Denying Bucha

The Kremlin's influence tactics in the aftermath of the 2022 Bucha atrocity

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1 Introduction

This report analyses Russian information influence tactics on social media platforms following the atrocities committed by Russian troops in Bucha in March 2022. The analysis focuses on the Bucha massacre as a significant news event to demonstrate how the Kremlin conducts propaganda designed to mislead domestic and international publics about war atrocities. By studying these tactics, we can gain a better understanding of how the Kremlin implements its communication strategies, as well as assess the potential effectiveness of Western countermeasures.[1]

The focus of this study is on how wartime information influence is conducted by Russia and its agents on social media platforms. In addition, the analysis discusses the dynamics between Western sanctions and social media companies' efforts to diminish Russia's disinformation presence on their platforms on one hand, and Russia's attempts to circumvent these measures on the other.

Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and its advance forces moved into the city of Bucha three days later. The Ukrainian army forced the Russian military to retreat from the Kyiv area after approximately one month. When Ukrainian forces entered Bucha on 1 April, the world was shocked by the atrocities and war crimes conducted by Russian troops. Ukrainian local authorities state at least 458 Ukrainians died in Bucha under Russian occupation.[2] The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has documented unlawful killings, including summary executions, of at least 50 civilians in Bucha.[3] The media has reported how civilians were killed by Russian snipers, repeatedly raped, tortured, and executed. Satellite images have refuted Russian claims that the atrocities were staged.[4]

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[1] This report summarises the collective findings from a conglomerate of research organisations who have been advising EU institutions and member states on how VLOP owners have handled Russian propaganda during the war, under the management of Felix Kartte and Ben Scott at RESET.

[2] https://babel.ua/en/news/82626-at-least-458-ukrainians-died-in-the-bucha-community-as-a-result-of-the-actions-of-the-russians

[3] https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/situation-human-rights-ukraine-context-armed-attack-russian-federation

[4] https://vp.nyt.com/video/2022/04/04/99814_1_4vid-bucha_wg_1080p.mp4
https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-execution-cellar/31787326.html
https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61442387
https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2022/04/04/russias-bucha-facts-versus-the-evidence/

NEW INFORMATION
New information may reach us through an event, a scientific discovery, a media revelation, or a political decision.

EXPERTS, OFFICIALS AND SOURCES
New information is observed and documented by witnesses, experts, and/or officials who explain or interpret the information.

MEDIA AND CULTURE
The information reaches the public through media and other forms of cultural expression such as newspapers, television, radio, blogs, or social media.

PUBLIC SPHERE
The information reaches the public sphere and is processed through discussion and dialogue within different groups in society, both face to face and on social media.

THE INDIVIDUAL
In this way, the information reaches you as an individual through the social structures you are a part of and the channels you consume.

As the mounting evidence gained international resonance in early April 2022, Russia started applying several parallel information influence techniques to cover up the war crimes. The focus here is on the efforts targeted at Russian domestic and Western audiences.

Overall, the approach appears aligned with the Kremlin's wider communication strategy around the invasion. This involves (i) controlling the domestic information environment via establishing legal ways to force independent media to flee the country; (ii) controlling key domestic propaganda channels such as TV news; (iii) tightening influence over social media platforms; and (iv) silencing dissenting voices through fear and repression. For example, in March 2023, ahead of the Bucha massacre anniversary, Russian activist and student Dmitry Ivanov was sentenced to 8 and a half years in prison for "spreading false information" about the Russian army. He ran a Telegram channel called Protesting MGU (Moscow State University), that posted factual information about Russia's atrocities in Bucha and Mariupol.[5]

In previous research on information influence, we have developed a simple model to demonstrate how specific influence techniques are used.[6] To begin with, we need to assume that opinions are formed as a result of a rational process that begins with something happening or new information coming
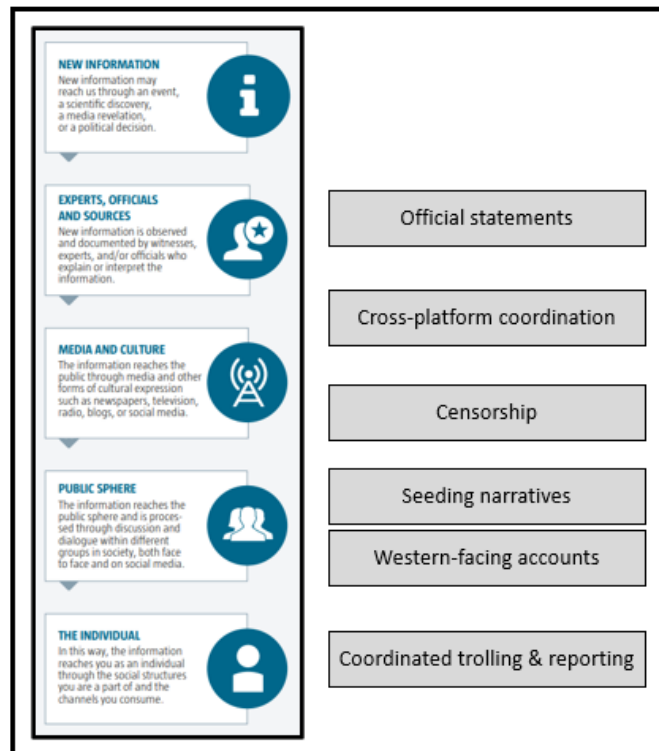
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[5] https://zona.media/online/2023/03/07/prigivor

[6] Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency. (2018). *Countering information influence activities – A handbook for communicatiors*. https://www.msb.se/ribdata/filer/pdf/28698.pdf

to light. Witnesses, researchers, officials, and other individuals with credibility in an area interpret or explain the situation in a broader context. The media pick up the information and spread it through their channels. This information will then reach different groups in society, both online and offline, including you. Of course, opinion formation does not quite work like this in practice, but this is broadly how the process of opinion formation in a democratic society can be theorised.

