DISINFORMATION & PROPAGANDA

about the Ukrainian far-right in Slovakia and Ukraine

Mapping actors and narratives on Facebook

Introduction

Ukraine has been defending itself against Russian military aggression since 2014. However, it has resisted Russian influence and information warfare for much longer. It is not only military means that Russia is using in an attempt to maintain its sphere of influence, it is a dream of the "Russian world", which includes Ukraine. For a long time, it seemed that cultural influence, the corruption of politicians, energy dependence and the spread of Russian propaganda would be enough to "contain" Ukraine in this way.

However, 2014 brought a turning point. Ukrainian society chose to work more closely with the West, especially the EU. Putin attacked Ukraine militarily, first annexing Crimea and using his armed forces to help the separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions to unleash military conflict. These events attracted international attention and Putin needed to convince the world public of the legitimacy of his war.

Thus, 2014 also brought to other European countries an intensification of Russian information operations and active measures aimed at legitimising Russian policy and discrediting Ukraine, the West and the democratic and international institutions that might stand in its way.

To achieve its goals, the Kremlin uses its own actors (embassies, spies, oligarchs), but for them, the key is cooperation with local actors who are willing to spread Russian propaganda for various motivations. This study looks specifically at local actors in Slovakia and Ukraine who spread Russian propaganda. This is because we assume that through their activities they have an influence on the formation of the image of Ukraine in both countries.

The aim of this study is to investigate how pro-Kremlin actors in both countries have constructed the image of Ukraine in public discourse since the beginning of the Maidan through a specific narrative of the "profound influence of the far-right in Ukraine". We focused on this narrative because it is one of the key propaganda narratives present among all actors spreading Russian propaganda. This includes actors from top Russian political leaders to Slovak and Ukrainian pro-Kremlin actors.

At the same time, it is a narrative that has been present in Slovakia and Ukraine for the entire nine years of the conflict. By monitoring and analysing the Slovak and Ukrainian information environment, we aim to identify similarities and differences in the formation and dissemination of the narrative under study, which undoubtedly result from the specific situation of both countries.

The study operates on the hypothesis that national discourses and the activity of the actors under study will differ, especially in terms of the amount of content and the

objectives of the narratives disseminated. Therefore, the interpretation of the research results will reflect the expectation that the Ukrainian information space will contain less relevant content. This is not only due to research limitations related to the blockage of some actors, but also due to the fact that Russian propaganda seeks to convince primarily Western audiences, and not Ukrainian ones, of the growing influence of the far right in Ukraine. Nevertheless, we consider the research relevant because Russian propaganda communicates in different spaces with different goals, but uses similar tools and narratives.

The study aims to provide readers with a better overview of how the observed metanarrative of the "profound influence of the far-right in Ukraine" is communicated and instrumentalised in Slovakia and Ukraine. The primary target audience is the broader professional community engaged in the topics of extremism, political mobilisation, hybrid threats or disinformation campaigns, in Slovakia, Ukraine and abroad.

The research is structured as follows. First, we provide a detailed description of the methodology to explain the framework of the study. It then proceeds with two national chapters – Slovak and Ukrainian. These are further subdivided into quantitative and qualitative sections, within which the above parameters are analysed. The research continues with a joint comparative section, which focuses on identifying similarities and differences in the formation of the observed narrative of the "profound influence of the far-right in Ukraine".

Executive Summary

- In **Slovakia**, the set of actors which dominated the communication activity throughout the period under review consists mainly of disinformation media, which have long shown signs of pro-Russian sentiment. The overall picture is completed by several political actors, including Ľuboš Blaha and the Communist Party of Slovakia. The Slovak dataset contained **1,203 analysed posts**.

- **The Embassy of Russia in Slovakia has been the most significant contributor to the monitored communication.** The 149 posts published by it correspond to more than 12% of the total number of analysed content. The Embassy of Russia in Slovakia mentioned Ukraine in more than 5% of its total content. The monitored narrative comprised up to one-fifth of the Ukraine-related content, which is primarily made up of posts from 2022.

- In addition to several alternative media and Facebook pages, **politicians dominate the ranking of the most effective actors**. This only confirms the long-term presence of a trend in which political actors are gradually taking over the roles of the main disseminators of disinformation in Slovakia.

- **The effectiveness of communication is clearly dominated by Ľuboš Blaha.** Through 55 posts he generated more than 519 thousand interactions. The greatest increase in activity can be noted in 2022, within which Blaha figures as a leading protagonist of pro-Russian narratives and disseminator of Russian propaganda.

- **The most mentioned keywords** were "Azov" (in 268 posts) and "Bandera" (in 228 posts).

- **The largest number of relevant and analyzed posts contained a narrative of criminal activities of far-right organizations in Ukraine**, mainly discussing groups such as Azov, Right Sector, UPA, etc. There has been frequent abuse of the 2 May 2014 incident at the Odessa Trade Union House (present in 55 posts), which pro-Russian actors interpret as the sole responsibility of the Ukrainian far-right. Far-right violence in Ukraine has been presented as "business as usual" and part of a "degenerate Western democracy". Posts sought to create the perception that Ukrainians have an entrenched tendency to support far-right groups.

- Another directly related narrative focused on **the war in Donbas** and sub-narratives primarily related to the rhetoric of oppression of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine. The war in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea were key

to one of the motives of Russian propaganda – to portray the Kremlin as a victim, a protector of the Russian-speaking population, a resistor of oppression by the West, but above all a fighter against Nazism.

- The third most common narrative included accusations of **the Ukrainian government being collectively labelled as fascists or Nazis**. The narrative began to take shape at the turn of 2013 and 2014. Since then, the rhetoric about Ukraine's internal conflict, which was supposed to take place between the fascist government and the rest of the population, especially those in the east of the country, has continuously prevailed.

- A significant part of the content consisted of **historical revisionism**, which was mainly linked to the person of Stepan Bandera and the Banderites, or their activities during World War II. Historical revisionism was often used in communication as a secondary tool for shaping the image of other topics. The image of the Banderites was reduced in the examined material to that of Nazi collaborators and murderers who killed civilians during and after World War II.

- Rhetoric which described the war in Donbas (not only) in terms of the conflict between the West and Russia was often used. The plethora of Western actors used within Russian propaganda was highly interchangeable. Naturally, the US was mentioned most often, and over time NATO as well. The EU was mentioned in the context of sanctions, and the UN or the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) were seen in a negative light, especially in the context of reports from observation missions.

Ukraine

- Almost 28% of Ukrainian publications were related to the Glorification of OUN UPA (58 posts). These publications are a part of a narrative of **historical revisionism** which covers the following aspects - role of OUN UPA in the World War II as "Nazi collaborators", origin of the Ukrainian greeting "Glory to Ukraine" and "war crimes" committed by OUN UPA against ethnic groups and civilians who supported the USSR.

- All posts in total reached **148,790 interactions** on Facebook. It is also essential to note that some actors who had the highest numbers of interactions were using in their communication a strategy to appeal to Ukrainian origin (e. g. pages "The Other Ukraine", "Patriots for Life") or to the narrative of "Great Patriotic War" ("The Victory Regiment"). There were also pages related to individual actors – politicians, political experts, journalists and representatives of civil society.

