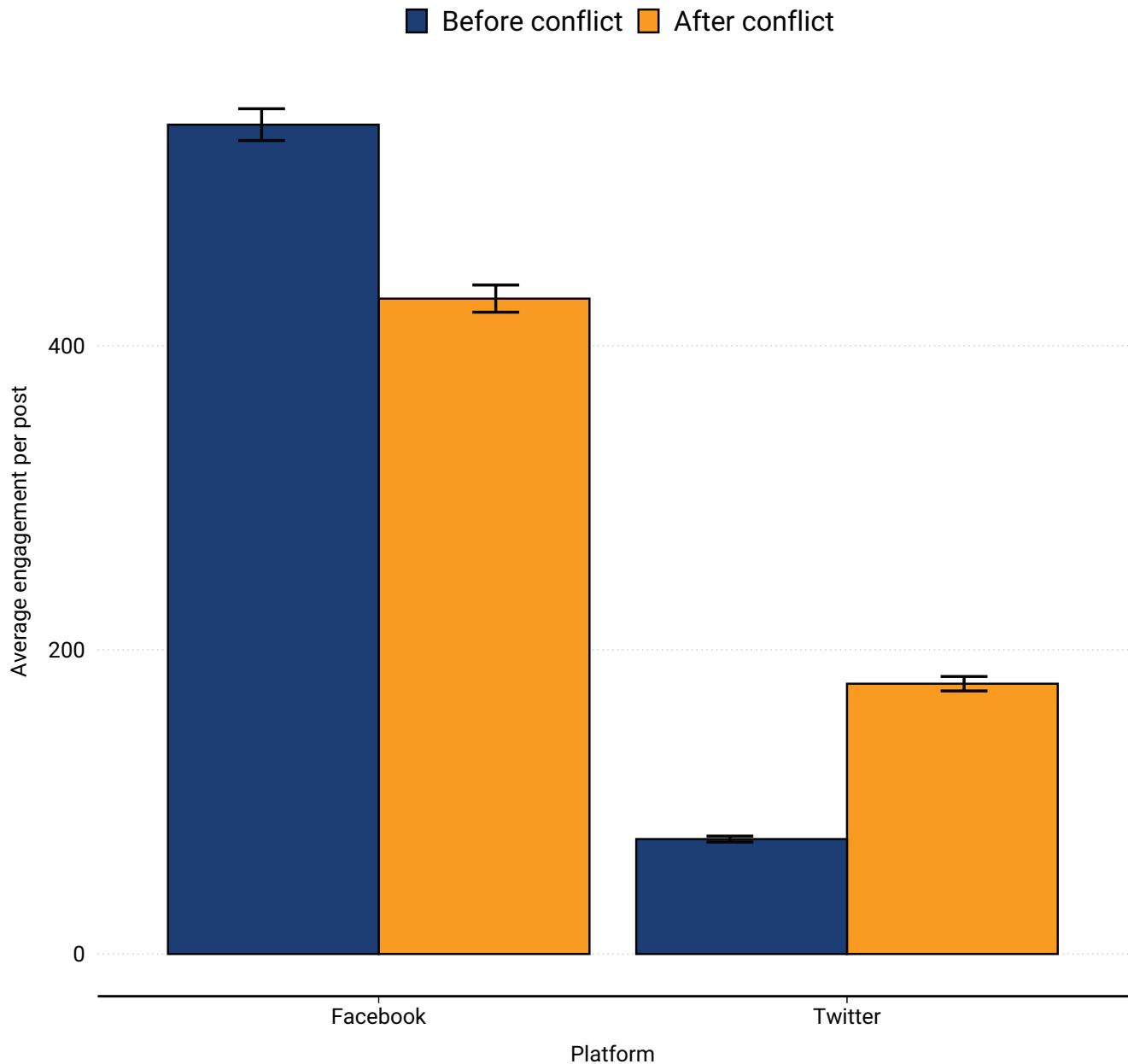
Notes: Author calculations, using data from Twitter's API and Facebook's CrowdTangle.

