

Similar Sentiments, but for How Long?

Wartime Pluralism and Online Discourse in Ukraine



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Similar Sentiments, but for How Long?

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Online Discourse in Ukraine**

About Democracy Reporting International

DRI is an independent organisation dedicated to promoting democracy worldwide. We believe that people are active participants in public life, not subjects of their governments. Our work centres on analysis, reporting and capacity-building. For this, we are guided by the democratic and human rights obligations enshrined in international law. Headquartered in Berlin, DRI has offices in Lebanon, Libya, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tunisia and Ukraine.

About this project

This project aims to provide an understanding of public online discourse and perceptions of conflict-related issues in the social media debates in Ukraine. By performing social media monitoring in and around Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this project tracks disinformation, and helps us understand the narratives and perceptions of the war online. This project also raises awareness by advancing the understanding of disinformation and social media's role in the war in Ukraine.

Due to security concerns, we are unable to disclose the names of the experts consulted in this report. They all have broad knowledge in areas such as online discourse, human rights and Ukraine's political environment.

For more information on the project, click [here](#).

Acknowledgments

This report was written by Beatriz Almeida Saab, Digital Democracy Research Associate, with contributions from Heather Dannyelle Thompson, Digital Democracy Manager, and Michael Meyer-Resende, Executive Director, and with data analysis by Anastasiia Alekseeva.

Forset designed the layout of this publication.

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1 | Executive Summary

People have different ideas and political opinions. In democracies, this pluralism is welcomed and protected institutionally, for example, by guarantees of freedom of expression. Access to a plurality of views is essential to enable citizens to form opinions and make their own choices. This piece looks at the pluralism of opinions and views in Ukrainian media, assessing how the full-scale Russian attack has changed patterns of communication and its effect on online pluralism.

To do this, DRI monitored Ukrainian debates on Twitter, Telegram and Facebook from February 2022 to August 2022. It analysed 717,239 tweets, 637,799 posts on Telegram and 100,000 posts in Facebook Groups. Four Ukrainian experts were also interviewed to provide a contextual understanding.

These are the report's findings:

1. The topics of conversation online changed quickly following the full-scale invasion, predictably narrowing largely to discussions related to the war. Before the invasion, the data set included a diverse range of topics, including religion, COVID-19, sports, music and family. With the war becoming an all-consuming topic, users tended to refrain from posting about entertainment and their daily lives, presumably because it would feel wrong in the context of massive violence and devastation.
2. On Facebook, the posts by politicians became more similar after the Russian invasion. This was even the case with politicians generally opposed to each other, such as President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and former President Petro Poroshenko.
3. Twitter is dominated by English-language content for an international audience. Most of the content observed consisted of retweets of curated accounts about the war and political commentary by national leaders. Many accounts were created immediately following the full-scale invasion, expressly to share information on the context of the war.
4. There has been little criticism of President Zelenskyy. Whether this is based on convictions that he is an effective leader or because of a "rallying around the

flag” effect cannot be gleaned from the data. Starting in August, however, there was an increase in the number critical remarks, possibly related to a speech by President Zelenskyy reflecting on a lack of preparedness for the war.

5. On the platforms observed, users were resistant to pro-Russian narratives after the full-scale invasion. Prior to this, pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian channels had more interaction (i.e., forwarded messages between the channels). After the war, pro-Russian channels tended to be ostracised and isolated. The dissimilarity of topics of focus for the two illustrates a divergence in the narratives.

| Why study pluralism in Ukraine?

Access to a plurality of ideas and analyses is essential to allowing citizens to confront different ideas, to make their own informed choices and to lead their lives freely. The concept of pluralism has many facets and meanings. This report will focus on the concept of [pluralism in discourse](#), referring to the plurality of voices, of analyses, of expressed opinions, and of issues.

2 | Methodology

This report analyses how pluralism in discourse has changed in Ukrainian online spaces during a time of war, focusing on the plurality of voices, analyses, expressed opinions and issues on Telegram, Twitter and Facebook.

Telegram is widely used in Ukrainian social media, with 65 per cent of Ukrainians getting their news from the platform, according to Civil Network [OPORA](#). Twitter is commonly used for political discourse, especially by politicians, journalists and analysts, and opinions and analyses on Twitter often travel to other platforms or are picked up by traditional news media outlets. Many Twitter users in Ukraine write in English, in order to reach an international audience. [Fifty-six per cent of Ukrainians](#) report using Facebook as their primary source of information, so it has been included in this analysis.

A total of 717,239 tweets were selected for the analysis, based on a list of hashtags related to the war: “StandWithUkraine”, “війнавукраїні” (“warinukraine”), “Ukraine”, “Russia”, “UkraineWar” and “UkraineInvasion”. From those, a subset was created of 194,510 retweets that were geolocated in Ukraine from 24 February to 14 July 2022, dropping those that weren’t. The data set was updated daily from 24 February, and, therefore, may contain tweets and accounts that may not be deleted or deactivated.

Based on [official Telegram statistics](#), channels were selected that are based in Ukraine and most used by Ukrainians. As a result, 637,799 posts from August 2021 to June 2022 from 33 popular news channels in Ukraine were analysed. Twenty-two of the channels tended to post pro-Ukrainian content, while the rest were prone to echoing Russian state propaganda or expressing pro-Russian views.

A total of 100,000 posts from 1 November 2021 to 7 September 2022 were collected from six popular Facebook groups in Ukraine that discuss politics: “Реальна політика” (“Real politics”), “Війна в Україні (ОПЕРАТИВНО)” (“War in Ukraine [OPERATIVELY]”), “Україна переможе!” (“Ukraine will win!”), “УКРАЇНА-ІНФО” (“UKRAINE-INFO”), “Новини, Політика, Цікаве” (“News, Politics, Interesting”) and “ІНФА УКРАЇНА” (“INFA_ UKRAINE”).

For some contextual evaluation and to contribute to the quantitative analysis, four Ukrainian experts were also interviewed for this report. The interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, and then translated into English.

3 | Analysis

| Topics narrowed around the war

A key aspect of pluralism, the variety of ideas shared and talked about among people, as could be expected, narrowed following the invasion, shown in Figures 1 and 2 below.

[Figure 1](#) illustrates the most popular topics in the selected Facebook groups before the full-scale invasion. The most popular topics were COVID-19, including sub-topics such as hospitalisation and grief from loss; and religion-related topics, including the sub-topic to “pray before hard times”. Overall, the topics were diverse and ordinary. These Facebook groups show Ukrainians discussing family concerns, school, popular bands and songs.