- The most popular keywords were "UPA" (in 122 posts), "OUN" (in 87 posts) and Ukrainian fascists/Ukrainian Nazis/ukro-Nazis/neo-Nazis (62 posts in total). These findings prove that main topics in constructing the narrative about "Nazism in Ukraine" are **historical revisionism** in the context of activity OUN UPA and **discrediting Ukrainians and Ukrainian government** influenced by Revolution of Dignity in 2014 and EU-integration processes in Ukraine.

- The highest number of publications containing keywords was published in **2021** (115 posts). This can be, presumably, explained with the broader social and political context, focused on the debates about the possibility of Russia`s full-scale invasion. Therefore, disseminating narratives of Russian propaganda could have been a strategy to destabilise the situation inside Ukraine.

- Among active Ukrainian actors, **Ukraine's news** (38 posts), **Oles Buzyna – Community** (31 posts), **Pershyy Kozats ʹ kyy** (21 posts) published the biggest number of posts. It can be also seen that the first and the third actor have a naming that is related to Ukraine and "Ukrainian identity" whereas the second one is related to Ukrainian pro-Russian publicist and a writer who was killed in 2015 and has been chosen as a symbol of "Nazi crimes against pro-Russian people in Ukraine".

- **Historical confrontation**, particularly related to the glorification of OUN UPA and **UPA anniversary in Ukraine**, was the main narrative (107 posts). This narrative consists of messages about the accusation of OUN UPA of Nazism and war crimes during WWII. Another aspect is presented by messages about memory politics in the context of commemoration of WWII in Ukraine. As far as appeal to the concept of "Great Patriotic War" has taken a significant place in Russian propaganda, it was

also used to accuse Ukraine of "Nazism" as well as to appeal to public emotions and divide Ukraine into "Western and Eastern".

- Other narratives, found while monitoring, were also related to appealing to "Nazism in Ukraine". Among them were found narratives about Ukrainian society as "Nazi and radical" (49 posts), Ukrainian government as "far-right" (23 posts). Smaller narratives related to the West supporting "fascism in Ukraine" (3 posts) and a threat from "Ukrainian radical parties" (23 posts) were also present. All of them were used to construct an image of Ukraine as a "failed Nazi state" as well as to discredit EU-integration processes and the Revolution of Dignity in 2014.

Research design and methodology

The research aims to elucidate the shaping of public discourse and communication through a specific narrative of the "profound influence of the far-right in Ukraine". The research design reflects the quantitative and qualitative levels of the issue, where it seeks to provide a detailed analysis of key sub-narratives and identify the actors involved in their dissemination. Respecting national specificities, it focuses on the analysis of the Slovak and Ukrainian information space.

The study seeks to answer key research questions:

- What topics and sub-narratives shaped the narrative under observation during the monitoring period?
- Which actors have been most active and effective in shaping it?
- What similarities and differences can be found in the formation of the narrative in Slovak and Ukrainian information space?

The research uses quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyse and evaluate the formation of the observed narrative on social media in Slovakia and Ukraine. It tracks the period between 21 November 2013 and 1 May 2022. The monitored period is thus bounded by the beginning of the Maidan in Kyiv and the end date, which allows for the identification and analysis of narratives which were already circulating during the full-scale war between Ukraine and Russia.

The dataset which was further annotated and analyzed has been acquired using the CrowdTangle monitoring tool. A set of keywords was used to search for content, which is listed in *Appendix 1*. The Slovak dataset contained a total of 1,685 results, of which 1,602 were available at the time of data collection. 7,583 posts on Facebook for the analysis were identified in the Ukrainian dataset.

The data were sorted chronologically to determine their relevance and relation to the different time phases and events of the monitoring period. In Slovakia, the data collection took place in May 2022, thus the study also analyses content that is no longer available or blocked at the time of the study's publication. In Ukraine, the data was collected in December 2022, including only available content on Facebook which may not be available after the study's publication.

The research focused on the content published by actors on Facebook, mainly because it is the primary communication channel and source of information for the public in Slovakia. Taking into account the blocking of Russian social networks in Ukraine based on order No. 133/2017 dated 15 May 2017, the number of Ukrainian Facebook users has increased

significantly over the past years. However, it is worth mentioning that Facebook [is not the most popular](#) social media in Ukraine.

The content search was based on a predefined list of actors. In the case of Slovakia, the set of tracked actors was created on the basis of Gerulata Technologies' list of pro-Kremlin actors and supplemented with actors that were active in the past decade, especially in 2013, 2014 and 2015. The list of pro-Kremlin sites, which was compiled by activist Juraj Smatana in 2015, was used for the addition of these actors.

The analysis and evaluation of the dataset were based on its thorough annotation. The annotation process, data filtering and visualization of results were done manually by the analysts based on the data received through the CrowdTangle monitoring tool.

Annotation

The entire dataset was processed by a team of experienced annotators. To ensure consistency and accuracy of the annotation process, the annotators were trained by senior analysts. After the annotation process, a quality check of the annotated data was performed to find and eliminate inconsistencies.

The annotation process allowed irrelevant content to be filtered out. In the case of Slovakia, this amounted to 1,203 posts to be analyzed. As for Ukraine, the total number of related posts amounted to 207.

The annotation process was designed to answer a number of questions: How has the public discourse on the "profound influence of the far-right in Ukraine" been shaped? What sub-narratives have shaped the narrative under review? How was it shaped in the context of specific historical events? Which actors were most active and effective in shaping it? What part of their overall communication did it constitute?

Answering these questions allowed us to capture four central categories: actors, narratives, events, and keywords.

Actors

The category focused on identifying the actors who shaped the narrative under review. In the quantitative part of the research, the category also made it possible to determine and evaluate the extent of their participation in shaping the public discourse.

The annotation of the dataset was preceded by the selection of specific actors who have been spreading pro-Russian disinformation narratives and Russian propaganda for a long time. In the case of Slovakia, this was a list with a total of 133 actors. In the case of Ukraine, the list included 35 active actors with available posts on Facebook.

Narratives

The category focuses on identifying the sub-narratives used in the formation of the discourse of the narrative under study. The annotation was preceded by the delineation of key narratives identified through a preliminary analysis of the dataset received. A single annotated post could also incorporate several of the sub-narratives under study.

In Slovakia, there were also 399 cases in which we discovered no relevance to the research. 91 posts did not contain any predefined sub-narrative, but due to their relevance, they were assigned to the "Other" category. In total, we identified nine key sub-narratives for the purposes of discourse categorization in Slovakia:

1. The Maidan was organised and dominated by the far-right;
2. Ukraine's political elite is far-right;
3. Criminal activities of far-right organisations;
4. The far-right in the war in Donbas (and Crimea);
5. The West supports the Ukrainian far-right;
6. Slovakia supports the far-right in Ukraine;
7. Mainstream media in Slovakia and the West lie about Ukraine;
8. Society in Ukraine is characterised by high support for the far-right;
9. Historical revisionism.

Based on the analyzed publications during the research period, the following narratives were revealed in Ukraine:

1. Historical confrontation;
2. Ukrainian society is "radical, fascist and neonazi";
3. The Ukrainian government is "full of far-right radicals";
4. The West supports "fascists" in Ukraine;
5. "Radical" parties and activists are threatening Ukrainian statehood, the foreign policy of Ukraine and its society, and global democracy;
6. Ukrainian volunteer battalions are "radical and act as penal military units";
7. "Radicals" are the reason why Ukraine is "losing its face in front of the West".

