OVERVIEW

The Kremlin has long employed disinformation and propaganda as strategic tools to further its geopolitical aims.[1] Amidst the conflict in Ukraine, the battleground has expanded beyond physical borders to the digital sphere, where Russia actively seeks to shape both domestic and international opinion in its favor, influencing alliances and rivalries. This project brief explores Russia's narratives surrounding significant events in the war in Ukraine and examines the evolution of a dominant pro-Kremlin narrative over time in the context of these events. In doing so, it highlights how Russia navigates significant developments as it seeks to gain strategic advantage in great power competition.

The brief provides insights on the discourse surrounding three key events—the outbreak of war with the Battle of Kherson, the civilian massacre in Bucha, and a significant geopolitical development of NATO extending its membership invitation to Sweden and Finland—based on the analysis of official Twitter accounts linked to the Russian Embassy in the United States, the Russian Embassy in the United Kingdom, and Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA).

METHODOLOGY

The data collection focused on tweets posted by the three government accounts during the one-week period leading up to the day of the event's onset, during the day of the event's onset, and in the one-week period after the event's onset for a total of 15 days of observations. This time frame allows us to examine temporal patterns and changes in pro-Kremlin messages depending on event type: a battle event, a human-rights violations event, and a significant geopolitical development.[2] The collected tweets were coded across various analytical categories to gain insights into the narrative strategies employed by the Russian government.[3] These categories include: physical threats posed by Ukraine; Russia's response to physical threats posed by Ukraine; cultural threats posed by Ukraine; Russia's response to cultural threats posed by Ukraine; political threats posed by Ukraine; Russia's response to political threats posed by Ukraine; political threats posed by Russia's rivals (other than Ukraine) and/or Russia's/Ukraine's neutral/contiguous states; Russia's denial of committing specific actions; Russia's engagement in any positive gestures towards Ukraine, other rivals, and/or contiguous neutral states; Russia's military/discipline as superior to that of Ukraine; Ukraine portrayed as militarily weak/undisciplined. A tweet that mentioned any of the themes was considered a pro-Russian message. The first section highlights the total distribution of themes in tweets related to each event, while the second section focuses on how the Kremlin's most dominant narrative, political threats posed by Western rivals, evolved before and after each event.

[1] Fitzgerald, Chad W., and Aaron F. Brantly. 2017. "Subverting Reality: The Role of Propaganda in 21st Century Intelligence." *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 30 (2): 215–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2017.1263528.

[2] The battle event analyzed here is the battle of Kherson and the timeframe of the research is 02/17/22until 03/03/22; the human-rights violations event is the Bucha massacre, with an analysis of tweets from 03/28/22 until 04/11/22; the significant geopolitical development is the NATO decision to extend membership to Sweeden and Finland, with an analysis of tweets from 06/22/22 until 07/06/22.

[3] For more details on the methodology and the analytical categories used, refer to: Radziszewski, E., & Doody, S. (2024). "The Impact of Events in the War in Ukraine on Pro-Russian Narratives: The Case of Twitter." *Global Responses to Asymmetric Threats*. College Park, MD: START (May).

DISTRIBUTION OF THEMES IN KREMLIN'S TWITTER FOR THREE KEY EVENTS IN THE WAR

Our analysis of 734 tweets from three Russian government agencies revealed that 391 messages (53.2 percent) contained a pro-Kremlin stance regarding the studied events. *Figure 1* illustrates that the primary theme across these tweets for all three events was "Political Threats Rivals," which captures narratives that mention the hypocrisy, corruption, social problems, threat to global or Russian security posed by Russia's rivals other than Ukraine and/or neutral contiguous states. These tweets, which focus predominantly on Western rivals, often criticized the United States' involvement in the conflict. The most surprising finding is that a theme related to a political threat posed by Ukraine to Russia is less commonly invoked in tweets in comparison to a narrative that portrays the West as a threat, highlighting that the war in Ukraine is framed by the Kremlin as part of a larger struggle against the West.

