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ASYMMETRIC THREATS ANALYSIS CENTER

The Impact of Events in the War in Ukraine on Pro-Russian Narratives: The Case of Weibo and Telegram

Dr. Elizabeth Radziszewski

START
NATIONAL CONSORTIUM FOR THE
STUDY OF TERRORISM AND RESPONSES TO TERRORISM

APPLIED RESEARCH LABORATORY FOR
INTELLIGENCE
AND SECURITY

UNIVERSITY OF
MARYLAND

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author of this report is Dr. Elizabeth Radziszewski of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland. Sean Doody, Salma Bouziani, Cora Caton, Marie Mach, Angela Ren, Julian Gonzales-Poirier, Anna Miskelley provided valuable assistance in the development of this report.

Questions about this report should be directed to Dr. Elizabeth Radziszewski at eradzisz@umd.edu.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

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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.

ABOUT ARLIS

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Introduction

This report is a companion study to START's 2024 report, The Impact of Events in the War in Ukraine on Pro-Russian Narratives: The Case of Twitter,[1] which explored pro-Russian narratives in connection with three significant events in the war in 2022: the onset of the battle of Kherson, the Bucha massacre of civilians, and NATO's announcement of membership offer to Sweden and Finland. That report reviewed existing insights on pro-Russian narratives—a tool of irregular warfare that a state can rely on to gain an edge over an adversary—and developed a set of testable hypotheses linked to the use of various themes in messages on social media platforms in the context of three events, with specific focus on expected changes in those themes before the onset of the event and after. The report also presented findings from statistical analysis in the context of Twitter. This study tests these hypotheses by focusing on Weibo and Telegram and concludes with a discussion of differences in the evolution of pro-Russian rhetoric between these social media platforms and Twitter.

Like in the case of Twitter, strategic narratives[2] and messages designed to build support for Russia's war effort could be embedded in Weibo and Telegram with opportunities to reduce costs associated with the invasion and shield Russia from domestic and international criticism from key allies. Therefore, these narratives can be useful in shaping audience perception of the causes and consequences of the conflict and in shifting agendas in a way that promotes Russia's geopolitical interests.[3] Weibo, which is mainly used by Chinese audiences, enables Russia to build support among the Chinese public to align their interests with those of the Chinese government in maintaining a much stronger relationship with Putin as the war began and to avoid fallout from sensitive developments such as the one coming from the massacre in Bucha. Past research shows that Chinese leaders are sensitive to domestic audiences and prefer an alignment between public opinion and their own foreign policy intent. When this alignment is missing, the government has historically tried to engage in media campaigns to reduce it.[4]

Disseminating pro-Russian narratives on Chinese social media platform, thus, helps to foster an alignment between the public and the Chinese government's intent to a build a stronger relationship with Russia during the war in Ukraine. Weibo, recent research shows, has been used to amplify the headlines from Chinese mainstream media.[5] This suggests a potential benefit to Russian supporters—individual users, Russian state media's Chinese language accounts and Chinese media[6]—for spreading pro-Russian content on Weibo in generating this alignment especially around significant events that have the potential to affect change in public views the most.

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[1] Radziszewski and Doody (2024).

[2] Bradshaw et al. (2024) define strategic narratives as "means of influence that construct a sense of shared understanding."

[3] Ibid (2024).

[4] Wang (2021).

[5] Tao and Peng (2023).

[6] Yang (2022).

Telegram is likely to be valued by Russia for the opportunity it could create for reducing domestic costs related to the war given the platform's popularity among Russians who are its second most prolific users.[7] While Telegram was used to disseminate pro-Russian views prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russian authorities have explicitly promoted the use of Telegram to fellow citizens shortly after the war started.[8] The use of Telegram could also give Russia a chance to strengthen its position among international audiences, especially its other valuable ally, India. In fact, users from India have the most dominant presence on Telegram.[9] Therefore, focusing on these social media platforms in addition to Twitter offers a chance to examine changes in the posts' narratives before and after the onset of events to observe if the patterns also vary depending on the platform.

The next section highlights key hypotheses introduced in the original report. I then discuss the methodology for collecting and identifying Weibo and Telegram data that forms the basis for testing the propositions. Next, I highlight key results from statistical analysis and compare these findings with insights gained from the original report. Lastly, I discuss the implications of this study for policy development.

Key Hypotheses

The original report argued that when states initiate a military conflict, they will seek to build domestic and international support for their war effort and reduce costs associated with specific developments in the conflict that could threaten that support. Pro-Russian narratives, the report noted, can be considered as one of the tools that can help to offset these potential costs and can be employed with greater frequency to shape domestic and international perceptions because messaging is relatively inexpensive to implement. With the generative AI revolution in full swing, the implementation costs are likely to go down significantly.[10] Furthermore, Russia already has extensive experience conducting information operations on social media and has evolved in its approaches,[11] which means that it can leverage various communication platforms on the internet to advance its interests. At the same time, not all events in a war generate the same type and severity of costs. Thus, pro-Russian narratives may vary in their intensity and content depending on the potential of the event to generate domestic and international costs. Below I review the logic of the three hypotheses that were featured in the original report, with additional insights that consider some modifications to one of the hypotheses based on the uniqueness of Weibo in that it is a platform predominantly used by one type of audience, the Chinese public.

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[7] Telegram users by country statistics come from WorldPopulationReview. com (2023).

[8] Buziashvili et al. (2024).

[9] WordPopulationReview.com (2023).

[10] Kuper (2023).

[11] For a literature review on this topic please see START's report on pro-Russian narratives on Twitter (Radziszewski and Doody 2024).

Event Type 1: The Onset of War (The Battle of Kherson)

The report argued that Russian government and its core supporters would be especially concerned about minimizing domestic costs at the onset of the battle of Kherson, which started the war in Ukraine in February 2022. The importance of this was underscored by two observations. Most Russians have close connections to Ukrainians making it harder to justify a full-on invasion, and at the beginning of the war close to half of the population expressed moderate or no support for the war. Strengthening domestic support, the reported further argued, would require invoking the emotions of fear in the domestic population against the out-group, prompting domestic audiences to then side with the in-group and perceive the government as the one capable of offering protection.

A threat-based narrative that pits an in-group against an out-group may not have the same emotional impact on international audiences as it does on domestic audiences whose countries are directly at war, but it can help justify the invasion. On Chinese Weibo, for example, that justification mattered as there were voices on the platform that were critical of Russia's invasion because of its violation of the norm of sovereignty, the very same norm that the Chinese government has for years primed domestic audiences to cherish.[12] By portraying Ukraine and its move closer to the West as a threat to Russia's existence, there is an implicit link to the idea of self-defense as a justification for an invasion, a concept that could resonate with some segment of international audiences and that could be exploited to benefit Russia. Therefore, the key expectation was that the onset of the battle would be linked to an increase in narratives that invoke fear in domestic audiences and acceptance from international audiences.

1)   *There is likely to be greater increase in the number of pro-Russian narratives with themes of physical and cultural threat posed by Ukraine after the onset of the battle of Kherson than before.*

Event Type 2: Civilian Massacre (Bucha Massacre)

The massacre of civilians in Bucha had the potential to generate both domestic and international costs, posing concerns about losing support from Russians with more moderate attitudes towards the war and India, Russia's democratic ally. Additionally, as hundreds of Chinese Weibo users took the risk and denounced the massacre on the platform,[13] it is also likely that Russian supporters might have been concerned about reducing fallout that could come from Chinese domestic audiences' questioning of Russia's involvement in Ukraine and their country's growing cooperation upon hearing about the killings of women and children. While Weibo users were divided on Russia's invasion of Ukraine when the battle of Kherson began,[14] there was stronger outcry in the context of Bucha.

The original report noted that a shift in narratives in posts would occur to reduce a possible fallout from international reports of the massacre, and that shift would include an increase in a more diverse spectrum of narratives to connect with various audiences. For example, while portraying Ukraine as a threat to

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[12] Feng (2022).
[13] ibid (2022).
[14] Associated Press (2022).

Russia's physical existence in posts might resonate with a more hawkish segment of the domestic population and international audiences, invoking this theme might not work on moderate audiences who are more likely to feel grief for the victims rather than see them as a threat. For more moderate audiences the goal is to shift the blame away from Russia, which can be achieved either by denying its involvement in the massacre or directing audiences' attention towards something else through the tactic of agenda setting.[15] Thus, the key expectation was that international reporting of the massacre would be linked to an increase in a diverse type of narratives, that would resonate with moderate and hawkish domestic audiences and reduce potential concerns from domestic audiences of India and China.