The ordinary nature of these topics might highlight that Ukrainians were not expecting an attack. Experts interviewed for this report stated that most Ukrainians simply did not believe this would happen or, if it did happen, that it would not be as big as it eventually became. One expert suggested that, despite early warnings of a full-scale invasion, average Ukrainians were not ready believe it. “War would imply a drastic change in their lives,” he said, “average Ukrainians were not ready to believe it”.

Before 24 February 2022, members of the most popular Facebook groups in Ukraine were generally sharing posts on everyday life problems.



Figure 1. The most popular topics discussed on selected Facebook Groups from November 2021 through February 2022. Data: DRI.

[Figure 2](#), below, shows the most popular topics shared by Ukrainians on Facebook groups. As anticipated, after the war started, discussion of topics related to daily life was greatly reduced, with the topic of the war now dominating discourse.

After 24 February 2022, there were more mentions of war-related topics, such as destroyed enemy tanks, Russia and Belarus, war chronicles, defenders of Ukraine, “orcs”, heroes of Ukraine, along with boosting support with posts containing “Ukraine will win”. There was much less conversation about music, entertainment or daily life.

This shift in the online public discourse was clear. One expert suggested that posts about lighter subjects would be “highly criticised, or even hated” online. “The online Ukrainian sphere has become more serious – there is not a lot of space for entertainment content”.

Additionally, the war has become a cross-cutting theme. Even when discussing other topics, many posts still address the war. For example, one interviewee noted that even birthday posts serve as “proxy” posts about the war (e.g., donating to the Ukrainian army for your birthday, and then posting about it).

Since 24 February 2022, members of the most popular Facebook groups in Ukraine have been sharing posts generally related to the war.



Figure 2. The most popular topics discussed on selected Facebook Groups from 24 February through July 2022. Data: DRI.

| On Facebook, politicians have moved closer together in their discourse

In terms of the plurality of expressed opinions, the speech of politicians on their official Facebook pages was analysed in order to understand whether their statements reflected the same relationship towards each other following the full-scale invasion as had been the case before. [Figure 3](#) shows the results of this analysis. The names listed in black show the relative stance of a politician before the war, with their name listed in orange showing their position after the full-scale invasion. It is important to note that the figure does not assign values to the x- or y-axis. The measurement of similarity is reflected by the density of the cluster.

The results illustrate that the statements by those politicians analysed, some of whom are political opponents, grew more similar during the war, reflected in the increased density of the names listed in orange. This similarity is also reflected in the topics of discourse in their posts.

Ukrainian politicians began to produce more similar content on their Facebook pages after 24 February 2022.

● Before 24 February ● After 24 February

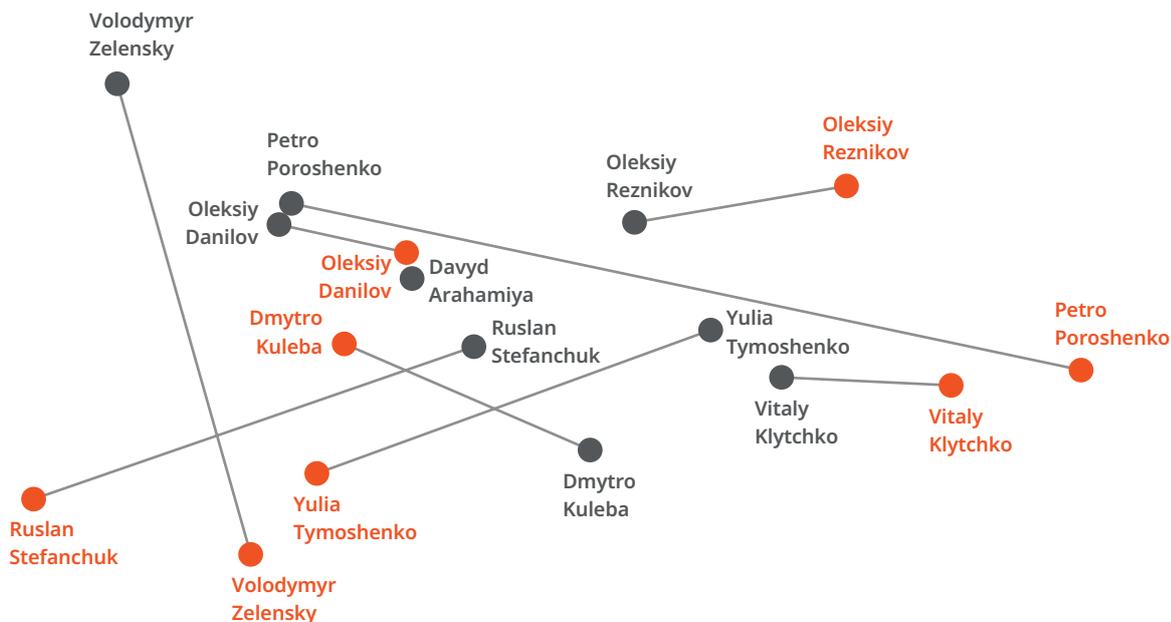


Figure 3. A map of politicians showing the proximity of their statements before and after 24 February 2022. Note that the figure does not assign values to the x- or y-axis. The measurement of similarity is reflected by the density of the cluster. Data: DRI.

The English-language tweets, in red, show a clear pattern of more frequently re-tweeting English-language content on the platform. This analysis corroborates [previous DRI reporting](#) on the use of Twitter mainly for reaching an international audience, and not as the platform of choice within the Ukrainian community. Figure 5, below, shows a zoomed in picture of the network analysis. From this cluster, we can see the accounts that seem to drive the bulk of the conversation on Twitter: official government accounts, curated accounts of military coverage, and the accounts of political experts.