Put another way, before the conflict, a Facebook post averaged around 545 total engagements, whereas a Twitter post averaged around 75 total engagements. After the conflict began and social media platforms implemented new policies designed to slow the spread of Russian state-backed content about the crisis,

engagement with each Facebook post dropped by more than 20%. Meanwhile, engagement with each Twitter post increased more than twofold (see figure 7). Despite the decline in Facebook engagement, it remained much higher than on Twitter, partly because Facebook is far more popular in the region.²⁴

FIGURE 7

After the invasion, overall engagement with all Russian state-backed content dropped significantly on Facebook and more than doubled on Twitter, though total engagements remained much higher on Facebook than Twitter



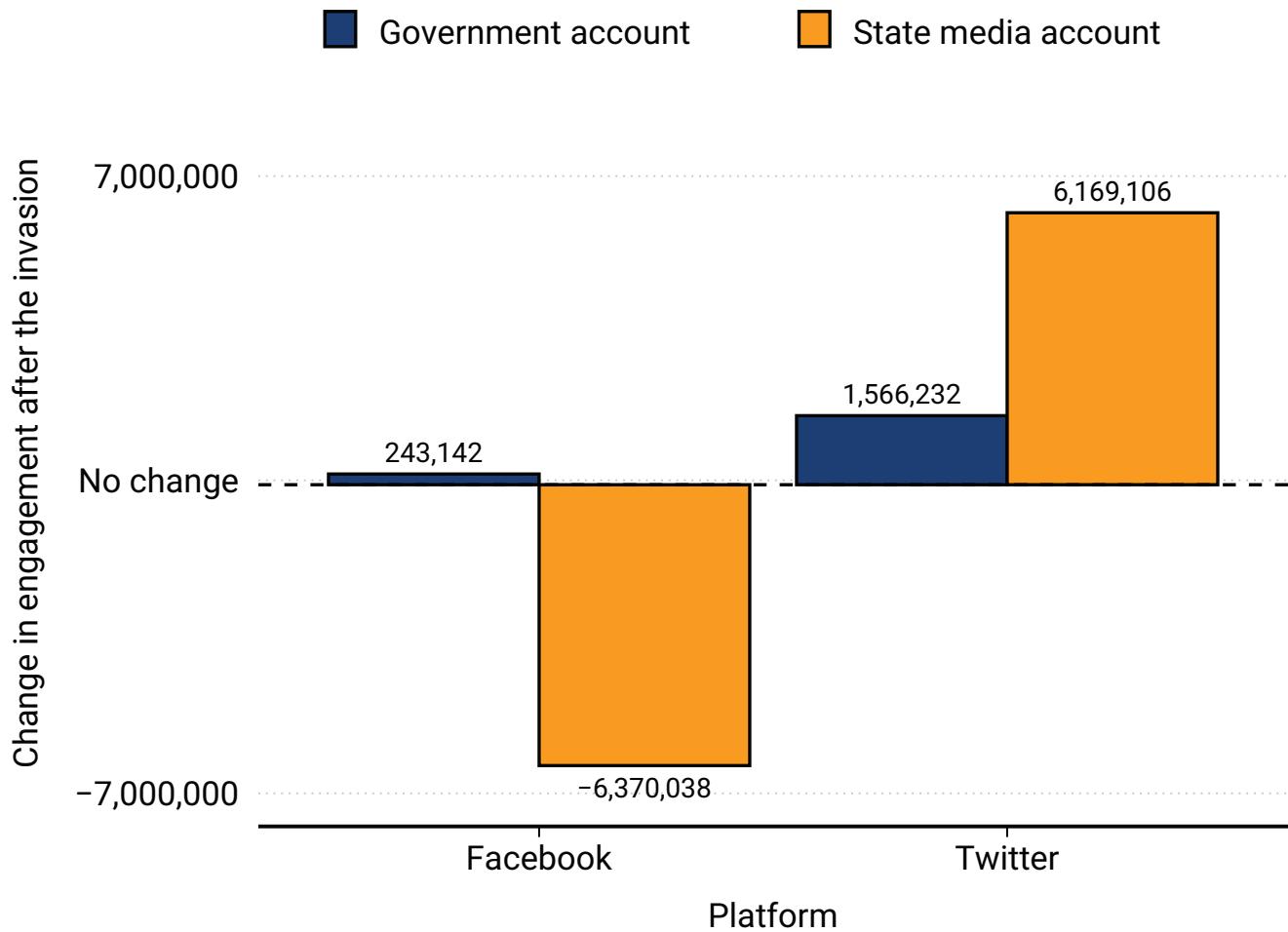
Notes: Author calculations, using data from Twitter's API and Facebook's CrowdTangle.