The largest number of pro-Russian tweets (141 or 36%), regardless of the type of a theme they contained, is associated with the onset of the Bucha massacre, while the Kherson battle is associated with the highest frequency of pro-Russian themes across tweets (207). [4]The dominant narrative in tweets for the Bucha massacre is a reference to political threats posed to Russia and/or global security by mostly Western rivals ("Political Threats Rivals"), which appeared in 52 messages. The second most prevalent theme related to the Bucha massacre is that of 'Denial." Appearing 42 times, this theme aimed to deny Russia's involvement in the crime. The Kherson battle, which was associated with 137 pro-Kremlin tweets (35%), featured a dominant theme of "Political Threats Rivals" (invoked 76 times), followed by a theme of a physical threat posed to Russia's existence by Ukraine ("Physical threats"), which appeared 47 times. NATO's offer to extend membership to Sweden and Finland was associated with 113 tweets. The dominant theme for this event was "Political Threats Rivals" (appearing 68 times), followed by the theme of "Physical threats."
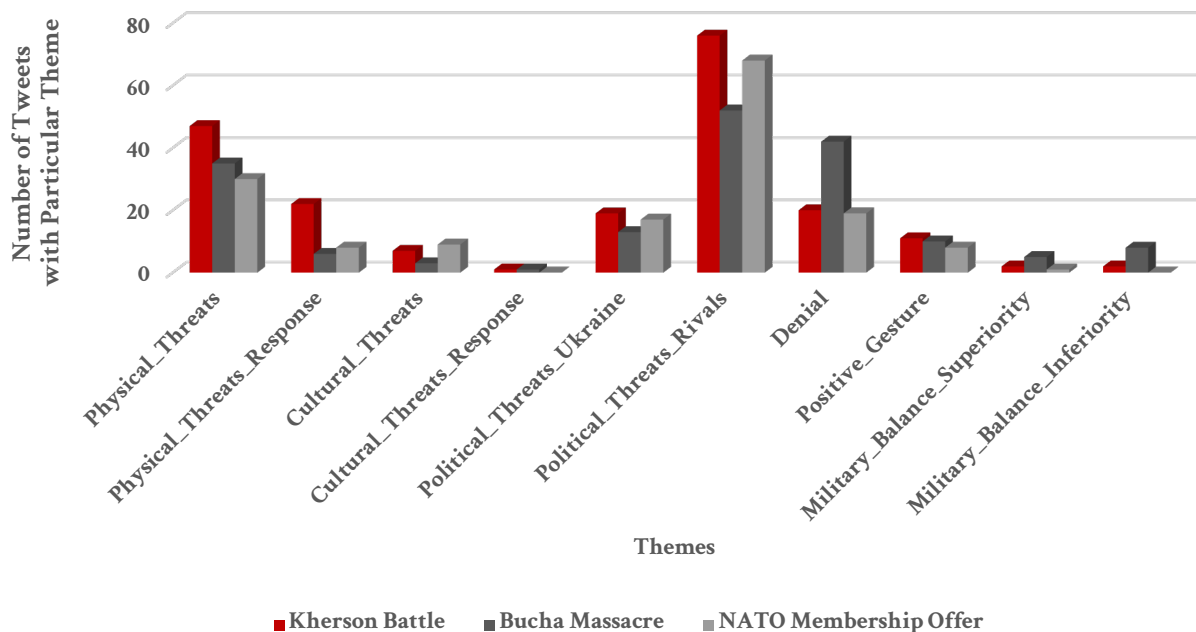

Figure 1: Theme Frequency for Kherson Battle, Bucha Massacre, and NATO Membership Offer

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[4] The number of pro-Russian themes is not the same as the number of pro-Russian tweets as it is possible for a single tweet to include more than one theme.