This process is based on a few basic principles. First, it depends on the event or information being correct and based on facts. It also assumes that the claim is verified by credible sources in the form of individuals whose reputation will be undermined if they lie. It assumes that the media that pick up the story are balanced in their coverage, that they double-check facts and sources, and that they strive to serve the public interest. We also expect discussions in various groups of society to take differing voices and opinions into account and a constructive debate to be conducted before drawing any conclusions.

Information influence activities exploit situations in which opinion formation can be deviated from processes that provide checks and balances. Through opportunistic, creative, and sometimes technologically advanced methods, foreign powers can direct their influence techniques at vulnerabilities of the opinion-forming process in order to compromise the flow of information. Foreign powers identify vulnerabilities in how critical information travels through the media landscape and in how our brains process information.

Facts can be falsified or manipulated. False experts can be called in, and witnesses can be coerced. News services can be run as one-sided propaganda channels, and the digital public discourse can be conducted between automated bots that create the false appearance of a lively public debate. When these activities are carried out deliberately, sometimes in the form of coordinated campaigns with the aim of undermining democratic processes, we cannot always rely on a self-adjusting system.

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Official statements

Cross-platform coordination

Censorship

Seeding narratives

Western-facing accounts

Coordinated trolling & reporting

In the case of Bucha, our study shows that the Russian Federation attempted to influence almost every aspect of the information ecosystem. While they could not do much to change the facts on the ground (*new information*), official statements and coordinated social media posts disputed those facts, while Russia opposed an independent UN investigation that could improve factual knowledge.[7] For example, in early April 2022, Russia tried to leverage its status as a permanent member in the UN Security Council and demanded the convening of the council in connection with the "criminal provocations of the Ukrainian military", while the UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres called for an independent investigation into the alleged war crimes.[8]

The Kremlin tried to use its own experts and official sources to shape the debate mainly for domestic audiences, while cross-platform coordination was used to link those narratives to Western journalists and politicians (hence Cross-platform coordination sits between *Officials* and *Media & Culture*). A culture of censorship limited oppositional media in Russia, while social media (*Public sphere*) was used to seed narratives that served the Kremlin's interests. Pro-Kremlin social media accounts were used to infuse debate elsewhere in the world with Russian narratives. Finally, at the level of *Individuals*, harassment and abuse of platform reporting systems was used as a further tool to repress individual decision-making and freedom of speech. The remainder of this report shows how each of these steps was conducted, in order of activity.

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[7] https://www.newsweek.com/russia-ukraine-putin-bucha-war-crimes-icc-1698858

[8] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_3543

2 Seeding narratives

The Kremlin's response was at first delayed. It has become clear during the war that Telegram has often been the fastest operational platform for Russian propagandists, sometimes being used to seed narratives ahead of official Kremlin lines. On social media, one of the first reactions outlining the narrative that the "*Bucha massacre is a deliberately prepared fake*" was on the Telegram channel "War on Fakes". This fake factchecking project is promoted by Russian state media and authorities and runs two related websites for domestic and foreign audiences (in Arabic, Chinese, English, French and German).[9]

At 14:28 on 3 April, @Warfakes shared a now notorious video purporting to show bodies moving.[10]
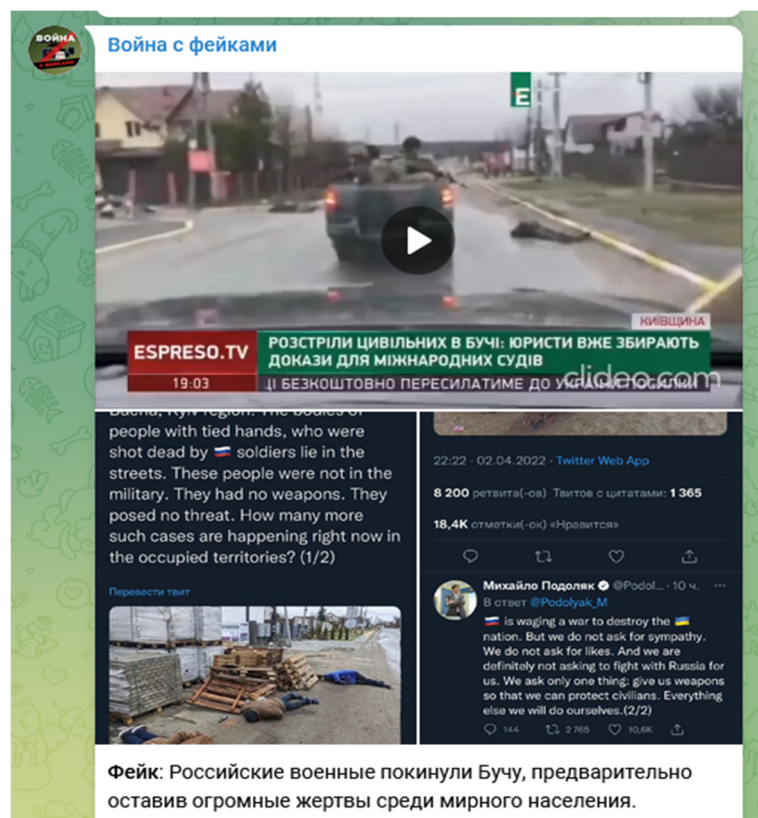
Figure 1. A screenshot of a Telegram post by War on Fakes -channel. The post received 2M views.

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[9] https://войнасфейками.рф/, https://waronfakes.com/

[10] https://t.me/s/warfakes/1896

Twenty minutes later, the first posts claiming that the Ukrainian allegations were staged appeared on the social media platform VKontakte (VK).[11] At 15:04, the well-known pro-Kremlin blogger Vityazeva (linked to the recently sanctioned FSB-controlled NewsFront website[12]) collated spurious social media evidence that the atrocities had been staged by Ukrainian armed forces.[13] Over the next few hours material appearing to debunk Ukrainian claims were disseminated through pro-Kremlin groups on Telegram and VK.