After the invasion, both Twitter and Facebook enacted policies designed to de-amplify Russian state-backed content. Facebook prohibited Russian state media accounts from advertising on the platform and demonetized their accounts. Twitter went further and demonetized search terms related to the war, preventing advertisements from appearing on the results pages for those words.²⁵ (Twitter has banned advertisements from running on all accounts owned by RT and Sputnik since 2017 and on all state-backed news outlets since 2019.) Also, in the aftermath of Russia's invasion, Facebook began globally demoting content from Russian state media Facebook pages and posts linking to Russian state media websites.²⁶ Twitter began adding labels to tweets linking to Russian state-backed media websites.²⁷ (Twitter has not recommended or amplified Russian state-backed media accounts since 2020.) In April 2022, Twitter announced that it would not amplify or recommend government accounts of states that limit access to free information and are engaged in armed interstate conflict, beginning with Russian government accounts.²⁸

Figure 8 shows the change in engagements with Russian state-backed government and media accounts on Facebook and Twitter after the invasion. Facebook's initial policy changes aimed to stem the flow of state-backed content and indeed seem to have helped stall the explosive spread of this content in Latin America. By contrast, Twitter's policy changes appear to have had less of an effect, likely because Twitter had already implemented significant policies restricting Russian state-backed content in the years before. However, the more than doubling of engagement with Russian state-backed content on Twitter suggests that the Kremlin was successful in circumventing platform remediations to disseminate content targeted to the region. Engagement with Russian government accounts on both platforms accelerated in the aftermath of the conflict, but these accounts make up only a small fraction of the Russian state-backed information apparatus on both Facebook and Twitter. On Twitter, government accounts make up just 5.4% of total posts; on Facebook, they make up 6.4%. Russia's government accounts have posted nearly three times as much as on Twitter as they have on Facebook. Whereas Facebook's policies did not directly address Russian government accounts, Twitter's policy changes in early April attempted to stem their reach.

FIGURE 8

The change in engagement with Facebook content after the invasion can primarily be attributed to the platform's policy to de-amplify them



Notes: Author calculations, using data from Twitter's API and Facebook's CrowdTangle.

Taken together, these findings highlight that the clear attempt by Russian government and state-backed accounts to rapidly push pro-Russian narratives out to Latin American audiences resulted in a corresponding rapid increase in user engagement. This fact demonstrates how important it was for the platforms to swiftly respond. Facebook's efforts to reduce exposure to Kremlin propaganda about the war appear to have had a more dramatic impact than Twitter's, suggesting potential lessons for future rapidly

evolving crisis scenarios playing out both on the battlefield and online – for example, monitoring whether existing policies remain sufficient or incorporating additional labels and context to notable accounts/tweets as part of a broader policy rather than only in times of crises. As Twitter grapples with its content moderation approach, these findings are a reminder of the significance of platform policies to the spread of propaganda content online.