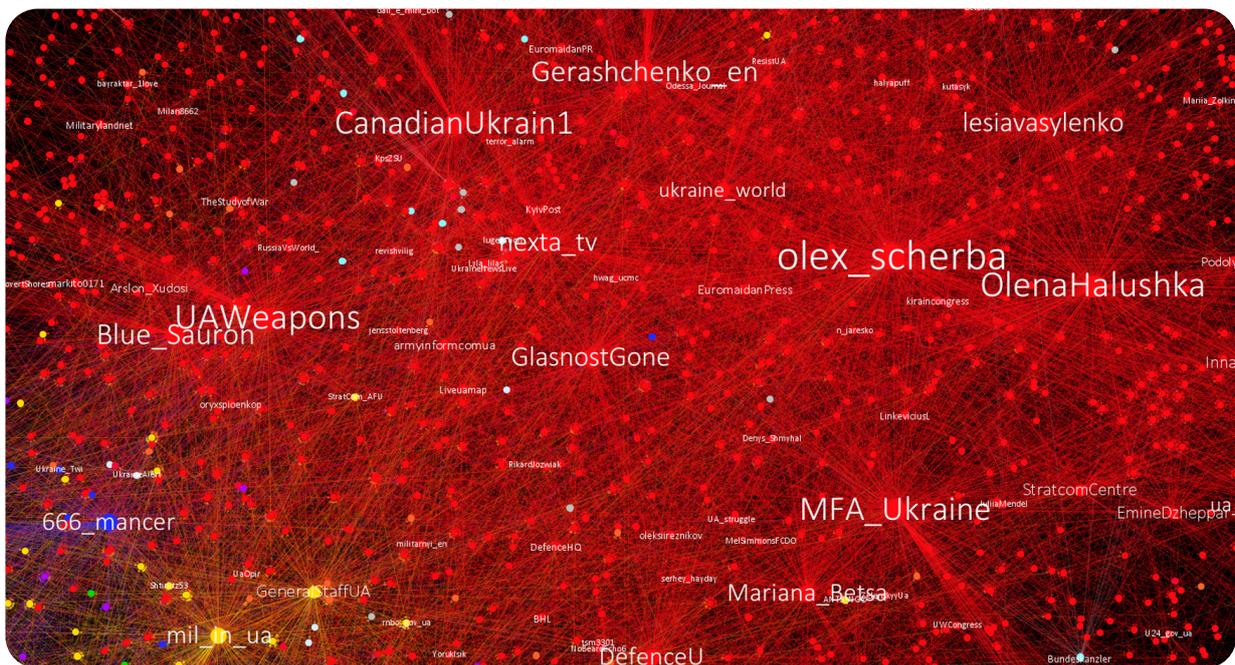


Figure 5. Main accounts at the centre of the network. Data: DRI.

Presented in another way, [Figure 6](#), below, depicts a time horizon of retweets on Ukrainian Twitter. This explosion of retweets by government sources, such as MFA_Ukraine (the account of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry), curated military coverage accounts, such as UAWeapons, and the accounts of political experts, such as olex_scherba, is clear in the heat map below.

Number of average retweets per to accounts

The data were collected at 9 August 2022

Number of average retweets 0  3000

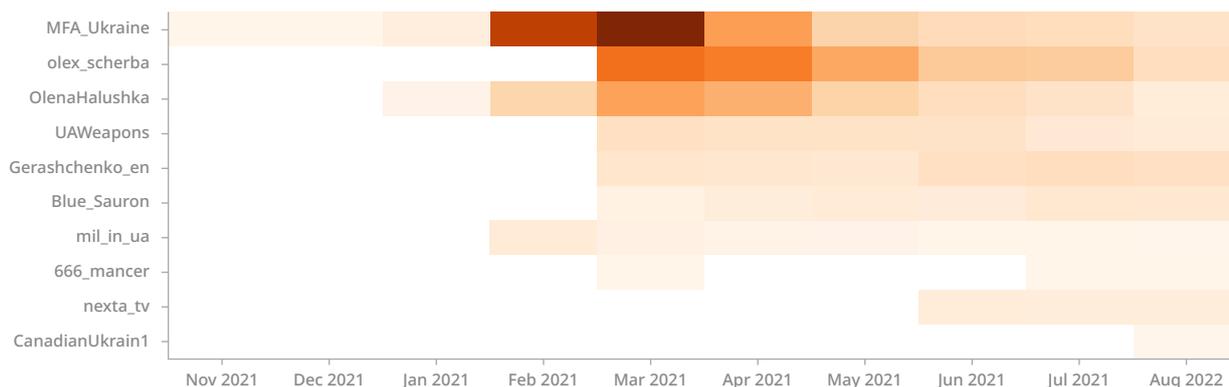


Figure 6. Heatmap of the most retweeted accounts showing the number of average retweets per account.
Data: DRI.

As can be seen, many of these accounts did not have a significant retweet history before February 2022, indicating either low re-tweet activity or the creation of a new account. The war generated either newfound attention to existing accounts, as was the case for MFA_Ukraine, or the creation of new accounts to fill a niche (UAWeapons).

Over time, a decrease in overall retweets can be seen, as February, March and April saw the largest volumes of retweets of top accounts. The subsequent decrease could be a sign of the war becoming a sort of “new normal” for many.

The following content provides descriptions of the most retweeted accounts:

The most retweeted **government** account was the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ([MFA Ukraine](#)). This official account typically tweets organisational and official information about the war. Most of the content on the MFA Twitter feed was in English.



Figure 7. A tweet from the Minister of Foreign Affairs sharing statistics on the losses of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine.

Two curated accounts of **military coverage** stand out from the rest, receiving a larger number of retweets. “Ukraine Weapons Tracker” ([UAWeapons](#)) describes itself as a Russian and British debunking and tracking usage account, dedicated to identifying and analysing weapons that appear in Ukraine. The account was created in February 2022, and its classification is as a Media and News Company. The project was founded by two anonymous armament researchers, working under the pseudonyms [Calibre Obscura](#) and [Armory Bazaar](#). Its content is usually very specific to the armaments being used in the war, sharing live updates on the conflict.

