Analyzing Twitter Disinformation/Propaganda Related to Russian Aggression Against Ukraine

Report Number 3

March 3, 2022

MYTHOS LABS
INTRODUCTION
The Russian invasion of Ukraine is playing out in cyberspace as well, with pro-Russian actors spreading disinformation and propaganda related to Ukraine on social media. Since November 2021, Mythos Labs has leveraged its AI-based MIDAC software, as well as the expertise of local researchers, to identify and analyze Ukraine-related disinformation and propaganda on Twitter. This is the third in a series of reports analyzing Twitter disinformation/propaganda about Ukraine.

KEY FINDINGS
1. The Volume and Activity of Twitter Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda Related to Ukraine Increased Sharply in February
   Between January 5th, 2022 and February 28th, 2022, Mythos Labs identified 914 accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda about Ukraine (up from 58 in November of 2021 and 697 in January of 2022). The volume of Ukraine-related tweets by accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda also increased by over 1,000% during the last two weeks of February.

   Figure 1: Growth in Ukraine-related Tweets by Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda

2. In the Leadup to the Russian Invasion, Accounts Spreading pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda Accused the West of Manufacturing a Crisis and Tried to Ferment Disunity within NATO and the EU
   Some of the most common narratives expressed by these accounts prior to February 24th included:
   - NATO is a grave threat to Russian security (figure 2)
   - The US and UK want war with Russia (figure 3)
   - CIA trains Ukrainians to kill Russians (figure 4)
   - Western arms will be used by Ukraine against innocent civilians in Donbass (figure 5)
   - Talk of an “imminent Russian invasion” is Western propaganda and fake news (figure 6)
   - There are splits emerging in NATO and the EU on the issue of Ukraine (figure 7)
3. Since the Start of the Invasion, the Share of Russian-language Tweets by Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda has Nearly Doubled

From January 5th until the start of the Russian invasion on February 24th, the share of Russian-language tweets by accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda was 34%. In the days that followed, it shot up to 61%. Russian-language tweets posted by these accounts since February 24th accuse Ukraine and the West of committing atrocities in Donbass and attempt to glorify Russia’s military intervention (figure 10). The sharp rise in Russian-language tweets may indicate an increasing need to justify the heavy toll of the invasion to audiences in Russia and Eastern Ukraine.

Figure 8:
Language Breakdown of Tweets by Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda (January 5th – February 23rd)

Figure 9:
Language Breakdown of Tweets by Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda (February 24th – 28th)
4. Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda are Amplifying anti-Western Tweets by Chinese State-Affiliated Entities

Between January 5th and February 28th, 67 accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda amplified tweets by Chinese state-affiliated entities and individuals. These included tweets by China Global Television Network (CGTN) and Chen Weihua, the EU Editor of China Daily. The tweets blamed Western provocations for the Russian invasion of Ukraine and dismissed American criticism of Russian military aggression as hypocritical, citing the U.S. military presence in East Asia.

5. Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda are Amplifying Tweets Directed at Indian Audiences that Vilify Ukraine and Glorify India’s Historical Ties with Russia

Since January 5th, 59 accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda amplified tweets expressing a range of anti-Ukraine and pro-Russian narratives related to India. These tweets included misleading claims that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed support for the Russian invasion (figure 12) and that Ukrainian authorities are intentionally using Indian students in Kyiv as hostages (figure 13). They also promoted the narrative that Russia has been a consistent ally of India (figure 14). The aim of these tweets appears to be to garner support among audiences in India, a country whose government has thus far publicly maintained a neutral position regarding the conflict in Ukraine.
6. The List of Prominent Western Figures Amplified by Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda Grew to Include Benjamin Norton, Tulsi Gabbard and Tucker Carlson

In December of 2021, accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda began increasingly amplifying prominent individuals advocating against Western intervention in Ukraine, e.g., Jack Posobiec, John Pilger and Glenn Greenwald. Since January of 2022, they have also begun amplifying American journalist Benjamin Norton (@BenjaminNorton, 184,000 followers), whose tweets accusing the US of imperialism and war-mongering were retweeted by 206 accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda. Another prominent individual recently amplified by pro-Russian accounts is U.S. Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard (@TulsiGabbard, 1.2 million followers) whose tweets were retweeted by 61 accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda. Popular American cable news host Tucker Carlson (@TuckerCarlson, 4.9 million followers) was also amplified by 36 accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda about Ukraine.

**NEXT STEPS**

1. **Continue Monitoring Volume and Narratives of Tweets by Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda about Ukraine**
   
   This will enable us to identify new narratives, monitor the growth of the network and identify strategic shifts in goals/aims of disinformation/propaganda campaigns.

2. **Continue Analyzing Differences in Messaging by Language**
   
   A detailed textual analysis of the malign narratives shared by pro-Russian networks in multiple languages will reveal potential differences in messaging directed at various audiences, enabling the development of more targeted counter-messaging efforts.

3. **Investigate Degree of Coordination among Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda**

   To determine if (and to what degree) accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda are acting in a coordinated manner, MIDAC will continue analyzing temporal and behavioral correlations within the network.
AUTHORS

Olga Tokariuk
Olga Tokariuk is an independent journalist and researcher based in Kyiv, Ukraine specializing in Ukrainian politics and the impact of disinformation on democracies. She is a former head of the foreign news desk at the independent Ukrainian Hromadske TV and has extensive experience working with Ukrainian and international media including EFE news agency (Spain), RAI, ANSA (Italy), BuzzFeed News, NPR (USA), ABC (Australia) and RSI (Switzerland). A Non-resident Fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), Olga co-authored an investigative documentary about a controversial trial of Ukrainian soldier Vitaliy Markiv in Italy and published a research paper on the role of Russian disinformation in this case. She holds an MA in political science and international relations from the University of Bologna (Italy) and in journalism from the Taras Shevchenko University of Kyiv (Ukraine).

Priyank Mathur
Priyank Mathur is Founder and CEO of Mythos Labs, a social enterprise that uses technology and media to counter mis/disinformation and online harm. He is the lead author of multiple reports commissioned by UN Women and the European Commission researching online disinformation and hate speech in Asia and Europe. Previously, Priyank served as a Policy Advisor at the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as Global Consulting Director at Ogilvy and Mather. Priyank is the host of several documentaries and podcasts related to international security, including the United Nations’ "ExtremeLives" and "Let’s Talk About ISIS in India." His work has been profiled on international outlets including CNN, BBC, Devex, Bangkok Post, India Ahead TV, Quartz and the Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs’ Home Team Journal. Priyank holds an MBA from MIT Sloan School of Management, as well as an M.A. and B.A. in International Relations from Boston University.

Special thanks to Asif Hassan, Jannat Jain and Shivani Das for data support and design

ABOUT MYTHOS LABS
Mythos Labs is a social enterprise that uses technology and media to counter online harm and mis/disinformation. Mythos Labs’ primary activities include using its AI-based technology MIDAC to research mis/disinformation, creating “edutaining” viral videos that convey positive narratives and conducting digital literacy capacity building programs.

mythoslabs.org
@WorldOfMythos
Mythos Labs, Inc.
contact@mythoslabs.org