> 2) *There is likely to be greater increase in the number of pro-Russian narratives with themes of denial, a theme of positive gestures, themes of physical and cultural threats posed by Ukraine, and themes of Western rivals' threat after the Bucha massacre than before.*

Event Type 3: International Political Event Undertaken by the Rival (NATO Membership Offer)

The report also argued that an international event like NATO's announcement of a membership offer to Finland and Sweden in April 2022 had the potential to alter the balance of power between enemies, pushing some states to consider shifting their support of Russia's war in Ukraine and instead joining the side (in this case Western democracies) whose power seemed to be expanding. For a state like India that has maintained a delicate balance of cultivating a close relationship with both Russia and the U.S., this expansion could have introduced more caution into India's relationship with Russia. While India has maintained a more hands-off approach when dealing with NATO historically, the alliance's growing outreach to Indo-Pacific states has presented India with a new perspective to expand its relationship with NATO.[16]

To reduce the fallout from NATO's expansion, pro-Russian rhetoric, the report noted, could be designed to present NATO and Russia's other rivals as threats to global security and/or highlight such rivals' internal weaknesses. This could create uncertainty about NATO's expansion, prompting international audiences to, at the very least, question the meaning of this event instead of perceiving it as a win for the alliance. In fact, Russia's past influence operations have been known to focus on sowing doubt and confusion.[17] However, ramping up pro-Russian narratives would be less useful in the context of Weibo. Unlike in the case of civilian massacre that has a stronger psychological impact on people, this event is unlikely to generate an emotional response from Chinese domestic audiences and risk public-state misalignment on China's foreign policy that would not be favorable to Russia. The Chinese Communist Party has cultivated anti-NATO propaganda at least since 2019 with the intensification of the Sino-U.S. rivalry,[18] which suggests that public-state misalignment gap when it comes to NATO would be minimal.

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[15] For insights on Russia's past efforts to use agenda setting to influence perceptions, see Ehrett et al. (2022).
[16] Mohan (2022).
[17] For example: Bastos and Farkas (2019).
[18] Shetler-Jones (2023).

Without the gap, there would be limited interest in ramping up pro-Russian narratives in connection with NATO enlargement to shape the views of Chinese users on Weibo. This leads to the following modification of the original hypothesis from START's Twitter report.

> *3a) There is likely to be greater increase in the number of pro-Russian narratives with a theme of Western rivals' threat to global security after NATO membership offer to Sweden and Finland was formally announced than before in the context of Telegram.*

> *3b) The announcement of NATO membership offer to Sweden and Finland is less likely to impact the pattern in pro-Russian narratives with a theme of Western rivals' threat to global security on Weibo.*

Data & Methodology

Collecting data for Weibo posed a challenge and has important limitations. Weibo does not have an English-language API with functionality like Twitter's Academic Historical Search API. Thus, the study used secondary data source of Weibo messages collected by researchers from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.[19]

Fung and Ji (2022) built their Weibo dataset by manually constructing a list of the top 120 public user profiles who were posting content about the war in Ukraine on the platform in the early months of the war. The authors used the Weibo-scraper Python package to scrape messages from these accounts, filtering on the following keywords: 俄罗斯 (Russia); 乌克兰 (Ukraine); **普京** (Putin); 泽连斯基 (Zelenskyy);**基辅** (Kiev); **北约** (NATO); 车臣 (Chechen); **俄乌** (Russia-Ukraine); **俄方** (Russian side); 乌方 (Ukraine side); **俄军** (Russia army); 乌军 (Ukraine army); **哈尔科夫** (Kharkiv); **敖德萨** (Odesa); and **切尔诺贝** (Chernobyl). Their dataset contains observations that cover the time span needed for this study's focus on the Battle of Kherson event and the Bucha Massacre event but does not cover the period surrounding NATO's announcement of membership offer to Sweden and Finland. To augment this limitation, START's research team additionally collected all messages for the Russian Government's official Russian Embassy in Beijing Weibo account, @俄罗斯驻华大使馆. Like Fung and Ji (2022), the research team used the Weibo-scraper Python package to write a custom scraping script that downloaded messages from the Russian Embassy account over the time surrounding NATO's announcement. Due to a small number of observations for the Russian Embassy in Beijing Weibo account, every observation for each event was coded without keyword filtering.

The research team also collected data from Telegram. Telegram is based around channels that are run by organizations or individuals. While publicly accessible, these channels must be joined by users and do not exist in a streaming timeline format like Twitter. Messages in these channels are communicated by the channel owner and passively consumed by channel subscribers.

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[19] Fung and Ji (2022). The raw data can be downloaded here:
https://uofi.app.box.com/s/qn99omy53muyi9a4z72s4qktx3h3gzvz

The analysis focuses on four important channels with ties to the Kremlin: RIA Novosti (RIAN), a Russian state-owned news agency (rian_ru); the TASS state-run news agency (tass_agency); the Telegram channel of Maria Zakharova, the Director of the Information and Press Department of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MariaVladimirovnaZakharova); and the channel of Vladimir Solovyov (sometimes stylized Vladimir Soloviev), an influential Russian propagandist and TV news anchor (SolovievLive).

The research team used Bellingcat's fork of the snscrape Python library to collect the messages. Custom Python scripts were written to send requests to each channel, scrape the HTML content of the messages, and store the results in new-line delimited JSON objects.

For both Weibo and Telegram extraction, messages were filtered by each event's observation period and by any keyword from a list of keywords in each event observation period. For the Battle of Kherson, the keywords were **Херсон** and **Kherson** (Telegram) and **赫尔松** and **Kherson** (Weibo); for the Bucha Massacre, the keywords were **Буча** and **Bucha** (Telegram) and **恰**, **布查** and **Bucha** (Weibo); and for the NATO event, the keywords were **Финляндия**, **Швеция**, **НАТО**, and **NATO** (Telegram). We included both uppercase and lowercase variants of the terms in each query. Coders then analyzed random batches of messages sampled after this filtering process took place. This was necessary given the time-consuming nature of coding, which required translation from Russian to English and from Chinese to English of long messages.

Coders manually translated Weibo posts from Chinese to English and Telegram posts from Russian to English then coded each posting for the presence/absence of specific pro-Russian themes, as the research team did in START's Twitter study. Each post was coded for the following themes: references to Ukraine posing physical threats to Russia; any Russian responses to physical threats posed by Ukraine; references to Ukraine posing cultural threats to Russia; any Russian responses to cultural threats posed by Ukraine; references to Ukraine posing a political threat to Russia; denials of Russian massacre of civilians and/or other actions Russia has been accused of; any references to Russia's positive gestures towards Ukraine; references to Russia's military superiority; references to Ukraine's military inferiority; and references to threats to global security posed by any of Russia's rivals other than Ukraine. This study examines expectations related to the subset of these pro-Kremlin themes. Specifically, the statistical analysis focuses on the following themes, coded as dichotomous variables.

1) physical threats posed by Ukraine to Russia and/or Russian responses to those threats (An example includes a Weibo post like this one, translated from Chinese to English: *In recent years, the Ukrainian government has been accused of tolerating Nazi ideology, and the infamous "Azov Battalion" has been absorbed into the Ukrainian military, becoming part of their regular forces. On December 16, 2021, the United Nations General Assembly once again adopted a resolution titled "Combating glorification of Nazism and neo-Nazism," submitted by Russia and 30 other countries. The resolution received support from 130 countries, while 49 countries abstained. Only the United States and Ukraine voted against it. RT released a video exposing the atrocities committed by the Ukrainian government*

forces in Donbas, where victims included elderly people and children. Many of them were left unidentified and buried in mass graves. #Zelensky Willing to Engage in Direct Dialogue with Putin# [Link])

2) cultural threats posed by Ukraine to Russia and/or Russian responses to those threats