In the evening, state news agency Ria Novosti rejected all the claims, posting that "not a single local citizen had been hurt". The spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Defence likewise denied involvement and labelled the evidence of an atrocity in Bucha a 'provocation'.[14] State TV started reporting[15] about Bucha only after Russia's Ministry of Defence commented on it at 9pm Moscow time on 3 April.[16]

Therefore, even though the information had been available in Ukrainian and independent sources for many hours, the narrative on Russian social media was established extremely quickly by pro-Kremlin groups. It is worth noting that this process was much more streamlined later on, for example with the Kramatorsk bombing of 8 April. The decision to claim that the bombing was a Ukrainian fake seems to have happened within two hours, after which the pro-Kremlin community from trolls to state media to the Ministry of Defence reacted in the same way[17]. It may have taken over a month, but the propaganda machine seems to have learned from the Bucha response and established more efficient crisis communication routines. Throughout, Telegram played a key function as a central coordination hub from which the messages were amplified to other social media platforms.

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[11] https://vk.com/public163061027?w=wall-163061027_1999094
https://vk.com/public197110563?w=wall-197110563_19683

[12] https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0126

[13] https://vk.com/id41374063?w=wall41374063_692422

[14] https://vk.com/public15755094?w=wall-15755094_35044700
https://vk.com/public152992737?w=wall-152992737_3033245

[15] https://smotrim.ru/article/2698301

[16] https://t.me/mod_russia/13949

[17] https://t.me/rian_ru/157788, https://www.interfax.ru/russia/833865

3 Cross-platform coordination

A core group of Telegram channels coordinated harassment and trolling towards Western audiences, with a focus on targeted messaging rather than suppression. Telegram was used to mobilise and coordinate troll activity to target 50 of the most prominent Western and global media outlets, as well as several Western leaders such as German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and EU High Representative Josep Borrell and members of the UN Security Council. The call to action contained instructions for pro-Kremlin trolls as well as links to content that falsely debunked the massacre or that claimed it was caused by the Ukrainian army.[18] The trolls were encouraged to send those links and image/video content to individual journalists by email, and to comment on posts on the news sites' social media accounts.
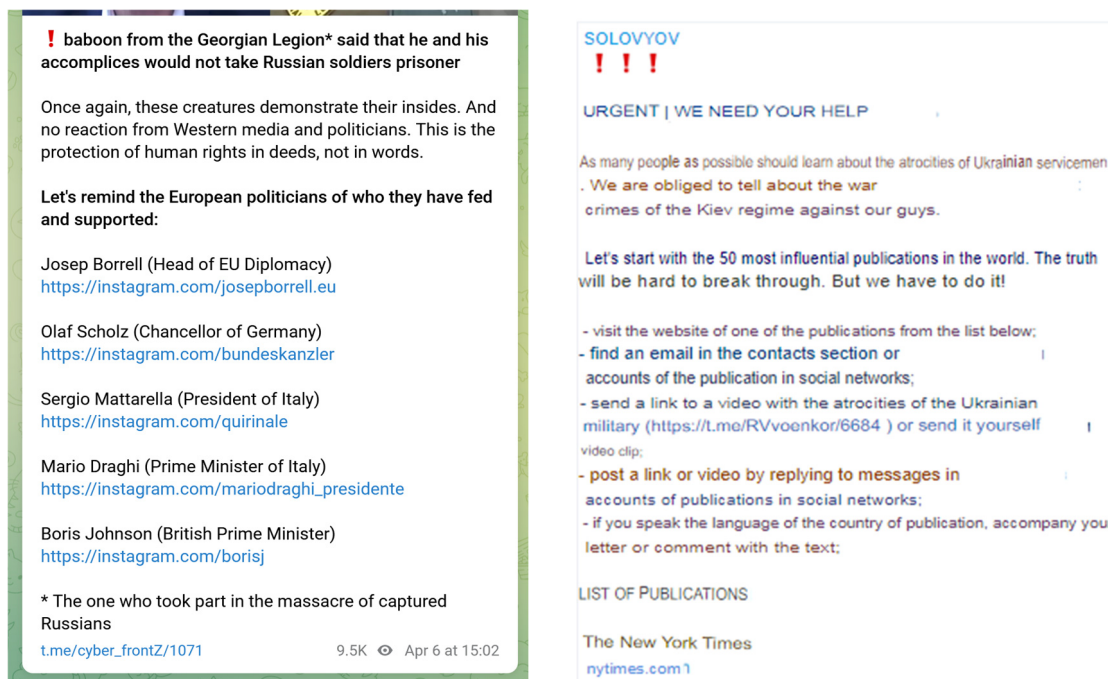
Figure 2. On the left a call to target European politicians' social media channels posted by Cyber Front Z Telegram channel on 6.4.2022. On the right a call to target Western media outlets posted by Vladimir Solovyov on 5.4.2022. Automated translation from Russian to English.

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[18] One of the links is to a video of Ukrainian soldiers executing a Russian POW, that some news sources have corroborated. While this may be true, it was used as an attempt to switch the news media's attention and distract it from Bucha.