Events

The category focuses on identifying the events that were used to shape the narrative within the content under review. The category is divided into eight events, which allowed the creation of a schematic necessary for understanding their relationship with each narrative or understanding their use across the years of the study period. The eight events are:

1. Maidan;
2. War in Donbas;
3. Annexation of Crimea;
4. Violence in Odessa;
5. Decommunization Laws (2015);
6. Shooting in Mukachevo;
7. Law on the Status of OUN/UPA Veterans (2018);
8. Invasion (2022).

Based on the content data for the Ukrainian segment of Facebook, the narratives in the posts were related to the following events' categories:

1. Bandera's birthday (1 January);
2. Decommunization;
3. Donbas;
4. Glorification of OUN and UPA;
5. Maidan;
6. Events in Odessa;
7. UPA anniversary (14 October).

Keywords

The category focuses on identifying the keywords used to communicate and shape the narrative under study. These are primarily terms which name specific subjects or phenomena that Russian propaganda operated with. In the context of the research, they can be understood as buzzwords that were used by actors to label more complex issues. We focused on the most dominant keywords, which were:

1. Azov;
2. Right Sector;
3. Bandera;
4. Banderites;
5. Genocide.

In the case of Ukraine, three additional keywords have been added:

1. TikTok trend "Our Father Bandera" (October 2021);
2. Tomos (6 January 2019);
3. Victory Day.

Analysis

Actors analysis

Using the annotated data, the authors focused on analysing the key actors who communicated the narrative under study during the monitoring period. The research evaluates actors' actions based on the dataset and statistics obtained, distinguishing two categories: actor activity (amount of posts) and actor effectiveness (amount of interactions generated). At the same time, it focuses on the volume of content that the tracked actors communicated. The research evaluates their activities based on the ratio between general and Ukraine-related content, and then with the content that incorporated the observed narrative. The analysis of actors was conducted not only through quantitative but also qualitative research, in which the authors focused on identifying actors active in the dissemination of specific narratives and messages.

Narrative analysis

The analysis of the narratives was conducted in the quantitative and qualitative parts of the research. In the quantitative part, the authors focused on the presence of each sub-narrative during the period under study. The individual narratives were analysed not only in relation to the time period during which they were communicated but also in relation to the events that served as a platform for their communication. The research also focuses on identifying the most dominant sub-narratives that shaped the public discourse on the issue.

In the qualitative part, the research focuses on identifying key narratives, which the authors then confront with reality and point out the conscious or unconscious shortcomings of actors' communication. The added value of the chapter comes from the expert opinions provided by historians debunking various incorrect or manipulative statements.

Comparison between Slovakia and Ukraine

Part of the research focuses on the comparison of the factors that influenced the formation of the narrative under review in the Slovak and Ukrainian information space. The key focus is on the differences in the disseminated sub-narratives and the overall communication schematic of the narrative about the "profound influence of the far-right in Ukraine". It reflects the diversity of the target audience, but also the specificities related to the historical as well as contemporary realities of the political and social situation in both countries. It offers a comprehensive overview of the actors and messages that were used in the construction of the narrative under study.

Limitations

The research may not capture all the partial elements of the formation of the narrative under study. This is mainly due to the fact that the retrieval of the further analysed content was done through a set of keywords that may not contain all the related terms. At the same time, the content search focused on a limited number of actors who are, however, long known for spreading pro-Russian narratives and Russian propaganda. Therefore, we believe that the research at least captures the key lines of communication of the narrative under study.

The time period on which the research focused can also be considered a limitation. In particular, the problem lies in the fact that several relevant actors may have ceased their activities by the time the data collection started and subsequently removed them, or may have been blocked on social media. At the same time, the research relies heavily on manual annotation, which is time-consuming and requires trained annotators. Even annotated data may not be sufficiently reliable without subsequent quality control.

Identifying the lists of posts, most of them were neutral or simply informative, therefore, they were not useful for the analysis. After reviewing all posts, the specialists selected only those items which were clearly bearing Russian propagandistic narratives. From identified 7,583 posts on Facebook in Ukraine, most of them were neutral or simply informative so they were not useful for the analysis. It is worth noting that we took into consideration only those posts which are accessible on Facebook as of January 2023. A lot of pro-Russian propagandistic sources were not accessible as their pages of origin were blocked by Meta following the complaints of Ukrainian media organisations and civil society. So the real extent of Russian propaganda in 2013 – 2022 has been much higher until Ukraine began to address the situation.

Slovakia

Slovakia, as a member of the EU and NATO, has long been a target of Russian hybrid operations, including information operations, which can be seen as a dominant tool used by the Kremlin. Apart from the Russian Embassy in Slovakia, this role is primarily performed by domestic political, media and non-governmental actors. Under the guise of alternative reporting in opposition to the standard media and politicians, they disseminate problematic content, including Russian propaganda.

Pro-Kremlin actors use narratives of Russian propaganda on various topics while pursuing political, economic, psychological or other motives. Over the past nine years, dozens of websites and Facebook profiles have been created in Slovakia, either reproducing content from Russian state media or creating content themselves, with a clearly positive sentiment towards the Kremlin's geopolitics.

They indirectly lend their communication channels to the propaganda of a state that has labelled Slovakia an enemy. In doing so, they were able to apply the Russian view of the world to various topics, such as the coronavirus pandemic, the defence agreement with the USA or the war in Ukraine. For the last two years, this ecosystem has been the originator of every serious communication crisis or at least a major amplifier of it. Given the significance of 24 February 2022 and the changes that this date has brought not only in international but also in domestic politics, the topic of war is present in the Slovak information space on a daily basis.

Are pro-Kremlin trends in some parts of Slovak society the result of pro-Russian propaganda, or are the actors spreading this propaganda targeting already existing ideas in public opinion? Both statements could be described as true while complementing each other in reality. Propagandists work with certain historically constructed ideas about Russia (or the USSR) and use them to inform about current events in the world, thereby reinforcing these ideas and trying to reach as wide an audience as possible.

This does not mean, however, that the narratives of Russian propaganda are accepted by the majority of society. It is a rather large minority. Globsec's poll from September 2022 showed that 47% of the Slovak population wanted Ukraine to win and 19% wanted Russia to win. However, up to 24% of respondents said they did not care who wins and 10% could not answer. Thus, a third of the Slovak population does not have a clear opinion and is a potential target of propagandists.

Hence, there is a relatively favourable environment for the dissemination of Russian propaganda in Slovakia. There are multiple active political, media and other actors in the information space who share the Russian view of the world. At the same time, there is a rather large sample of people who are willing to listen to them. The Slovak online information space is highly structured, and the clusters of pro-Western and pro-Russian

actors are clearly decipherable. Topics related to Russian geopolitics can be considered the fundamental polarizing line which is used by the alternative information subsystem (primarily made up of far-right, far-left and pro-Kremlin actors) to disseminate content with a pro-Russian orientation.