THE KREMLIN IS USING AUTHENTIC INFLUENCERS

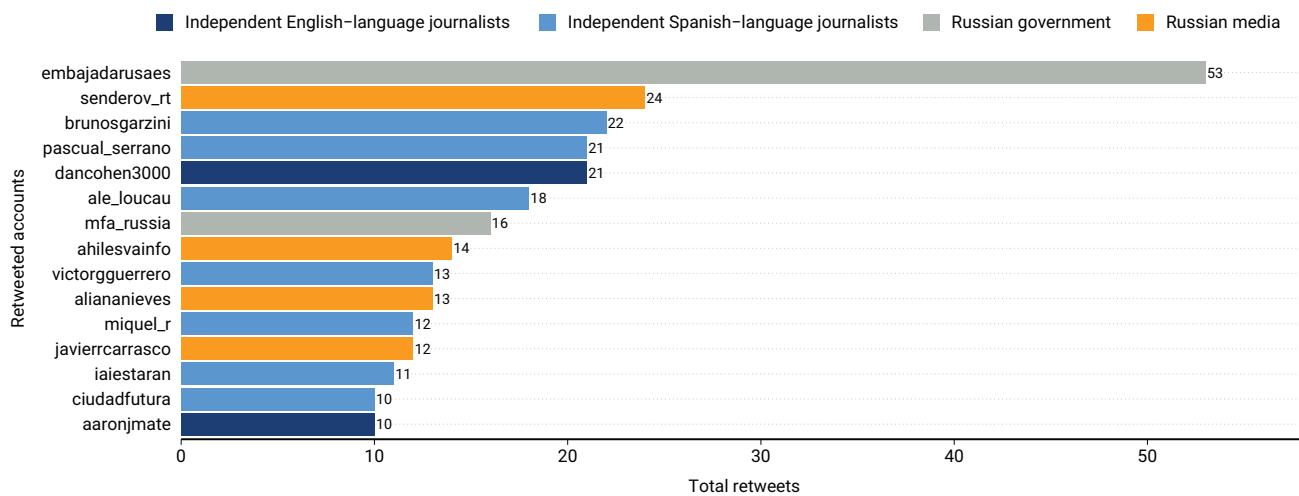
Russian state-backed accounts also made a concerted effort to boost authentic influencers – primarily Spanish-speaking independent journalists – as independent disseminators of the Kremlin’s messaging. Of the top 15 most retweeted accounts by users in our original list, two belonged to Russian diplomatic and government entities (the Embassy of Russia in Spain, @embajadarusaes, and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, @mfa_russia), three belonged to RT or Sputnik employees (@senderov_rt, @javiercarrasco, and @aliananieves), and one belonged to an RT en Español-affiliated media outlet (Ahí les Va, @ahilesvainfo) (see figure 9). The remainder were influencers: two are or were affiliated with alternative, Western, English-language outlets, including Grayzone and MintPress news – frequently cited by Kremlin media on a wide variety of topics targeting different regions; and seven are independent Spanish-language journalists (two from Latin America and five from Spain). These

independent influencers regularly tweeted and retweeted conspiratorial, anti-Western views on a range of topics, with content that was more commonly shared by state media-affiliated journalists than Russian diplomatic accounts.²⁹

The independent Spanish-language influencers tended to have smaller followings than those of the Western figures who feature regularly in Kremlin messaging globally (only one of the seven had a following greater than 100,000 individuals). However, their tweets are evidence of Russia’s effort to amplify authentic voices in order to boost the reach and resonance of Russia’s messaging – and to remove a degree of ownership over the content and add a gloss of legitimacy. This strategy of amplifying “fellow travelers” who share elements of the Kremlin’s worldview and foreign policy goals is one Russia has used widely to reach U.S. and European audiences.³⁰ But a blanket policy of labeling these accounts could have problematic consequences for freedom of expression, which should be prioritized.

FIGURE 9

Top 15 most retweeted accounts not in the original account list



Notes: Author calculations, using data from Twitter’s API. Data only includes the retweets of accounts not in the original account list for the analysis.

One of the most frequently retweeted accounts is what might at first appear to be an independent media account but is in reality an RT en Español-affiliated media account.³¹ Ahí les Va, which brands itself as an alternative to Western news, regularly retweets posts from RT en Español, promotes its video content, and defends it from attacks online.³² The outlet

established a new Twitter account in April, shortly after Twitter imposed new restrictions on Russian state-backed accounts. Despite its clear link to RT en Español and its support of Russian messaging priorities, only TikTok applied a label to its content for the first 150 days of the conflict.³³