The Telegram channels of propagandist Vladimir Solovyov (1,3M subscribers, 1.7M post views on 23.11.2022)[19] and Cyber Front Z (111K subscribers, 6,5K post views on 23.11.2022)[20], were among the channels sharing calls to action. Cyber Front Z involves operatives reportedly linked to oligarch Yevgeni Prigozhin's other influence operations in St. Petersburg.[21] In one Telegram group, commentators were reporting on their actions against Western news outlets and collected lists of email addresses to be spammed.
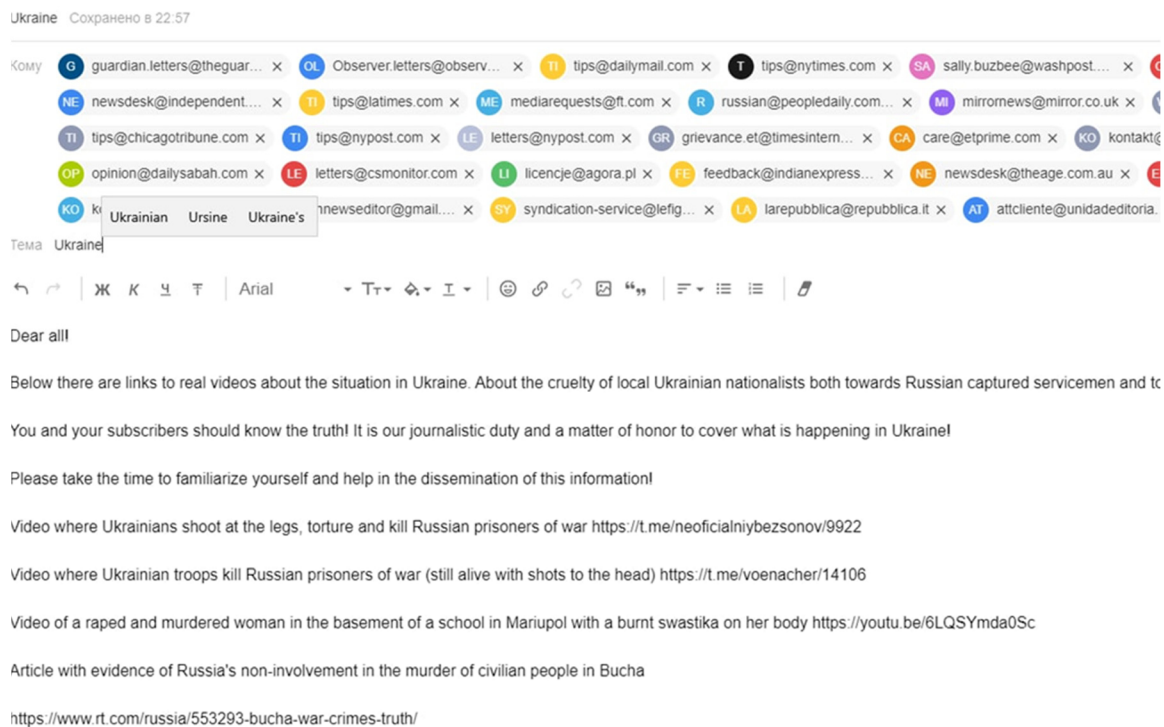

Figure 3. An example of a post by a Telegram user posting evidence of reacting to the call for action.

There are indications of the same call for coordinated action later being shared on other platforms besides Telegram. Meta states that it removed 45 Facebook accounts and 1,037 Instagram accounts run by the Cyber Front Z operation[22]. It is difficult to independently verify to what degree this stated intervention mitigates pro-Kremlin brigading, trolling and coordinated inauthentic behaviour on Meta's services. According to a CrowdTangle search, the posts calling to target the 50 most influential media outlets related to Bucha remained online in at least 11 public Facebook groups and pages by 10/11/2022. CrowdTangle is Facebook's in-house analytical tool shared with researchers.

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[19] https://t.me/SolovievLive/98802

[20] https://t.me/cyber_frontZ/982

[21] https://www.fontanka.ru/2022/03/21/70522490/

[22] https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Quarterly-Adversarial-Threat-Report-Q2-2022.pdf

Figure 4. Screenshot of a CrowdTangle search with examples of a brigading post being shared in the "Russians in Germany" group.

4 Official statements

In addition to these coordinated efforts on social media, the Kremlin moved to prepare audiences to accept future atrocities as a matter of foreign and domestic policy. Two publications outlined the Kremlin's ideological stance and justified use of extreme violence in the "denazification" of Ukraine. Telegram, once again, served as the primary operational platform for conveying the Kremlin's messages approving and accepting war crimes.

State news agency Ria Novosti published an editorial by Timofei Sergeitsev on 3 April saying that those who resist "denazification" will be executed or sentenced to forced labour.[23] Ukraine should be destroyed, he continued, not only "denazified" but also "deukrainised" and cease to exist as a sovereign state.

In line with the editorial, the deputy chairman of Russia's security council Dmitry Medvedev published a Telegram post on 5 April (2.2M views on 24.11.2022) reminding audiences of Putin's stated goals of "demilitarisation" and "denazification" of Ukraine, adding that "these complex tasks do not happen all at once … To change the bloody and false consciousness of today's Ukrainian is the most important goal."[24]

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[23] https://ria.ru/20220403/ukraina-1781469605.html?fbclid=IwAR0Uib3FDMZ-3ITzMS0xTLNu-00EdzMLzuqjmjRgOadzpZWC5Bzf8Boivqc

[24] https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/34

5 Censorship

The timeline of social media discourse on the Bucha massacre on VK illustrates how geo-blocking together with coordinated trolling and harassment created an environment where visible dissent was almost entirely removed. Geo-blocking means blocking access to a certain social media page, group, or account in a specific geographic area.

On 31 March, a small number of VK users posted information on damage caused by Russian forces in Bucha, including incidents of murder and looting. The next day the first video showing destruction and bodies in the streets emerged.[25] As news about Russian troops withdrawing from Bucha broke, pro-Russian channels claimed that the Ukrainian forces were ordered to cause mass destruction. These claims served to pre-empt accusations of damage that would later come from the Ukrainian side.
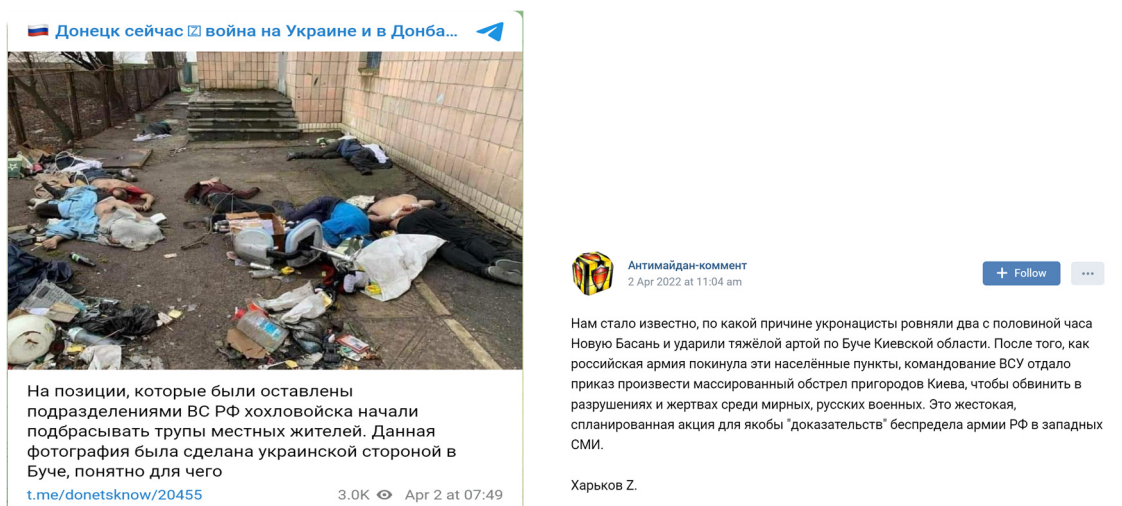

Figure 5. Examples of posts by pro-Russian Telegram channels accusing Ukraine's army of atrocities in areas surrounding Kyiv.