Target

This section delves deeper into the most dominant narrative frame appearing in tweets across all three events, political threats posed by rivals other than Ukraine and/or Russia's/Ukraine's neutral contiguous states. *Figure 2* shows that almost 68 percent of tweets with this theme mention the United States either directly or indirectly, thus making this rival a primary target of pro-Russian rhetoric. The narrative accuses the U.S. of hypocrisy, citing instances where "*many countless (nonwhite countries I might add) the US/NATO super empire has destroyed, invaded, starved, or punished in similar if not worse fashion (or lies) as Russia invading Ukraine? 🤔*" It also points to the U.S.'s role in destabilizing the global economy: "💬*#Antonov: With 🇺🇸 and its allies rupturing economic ties with 🇷🇺, the crisis phenomena in the 🌍economy have been exacerbated to the maximum. There is an omnipresent decline in business activity, the destruction of transport and logistics chains.*" Additionally, narratives that hold the U.S. responsible for contributing to food insecurity are also present in tweets, as noted, for example, by the following posting, "*As far as food security is concerned, it is the wave of anti-🇷🇺 restrictions, imposed by the collective West with 🇺🇸 at the head, which has spurred the global food crisis.*" Furthermore, the narratives criticized the U.S. for providing weapons to Ukraine claiming that, "*US and NATO mission is clear: to flood Ukraine with most advanced weapons in order to prolong war & weaken Russia at the expense of Ukrainian lives because Russia is their biggest threat. UK helped stage Bucha to derail peace talks. WAKE UP*". Besides the United States, the EU and NATO were frequently targeted by the government accounts; they were mentioned in 39 percent of the tweets invoking the "Political Threats Rivals" theme. The UK also stands out as the target of Kremlin's tweets in connection with the "Political Threats Rivals" theme. Finally, it is worth noting that the Baltic states and Poland—countries that emerged early in the war as the most vocal supporters of Ukraine and which are of strategic relevance to NATO in Europe—are rarely targeted.
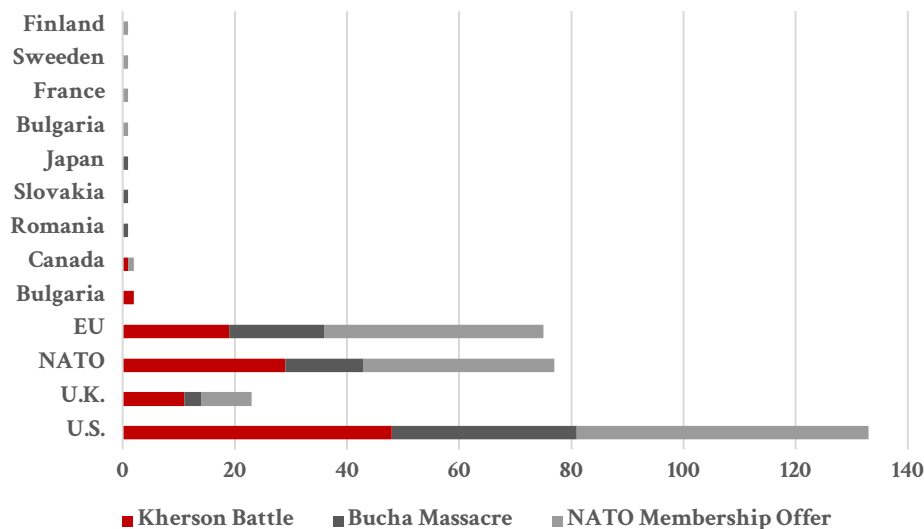

Figure 2: International Rivals Most Frequently Targeted by the Kremlin

Rival Narrative: Variation in Theme Coverage over Time

The prevailing theme of political threats posed by Western adversaries emerges prominently in the examined collection of government tweets. Nevertheless, the temporal distribution and frequency of the anti-rival tweets differ across various events and government agencies.

Bucha Massacre

The Bucha massacre, which occurred on April 4, 2022, resulted in the tragic loss of hundreds of civilian lives, drawing condemnation from both domestic and international communities. Our analysis of a sample of pro-Russia tweets related to this event shows that 52 tweets invoked the "Political Threats Rivals" narrative between March 28 and April 11. As illustrated in *Figure 3*, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) exhibited notably heightened activity in tweeting about threats posed by Russia's western rivals immediately after the event became publicized by the international media. The MoFA posted 23 percent more narratives about rivals on the day of the event and the seven days after, compared with the seven-day period preceding the massacre, with the strongest reaction occurring just two days after international reports about the massacre surfaced. The Russian embassies, on the other hand, were less active, and the massacre did not seem to alter the pattern in the narrative in the way that it did for MoFA.
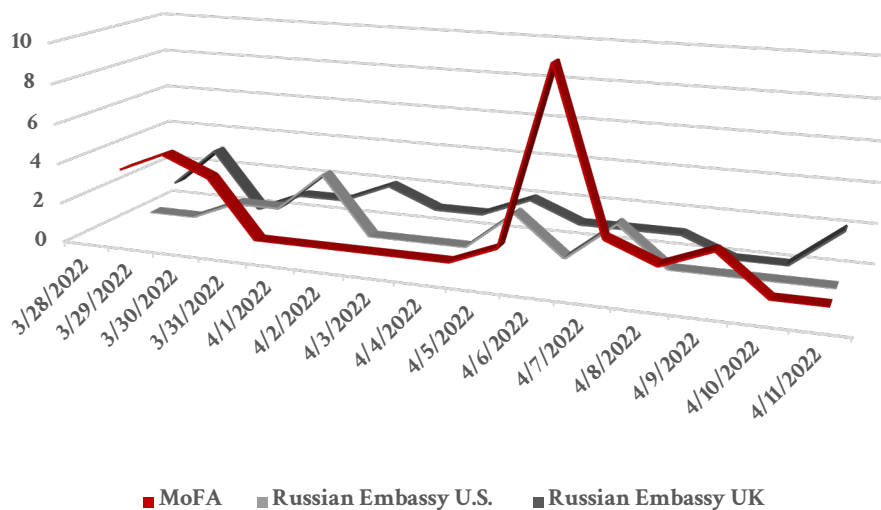