RUSSIAN NARRATIVES IN LATIN AMERICA

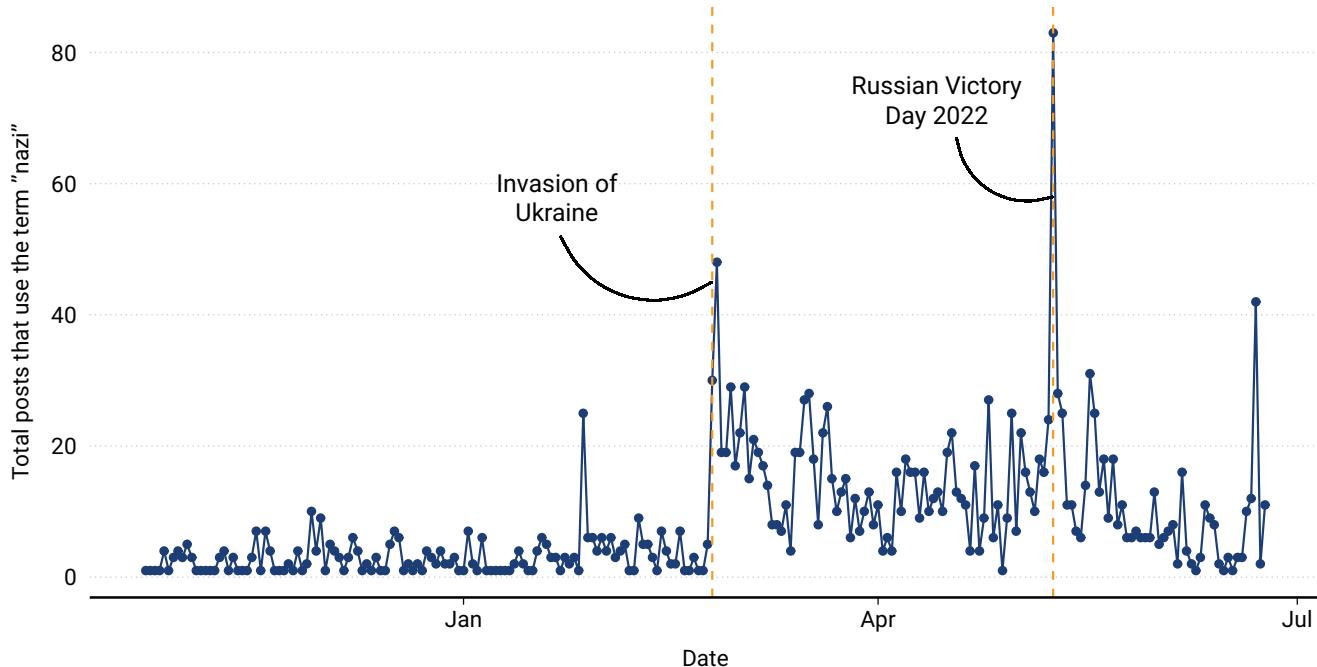
Broadly speaking, Russian state-backed accounts targeted to Latin American audiences have sought to not only divert blame for the Ukraine conflict and its consequences but also build support for the Russian government. Among the most popular posts analyzed were those featuring videos of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warning against NATO expansion, rationalizing the invasion against a “government that commits genocide against a part of its population,” and urging the Ukrainian Army to “immediately put down their arms and return home to their families.”³⁴ Other posts shared widely came from political commentators and pundits affiliated with Russian state media. These posts, some of which garnered more than 20,000 likes and retweets, highlighted an alleged hypocrisy of Western media and governments. One prominent journalist lamented that the blockade of Russian media was a manufactured excuse “to end any hint of awkward storytelling,” presumably by journalists who challenged Western narratives more broadly.³⁵ Another popular post seemed to use early fighting in the Donetsk region as a justification for a full-scale Russian invasion, placing blame on Ukraine for the violence.³⁶

This content reflects familiar talking points of the Russian government and features prominently across the analyzed posts during the eight-month period. Based on the dictionary of terms developed for the analysis, two specific narratives were particularly prominent in Russian state-backed messaging during this time: (1) the invasion of Ukraine was required to counteract the growing threat of Nazi influence in Kyiv, and (2) unjustified Western sanctions are responsible for the growing economic hardship in Latin America and around the world.