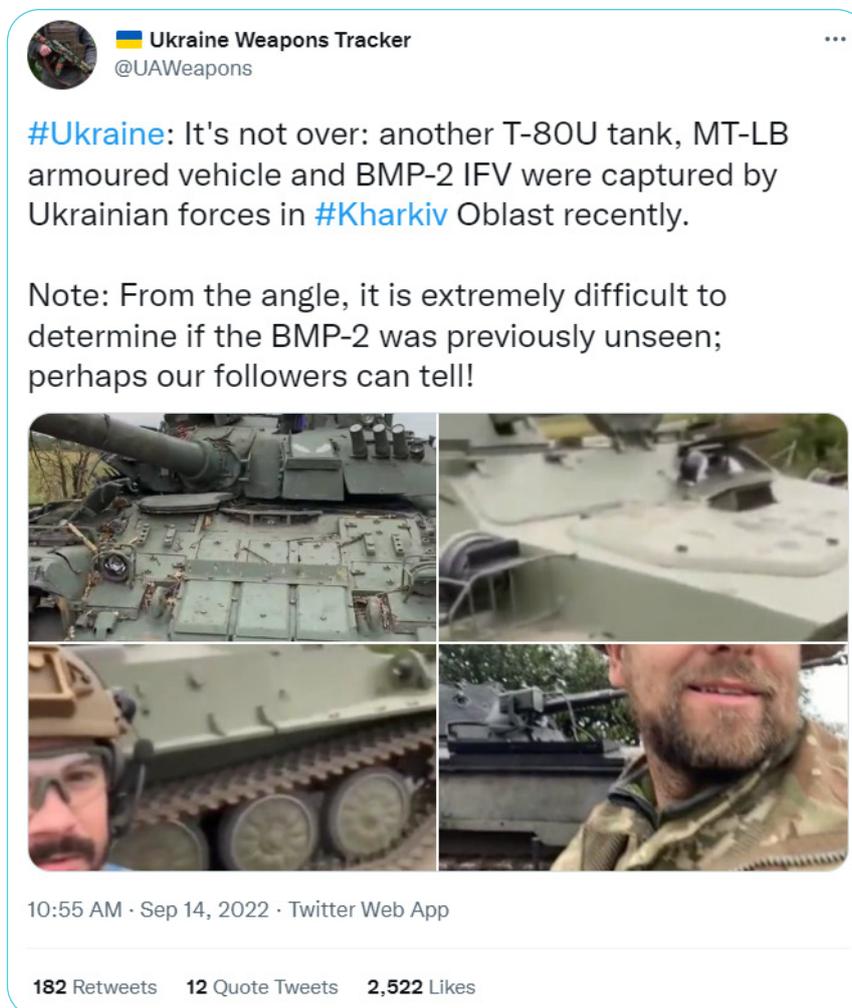


Figure 8. A tweet from the account *Ukraine Weapons Tracker*.

The second of these is [Blue Sauron](#), which claims to provide military coverage on various conflicts, including the Ukrainian-Russian war. The content of the account is very similar to that of Ukraine Weapons Tracker, sharing information about different armaments and updates on the work of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.



Figure 9. A tweet from the account BlueSauron.

Regarding **political and war experts**, two accounts were identified by the analysis as the most retweeted. The first of these, the account of the former Ukrainian ambassador to Austria, Olexander Scherba ([olex_scherba](#)), is very prominent. The verified account posts numerous political and morale-boosting comments and retweets, often promoting the political work of the EU and foreign allies.



Figure 10. A tweet from Ukraine's former ambassador to Austria, Olexander Scherba.

The second such account is that of Anton Gerashchenko ([Gerashchenko_en](#)), who is an advisor to the Minister of Internal Affairs. His posts are patriotic in tone and contain updates on the war and praise for Ukraine's soldiers.



Figure 11. A tweet from political expert Anton Gerashchenko.

One other account is noteworthy here. [CanadianUkrain1](#) is an account that also appears in the centre of the network in Figure 5 and Figure 6. There is debate, however, about the legitimacy of the account. The Twitter account claims to be that of a Canadian volunteer soldier fighting in Ukraine, although it has been [outed as a fake by other accounts](#), such as [Ukraine Battle Map](#). The account, which had been created in March 2022, grew to over 100,000 followers in a short period of time before shutting down on 1 July 2022. In August the account joined Twitter again, sharing the same type of content as before – videos and images claiming to be from a soldier in combat

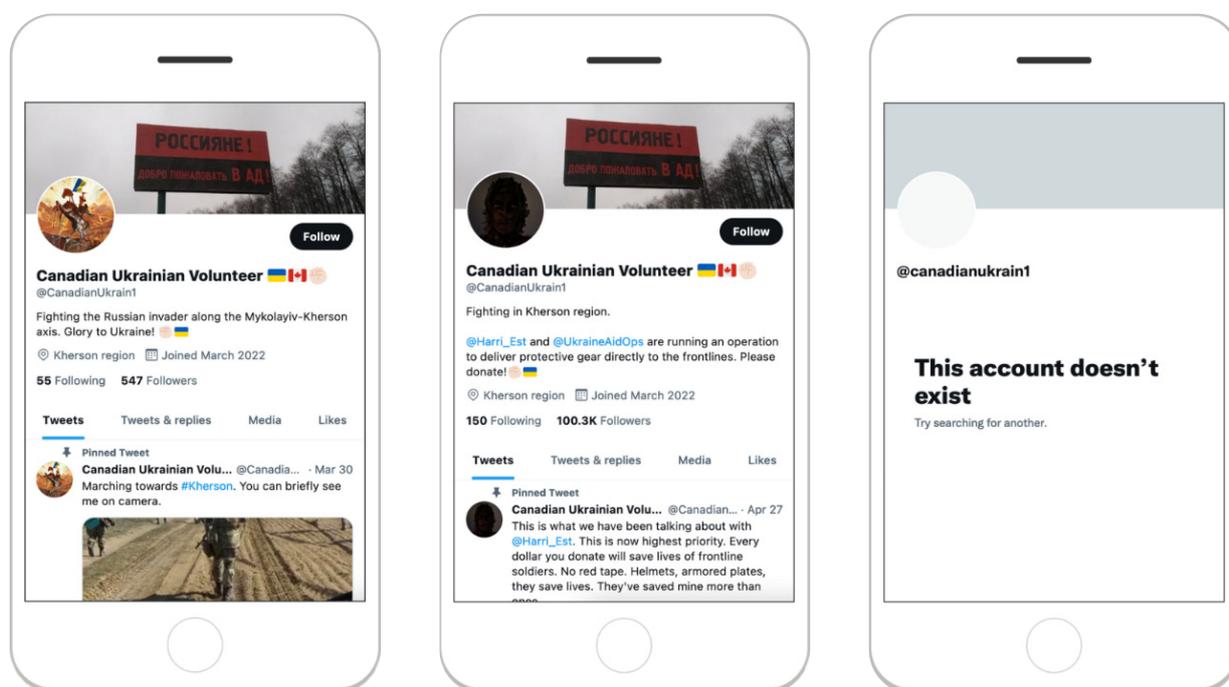


Figure 12. Three screenshots of the account [CanadianUkrain1](#). The first is around the date of its creation, in March. The second is from the same account, but in June, and the third is the message that the account had been deleted. Source: [Rest of World](#).