(An example includes a fragment from a Telegram post like this one, translated from Russian to English: *And a continuation. 🔼...Russophobic Nazism plays a special role in the Ukrainian political landscape. So the organization "Carpathian Sich" openly declares "hate for the Russian world." Moreover, this is absurd, there's no nation or nationality closer than the Russians or the Belarusians. In this of course, are ultra right wing innovators. At the same time, Carpathian Sich maintains friendly relations with its partners - extremely radical, on the verge of extremism - organizations in Europe. Another anti-Russian organization, C14, openly calls for reprisals against ethnic Russians and Russian citizens. Many of their volunteer fighters are supporters of members of C14. The level of aggression and inclination towards violence of these extremists highlights the fact that its members are one of those suspected in the murder of the journalist and writer Oles Buzina. As for the merging of Neo-Nazis and law enforcement agencies - on the internet there's evidence, including the admission by members of C14 - that money for their "events," the radicals received money from the SBU. A large and extensive network of Nazi structures in Ukraine allows many of them to even get their own kind of "specialization". Something like this happened during the rise of National Socialism in Germany. And so, radicals from "Tradition and Order," are responsible for the attacks on monuments and buildings with connections to Russia and the Soviet Union, and the group "Fraikor" for attacks on members of the LGBT community and left leaning youth. In the West, as a rule, for some reason they continue to look calmly at such a deviation from attitudes towards human rights that are traditional in Europe...)*

3) Russia's rivals[20] (other than Ukraine) posing threats, such as threats to global security

(An example includes a Telegram post like this one, translated from Russian to English: *On February 25 a meeting between the leaders of the NATO member-countries took place virtually. In every possible way they demonstrated their support for an "independent, peaceful and democratic" Ukraine - a country, that with the connivance of the West, has become a hotbed of Nazi ideology. Representatives of the alliance hypocritically announced, that "the foundation of peace on the European continent has essentially been destroyed." And by whose hands was this done? Weren't NATO countries silently watching the US destroy the ABM Treaty? They stood aside when Washington unilaterally withdrew from the INF Treaty. They allowed the Americans to refuse to participate in the OST, which devalued it as an effective mechanism for controlling military activities. Didn't NATO's allies participate in the bombing of Yugoslavia, the invasion of Libya, and interfere in Iraq? For 20 years they led the situation in Afghanistan to total degradation, and leaving there, left their weapons worth billions of dollars. Before calling on Russian to answer for the demilitarization and denazification operation, the countries of the Northern Atlantic bloc must answer for their own military adventures, as well as their inaction in encouraging the Kiev regime to a peaceful settlement of the Donbass problem. For eight years, the countries of the West have impassively watched the murder and abuse of thousands of civilians in the South-East of Ukraine.*)

4) denial of actions that Russia is accused of committing

(An example includes the following Weibo post translated from Chinese to English: *#MilitaryNews #More "Bucha events" will be created as long as Europe and the US need them! Throughout history, many events that determine the course of history have been manufactured, and the truth often doesn't matter. The only important factor is whether or not it serves the purpose of manipulating the event at the time. If the event is to the benefit the manipulator, small things can be magnified until the crowd is outraged, and finally the party that controls public opinion reaps the fruits. If*

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[20] We considered any actor that opposed Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a rival.

the matter is unfavorable to the manipulator, the big thing can be infinitely reduced, and the Nazis can be transformed into loving people. Russia and Ukraine have more than four hundred thousand combatants, currently civilian deaths are in the thousands, a major war of this scale, if replaced by the Americans to fight, there will be how many civilian casualties, we all know. The Russian army fights carefully, their war is mainly political, and they do not want to have an impact on civilian life - it is the world's general consensus. But how can this civilized country all of a sudden become a mass murderer? I do not believe it, but it does not matter. We can see that as soon as this incident came out, before it was investigated, Western sanctions began to increase, which shows that the investigation is not important, what is important is to have such an incident, of course, if this incident is not enough to explain the problem, create a few more similar incidents, is it not too easy to create a few similar incidents in a big war of this scale? The most pathetic is the Ukrainian civilians, the Russians came, they cannot fight with their bare hands, and the Russian army left, they will be suspected of collaborating with the enemy and the Ukrainian police will do the "cleaning", and then the Russian army will be framed.)

5) Russia's positive gestures towards Ukraine, other Western rivals, and/or contiguous states (An example includes this Telegram post translated from Russian to English: *Russia immediately responded to Kyiv's request for a humanitarian corridor from Mariupol, but the neo-Nazis are not letting anyone out, Putin said.*)

Because the posts occur over a two-week period, incorporating the dynamic elements of the data is crucial to capture the underlying data generating process and determine the effect of the events. For this analysis, Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) modeling[21] is an appropriate choice. It is a method developed for modeling time series and is useful where there are under 50 observations to analyze, as is the case here.[22]

ARIMA allows to model time-series data while accounting for potential autocorrelation, trends, and seasonality in the data. Given that this study is interested in exploring the difference between two time periods (days 1-7 vs. days 8-15), ARIMA allowed for the incorporation of this time-dependent structure. The model is also useful for handling the non-stationarity and any underlying patterns in the daily averages.

A standard practice suggested in development of ARIMA/ARMA modeling was used in this study.[23] The first step was to examine stationarity using the autocorrelation function (ACF) and partial autocorrelation function (PACF) which produce plots identifying spikes in the data and aiding in determining the order of the models and selecting lags. If necessary, time series variables were detrended or differenced to achieve stationarity in the residuals. Number of lags determined the autoregressive order, whether the model was differenced to achieve stationarity determined whether it was integrated, and the influence of the residuals determined the moving average order. Maximum likelihood methods were used to estimate model parameters (coefficients for the AR and MA terms), followed by model diagnostics to ensure white noise residuals (re-evaluation of the ACF/PACF, Ljung-Box Test, and Augmented Dickey Fuller). This process ensured that the model was properly fitted for the analysis.

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[21] Box and Jenkins (1970). Since the data is count-based it has been aggregated to turn it into a pure time series.
[22] Yanovitzky and VanLear (2007).
[23] Box et al. (1976). I thank Cora Caton for valuable assistance with the analysis.

Analysis & Findings

The data shows a total of 516 pro-Kremlin Weibo posts in the study's sample of 1,511 observations that matched the search for relevant events. The pro-Kremlin posts constitute 34.1 percent of all the original posts. Surprisingly, this number is much higher than the 11.5 percentage of pro-Kremlin tweets that was found in START's previous study on Twitter, suggesting pro-Kremlin supporters' strong interest in reducing potential discord between Chinese public opinion and the PRC's official support of Russia. The data also shows a higher percentage of pro-Kremlin messages on Telegram in comparison to Twitter but smaller than on Weibo. Specifically, in the study's Telegram sample of 1,208 observations there were 263 pro-Kremlin posts, which constitute 21.8 percent of all Telegram observations.

In the context of Weibo, the smallest number of pro-Russian themes that was noted,[24] regardless of theme type, is associated with NATO membership offer event (only 12 times that a pro-Russian theme was mentioned in posts the day of the event and seven days post-event[25]); the civilian massacre has the most (671 on the day of the event and seven days after). The onset of the battle has 99 pro-Russian themes on the day of the event and seven days after. The biggest spike in pro-Russian themes in posts occurred in the context of the massacre, with 96 percent of such themes appearing on the day of or after the global media reported on the massacre.

In the context of Telegram, the smallest number of pro-Russian themes, regardless of theme type, is associated with the onset of the battle of Kherson (only 33 times that a pro-Russian theme was mentioned on the day of the event and seven days after), while the civilian massacre in Bucha has the most (104) and is closely followed by the NATO announcement event (103). The biggest increase in pro-Russian themes in posts occurred in the context of the NATO event. Sixty three percent of pro-Russian narratives in posts surrounding this event occurred on or after the event.

I now focus on examining the validity of the study's key expectations by looking at the statistical significance of the events' impact on the frequency of specific themes.

Battle of Kherson

Weibo

The onset of the battle of Kherson triggered an increase in pro-Russian narratives that focus on physical threats posed by Ukraine and the ways in which Russia responds/should respond to these threats. The impact of this intervention (battle onset) on the shift in frequency of the "physical threats" theme is statistically significant at 0.1 level (Table 1). This theme constitutes 17.4 percent of all pro-Russian narratives coded for this event, most of which are coming on the first day of the event and after (Figure

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

[25] This is expected given the sampling limitation with respect to this event, with posts extracted only from Russian Embassy in Beijing.

1). However, references to Ukraine posing a threat to Russia's culture and/or responses to such a threat were small surrounding all the events (only six), which suggests that this theme was not seen as particularly useful in promoting pro-Russian interests.[26] Thus, I find partial support for the expectation that a battle's onset is likely to be associated with an increase in narratives of "physical threats" posed by Ukraine to Russia and in doing so justify the violation of another state's sovereignty.