At 3 AM (Moscow time) on 3 April, a number of Ukrainian outlets published about atrocities in Bucha. This material was also posted to their VK pages, but the most successful of these posts were seen less than 2,000 times. The next morning the BBC and Meduza - both geo-blocked within Russia - reported on the atrocities. The Meduza article was seen 14,000 times.[26]

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[25] https://vk.com/id3713324?w=wall3713324_468

[26] https://vk.com/meduzaproject?w=wall-76982440_5815134 View count as of February 2023.

The initial VK mentions of atrocities in Bucha on 2 and 3 April drew attention to the war crimes committed by Russian troops. But the reach for this material was limited due to the extensive use of targeted geo-blocking in Russia of accounts which mentioned the 'war' in Ukraine. Russian VK users who saw these posts were either located physically outside the Russian Federation or chose to browse the platform using a VPN connection. As the timeline in Figure 6 below shows, none of this material gained much traction on the platform:
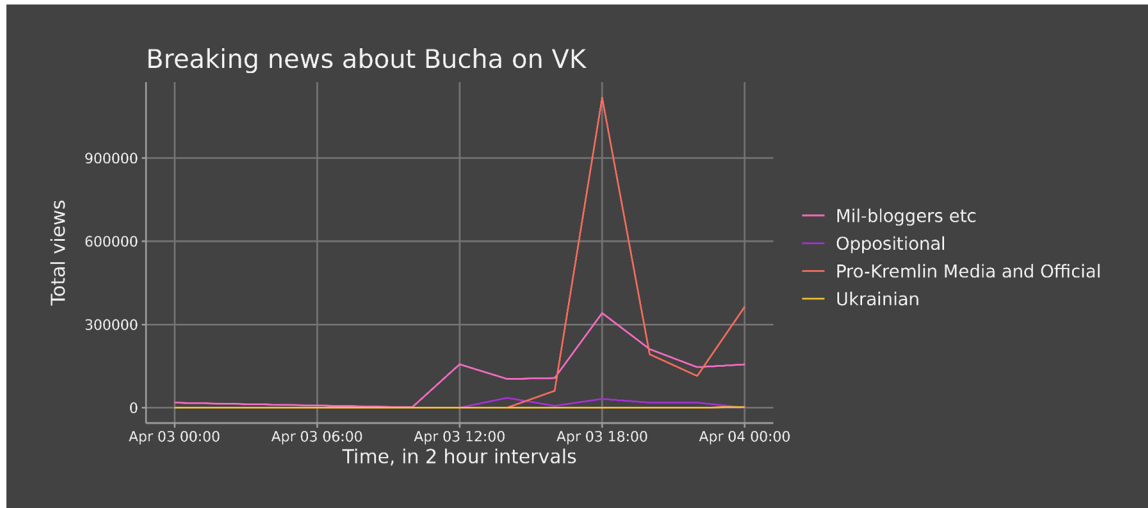

Figure 6: Chart shows views of posts about Bucha on VK.

Instead, the narrative was set by pro-Kremlin communities who decried the activities as fake (marked Military bloggers in Figure 6). The claim that everything was fake was later adopted by state media outlets (green line above).

6 Coordinated trolling & abuse of reporting systems

VK has long had a cosy relationship with the FSB. The current management is additionally linked to the Presidential Administration.[27] Users and pages critical of the war in Ukraine are rapidly blocked. Partly this is the result of the platform's swift implementation of bans decreed by media regulator Roskomnadzor, and partly because it is encouraged by the brigades of trolls who harass and report other social media users.

Data about user banning demonstrates how effectively this 'crowd sourced' reporting system performed. On 5 April, we collected data on users who had action taken against them on VK due to their comments about Bucha. 160 accounts that had posted links to material showing atrocities in Bucha, typically in the comments sections to posts on pro-Kremlin pages, had been banned by the platform. Without exception, the banned accounts had been critical of the Russian army's actions.

Material shared in the telegram group 'Cyber Front Z' suggests these bans were not a coincidence: at 4pm the group's administrators called on supporters (and paid trolls) to spread the 'proof' that Bucha was staged and to target specific VK walls and Telegram groups. It was effective: the four targeted VK posts were all deleted; two of the pages have also since been geo-blocked in Russia.[28]

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[27] https://www.theverge.com/2022/2/26/22951307/us-sanctions-russia-vk-ceo-vladimir-kiriyenko

[28] https://vk.com/club256996 (banned in RF)
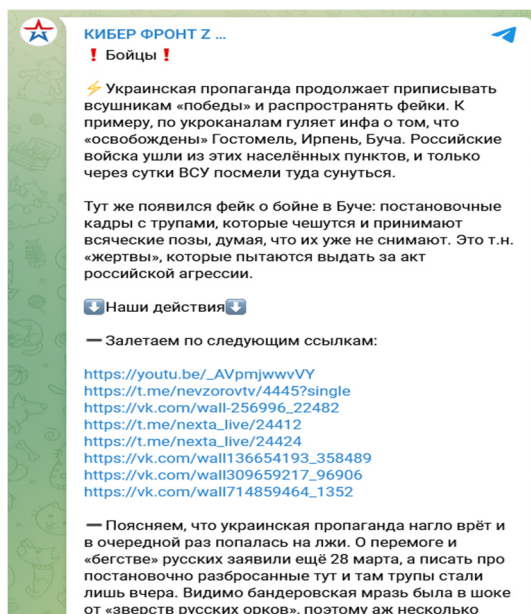   https://vk.com/id714859464 (banned in RF)

Figure 7. Cyber Front Z's Telegram post calling to target VK pages and Telegram groups.