Figure 3: Political Threats Posed by Rivals Narrative Before and After the Bucha Massacre

Kherson Battle

On February 24, 2022, Russian troops launched an invasion of the Kherson Oblast, entering from the south via occupied Crimea. Despite resistance, by late February the Ukrainian troops were forced to withdraw to the outskirts of the city of Kherson, which was later encircled by Russian forces. *Figure 4* depicts change in Russia's narrative focusing on Western rivals disseminated by the Russian embassies in UK and U.S. as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before and after the start of the battle. Russian government accounts referred to Western rivals 76 times between February 17 and March 3, 2022, the period leading up to, during, and following the battle.
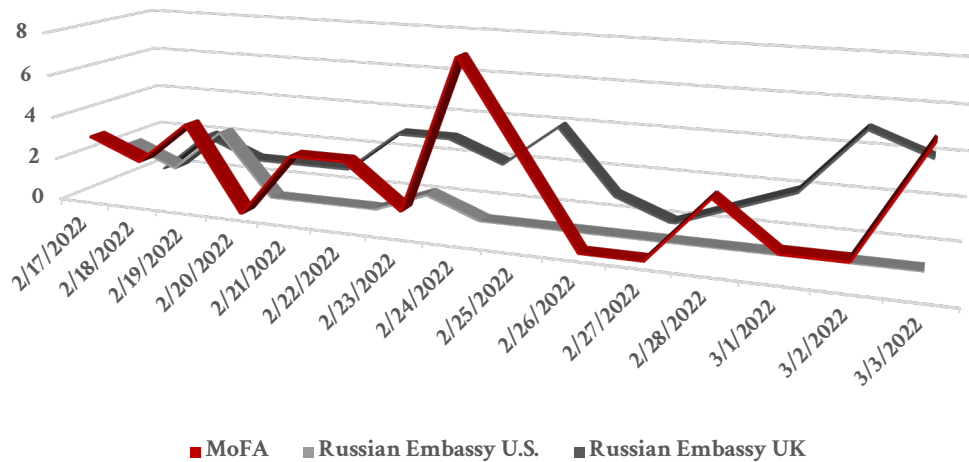
Figure 4: Political Threats Posed by Rivals Narrative Before and After the Kherson Battle

There was a notable surge in pro-Kremlin tweets posted by the MoFA and the Russian Embassy in the UK on February 24, the day of the Kherson Battle's onset, which then declined before picking up again towards the end of our observation period. The MoFA posted 18 percent more narratives about rivals on the day of the battle's onset and the seven days after, compared with the seven-day period preceding the event. Similarly, the Russian Embassy in the UK posted 26 percent more narratives on rivals on the day of and seven days after the event than seven days before it. It is worth noting that the frequency of tweets of both agencies subsided after February 25 but surged back again on February 28, as reports depicting the atrocities committed by Russian troops during the battle began to emerge. There was substantially less activity from the Russian Embassy in the U.S. compared to the active engagement observed from both the Russian Embassy in the UK and Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The seven tweets originating from the embassy that invoked the theme of "Political Threats Rivals" focused primarily on perceived hypocrisy and continuous meddling by the United States, and none were posted after the battle. Overall, these findings suggest that the government had limited interest in shaping perceptions of Americans when the war started, but instead focused more on crafting anti-U.S. narrative aimed at other audiences.