The myth of the Ukrainian far-right in numbers

In this part of the paper we analyze the quantitative parameters of the research data. The aim of this section is to determine the frequency of occurrence of the phenomenon under study and its characteristics and mutations over time. We also focus on the quantitative analysis of the actors who operated with and shaped the studied metanarrative.

The chapter begins with a quantitative definition of the content under study (total number of posts, number of posts by year). It then proceeds by identifying the most active and influential actors. An important part of the chapter involves identifying which actors engage with the topic of Ukraine the most and what proportion of the posts consists of content with the analysed metanarrative and its variations.

The actor analysis is followed by quantification of the individual variations of the metanarrative under study, as well as the events and keywords that the metanarrative is linked to. This part of the study answers our questions of who utilizes the metanarrative of the Ukrainian far-right, and how often and when, to shape the discourse on Ukraine.

During 2013, no relevant content was captured. However, activity related to the narrative of the far-right in Ukraine has been gaining momentum in the following years. Communication activity naturally responded to events related to the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. Since 2016, despite a gradual upward trend in the number of relevant content, we notice a certain decline compared to the first years of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which in fact persists until 2020. However, the year 2021 marks the revitalization of the narrative under scrutiny, mainly related to the pre-war period and the first preparations for Russian aggression, which also took place in the information space. That the narrative of Ukrainian fascism is largely correlated with the war in Ukraine and is used as one of the main communication tools to justify Russian aggression which is confirmed by the data from the first four months of 2022. The exponential increase in content is particularly evident in comparison to previous years: from 2014 to 2021, we recorded a total of 754 relevant posts, and from the beginning of 2022 to 1 May 2022, we recorded 449 posts. The results underline the significant increase in the frequency of communication of the narrative of the Ukrainian far-right, and thus inherently Russian propaganda, which has been disseminated by various actors.

Number of posts, per year
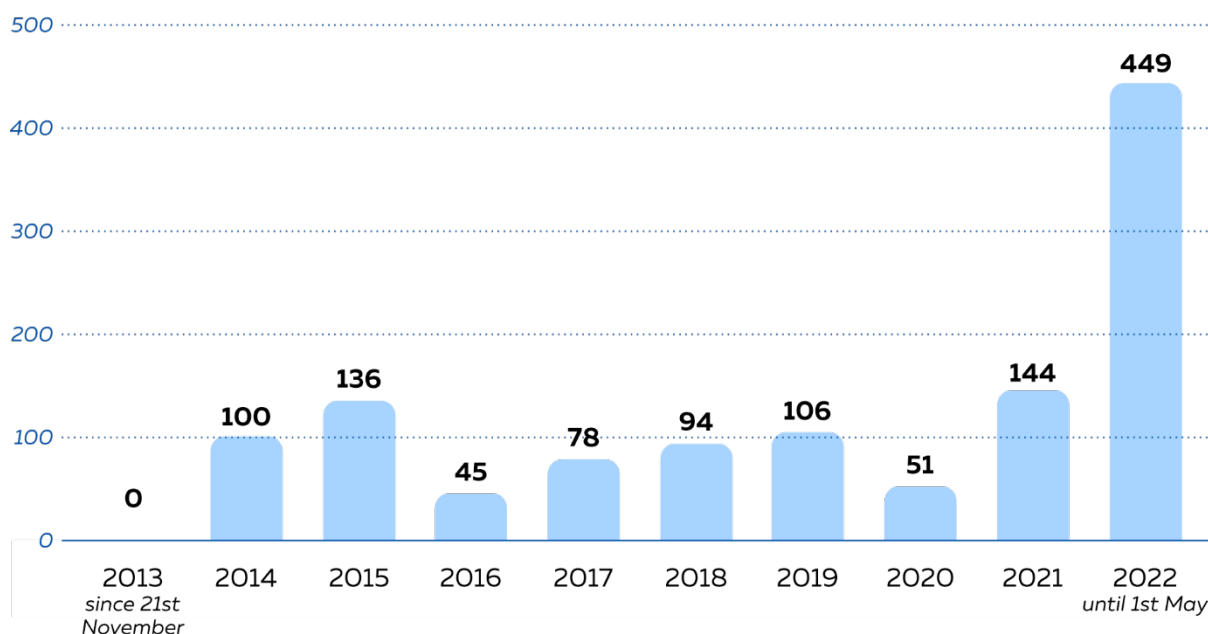
Graph 1: Number of relevant posts by year. Data obtained via CrowdTangle.

Actors analysis

Topics related to the metanarrative of the "profound influence of the far-right in Ukraine" were communicated by a variety of actors. When assessing their impact on the information environment of Slovakia, we focused on two categories: the overall activity of actors (number of posts) and the effectiveness of their communication (number of interactions generated). The activity of individual actors varied during the period under review; due to the length of the monitoring period, some of the actors analyzed were active only in certain segments of the period. The list of the most effective actors according to the interactions reached can be found in *Annex 3*.

The set of actors that dominated the communication activity throughout the period under review consists mainly of disinformation media, which have long shown signs of pro-Russian sentiment. The overall picture is completed by several political actors, including Ľuboš Blaha and the Communist Party of Slovakia. However, the official page of the Russian Embassy in Slovakia has been the most significant contributor to the communication. It has long been operating in the Slovak information space beyond the expected (diplomatic) activities and can be described as an influence and propaganda tool of the Russian Federation. The 149 posts published by it correspond to more than 12% of the total number of analysed content. The page was primarily active in 2014 (especially in relation to the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas), and only revived communications related to the narrative under review in 2018. Activity grew throughout 2021, but peaked in 2022 when it published 91 posts in the first four months alone. The

findings only underscore Russia's interest in informational influence on the Slovak population, especially in the context of Russia's unprecedented aggression in the form of launching a full-scale war in Ukraine. The second actor in the list, *Slovanské noviny*, is a disinformation media outlet that has been actively spreading pro-Russian content since 2021. The list also includes the fan site *Alexander Ivanovič Možajev*, which has been dedicated to pro-Russian separatists since its inception and presents itself as an independent and impartial information portal. In the context of the narrative under review, the page in question has been communicating problematic messages about the Ukrainian far-right continuously since 2014. Despite the high number of posts, with one exception, the actors in question failed to generate a large number of interactions.