Overall, while we see the topics of conversation have narrowed, when discussing the topic of war, we see that plurality has been preserved in the number of voices and narratives presented on Ukrainian Twitter. Accounts of different types, such as those of the government, news media and political experts, along with those providing military coverage, form the main group of disseminators. At the same time, the heatmap also shows how these voices in the centre might move forward or fall back in terms of engagement and attention received. This dynamism in the Ukrainian online space makes room for new narratives to be created by recently created accounts or well-established ones, showing that online debate is fluid and constantly changing.

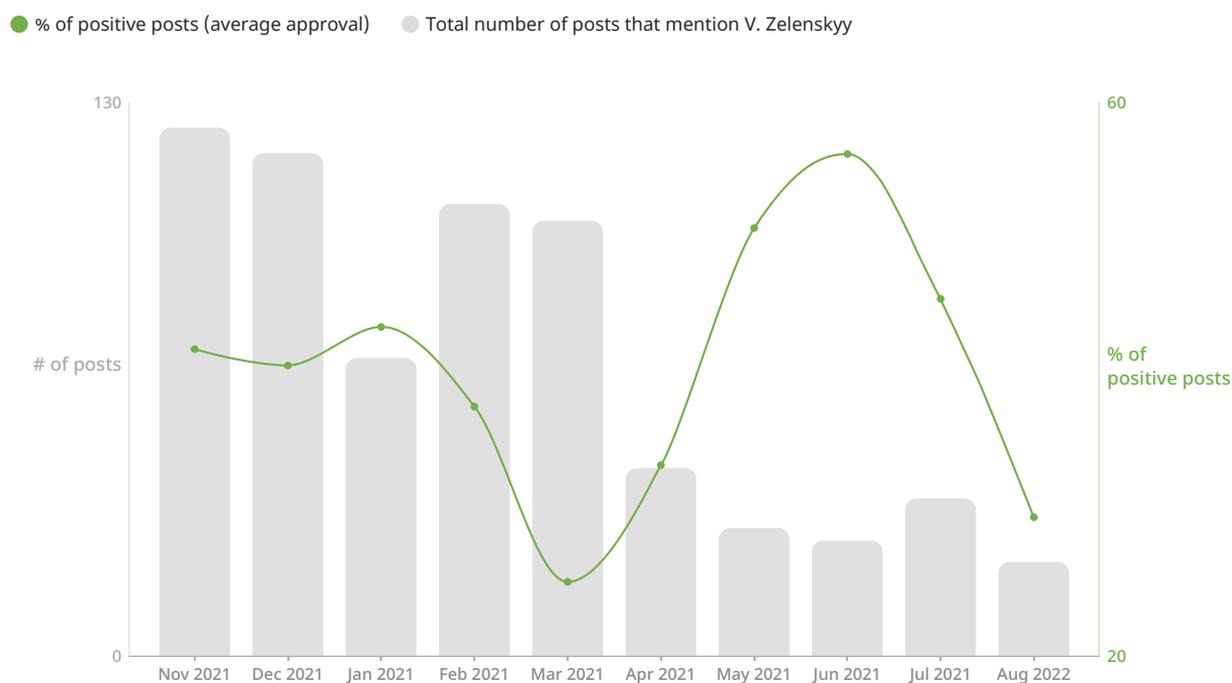
| Within the common discourse, there has been variation over time

Since the onset of war, President Zelenskyy has enjoyed high approval ratings, [according to opinion polls](#).

As such, much of the support and backing for President Zelenskyy reflects people's positive views regarding his handling of the war. One of the interviewees claims that the criticism people had towards other parts of the government, such as those responsible for economic policy and issues, were put aside once the war started. This limitation of criticism is not surprising at a time where unity of purpose is particularly important.

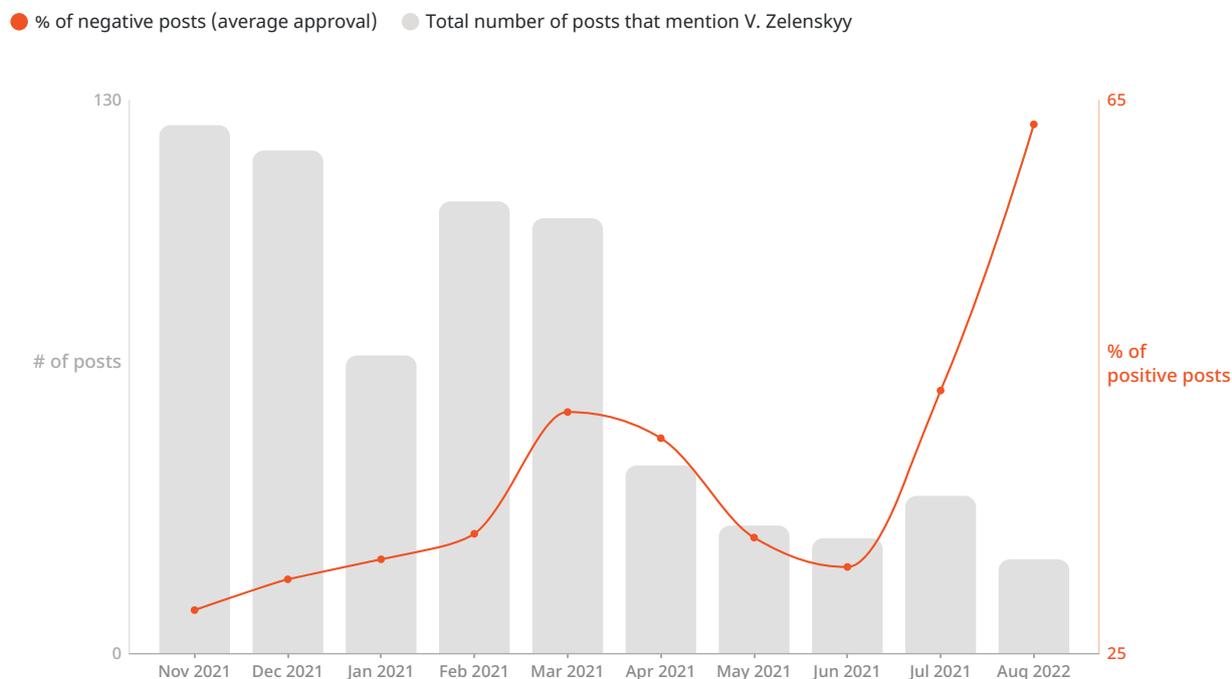
Graphs 1 and 2, below, show the number of posts that mention President Zelenskyy on Facebook groups over time, behind a tracking of the percentage of these posts that were positive and negative, respectively. The graphs reveal that, overall, the Ukrainian leader generated a high level of positive sentiment. Along with a decrease in the number of posts mentioning Zelenskyy, the percentage of these posts that were also positive decreased significantly from June 2022. As might be expected, Graph 2 demonstrates that, at the same time, the percentage of disapproving texts increased.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy's average approval on Facebook groups



Graph 1. The number of posts mentioning President Zelenskyy in Facebook Groups, and the percentage of those posts that were positive, representing his average approval rate. Data: DRI.