In addition to confirming the hypothesis about references to physical threats, the analysis uncovered an unexpected finding. After the battle of Kherson's onset, there was a statistically significant increase in the number of pro-Kremlin narratives emphasizing Russia's positive gestures towards Ukraine (Table 2). As Figure 1 shows, there is an increase in the frequency of the "positive gestures" theme, from three occurring immediately before the event to 27 on and after the event. In fact, "positive gestures" is the most dominant pro-Russian theme in the analysis of this event. An increase in postings with this type of narrative, coupled with an increase in postings containing the theme of Ukraine posing a threat to Russia's existence, suggests that messages are portraying Russia as a victim (of Ukraine's threat to its existence) and a positive member of the global community that is open to negotiations and eager to help civilians rather than being an aggressor. There were only eight messages with a theme of "denial" posted on and after the battle's onset and 10 related to depicting Western rivals as threats to global security (Figure 1). There is no statistical significance noted for changes in the pattern of these postings' occurrence (Table 3 and Table 4). Overall, the findings suggest the presence of a two-dimensional dynamic that builds international support through different types of narratives. It is worth nothing, however, that a variety of pro-Russian themes in Weibo posts is nevertheless less diverse than what was uncovered in START's report on pro-Russian messages on Twitter for the same event.

Table 1: Event Effects on Physical Threats

	ARIMA
Battle of Kherson	1.40*
	(0.63)

Robust standard errors in parentheses

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

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[26] Due to a very small number of observations, I do not include this variable in the statistical analysis.

	ARIMA
Battle of Kherson	2.66**
	(0.99)

Robust standard errors in parentheses

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 3: Event Effects on Denial

	ARIMA
Battle of Kherson	0.61
	(0.87)

Robust standard errors in parentheses

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 4: Event Effects on Political Rivals

|	ARIMA
Battle of Kherson	1.00
	(0.66)

Robust standard errors in parentheses

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 1: Theme frequency before, during and after the battle's onset: Physical threats/response to physical threats; Cultural threats/response to cultural threats; Denial; Positive gestures; Rivals' (other than Ukraine) threat to global stability
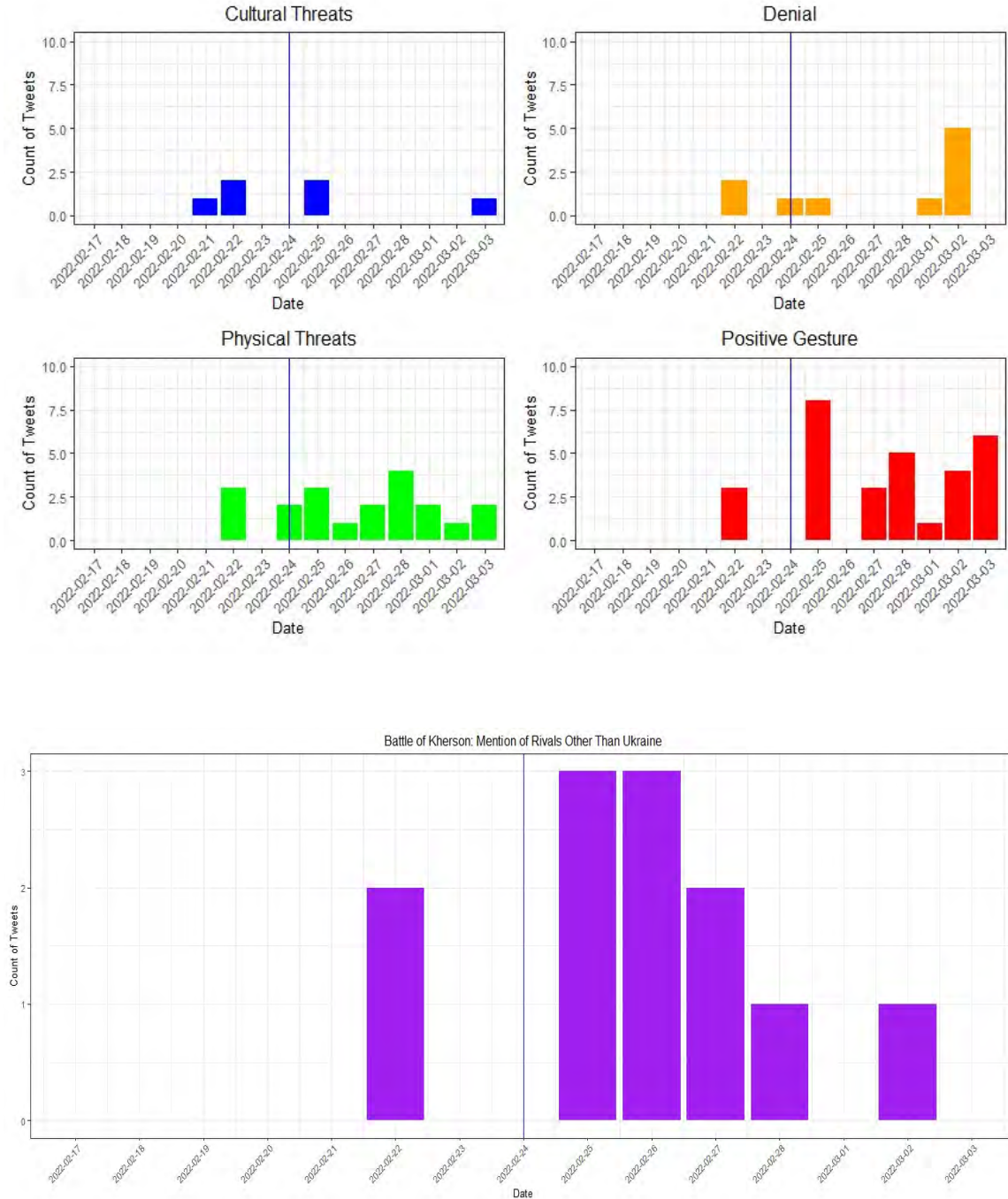
I do not find support for the hypothesis that the onset of the battle of Kherson is associated with an increase in pro-Russian themes focusing on a physical threat posed by Ukraine to Russia and/or Russia's responses to such a threat based on four influential pro-Russian Telegram accounts analyzed in this study. The number of posts with such a theme is very low (14), with eight coming after the event's onset (Figure 2). There is no statistically significant change in the pattern of posts related to the event (Table 5). The data only has one post with a theme of cultural threats posed by Ukraine to Russia and/or Russia's responses to such a threat.[27] The numbers are also low for other themes with no major variation in pattern across time (Figure 2).[28] The lack of statistical significance is surprising (Table 6 and Table 7), especially considering the findings related to Weibo and those published in START's Twitter study. While the sample used for Telegram analysis is based on only four accounts, nevertheless all these accounts either have direct or indirect ties to the Kremlin and thus are strongly pro-Russia. Even though Russians are the second most frequent users of Telegram, there is limited evidence to support the idea that pro-Russian narratives focusing on physical threats and several other themes analyzed in this study proliferated extensively on the platform's influential accounts following the battle's onset to reduce potential domestic costs.

Table 5: Event Effects on Physical Threats

	ARIMA
Battle of Kherson	0.80
	(0.52)

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

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[27] I did not conduct any statistical test for this theme given that there was only one observation noted.

[28] I did not conduct statistical analysis for the "positive gestures" theme due to a low number of observations.