Top 10 Actors by Number of Posts
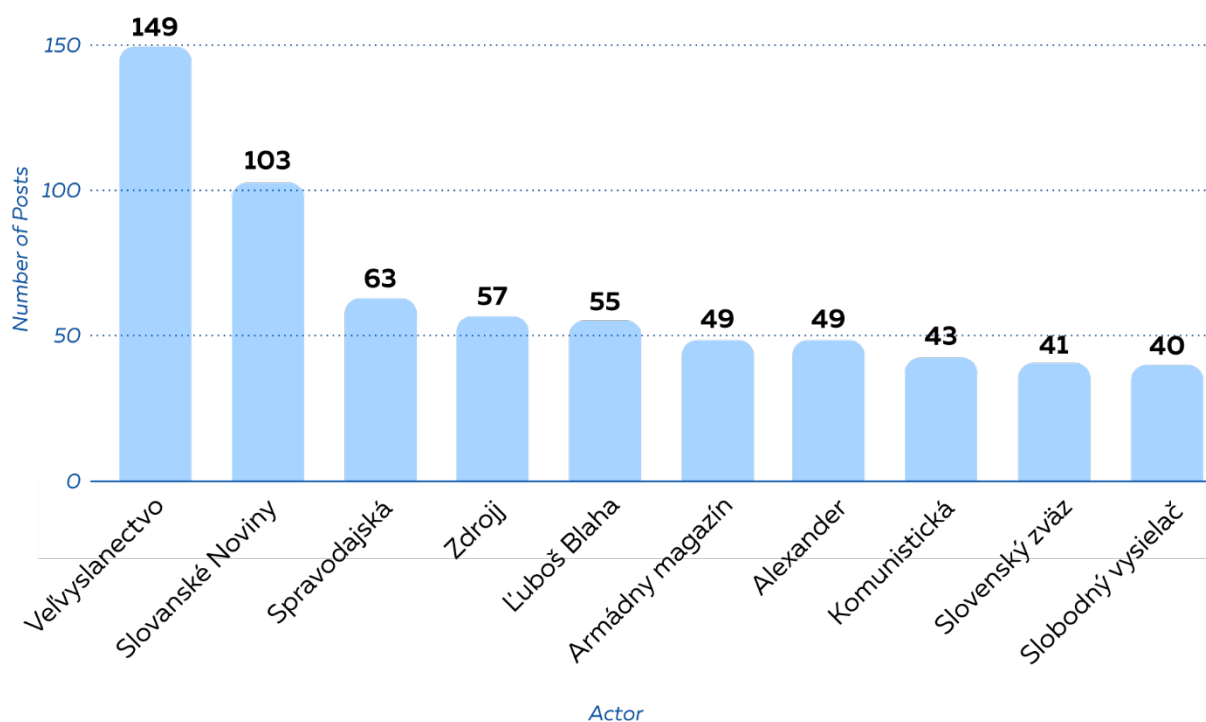
Graph 2: Top 10 actors by the number of posts (communication activity). Data obtained via CrowdTangle.

The effectiveness of communication is clearly dominated by Ľuboš Blaha, a member of the SMER-SD party, whose Facebook account is currently banned.[1] 55 of his posts generated more than 519 thousand interactions. This means an average of almost 10 thousand interactions per post. Blaha has been using the surveyed metanarrative for a long time, his activity starting in 2018 shows an upward trend. In his posts, Blaha uses the narrative of the Ukrainian far-right as not only a secondary but also a primary topic. The

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[1] In mid-June 2022, the member of the SMER-SD party was banned from Facebook by Meta. His account, which was followed by more than 170 thousand users, was permanently suspended due to repeated violations of the rules regarding hate speech, bullying and harassment, incitement to violence, as well as disinformation and damage regarding COVID-19.

greatest increase in activity can be noted in 2022, within which Blaha figures as a leading protagonist of pro-Russian narratives and disseminator of Russian propaganda. In addition to several alternative media and Facebook pages, politicians dominate the ranking of the most effective actors. This only confirms the long-term presence of a trend in which political actors are gradually taking over the roles of the main disseminators of disinformation in Slovakia. Despite the relatively low number of posts, political actors were able to create and further exploit topics. Particularly noteworthy is the activity of Milan Uhrík, MEP and chairman of the far-right Republika party, who generated more than 30-thousand interactions through two posts discussing the Azov battalion. At the same time, it should be pointed out that the communication efficiency of the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Slovakia is relatively low, with an average of 144 interactions per post.

Top 10 Actors by Number of Interactions
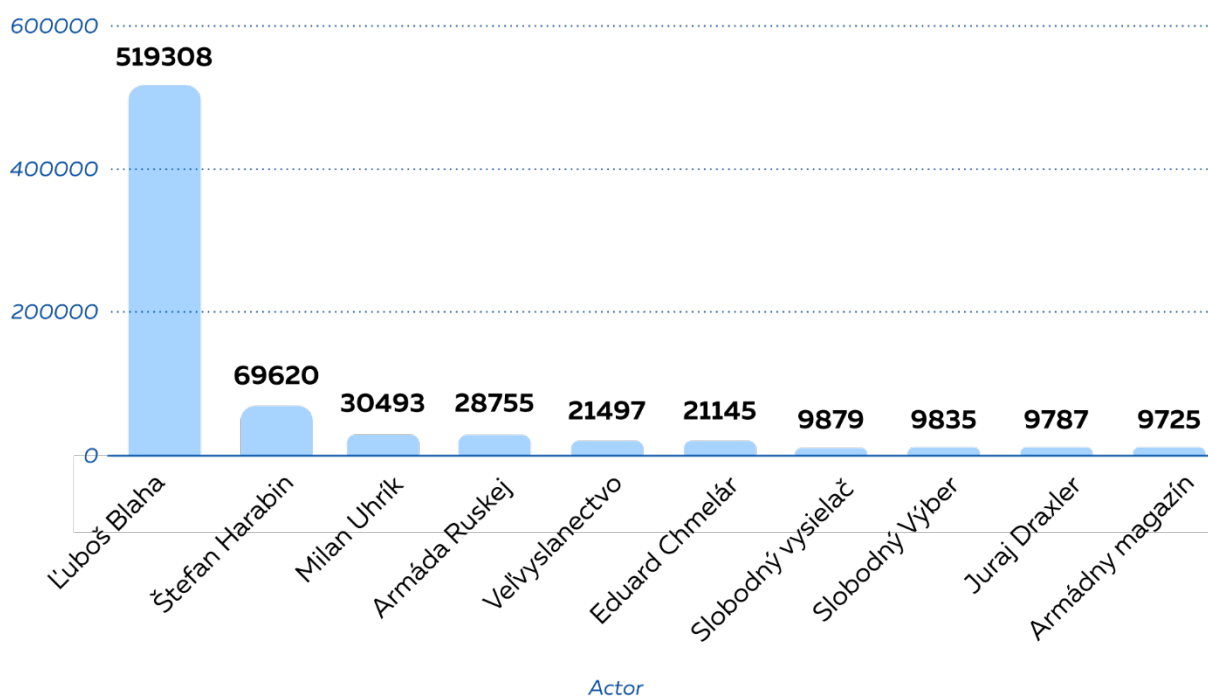
Graph 3: Top 10 actors by the number of interactions (communication effectiveness). Data obtained via CrowdTangle.

As a part of the research, we also focused on categories that assess the level of occurrence of Ukraine-related content (in general) for the ten most active and effective actors.[2] We also assessed the presence of the metanarrative of the Ukrainian far-right within this content. Among the actors, *Slovanské noviny* devoted the most attention to the topic of

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[2] To obtain content that covered Ukraine in general, we used a keyword search for "Ukraine" on a sample of the ten most active and effective actors. The search was conducted using the Gerulata Juno monitoring tool developed by Gerulata Technologies. The tool in question allows for searches that do not only focus on a specific keyword, but also find its used forms and variations in the content.