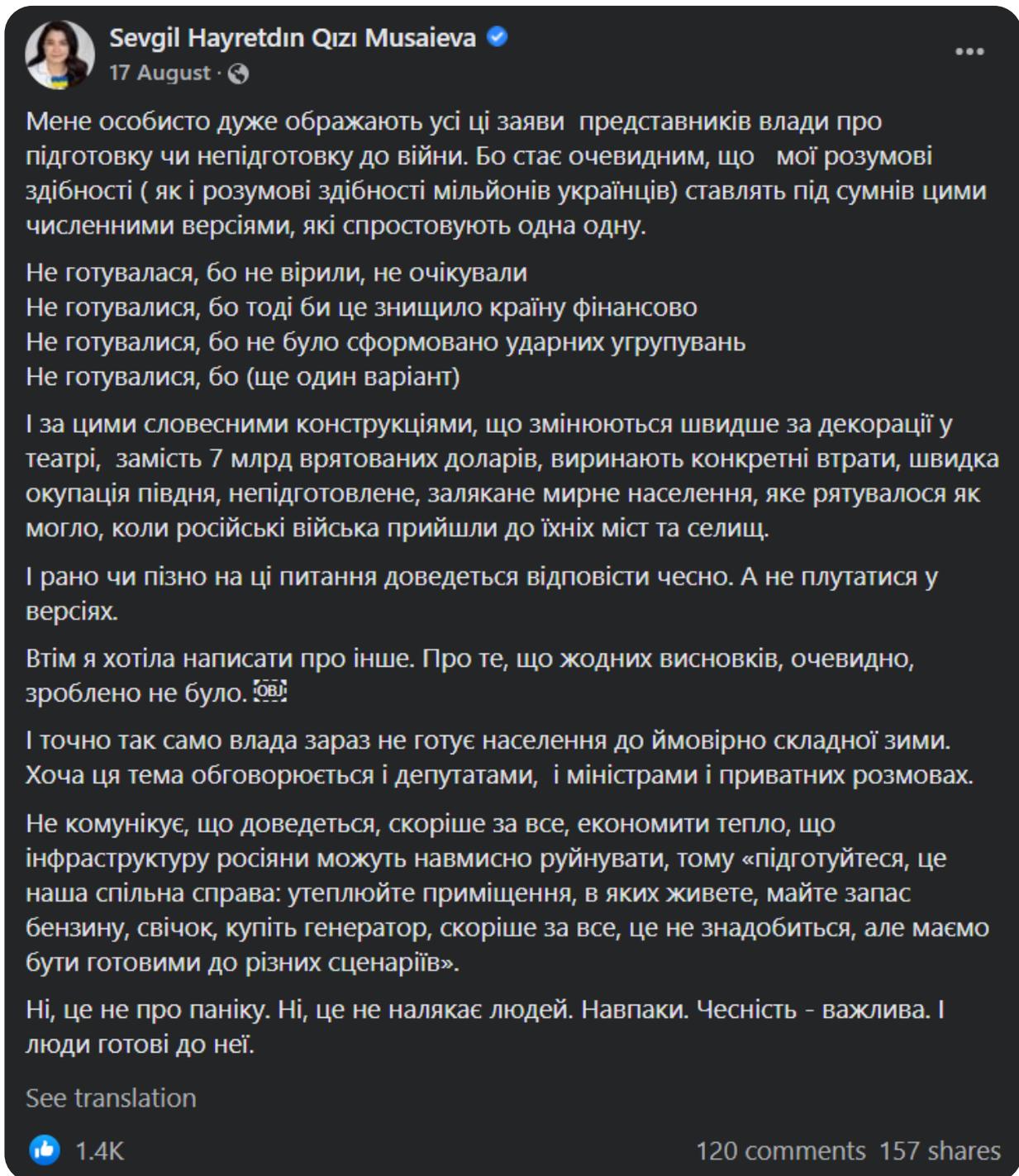
Volodymyr Zelenskyy's average disapproval on Facebook groups



Graph 2. The number of posts mentioning President Zelenskyy in Facebook Groups, and the percentage of those posts that were negative, representing his average disapproval rate. Data: DRI

Even though there was a fall in average approval, support for President Zelenskyy is still very high among Ukrainians. At the same time, according [to recent news](#), people are beginning to criticise the leader. One potential reason for this criticism could be the lack of preparedness for the war and of government warnings ahead of the Russian attack.

In an interview to the [Washington Post](#), President Zelenskyy cited his fears that Ukrainians would panic, flee the country, and trigger economic collapse as the reasons he chose not to reinforce or endorse the stark warnings published by the United States' Central Intelligence Agency, or to share the urgent advice from United States officials before 24 February regarding Russia's plans. The interview was not received well by many Ukrainians, who suggested that many lives could have been saved if the government had adequately prepared the population for war.



Sevgil Hayretdin Qızı Musaieva ✓
17 August · 🌐

Мене особисто дуже ображають усі ці заяви представників влади про підготовку чи непідготовку до війни. Бо стає очевидним, що мої розумові здібності (як і розумові здібності мільйонів українців) ставлять під сумнів цими численними версіями, які спростовують одна одну.

Не готувалася, бо не вірили, не очікували
Не готувалися, бо тоді би це знищило країну фінансово
Не готувалися, бо не було сформовано ударних угруповань
Не готувалися, бо (ще один варіант)

І за цими словесними конструкціями, що змінюються швидше за декорації у театрі, замість 7 млрд врятованих доларів, виринають конкретні втрати, швидка окупація півдня, непідготовлене, залякане мирне населення, яке рятувалося як могло, коли російські війська прийшли до їхніх міст та селищ.