Across the posts, these narratives recurred over and over. The term “nazi,” for example, was among the most widely used, with nearly 2,000 references throughout the eight-month period. Posts that referenced Nazis collectively garnered 8% of total engagements with Ukraine-focused content. Although the Russian government and associated state media outlets widely disseminated the Nazi narrative as a “justification” for launching an offensive attack on Ukraine, the data show that if anything, it appears to be a post-hoc rationalization. Of the approximately 2,000 references to Nazis in the dataset, 81% surfaced after the conflict began (see figure 10). As a percent of the total content about Ukraine, Russian state-backed accounts used the term “nazi” 50% more often after the invasion began. The only major spike prior to the conflict, on January 27, 2022, marked the 78th anniversary of the end of the Siege of Leningrad by Nazi forces.

FIGURE 10

81% of the usages of the term “nazi” by Russian state-backed accounts occurred after the invasion began



Notes: Author calculations, using data from Twitter’s API and Facebook’s CrowdTangle.

Among the most popular posts analyzed were those furthering the narrative that Ukraine is a country swarming with Nazis – often by using broad generalizations without evidence.³⁷ Other popular posts pushed the narrative that the United States and European countries are turning a blind eye to the “infestation” of Nazis in Kyiv, simply because they, too, oppose Russia (see figure 11).³⁸ Ukraine does have a far-right problem at the periphery of its politics, and the Kremlin has aggressively exploited it – as it has elsewhere and on many other issues – by taking a kernel of truth and blowing it out of proportion.³⁹ This push by the Russian

government, state media, and associated outlets to amplify the “Nazi” narrative may stem from the Soviet Union’s role in helping to defeat Germany during World War II, a feat that is still widely celebrated today, primarily at Russia’s annual Victory Day celebration and parade. Although the main objective of this narrative was likely to influence public opinion in Eastern Europe, countries in Latin America may have been receptive to it as well: after the end of World War II, several countries in Latin America, including Argentina and Brazil, were among the most popular destinations for Nazis fleeing prosecution for war crimes.⁴⁰

FIGURE 11

Examples of posts furthering the Nazi narrative as justification for the conflict in Ukraine

Tweet

Embajada de Rusia en México  @EmbRusiaMexico ...
Organización gubernamental de Rusia

¿ Por qué **#nazismo** es una amenaza real?

Hay solo dos países en el mundo que cada año votan en contra de la resolución de la Asamblea General de la **#ONU** contra la glorificación del nazismo y otras formas de **#racismo**: **#Ucrania**  y **#Estados Unidos** 

 facebook.com/EmbRusiaMexico...
Translated from Spanish by Google

Why is **#nazismo** a real threat?

There are only two countries in the world that each year vote against the General Assembly resolution of the **#ONU** against the glorification of Nazism and other forms of **#racismo** : **#Ucrania**  and **#Estados Unidos** 

 facebook.com/EmbRusiaMexico...



Cancillería Rusia  and 8 others
12:20 AM · Mar 3, 2022 · Twitter Web App

1,144 Retweets 48 Quote Tweets 2,031 Likes

During the eight-month period, terms tied to “sanctions” — “sanciones” in Spanish and “sanções” in Portuguese — were the second most popular topic, after the term “Ukraine.” Whether characterizing sanctions as unjustified or blaming them for global economic hardship, these terms featured in the analyzed posts nearly 4,500 times, or about one in every eight

Cancillería Rusia  @mae_rusia ...
Organización gubernamental de Rusia

#Zajárova: El antisemitismo, la xenofobia, la discriminación racial que florecen hoy en Ucrania son los fenómenos de los que hablamos durante 8 años y de los que hizo la vista gorda el Occidente colectivo empeñado en patrocinar a los continuadores ideológicos del nazismo !
Translated from Spanish by Google

#Zajárova : The anti-Semitism, xenophobia, racial discrimination that are flourishing today in Ukraine are the phenomena that we talked about for 8 years and that the collective West turned a blind eye to, bent on sponsoring the ideological followers of Nazism !