NATO Membership Offer

In response to changing political and security dynamics and with the aim of bolstering collective deterrence against Russia, NATO member states extended invitations to Finland and Sweden to join the alliance during the Madrid summit on June 29, 2022. Analysis of a sample of 68 tweets invoking the pro-Kremlin rival-related narrative between June 22 and July 6 indicates a significant increase in tweets on the day of the summit, followed by a decline immediately after. There was an increase in tweets posted by all three governmental institutions on the day of the summit, but the spike dissipated soon after, suggesting a reactionary rather than a long-term strategic response. The MoFA posted 28 percent more narratives about the rivals on the day of the announcement and seven days after, compared with the seven-day period preceding the event. The Russian Embassy in the UK posted 38 percent more narratives on the rivals on the day of and seven days after the event than seven days before it. Out of the three events, MoFA and the Russian Embassy in the UK reacted most strongly to the announcement of NATO membership invitation. As was the case with previous events, the Russian Embassy in the U.S. was less active than the other government accounts, posting only eight messages containing the theme of rivals, but most of them did come on the day of the announcement and the seven days after.
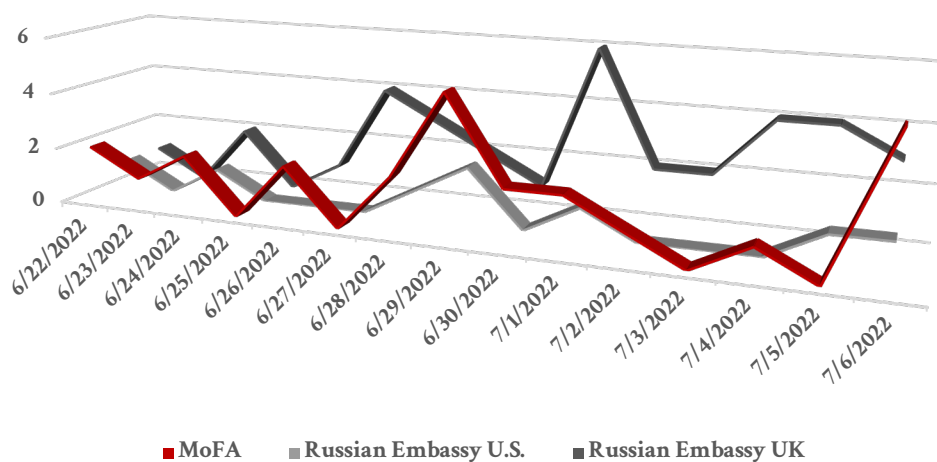
Figure 5: Political Threats Posed by Rivals Narrative Before and After NATO Membership Offer

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The examination of Russian government's tweets related to the Kherson battle, the Bucha massacre, and NATO membership offer extended to Sweden and Finland yields three key findings. First, Russian government accounts have a strong interest in promoting an anti-West narrative. The theme of targeting Russia's rivals, mostly the United States, NATO, EU, and the UK, is dominant across all three events. The fact that Russia's most dominant focus in its Twitter narrative is on Western rivals posing a threat and less so on Ukraine highlights Russia's perception of the Ukraine war as not merely as an armed conflict between two antagonists who are directly involved, but as a bigger struggle against the West. Aside from the dominant theme, we observe differences across the events in how the Russian government has used secondary narratives. The narrative of "Denial" is most associated with the Bucha massacre, whereas the rhetoric focusing on Ukraine as a threat to Russia's physical existence was most frequently associated with the Kherson battle and NATO's announcement of a membership offer to Sweden and Finland.

Second, the analysis shows that Russia's MoFA is the most active of the three governmental institutions we examined. When analyzing a sample of tweets that specifically targeted Western rivals before and after each event, it is this institution that emerged consistently as the most reactive. Thus, monitoring MoFA's online activities might be of relevance in the context of great power competition, especially when significant geopolitical events take place. Furthermore, rather limited activity from Russia's Embassy in the U.S. that we found in our sample of tweets suggests that official messages are geared primarily towards international audiences other than Americans.

Finally, the analysis shows that MoFA was most active on the day of or immediately after the occurrence of each event, suggesting that significant geopolitical events trigger a response on Twitter. However, because the reactiveness dissipates rather quickly (one to two days), this demonstrates that Russian government's accounts are aiming to create noise, distract the audiences with alternative interpretations of events, and introduce doubt or uncertainty about the meaning of events. This is likely an approach designed to reduce immediate international costs from the onset of events rather than a strategy to change opinions and beliefs.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

ABOUT START

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is a university-based research, education and training center comprised of an international network of scholars committed to the scientific study of terrorism, responses to terrorism and related phenomena. Led by the University of Maryland, START is a Department of Homeland Security Emeritus Center of Excellence that is supported by multiple federal agencies and departments. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and effects of terrorism; the effectiveness and impacts of counterterrorism and CVE; and other matters of global and national security. For more information, visit **www.start.umd.edu** or contact START at **infostart@umd.edu**.

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