І рано чи пізно на ці питання доведеться відповісти чесно. А не плутатися у версіях.

Втім я хотіла написати про інше. Про те, що жодних висновків, очевидно, зроблено не було. [OBJ]

І точно так само влада зараз не готує населення до ймовірно складної зими. Хоча ця тема обговорюється і депутатами, і міністрами і приватних розмовах.

Не комунікує, що доведеться, скоріше за все, економити тепло, що інфраструктуру росіяни можуть навмисно руйнувати, тому «підготуйтеся, це наша спільна справа: утеплюйте приміщення, в яких живете, майте запас бензину, свічок, купіть генератор, скоріше за все, це не знадобиться, але маємо бути готовими до різних сценаріїв».

Ні, це не про паніку. Ні, це не налякає людей. Навпаки. Чесність - важлива. І люди готові до неї.

See translation

👍 1.4K 120 comments 157 shares

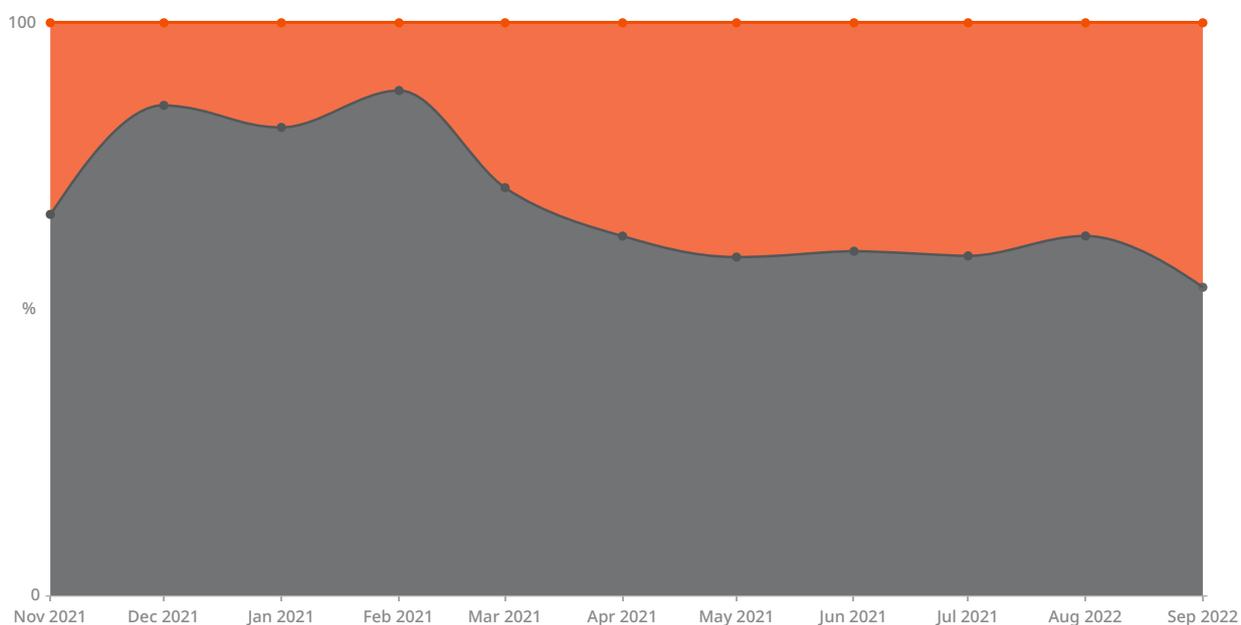
Figure 12. A Facebook post by Sevgil Musaieva, editor in chief of *Ukrainska Pravda*, a Ukrainian news site, stating that she was “personally offended” by Zelenskyy’s explanation, saying it called into question the intelligence of Ukrainians. Source: [Facebook](#).

| People are posting more emojis online than before

One interviewee suggested that a time of war is a time for simple emotions, such as fear, hope and hate. This reality may be reflected in the increased use online of emojis.

Ukrainians have been using more emotional emojis on Facebook groups since the start of the full-scale invasion.

● Likes ● Emotional emoji (Love, Wow, Haha, Sad, Angry, Care)



Graph 3. The percentage of likes and emotional emojis used on Facebook groups since 24 February 2022.
Data: DRI.

When analysing how Ukrainians are expressing their emotions, the graph above shows us that they have been using more emotionally charged emojis, especially on Facebook. Telegram channels may have been responding to the trend by turning on emoji features.

Emojis show different emotions but, overall, the experts highlighted in their interviews that Ukrainians are positive about the outcome of the war, confirming the [recent news](#) that suggests the majority of the population believes in a Ukrainian victory.

| More silos: Pro Ukraine vs pro Russia? Networks of isolation

Another way of understanding how the state of pluralism has changed in Ukraine following the full-scale invasion is by observing how different channels with various narratives are connected online. The network figures below show how pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian channels are connected, based on the messages forwarded between them.

Before the invasion, pro-Kremlin channels tended to be more connected to pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels. Figure 14 shows that there was a lot of content shared between these two types of channels, implying that they could be discussing common topics.

Pro-Kremlin channels tended to have more connections with Ukrainian Telegram channels before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The data were collected at 9 August 2022

Group ● Forwarded from ● Pro-Russian ● Pro-Ukrainian

Click to interact!

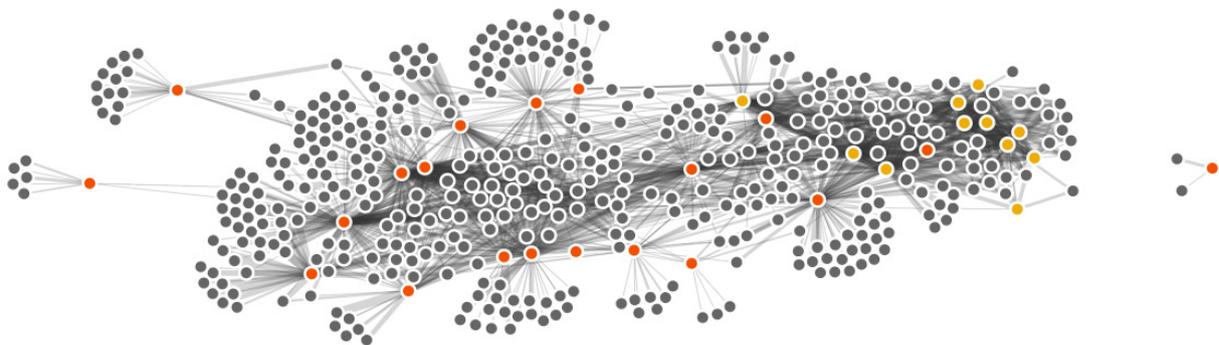


Figure 14. The network of Pro-Russian and Pro-Ukrainians Telegram Channels, based on forwarded messages between them from August 2021 through February 2022. Data: DRI.