Table 6: Event Effects on Denial

	ARIMA
Battle of Kherson	-0.27
	(0.33)

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 7: Event Effects on Political Rivals

|	ARIMA
Battle of Kherson	0.50
	(0.47)

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 2: Theme frequency before, during and after the battle's onset: Physical threats/response to physical threats; Cultural threats/response to cultural threats; Denial; Positive gestures; Rivals' (other than Ukraine) threat to global stability
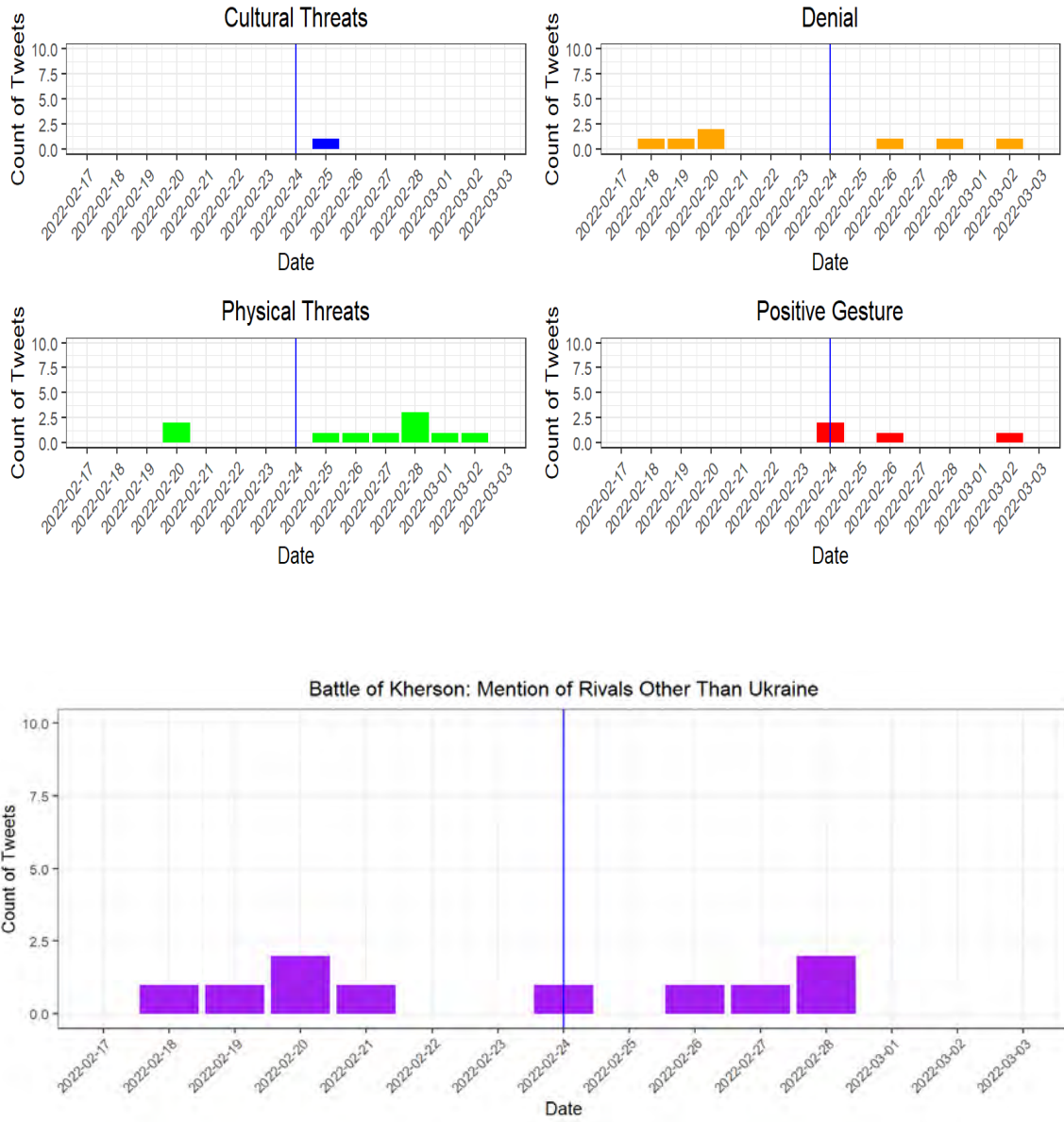
Bucha Massacre

Weibo

I find support for the expectation that to reduce fallout from a civilian massacre, pro-Russian supporters would ramp up the narratives of denial, positive gestures, and threats from Western rivals on social media. The event has a statistically significant impact on increasing the volume of such themes (Tables 8-11); the impact is especially pronounced for "denial" (Table 8). "Denial" is also the most dominant theme that emerged when the massacre was first reported by the global media and seven days after (Figure 3); it constitutes 41.2 percent of all pro-Russian themes on and post-onset of the event. The largest increase occurred on the day that the media first reported the event (80 mentions of this narrative) and the day after (70 mentions). On the third day there is a decrease to 30 mentions, which then decreases more over the course of the next few days. The "denial" theme occurred, on average, 35 times per day on and after the reports of the massacre appeared. This suggests an immediate but also short-term response to the fallout coming from Russia's actions in Bucha. This is also a very similar trend to the one that was noted in START's report on pro-Russian messages in the context of Twitter, albeit at a lower magnitude in terms of the theme's appearance in posts.

The event also had a statistically significant impact on increasing the volume of posts with a "positive gestures" theme ($p < 0.001$) (Table 9). The data shows that only one such theme was detected before the massacre was first reported by the global media while 51 were present on the day of or after (Figure 3). The "positive gestures" theme appeared on average six times per day on and after the reports of the massacre emerged.

The focus on physical threats is also present in the context of Bucha, and there is an increase in this narrative after the massacre that is statistically significant ($p < 0.1$) (Table 10). However, the impact is smaller than for the "denial" theme. On average, there were 11 mentions per day of Ukraine posing a physical threat to Russia and/or how Russia should respond to this threat at the time when the event was first reported by the global media and over the next seven days (Figure 3). The event had no meaningful impact on increasing narratives about Ukraine posing a cultural threat to Russia and/or how Russia should respond to this threat. As the theme occurred only five times during the entire span of observations, the sample was too small to conduct a meaningful statistical analysis of this theme.

Lastly, there was a spike in the narratives that link Russia's rivals (other than Ukraine) to global instability post Bucha. This Bucha-driven increase is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and demonstrates an attempt to distract international audiences from the global media's focus on this crime (Table 11). The theme was mentioned, on average, 12.5 times per day over the course of eight days (the event day and seven days after), while there were only six times this narrative occurred before the event (Figure 3). The dissemination of this theme appears quite important as it is the second most dominant theme in the analysis after the "denial" narrative.

Overall, the analysis shows a more intense and multidimensional proliferation of pro-Kremlin narratives that could help Russia reduce possible domestic and international costs associated with its significant human rights abuses. It resembles the type of approach that was noted in START's report on pro-Russian messages in the context of Twitter, though on a smaller scale. The use of "denial," "positive gestures," and "threats posed by rivals (other than Ukraine)" speaks to the idea that disassociation with civilian killings and/or distracting audiences matters for avoiding the alienation of those who feel empathy for the targeting of innocents. The use of narratives related to physical threats posed by Ukraine suggests attempts at justification in the name of survival, which could resonate with more hawkish supporters.

Table 8: Event Effects on Denial

	ARIMA
Bucha Massacre	32.27***
	(8.68)

Robust standard errors in parentheses

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 9: Event Effects on Positive Gestures

	ARIMA
Bucha Massacre	6.29***
	(8.68)

Robust standard errors in parentheses

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 10: Event Effects on Physical Threats

	ARIMA
Bucha Massacre	9.27***
	(2.24)

Robust standard errors in parentheses

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 11: Event Effects on Political Rivals