#ZAJÁROVA #UCRANIA #RUSIA #DONBASS
PARA NOSOTROS ESTÁ CLARO QUE LA NEGATIVA A RECONOCER LOS EVIDENTES PROBLEMAS EN EL ÁMBITO DE LUCHA CONTRA EL RACISMO NO SOLO ATOLLA LA SITUACIÓN EN MATERIA DE DERECHOS HUMANOS SINO QUE ES UNA POSTURA ABSOLUTAMENTE IRRESPONSABLE QUE HACE SUFRIR A PERSONAS CONCRETAS.

MARIA ZAJÁROVA
LA PORTAVOZ DEL MAE DE RUSIA

Sputnik Mundo and 9 others
10:08 AM · Mar 3, 2022 · Twitter Web App

891 Retweets 42 Quote Tweets 1,528 Likes

posts focused on Ukraine-related content. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of these instances occurred after the invasion began and sanctions were swiftly put in place. During the period, posts about sanctions garnered around 12% of all engagements with Ukraine-related content.

The topic of sanctions first became visible in early December 2021, when Putin, in a video that has garnered nearly 24,000 engagements as of June 25, 2022, warned the United States and the European Union about imposing sanctions on Russia; Putin emphasized that the United States and its allies had on multiple occasions “entered other countries” in support “of their interests and security,” much like Russia might aim to do in Ukraine.⁴¹ But as Western sanctions began to mount in the early days of the invasion, the Kremlin’s rhetoric changed to focus on the narrative that they are a major cause of global economic hardship, including higher fuel prices and food shortages

(see figure 12).⁴² This alternate narrative may resonate in Latin America in particular, where public opinion seems decidedly against providing financial support to Ukraine (given economic crises at home) or paying more for fuel to help defend the sovereignty of another nation (as a result of sanctions).⁴³

Taken together, the prevalence and prominence of these topics and themes highlights just how effectively Russian propaganda works to coalesce the talking points of various actors – from journalists to diplomats – around a few major ideas that resonate with international audiences.

FIGURE 12

Examples of posts blaming sanctions for food shortages

 Cancillería Rusia  @mae_rusia
Organización gubernamental de Rusia

! El operativo militar ruso en Ucrania NO amenaza el suministro de comida.

Estas son las verdaderas razones de la crisis alimentaria:

- ▼ COVID-19
- ▼ Políticas miopeas de EEUU y Europa
- ▼ Guerras comerciales
- ▼ Sanciones ilegítimas contra Rusia

Más  t.me/MAERusia/456
Translated from Spanish by Google

! The Russian military operation in the Ukraine does NOT threaten the food supply.

These are the real reasons for the food crisis:

- ▼ COVID-19
- ▼ Myopic US and European policies
- ▼ Trade wars
- ▼ Illegitimate sanctions against Russia

More  t.me/MAERusia/456

Mito:
La operación militar especial rusa en Ucrania ha puesto en peligro el suministro mundial de alimentos 

Realidad:

| Causas: | Efectos: |
|---|---|
|  COVID-19 y la recesión pospandémica  Condiciones climáticas desfavorables  Transición verde desacertada |  Alza de precios de la energía  Interrupciones logísticas  Así aumentaron los precios a partir de 2020: Trigo - 62% Maíz - 162%  Abonos - 200% |
|  Guerra comercial de Occidente  Malas políticas económicas de la UE  Sanciones ilegítimas contra Rusia |  Falta de comida  Inflación creciente |

Nada de esto está vinculado con las acciones de Rusia en Ucrania 

*Source: Comments by EU HR/VP Josep Borrell following the EU Foreign Affairs Council, 11 April 2022

Rusia en España and 8 others

3:24 PM · Jun 21, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

166 Retweets 5 Quote Tweets 247 Likes

 RT en Español  @ActualidadRT
Medios afiliados al gobierno, Rusia

"Muchos años de errores en la política económica de Occidente y las sanciones ilegítimas han provocado una inflación mundial, la ruptura de las cadenas de suministro y producción habituales, un brusco aumento de la pobreza y una escasez de alimentos"
esrt.press/actualidad/431...