If before the invasion there were no clear silos, after the invasion there is a movement of isolation towards pro-Russian Telegram channels, creating their own network of isolation. This means that there was no longer a significant number of messages being forwarded between pro-kremlin and pro-Ukrainian channels. This creation of silos for the two channels shows that the Ukrainian social media sphere is resistant to divergent narratives in times of war, and highlights that the topics discussed between them are not similar.

Pro-Kremlin Telegram channels tend to be ostracised.

Group ● Forwarded from ● Pro-Russian ● Pro-Ukrainian

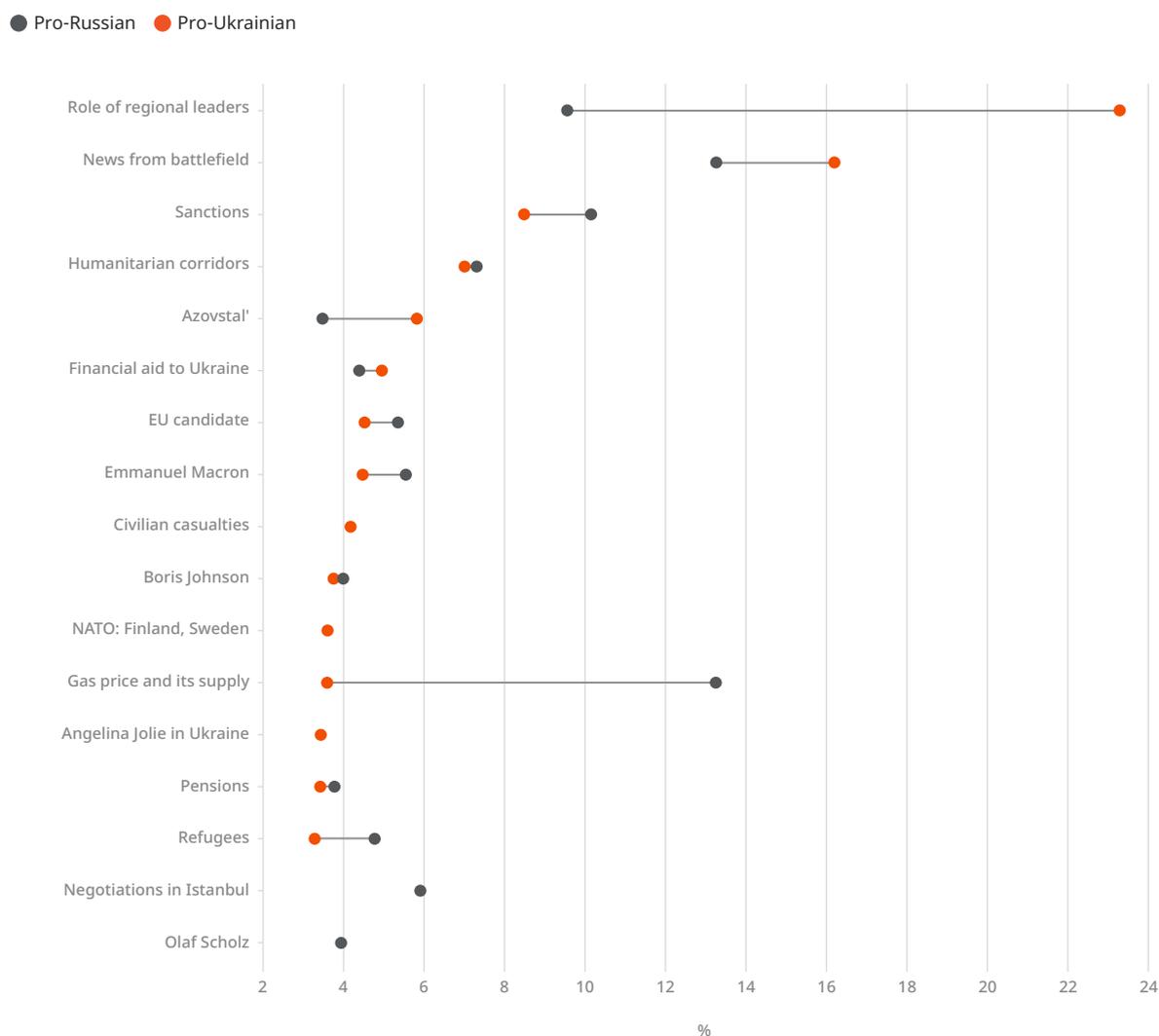


Figure 15. The network of Pro-Russian and Pro-Ukrainian Telegram Channels, based on forwarded messages between them from 24 February through June 2022. Data: DRI.

Comparing dominant topics in each of these channels after the invasion, it is apparent that pro-Ukrainian channels have tended to focus on a few more topics than pro-Russian channels. Since pro-Russian channels resonated with much Russian state propaganda, the absence of certain topics may be indicative of a deliberate strategy to de-emphasise those topics that did not align with Kremlin narratives. This first such topic was related to the "Role of Regional Leaders". At the core of this topic lies the role regional mayors and officials played in organising the defence of Ukraine, which was often seen as very heroic by many Ukrainians. In a similar vein, the topic of "Azovstal", referring to the protracted Siege of the steel plant in Mariupol, was far less present on pro-Russian channels,

despite sparking widespread international attention. Pro-Russian channels seemed to pay far more attention to other topics. For example, pro-Russian channels focused more on “Gas price and its supply”, underlining the importance of Russia in the supply of gas in Europe, in particular to countries like Germany. The popularity of this topic on pro-Russian channels might have been a strategic move to stoke fears concerning long and protracted hostilities.

Most popular topics in pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian Telegram news channels in Ukraine



Graph 4. Most popular topics in pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian Telegram news channels in Ukraine from 24 February through June 2022. Data: DRI.