There were still a few pages on VK posting genuinely oppositional or anti-war content. Those that did were near-uniformly blocked to users located in Russia. Chart 2 below shows attention gained by posts on VK mentioning Bucha for the period 2-4 April.
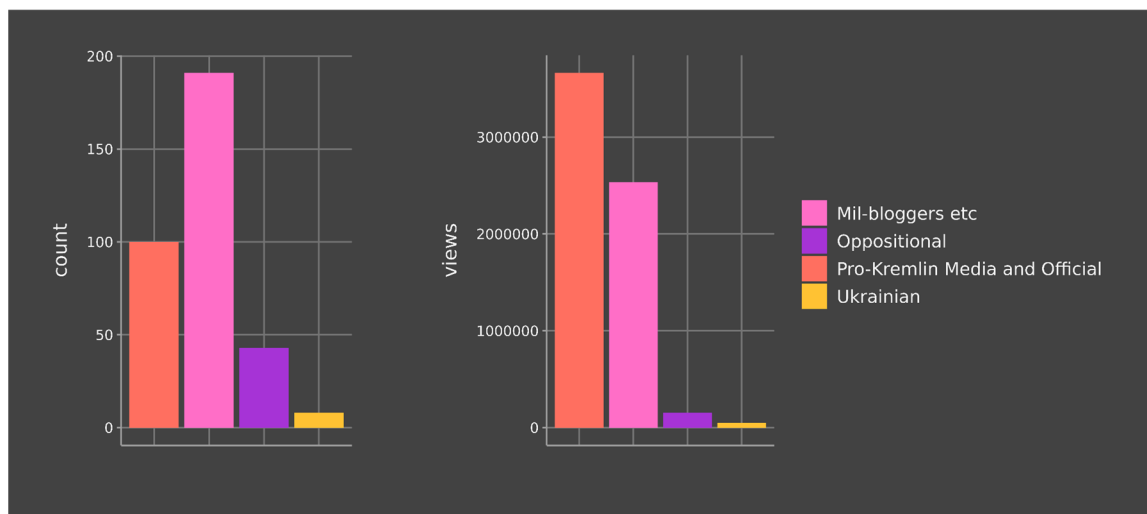

Figure 8: Post and view counts on pages of different orientation.

In Figure 8, the category 'Oppositional' includes some sources hostile to the Kremlin, as well as a number of largely neutral news sources. Note the disproportionately low visibility of content in oppositional and Ukrainian groups. Users of VKontakte were presented with information about Bucha almost entirely consisting of pro-Kremlin material. Some of the views in Figure 8 above come from users outside of the Russian Federation. Given users inside Russia needed a VPN to see oppositional or Ukrainian

messaging, we can infer that the unusually low visibility of sources telling the truth about Bucha would be smaller still if it was possible to isolate views from Russia-based users.

It is difficult to draw conclusions about how fast or far material from Ukrainian pages and independent news outlets might have travelled without the geo-bans imposed by Roskomnadzor. But we have a clue from a natural experiment presented by the diverging fates of two VK pages, Media and Lentach. Both projects trace their roots to Lenta.ru, the once popular news outlet purged in the wake of the annexation of Crimea. On 10 March 2022, Meduza's VK page was blocked to users in the Russian Federation, whereas Lentach remained available. Comparing the trendlines in Figure 9, it seems that both sources had growing average reach during February, but that from 10 March onwards. Lentach continued to attract more viewers, whereas Meduza fell to about a tenth of previous levels.
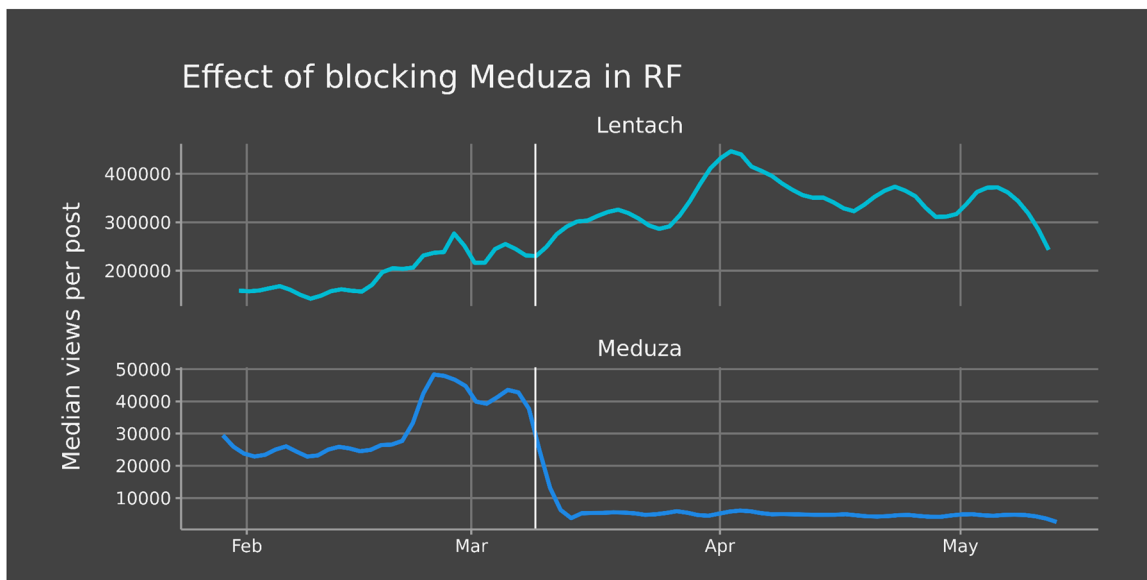

Figure 9. Average number of views on timeline posts by Lentach and Meduza. Meduza was blocked on 10 March 2022, indicated by a white vertical line.