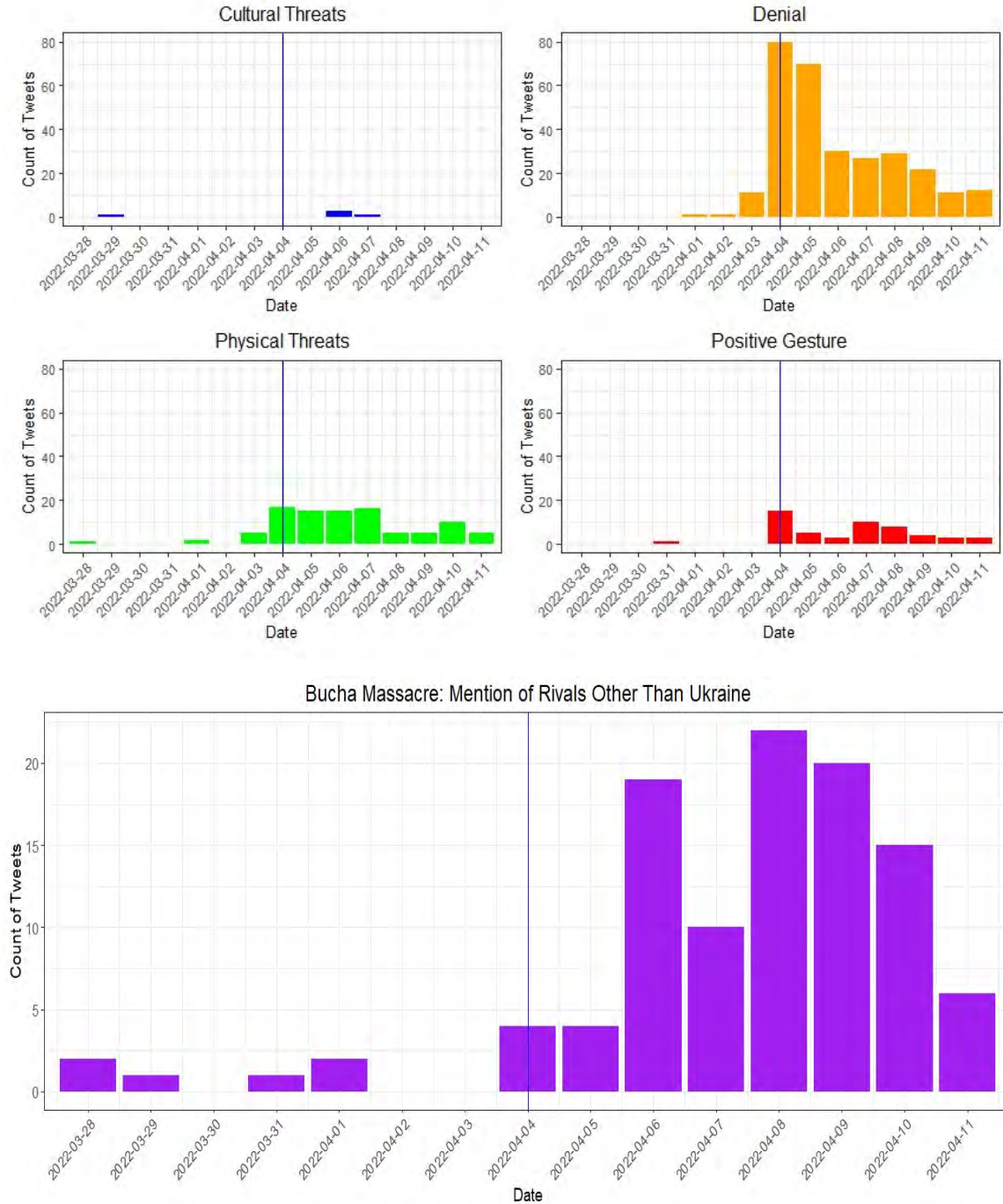|	ARIMA
Bucha Massacre	10.13***
	(3.10)

Robust standard errors in parentheses

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 3: Theme frequency before, during and after the massacre: Physical threats/ response to physical threats; Cultural threats/ response to cultural threats; Denial; Positive gestures; Rivals' (other than Ukraine) threat to global stability

Telegram

The analysis does not show support for the idea that the occurrence of the event had a statistically significant impact on changing the frequency of any of the pro-Russian themes in the posts that I analyzed (Tables 12-15). There is an increase in the appearance of the "denial" theme on and after the massacre (from an average of two messages with such a theme per day before the event, and four on and after), but the largest number of posts with a "denial" theme appeared the day before global media's reports of the massacre emerged (Figure 4). While this development might be surprising, it is nevertheless likely because local conversations about the crime were already taking place; thus, social media influencers might have started to deny its occurrence before the story was picked up and widely shared by the international media. Given the uniqueness of Telegram in its extensive use by Russians in comparison to platforms such as Twitter and Weibo, I took into consideration that Telegram influencers would be among the first to learn about the massacre. To account for this, I also conducted the analysis shifting the date of the event from April 4th when it was widely disseminated by the global media to April 3rd. This change, however, did not alter the results.

While an increase was also noted for the themes of "physical threats" and "rivals' threat," the relationship was not statistically significant, when considering both the date of global media reports and the day before. There was no notable change for the theme of "positive gestures" and "cultural threats."[29] Overall, these results demonstrate that influential accounts on Telegram might have been alarmed by potential fallout coming from reports of the massacre as evident by a spike in the "denial" theme; however, the "before" versus "on and after" change is not statistically significant. Thus, the absence of notable shifts in narratives on Telegram shows that sensitivity to Bucha-related costs on this platform was limited. This runs in stark contrast to the findings in the context of Weibo and Twitter, with both platforms noting statistically significant shifts.

Table 12: Event Effects on Physical Threats

	ARIMA
Bucha Massacre	0.40
	(1.60)

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

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[29] I did not include "cultural threats" theme in the statistical analysis due to a low number of observations.

	ARIMA
Bucha Massacre	1.67
	(2.35)

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 14: Event Effects on Positive Gestures

	ARIMA
Bucha Massacre	-0.35
	(0.54)

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 15: Event Effects on Political Rivals

	ARIMA
Bucha Massacre	0.56
	(0.67)

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 4: Theme frequency before, during and after the massacre: Physical threats/response to physical threats; Cultural threats/response to cultural threats; Denial; Positive gestures; Rivals' (other than Ukraine) threat to global stability
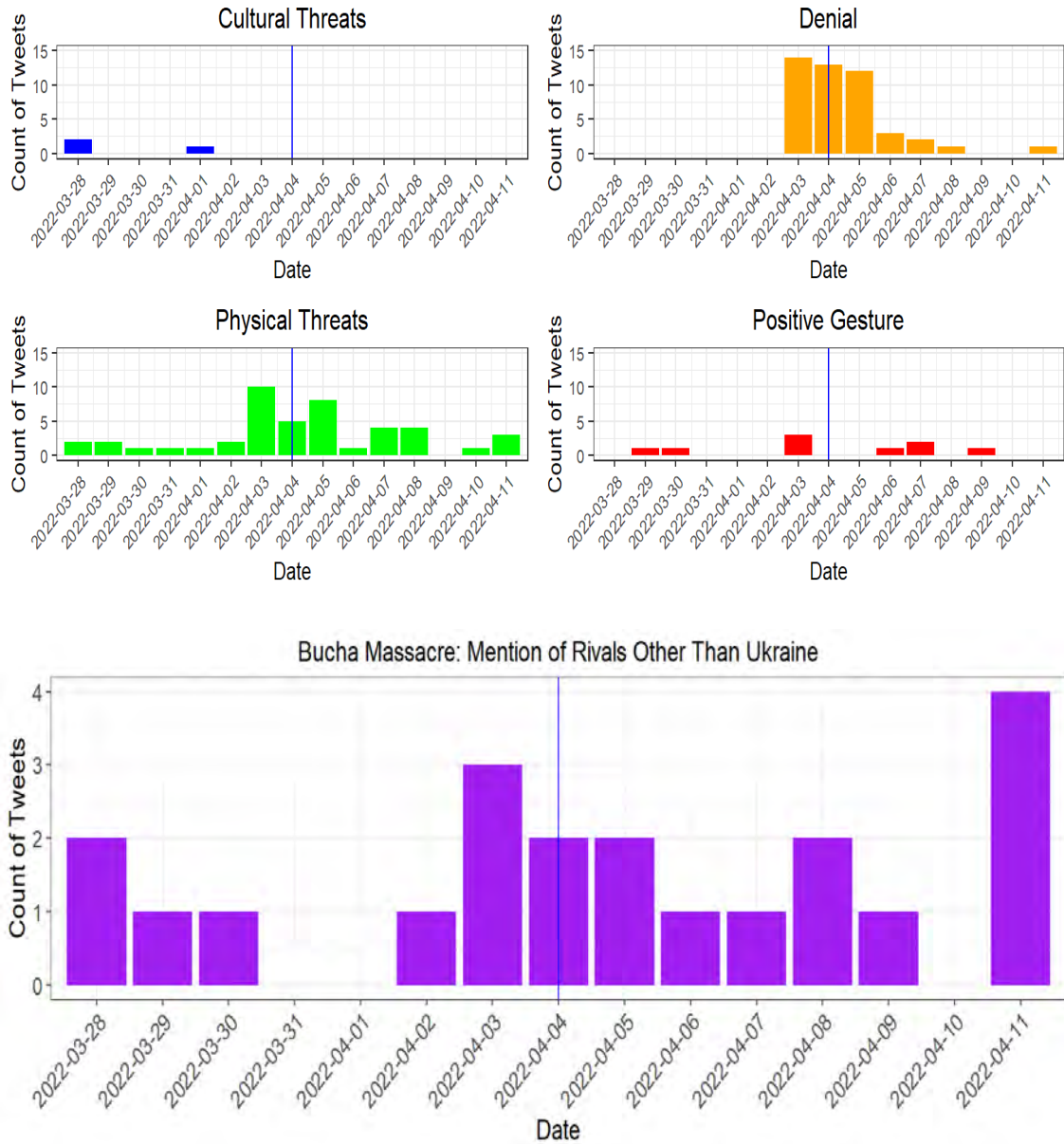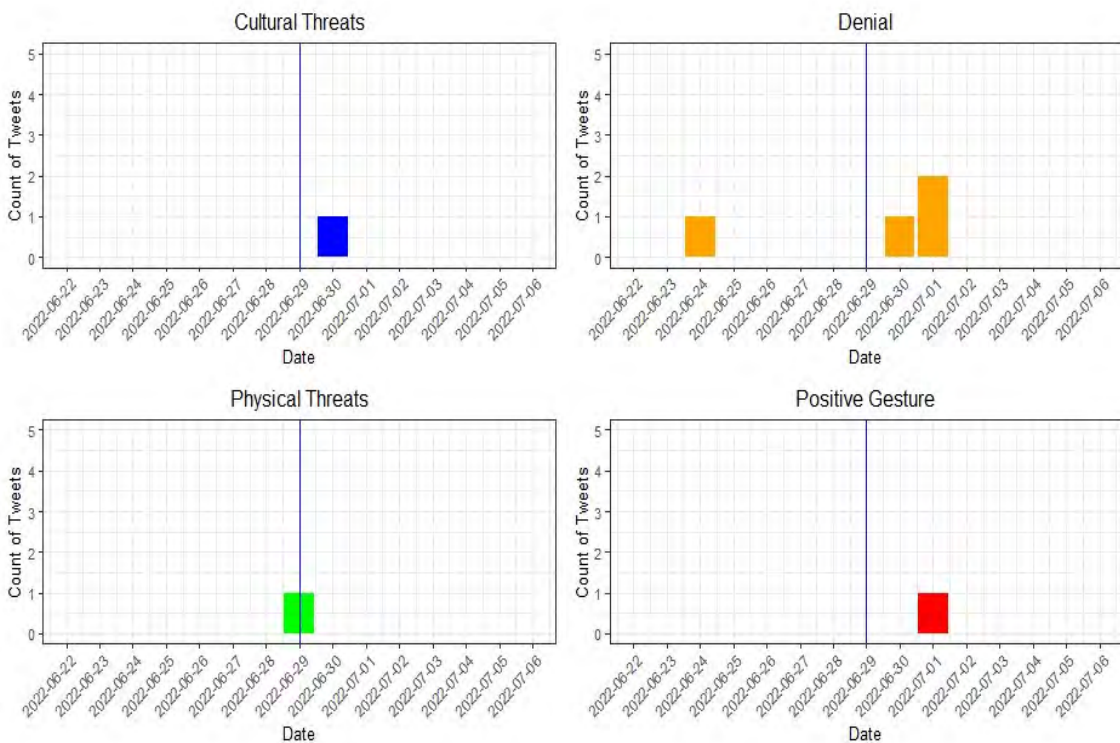
NATO Membership Offer