Translated from Spanish by Google

"Many years of Western economic policy mistakes and illegitimate sanctions have led to global inflation, the breakdown of usual production and supply chains, a sharp increase in poverty and food shortages"
esrt.press/actualidad/431...



7:02 PM · Jun 6, 2022 · TweetDeck

281 Retweets 1 Quote Tweet 559 Likes

RECOMMENDATIONS

To stem the reach and impact of Russian propaganda in the Western hemisphere, tech companies, civil society, and policymakers all have a critical role to play. As the data in this paper show, social media platform policies, especially those related to algorithmic amplification, can have a considerable impact on how various forms of content spread online. Ultimately, greater transparency about how algorithmic amplification functions on social media platforms, as well as about the nature of the policies they have implemented, would facilitate a better understanding of which policies work and which do not. This information will be enormously useful to policymakers across sectors, from lawmakers to trust and safety teams within companies themselves. One way to improve transparency is to use synthetic data instead of real personal data to test how platform algorithms shape outcomes. This would also be a pathway to ensuring accountability and, ultimately, minimizing the spread of propaganda without infringing on free expression.

Given the importance of broadly distributed, pluralistic, vibrant, independent media for pushing back on information manipulation, U.S.-based civil society organizations could bring together and exchange best practices with organizations of independent journalists, researchers, and fact-checkers from across the hemisphere. The philanthropic community in the United States could further support civil society organizations that foster independent journalism in the region. Finally, recognizing the extent of engagement with Russian state-backed accounts across Latin America, and the consequences of that engagement for U.S. interests, policymakers in Washington should devote additional public diplomacy resources to the region. Since at least 2016, Washington has recognized the threat that Russian disinformation in the United States and Europe has posed to American interests and acted

to counter it. Among many other steps, the United States has conducted multiple bipartisan investigations into relevant Russian activity, established new task forces to address election-related challenges, devoted intelligence resources to track the threat, joined the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, and developed mechanisms to exchange best practices with partners and allies. Washington should also pay significant attention to the challenge in its own hemisphere.

The U.S. government could equip the State Department's Global Engagement Center to closely track Russian activities in the Latin American information domain; invest in U.S. Agency for Global Media outlets targeted toward Latin American audiences, updating them to resonate more credibly in the region; and support research on related themes, including on how much Russian propaganda targeted toward Latin American audiences crosses over to U.S.-based Spanish-speaking audiences. This is especially necessary in light of the roughly 8-to-1 disparity between RT en Español and the U.S.-based Voz de América in the number of engagements and followers on Facebook.⁴⁴ Washington should also consider ways of working with democratic governments in the region to build resilience to a shared challenge.

These activities should be fully transparent and based on truthful information. Critically, they should avoid the pitfalls of the failed ZunZuneo effort in Cuba, which reportedly included secret attempts by the U.S. government to build a text-based social network that it could use to organize protests and ultimately trigger political instability in the country.⁴⁵ Empowering citizens to evade repression – for example, through disbursing VPNs and other privacy-protecting technologies – is fair play, but clandestine messaging designed to evoke protests is not.

When democratic governments pollute the information environment with manipulated content, they undermine the credibility of their own institutions and values and ultimately do more harm to their own interests than to the Kremlin's.⁴⁶

In responding to Russian propaganda targeted at Latin American audiences, the United States should resist the temptation to rebut every charge, since doing so extends the conversation on Russia's terms. Instead, U.S. diplomats should focus on highlighting the tools and tactics that Russia employs (for example, whataboutism and conspiracy theories) in

order to draw contrast to Washington's own approach.⁴⁷ This will not work with every audience, but it can help shape public opinion on the continent over time. U.S. diplomats can also use truthful messaging to go on the offensive; they can highlight Russia's corrupt, clandestine, and coercive activities in Latin America, including its use of private security contractors and illicit commercial deals to prop up illiberal leaders, as well as Russia's repressive behavior at home.⁴⁸ Doing so may help dampen the attractiveness of Russia's messaging.

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