Ukraine. Such content accounted for more than 17% of their total activity over the period under review. Up to 12% of the content on Ukraine worked with the narrative of fascism. However, this is not the largest share. The first place clearly belongs to the disinformation media *Zdroj*. In the case of *Zdroj*, we noted the presence of the monitored narrative in more than 83% of the content related to Ukraine. This was followed by the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters – SZPB (59%) and the Communist Party of Slovakia - KSS (46%). Ľuboš Blaha operated with the narrative of the Ukrainian far-right in more than 30% of his content about Ukraine. Given his reach and the number of interactions generated, he is a key disseminator of this problematic narrative, according to the research findings. The Embassy of Russia in Slovakia mentioned Ukraine in more than 5% of its total content. The monitored narrative comprised up to one-fifth of the Ukraine-related content, which is primarily made up of posts from 2022.

Ukraine in the total number of posts and Share of monitored narratives from Ukraine related content
(Top 10 Actors by Number of Posts)
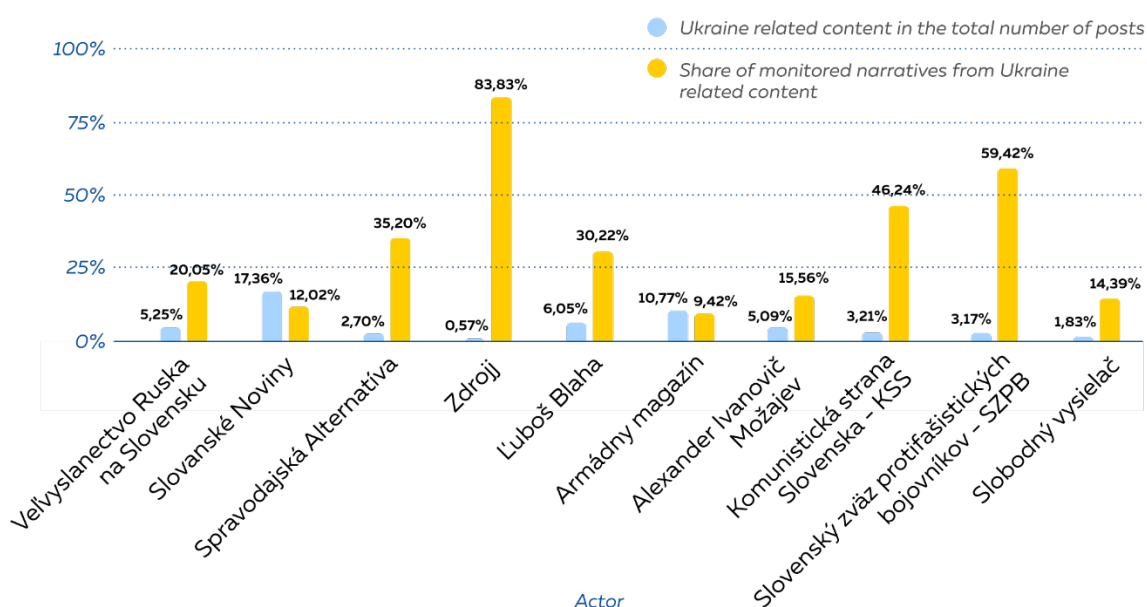
Graph 4: Ukraine in the total number of posts by the actors monitored. Percentage of tracked narrative from Ukraine-related content. List of top 10 actors by the number of posts. Data obtained through Gerulata Juno.

As for the most effective actors in terms of the number of interactions achieved, the list is half made up of profiles of political actors. Among the actors with the highest number of interactions achieved, the topic of Ukraine, in general, was addressed by *Armádny magazín* (10,77%); almost a tenth of the given content (9,42%) worked with the observed narrative. It is followed by Juraj Draxler, former Minister of Education, whose Facebook activity was dedicated to Ukraine in 9,90% of his total content, 9,72% of which contained a narrative about the Ukrainian far-right. However, the presence of a number of far-right and far-left politicians, in particular, needs to be highlighted. In addition to the

aforementioned Ľuboš Blaha, the list is rounded out by Milan Uhrík and Eduard Chmelár, who, although they do not devote a large amount of their content to Ukraine, thanks to their popularity and follower base on Facebook are able to generate high interaction numbers and at the same time effectively influence public opinion. This is also the case for content in which topics relevant to the research were communicated as secondary. Štefan Harabin presents the most prominent representation of the observed narrative in his content. Although Ukraine appears in only 2,4% of the content, if it is present in his communication, as much as 40,48% of it contains the narrative of the Ukrainian far-right.

Ukraine in the total number of posts and Share of monitored narratives from Ukraine related content (Top 10 Actors by Number of Interactions)
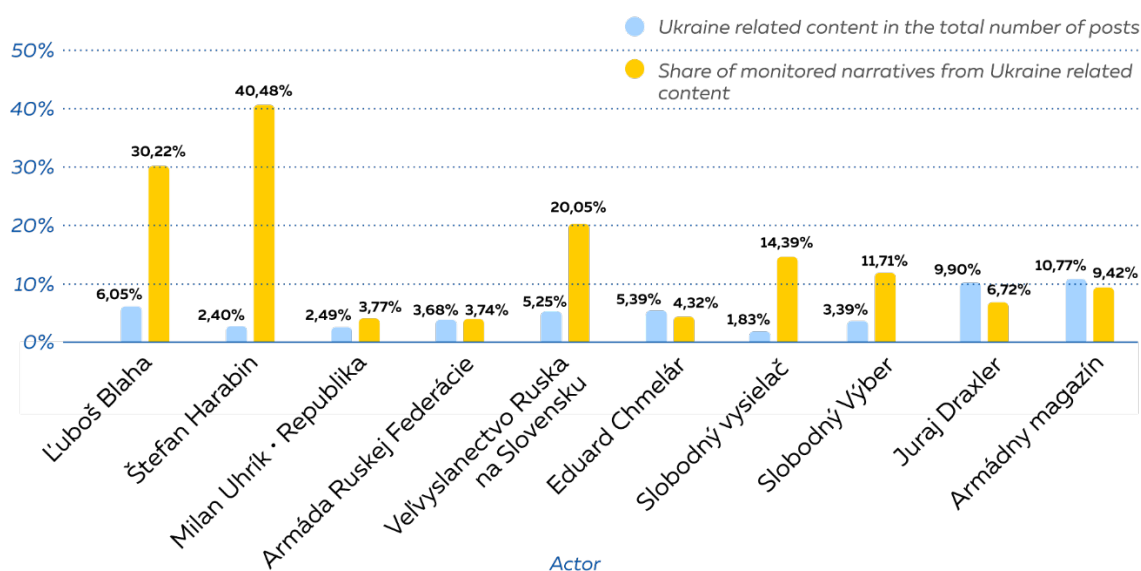

Graph 5: Ukraine in the total number of posts by the actors monitored. Percentage of tracked narrative from Ukraine-related content. List of top 10 actors by the number of interactions. Data obtained through Gerulata Juno.