Factoring in that a proportion of VK users are not affected by the ban because they are based outside Russia, we estimate that the blocks cut the visibility of independent news by between 90 and 95%.

YouTube occupies a unique position as a western platform accessible to both Ukrainians and Russians, and consequently has emerged as a prime site of information conflict. It is worth noting that as Russia is continuing to allow access to YouTube, independent reporting on Bucha in the Russian language has successfully reached audiences inside Russia.[29]

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[29] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/russias-halfway-hell-strategy

7 Western-facing pro-Kremlin accounts

The Bucha massacre shocked the world, yet the sanctions that should have limited the spread of pro-Kremlin narratives in the West were only successful in part. To understand how effective the platforms' countermeasures were, we assessed the prevalence of Bucha disinformation on six platforms. Our findings reveal a lack of fact-checking labels and moderation of posts originating from known pro-Kremlin accounts, which raises concerns about the efficacy of the platforms' moderation policies.

From a dataset consisting of posts by known pro-Kremlin accounts, we identified the top 100 highest performing pieces of content mentioning Bucha.[30] We conducted a content analysis to determine whether the shared content reflected the Kremlin's disinformation. Additionally, we noted whether the content had been fact-checked and was labelled with the appropriate warnings and disclaimers. Data collection was conducted in December 2022 for the platforms Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube.

Bucha is a case where one would expect the platforms to perform well: the accounts are well-known pro-Kremlin voices, who have frequently posted harmful disinformation in the past. Furthermore, content about the massacre has been widely fact-checked. We deliberately selected for content that had been the most widely viewed and engaged with, increasing the likelihood that a label would be applied. Furthermore, all the platforms have policies in place describing their responses to content of this type. For instance, YouTube prohibits 'content denying, minimizing, or trivializing well-documented violent events', and cited this policy to explain content removals about Russia's actions in Ukraine.[31] Meta does not allow 'posting content about a violent tragedy, or victims of violent tragedies that include claims that a violent tragedy did not occur.'[32] The company also uses assessments by fact checkers and automated systems to demote false and altered posts.[33]

One of the key challenges faced by social media platforms is their predominantly reactive approach to content moderation. While this method may be effective in handling material they have previously encountered and labelled, it falls short in times of crisis when new and unseen content emerges rapidly. The reliance on fact-checkers further exacerbates the issue, as their capacity can be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information during

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[30] In the cases of Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube the number of posts about Bucha was less than one hundred and all examples were included.

[31] https://twitter.com/YouTubeInsider/status/1502335030168899595

[32] https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/bullying-harassment/

[33] https://transparency.fb.com/features/how-fact-checking-works

events like the Bucha massacre. This reactive approach does not scale well and becomes increasingly inadequate when faced with new crises.
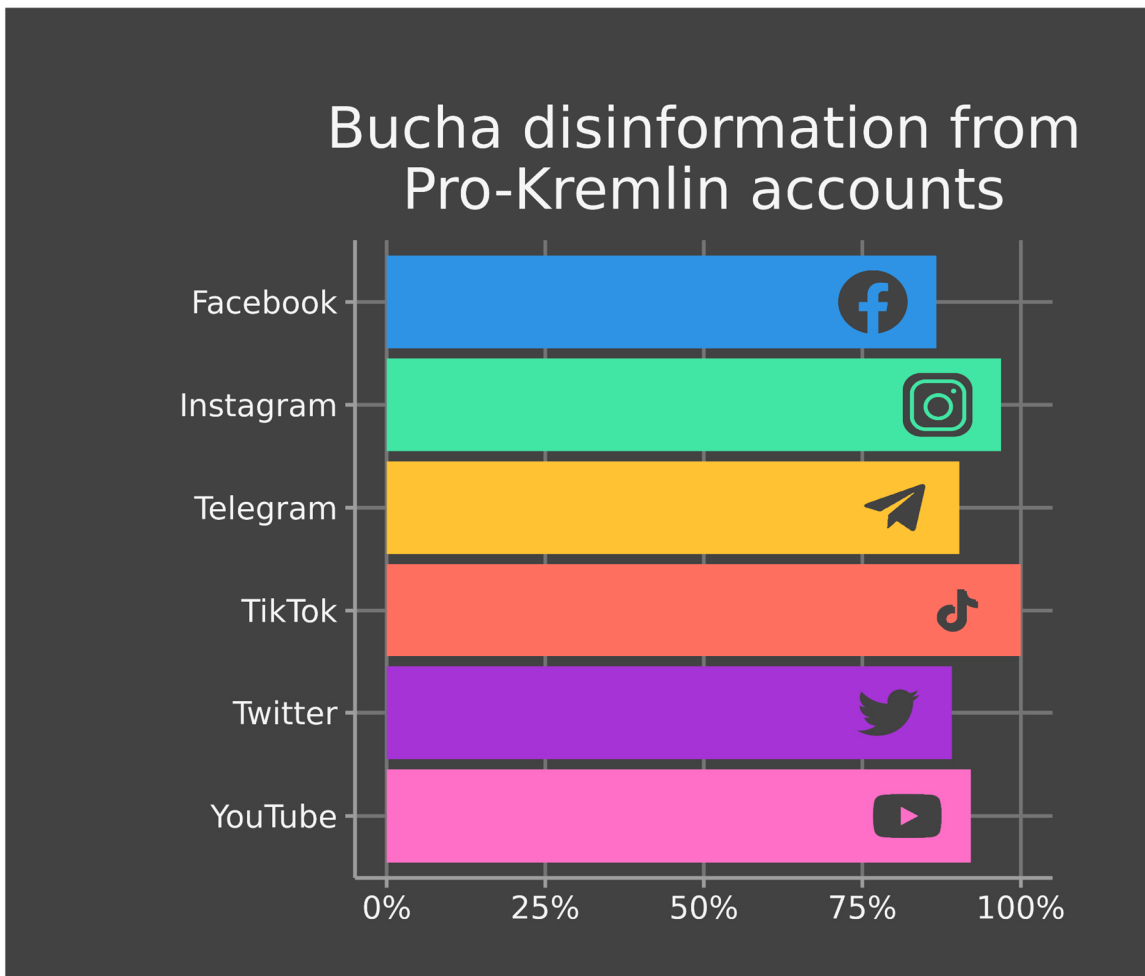

