

Engagement with pro- and anti-regime framing of the war in Ukraine on Russian social media

Keywords: social media, war, Ukraine, Russia, VK, political communication

Extended Abstract

On 24 February 2022, Russia started a large-scale invasion of Ukraine following the eight years of the hybrid war. In his televised address on the same day, Russian president, Vladimir Putin announced the beginning of the “special military operation” aiming to “demilitarize and denazify” Ukraine. Since then, the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin media consistently avoid calling the attack on Ukraine a war and refer to it as a special operation. Further, shortly after February 24, the Russian authorities passed a law under which what the authorities treat as fake information about the “special operation” (including its descriptions as a “war”) is punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

The Kremlin's decision to frame (i.e., to make certain aspects of a specific phenomenon more salient; Entman, 1993) its aggression as a special operation rather than a war is motivated by several reasons. Legally, a war requires an official declaration and implies adherence to the Geneva conventions. Domestically, framing the conflict as a special operation may be seen as less risky because it suggests a lesser scale of involvement and Russian superiority. However, to what degree the framing of the war the Kremlin desires is shared by the Russian population remains an open question. Answering it is a rather non-trivial task, in particular considering the legal barriers and the unreliability of traditional ways of measuring the public opinion (e.g., surveys) in the authoritarian context (Chapkovski & Schaub, 2022).

Given this, one possible approach for examining how the Russian public engages with pro- and anti-regime framing of the war in Ukraine is to use social media data. Despite the increasing efforts of the Kremlin to control the digital platforms in Russia, the censorship mechanisms are imperfect, in particular when dealing with individuals with a small following (and not large-scale influencers). Using the large sample of data from the largest social media platform in Russia, VK (or VKontakte), we employ a combination of natural language processing techniques (i.e., BERTopic, Grootendorst, 2022) and descriptive statistics to examine the thematic composition of the pro- and anti-regime war frames as well as characteristics of the audience engaging with them and the ways it does so. Specifically, we aim to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How was the Russian war against Ukraine represented in VK content associated with the special operation and the war frames overtime?

RQ2: What were the patterns of engagement with the content related to the special operation and the war frames on VK?

RQ3: What were the main characteristics of users who engaged with the war or the special operation frames in terms of demographics and selective information consumption?

The data were collected in July 2022 through VK's official API using `vk-r` R package (Sorokin & Antonov, 2020). VK API allows searching for public posts based on specific keywords. We collected all the posts returned by the API for the keywords “война” (“war”) and “спецоперация” (“special operation”, as commonly shortened in Russian) in all their declensions. The data were collected for the period from 14 February 2022 (10 days before the invasion to serve as a baseline) to 24 June 2022 (4 months since the beginning of the

invasion). In total, we collected 5,262,383 posts containing the word “war” and 1,153,119 posts containing the word “special operation”.

The analysis for RQ1 was implemented in two steps. First, we analyzed the frequency of publishing VK posts containing words “war” and “special operation”. Then, we analyzed the thematic composition of these posts using BERTopic (Grootendorst, 2022). To investigate the patterns of engagement with the content (RQ2), we first analyzed the temporal developments in the average number of views attracted by the posts that mentioned “war” and “special operation” published daily during the observation period. Then, to make conclusions about the content of the most popular posts, we extracted the top 20 posts by the number of views for each sample and manually examined them. To answer RQ3, we examined data on user demographics and their content consumption preferences. The latter preferences were analyzed based on the data about the users’ subscriptions to VK public pages.

We find that the framing of the Russian war against Ukraine on VK does not fully align with the Kremlin narrative. Many social media users still use the term “war”. Further, in the corpus of posts that refer to the invasion as a “special operation” - in line with the Kremlin’s framing - the most prevalent topic deals with the deceased Russian soldiers and posts associated with it are also the most actively engaged with by the VK users. The prevalence of content discussing deaths of Russian soldiers not only contradicts the “special operation” framing that implies the invasion being a low-risk endeavour, but also can interfere with the mobilisation effort of the Kremlin. Notably, most engagement came not from state- or media-related pages but rather from more general ones (e.g., public pages related to Russian Orthodoxy). We also observe that the “war” content often contains references to WWII, thus reinforcing the known tendency of the Kremlin to selectively instrumentalize WWII memory to advance its political aims (Gaufman, 2015). We also found differences in the demographics and content consumption preferences between the random sample of VK users and the users who published posts with the terms “war” or “special operation”: the latter tend to be older and more likely to follow pro-Kremlin VK pages than the random sample of VK users, with these characteristics being more pronounced in the “special operation” sample.

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