Narrative analysis

The meta-narrative of the presence and influence of fascism in Ukraine was traced through the monitoring of several partial narratives. In total, there were nine specific categories that were selected and specified prior to in-depth data analysis based on long-term monitoring of the information space. These were also supplemented by a category without a predefined narrative, which included posts unrelated to the nine specific categories. The largest number of relevant and analyzed posts contained a narrative of criminal activities of far-right organizations in Ukraine (392 posts in total), mainly discussing groups such as Azov, Right Sector, UPA, etc. Another directly related narrative focused on the war in Donbas and sub-narratives primarily related to the rhetoric of

oppression of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine (304 posts in total). The third most common narrative included accusations of the Ukrainian government (not only the current one but also previous ones) being collectively labelled as fascists or Nazis (300 posts in total). The given narrative also included the rhetoric of Kyiv's far-right regime or the "fascist junta". A significant part of the content consisted of historical revisionism, which was mainly linked to the person of Stepan Bandera and the Banderites, or their activities during World War II (291 posts in total). The content did not only concern Ukraine but also Slovakia and Poland. At the same time, it should be added that the content in question was often used in communication as a secondary tool for shaping the image of other topics. In the period under review, the narrative that accused the West, either collectively or individually, of supporting the Ukrainian far-right regime or far-right groups also resonated (273 posts in total). A specific narrative is represented by claims that saw the gradual rise of the far-right in society itself, ordinary citizens and everyday life in Ukraine (171 posts in total). We consider this narrative to be particularly important in terms of justifying the unprecedented Russian aggression in Ukraine after the outbreak of war in February 2022. Narratives related to the media and Slovak support for Ukraine (within the narrative of support for the Ukrainian far-right) resonated somewhat less. Accusations of inaccurate and subjective media coverage of events in Ukraine appeared, albeit to a lesser extent, but continuously throughout the period under review (146 posts in total). Allegations of Slovak support for the Ukrainian far-right began to resonate primarily in 2022 (132 posts in total). The least used narrative was the one about the Maidan organized by the Ukrainian far-right (82 posts in total). This may be because it was mainly spread in the period shortly after 2013, probably through communication channels other than Facebook.

Total Number of Posts per Narratives
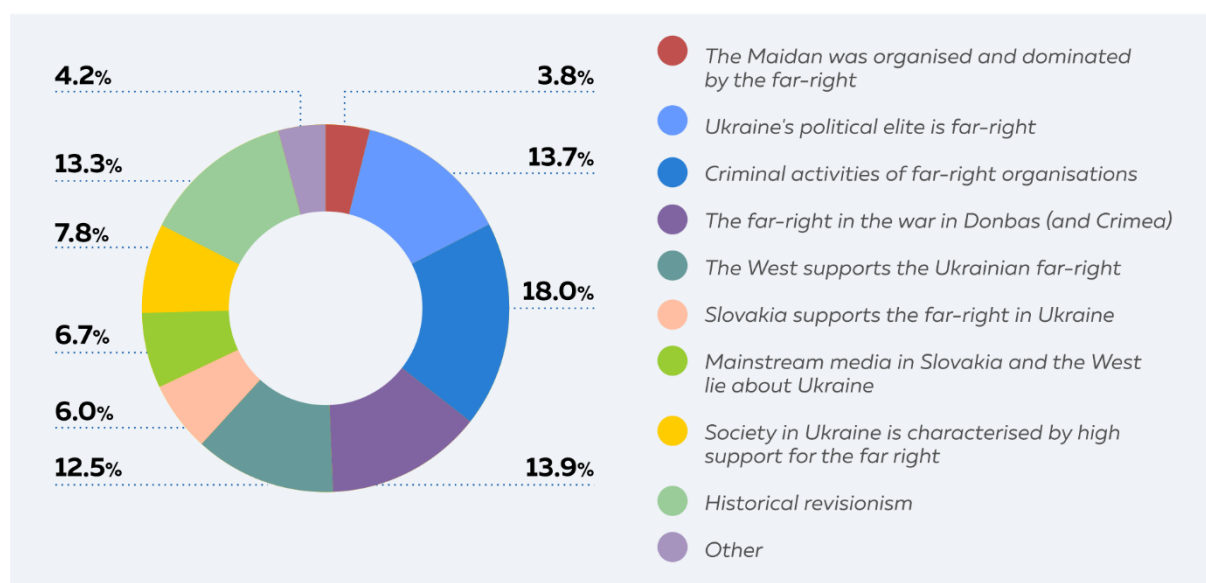
Graph 6: Total number of posts by categorization of narratives. Data collected via CrowdTangle.

Events analysis

In this chapter, we analyse the events presented by the actors under study using the metanarrative we have identified about the "fundamental influence of fascism in Ukraine". The events that took place in Ukraine over the last eight years were also presented by the actors under study using other narratives. At the same time, the Slovak actors also presented other events with the metanarrative under study. However, these were events that were addressed only at the moment of their action in the number of messages and not repeatedly. For example, the monitored actors devoted several messages each year to the marches on Stepan Bandera's birthday (1 January 1909) in Kyiv, which they presented as evidence of high support for the far-right in Ukraine.

The dominant events addressed and described by the researched actors in their Facebook posts within the framework of the metanarrative in the time interval were the 2014-2022 war in Donbas (285 posts) and then Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (206 posts). The graph shows that these described events outnumbered other events we identified by multiple times. In our research, we only identified events which actors interpreted using the metanarrative under study. Other such events include, for example, the 2013-2014 series of protests called Maidan, or Euromaidan (82 posts), and the May 2014 street riots between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian demonstrators in Odessa, which resulted in 48 casualties (55 posts).[3] To a lesser extent, actors using the metanarrative under study also addressed events such as the law by which the Ukrainian parliament granted war veteran status to UPA fighters in 2018 [4] (38 posts), the annexation of Crimea (32 posts), the law, by which the Ukrainian parliament recognised UPA fighters as fighters

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[3] The cause of the tragedy in Odessa was a clash between two demonstrations. A group of about 300 pro-Russian protesters attacked about 2,000 pro-Ukrainian demonstrators, including radical fans of the Odessa and Kharkiv football clubs, which were due to play a football match that day. Both rival camps used firearms in the clash and six people have already been killed during the fighting. The pro-Ukrainian camp was at an advantage in numbers and so gradually drove back the pro-Russian demonstrators who had barricaded themselves in the Trade Union House. Both groups used firearms and threw molotov cocktails at each other, causing the building to catch fire, in which 42 more people subsequently died. To this day, it is unclear who caused the fire in the building, as both sides threw molotov cocktails at each other. Adding to the confusion is the fact that the entire incident has still not been fully investigated.

[4] In December 2018, Ukraine adopted a law that recognises the veteran status also for the fighters of the UPA, OUN and the so-called Poleska Sich of Taras Bulba Borovets. The law designates members of these organisations as fighters for Ukrainian independence against the Soviet and Nazi regimes and recognises them with the same social benefits as veterans who fought in the Red Army. Previously, only those members of the OUN and UPA who fought against the Nazis had veteran status.

for Ukraine's independence in 2015[5] (14 posts), and the shootout in Mukachevo[6] (13 posts), which also involved members of Right Sector and was presented by Slovak pro-Kremlin actors as evidence of the rising criminality of Ukrainian far-right organisations.