Weibo

In sharp contrast to an increase in pro-Russian narratives in the context of Bucha massacre and the onset of the battle of Kherson, the data shows very limited presence of such narratives either immediately

before, on, or after NATO's announcement of its membership offer to Sweden and Finland (Figure 5). This is likely due to our sampling approach and data limitations. Given that the research team collected data on posts from the Russian embassy in China, the sample is small to begin with, only 21 posts made by the embassy. Out of those 21, 13 or 62 percent communicated a clear pro-Russian theme, mostly "denial," "rivals' threat," and "physical threats." Given the small nature of the sample for each theme, I did not conduct a statistical analysis for this event. Still, the small number of posts issued by Russian embassy surrounding this event suggests limited interest in setting the agenda on NATO's expansion, which is in line with my hypothesis. This does not mean that anti-NATO rhetoric surrounding the event was limited; the Chinese government has continued to promote such rhetoric.[30] Rather it suggests that the Russian government might not have been concerned about shifts in Chinese public opinion regarding NATO. As argued earlier, Chinese audiences have already been primed to embrace anti-NATO views given the extensive propaganda that that the Chinese government undertook over the course of several years.

Figure 5: Theme frequency before, during and after NATO membership offer announcement: Physical threats/response to physical threats; Cultural threats/response to cultural threats; Denial; Positive gestures; Rivals' (other than Ukraine) threat to global stability

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[30] Cheng (2024).

NATO Expansion: Mention of Rivals Other Than Ukraine
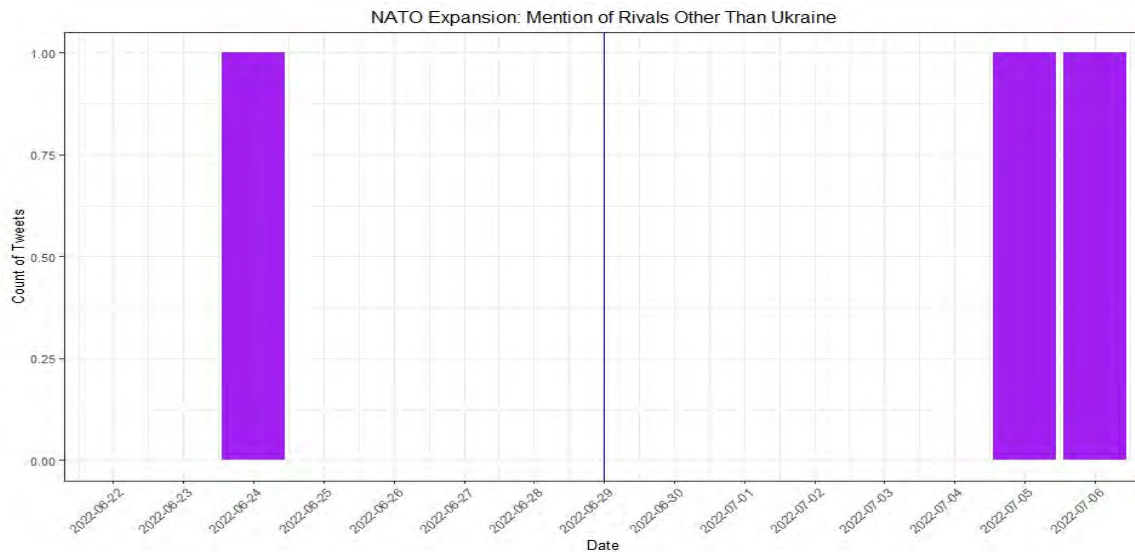
Telegram

Turning to Telegram, I do not find support for the hypothesis that NATO's announcement of membership offer to Sweden and Finland would be associated with greater frequency of themes focusing on Western rivals' (other than Ukraine) threat to global stability. While there is an increase in such themes in posts on and after the event (on average, five times per day on and after the announcement in comparison to three times for the seven-day period before the event) (Figure 6), the increase is not statistically significant (Table 16). In fact, the day with the second highest frequency is the day prior to the formal announcement.

Surprisingly, there is a statistically significant relationship between the event's occurrence and the presence of the theme of "denial" (Table 17). Specifically, the event is linked with a decline in the frequency of such a theme. However, given that the data has only 10 observations for posts surrounding the event with a "denial" theme, this finding would require additional data collection to examine its meaning. Furthermore, the event had no statistically significant impact on altering the pattern in the presence of the "physical threats" theme (Table 18). Due to a small number of observations of the "positive gestures" and "cultural threats" themes, I was not able to include these themes in the statistical analysis.

The results resemble the findings from START's report on Twitter with respect to decline in "denial" theme, although the Twitter study noted that the event was also linked to statistically significant reduction in all but "positive gestures" theme. As argued in that report, a greater number of posts with the "denial" theme before the event then after likely reflected the uncertainty regarding NATO's expansion associated with Turkey's opposition. This opposition might have been seen by Kremlin supporters as a fertile ground to exploit but less so when Turkey dropped its objection, and the announcement of offer followed. Overall, the results surrounding pro-Russian narratives surrounding the NATO event show that there is limited evidence to support the idea that pro-Russian narratives were

used by influential Telegram users to offset potential fallout from the alliance's announcement of its membership invitation to Sweden and Finland. There is some evidence of concern about the expansion before the actual event took place.