Figure 10. Percentage of posts by known pro-Kremlin sources containing disinformation about the Bucha massacre

The data suggests that pro-Kremlin accounts mentioning Bucha spread the Kremlin's disinformation in more than 80% of cases. Hundreds of such posts and videos remain live. One drawback of our retrospective approach is that we have no data on how many posts each platform moderated and deleted. Anecdotal evidence suggests numerous posts containing graphic content as well as denials of Russian involvement were successfully removed. Examples of content remaining online include a Facebook post from the Russian Embassy in Italy, posted on October 24, 2022 describing the "Bucha provocation" where the Ukrainians "groundlessly accused us [Russia] of civilian casualties".[34] Six months after the international community published documented evidence of the Russian war crimes, Facebook had still not labelled the post.

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[34] https://archive.ph/sE5Rq

On TikTok, *RiaNovosti's* denials of Russian involvement were available and unlabelled, including a clip of Putin saying that the Russian army had nothing to do with it, with more than 3,500 likes.[35] On Instagram, *navyofrussia's* 3 April post claiming that Bucha was staged remains live. As evidence it offers a low-resolution video where a smudge on the windscreen makes it look like one of the bodies moves his arm. Despite this content having been widely fact-checked, including by AFP,[36] the post is merely labelled as containing sensitive content.[37] On YouTube, a video by the outlet *COMPACTTV* called "Bucha: Facts versus propaganda" follows the pro-Kremlin narrative that photos and videos from Bucha could have been manipulated or staged.[38] In general, disinformation spread by conspiracy theorists, bloggers, and Russian state officials remains live and unlabelled on each of the examined platforms.[39]

Only on Facebook and Instagram is any disinformation about Bucha labelled whatsoever, at a rate of 7 and 3 per cent respectively. One might read this as an indication that Meta is marginally better at labelling disinformation than other platforms. However, this is partly because some objectionable content posted by high-profile accounts is labelled and left on the platform, rather than being removed. The four Russian-language accounts from which we identified Bucha disinformation on Facebook were all directly tied to the Kremlin. They included MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova, the Ministry of Defence, the news agency *Ria Novosti*, as well as the sanctioned *Channel 1*. From these official accounts that posted disinformation about Bucha, the content has remained live for almost a year, and only in few cases has been labelled.

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[35] https://www.tiktok.com/@ria_novosti/video/7091024997862444289

[36] https://factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.327R8KF

[37] https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb5CuNalGDx/

[38] https://archive.ph/CeH9D

[39] For instance this conspiracy theory video about Bucha, shared by German embassy in Berlin on Facebook and hosted on YouTube
https://www.facebook.com/RusBotschaft/posts/pfbid0xwxHsJDdDhnX954ZpEsJm4hZfC4sPoCoxgYR5uSrVvMTXXr62FsEXfC44nnX9fEel

8 Conclusion

This analysis sheds light on the Kremlin propaganda tactics employed on social media platforms as part of the effort to conceal the war crimes of the Russian military in Bucha. The primary approach involved leveraging the operational speed of Telegram to disseminate the core narrative that the Ukrainian army staged the civilian killings. Telegram was then utilised for cross-platform coordination to amplify the message to Western audiences. The Kremlin also employed Telegram to mobilize and coordinate troll activity targeting fifty prominent Western and global media outlets, as well as select Western leaders. To complement these coordinated efforts, the Kremlin issued statements designed to prepare audiences to accept future atrocities as a matter of foreign and domestic policy.

In addition to disseminating key messages, the Kremlin also utilised censorship and harassment tactics to suppress dissent on Russian social media platform VK. Through geo-blocking, coordinated trolling, and targeted harassment, visible opposition was effectively eliminated from the platform. Users and pages critical of the war in Ukraine were rapidly blocked. Partly this was the result of the platform's swift implementation of bans decreed by media regulator *Roskomnadzor*, and partly it was encouraged by the brigades of trolls who 'crowd sourced' the reporting of dissenting social media users.

The analysis also highlights how easily the Kremlin's disinformation spread on social media platforms in Europe. Our evaluation of six platforms found that known pro-Kremlin accounts shared disinformation to a large degree without fact-checking labels or warnings. In many cases, the content remained live for months without any moderation. This lack of moderation raises questions about the efficacy of the platforms' content moderation policies and their overall role in the pro-Kremlin information ecosystem.

Understanding the Kremlin's approach to Bucha is important for developing countermeasures to future disinformation about atrocities and war crimes. Clearly, the Kremlin's main tactic has been to pursue a battle of narratives, with their narrative position typically based on doubt, denial, and distraction. Independent, factual information is the essential building block of narratives based on truth. A major question then becomes the extent to which pro-Kremlin sources should be factchecked, debunked, removed and/or labelled if their narratives can be considered to contribute to public harm through atrocity denial and encouraging further atrocities.

We have discussed how this battle of narratives plays out in two information ecosystems. On the one hand, Russian domestic platforms and media have mostly restricted oppositional information with some success. Their narratives are the only ones with the oxygen to breathe. On the other hand, Western platforms have assumed a more ambiguous

stance, applying content moderation, deplatforming, and labelling in less systematic ways. While risks about freedom of speech are clearly only a consideration on the Western side, this should not equate to freedom of amplification for Kremlin war crime apologia. Put simply, implementation of countermeasures targeting pro-Kremlin propaganda on Western platforms is inconsistent and should do better.
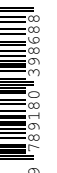
Meanwhile, countermeasures to reduce the effectiveness of brigading, particularly between platforms or to email addresses, appear difficult to design. At present, it is relatively easy to convene on a Russian platform such as Telegram, coordinate a plan of action, and conduct influence activities on Western digital platforms. Brigading and harassment are highly effective measures with few countermeasures available to the defender community.