Table 16: Event Effects on Political Rivals

	ARIMA
NATO Expansion	1.13
	(1.37)

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 17: Event Effects on Denial

	ARIMA
NATO Expansion	-1.16**
	(0.46)

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 18: Event Effects on Physical Threats

	ARIMA
NATO Expansion	1.80
	(1.21)

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 6: Theme frequency before, during and after NATO membership offer announcement: Physical threats/ response to physical threats; Cultural threats/ response to cultural threats; Denial and positive gestures; Rivals' (other than Ukraine) threat to global stability
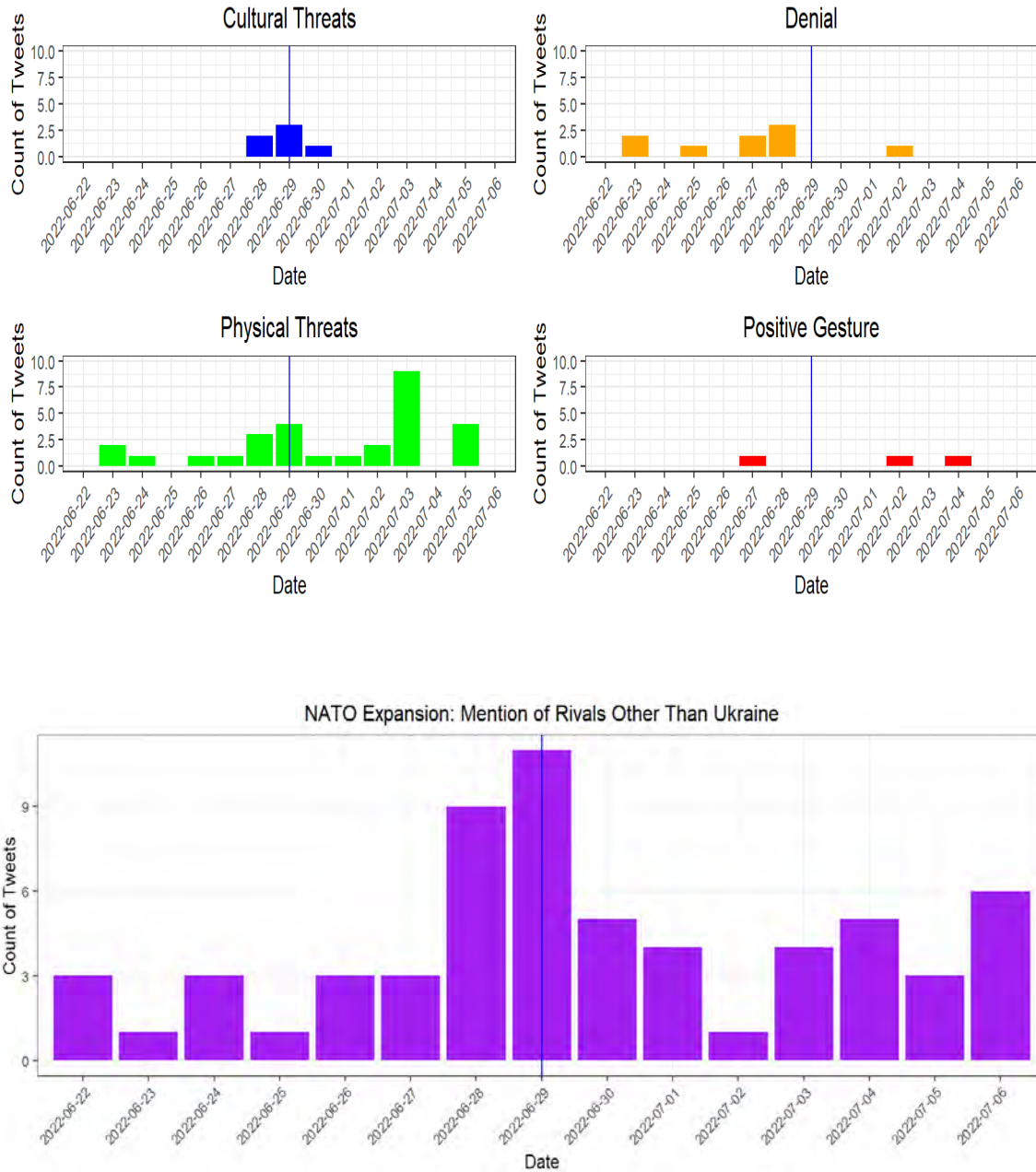
Key Insights and Implications

This study's aim was to fill the gap in research on the evolution of pro-Russian rhetoric on Weibo and Telegram across different types of events and examine an argument that variation in themes likely reflects the government's need to avoid costs in advancing its foreign policy. Some themes are more useful than others depending on expected audience costs generated by an event. The analysis highlights four main findings and implications for Western response.

First, the nature of pro-Kremlin narratives and their dissemination varies across different events in the context of Weibo. One event—the Bucha massacre of civilians—had a statistically significant impact, increasing the frequency of all but one theme that I analyzed. While Kherson followed a similar pattern, the battle's onset had no significant impact on an increase in "denial" narratives and narratives about a threat posed by Russia's rivals (other than Ukraine) to global security. Additionally, only in the context of Bucha there is a statistically significant difference in the intensity of "rivals' threat" theme as a tactic to divert attention from the atrocity. This demonstrates a concern for reducing fallout from potential costs and the utility of different themes in accomplishing this. The use of denial, diversion, and justification in the name of survival (physical threat) are themes that resonate with those who might feel empathy towards the victims and those who are neutral or uncertain in their views of the war and Russia's role in it. Findings related to Weibo confirm the results that emerged from START's report on pro-Russian narratives in the context of Twitter and suggest that Russia is vulnerable to international costs associated with significant events.

Second, that pro-Russian messages disseminated widely on Weibo on and after the global media began to report on the Bucha massacre and included multiple themes highlights that even authoritarian states might be sensitive to domestic views of other authoritarian states under unique circumstances. Thus, as this study shows, there is likely to be an effort on the part of pro-Kremlin supporters to react strongly to global reports of civilian massacres attributed to Russia in the future. A spike in pro-Russian narratives on Weibo related to Bucha and Kherson suggests that Chinese social media users should not be discounted as potential targets when it comes to pro-Western response. The gap that emerges between Chinese public opinion and the government's official stand, creates an opportunity not only for pro-Russian supporters to shift the tone of posts in a more favorable light to Russia but also for Western supporters to pro-actively set the desired tone as soon as intelligence about a crime becomes available and before these accounts are taken down by the Chinese government.

Third, the data demonstrates a more reactive aspect to pro-Kremlin narratives on Weibo in response to the massacre. Except for the "rivals' threat" narrative, the frequency of other narratives is high in the initial three days and then begins to subside. For example, on the first day after the reports of the massacre were published by the global media, there were 80 pro-Kremlin posts denying Russia's involvement in the massacre while on the seventh day after the event, the number of posts decreased to 12. The pattern resembles the findings from START's report on pro-Russian narratives in the context of

Twitter. This reactive pattern to information dissemination, however, is beneficial. Psychologists have shown that people display bias towards making judgments based on initially presented information.[31] Thus, a short-term approach to increasing the volume of specific pro-Russian narratives might be sufficient to impact perceptions through the "primacy effect."[32]

The implication is that a rapid pro-active approach to information dissemination aimed at limiting potential impact of the immediate deluge of pro-Kremlin rhetoric would be recommended so the primacy effect kicks in with respect to pro-Western frame first. This then requires knowledge about the type of events that are most likely to generate severe audience costs for Russia, thus leading its supporters to use narratives strategically. As this study and START's Twitter report have shown, global reporting of a civilian massacre attributed to Russia falls into the category of one such significant development with a potential to create significant audience costs. Furthermore, when pro-Russian narratives begin to rapidly disseminate, countering this information requires not repeating that information when seeking to present new one.[33] However, when undertaking a pro-active and/or countering approach is not viable in a timely manner, the alternative might be to wait until the intensity of pro-Russian narratives dissipates on its own. Repeating balanced information once the window of opportunity has closed could backfire, and likely sustain the intensity of pro-Russian rhetoric.

Lastly, the events had the strongest impact on shifting the pattern of pro-Russian narratives on Weibo and Twitter (as noted in START's report on that platform), and almost no impact on altering the pattern of such narratives on Telegram. Given that Russians are frequent users of Telegram, this finding shows that concern about domestic costs emanating from the three events was mostly missing. As the study tracked posts from four influential accounts on Telegram with direct or indirect ties to the Kremlin, an analysis of additional accounts could further verify these insights. Overall, when considering all three social media platforms, there appears to be greater vulnerability to international audience costs associated with significant events in the war in Ukraine.

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[31] Poluektova et al. (2024).
[32] Wang (2021) : 525.
[33] Poluektova et al. (2024).

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ASYMMETRIC THREATS ANALYSIS CENTER

National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)
University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20740
infostart@umd.edu
www.start.umd.edu