Events
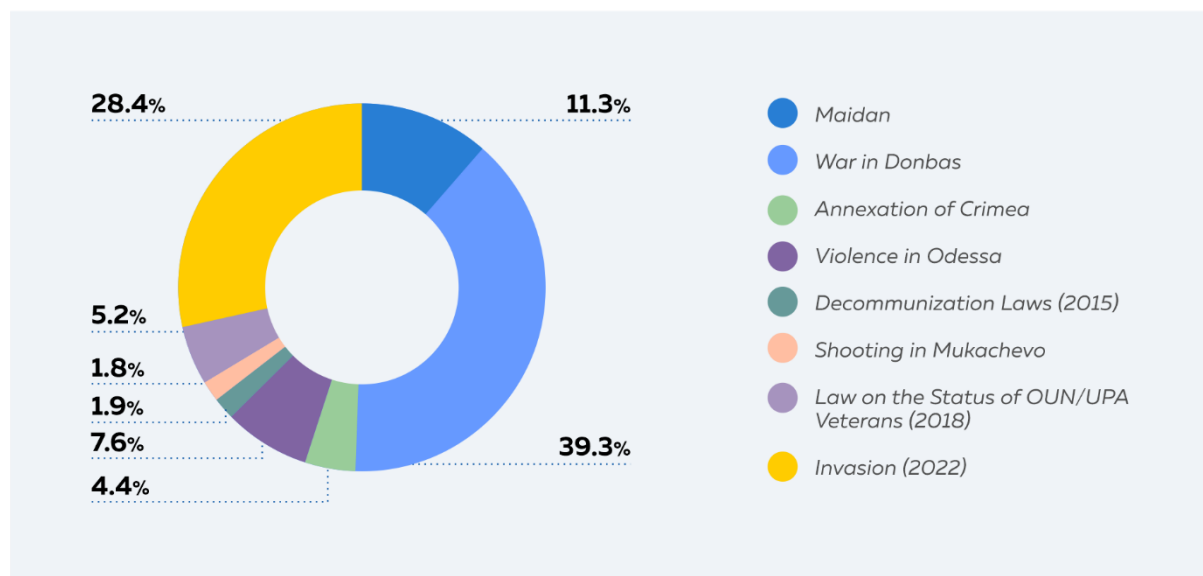
Graph 7: Total number of posts by categorization of events. Data collected via CrowdTangle.

The following graph describes a timeline that shows the number of posts with the examined metanarrative by which Slovak pro-Kremlin actors have addressed individual events. Leaving aside the full-fledged Russian invasion in 2022, the war in Donbas is the event that the studied actors have addressed the most during the whole monitoring period. In 2019 alone, the event with the highest number of posts with the presence of the examined metanarrative was the Veteran Status Act for UPA fighters. Coverage of all events declined to the lowest levels in 2020, which may have also been due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the diversion of attention away from the conflict in Ukraine. From 2021, the year in which the build-up of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border began, we may have seen an upward trend in posts, with a peak in 2022 after the outbreak of a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. The war in Donbas and the Maidan protests were among the only events that were reported by the actors studied using the metanarrative each year, and they used these events in legitimizing their discourse about

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[5] In April 2015, Ukraine adopted a set of four so-called anti-communist laws. The first of these condemns the communist and Nazi regimes, banning their propaganda and the use of communist and Nazi symbols. However, the media studied have given most coverage to the second law. This law identifies the OUN and the UPA as organizations fighting for the independence of Ukraine and criminalizes questioning this thesis. The other two laws concerned the opening of Soviet archives and the use of the term World War II instead of the Soviet term Great Patriotic War.

[6] In July 2015, a shootout took place in Mukachevo between Right Sector members and the security detail of former Party of Regions MP Mykhailo Lanjo. The incident left three dead and fourteen injured.

Ukraine. The third most frequently described event was the violence in Odessa. Together with the war in Donbas and the Maidan, these events were thus among the strongholds of pro-Kremlin propaganda about Ukraine in Slovakia throughout the monitoring period.

Number of Posts Related to Events, per year
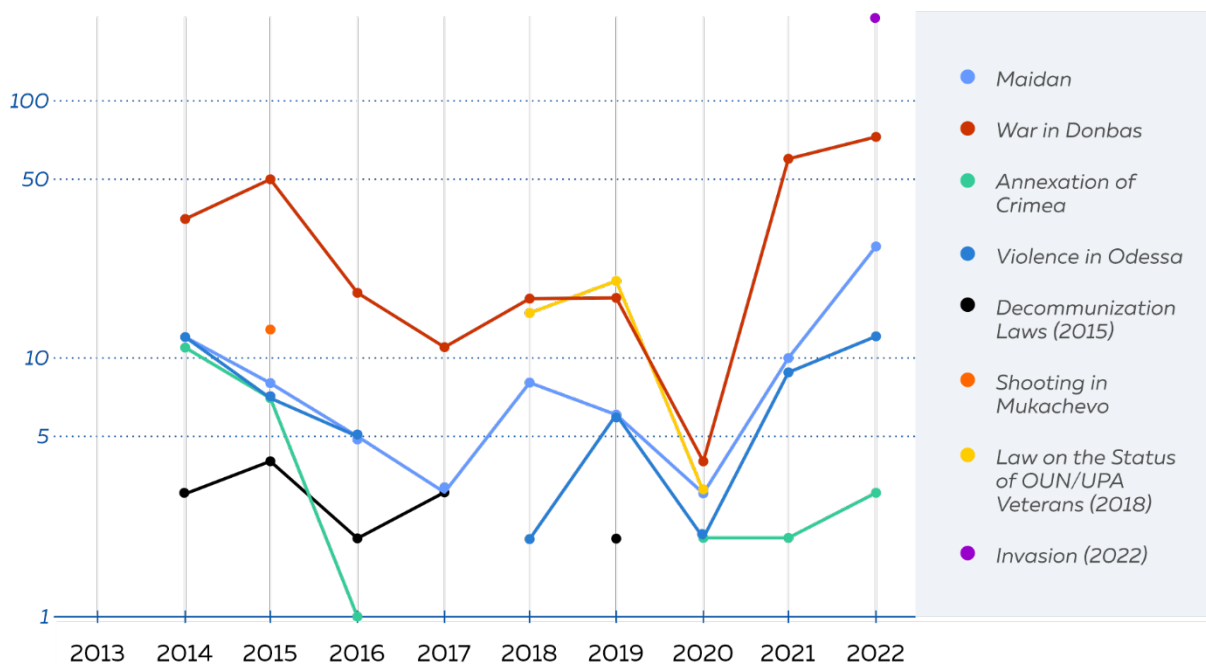
Graph 8: Number of posts by categorization of events by each year of the period under review. Data collected via CrowdTangle.

Keywords analysis

Azov, Bandera, Banderites, genocide and Right Sector are the keywords which the study tracked in the posts throughout the monitoring period. The aim of this part of the research was to show what narratives were attached to these selected keywords and what was the trend of their quantitative occurrence in the monitored period. We chose to monitor these terms because of their concreteness, specificity and clear meaning indicating a particular phenomenon and its associated explanations of reality. In the following graph, we can see the number of posts with the selected keywords for the whole period under study.

The most frequently mentioned keyword was the name of the Ukrainian combat battalion Azov (268 posts), followed by the terms Banderites (228 posts), Right Sector (204 posts), Bandera (178 posts) and genocide (20 posts). We focused on the keyword genocide in the context of the war in Donbas since 2014, as the alleged genocide of the Russian-speaking population by the Ukrainian far-right was one of the main legitimising arguments for the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The low incidence of this term may be due to the use of other terms associated with the alleged killing of the Russian-speaking population in

Donbas, such as murder, killing, terror, terrorization, discrimination, massacre, butchery, etc.

Number of Posts with Keywords
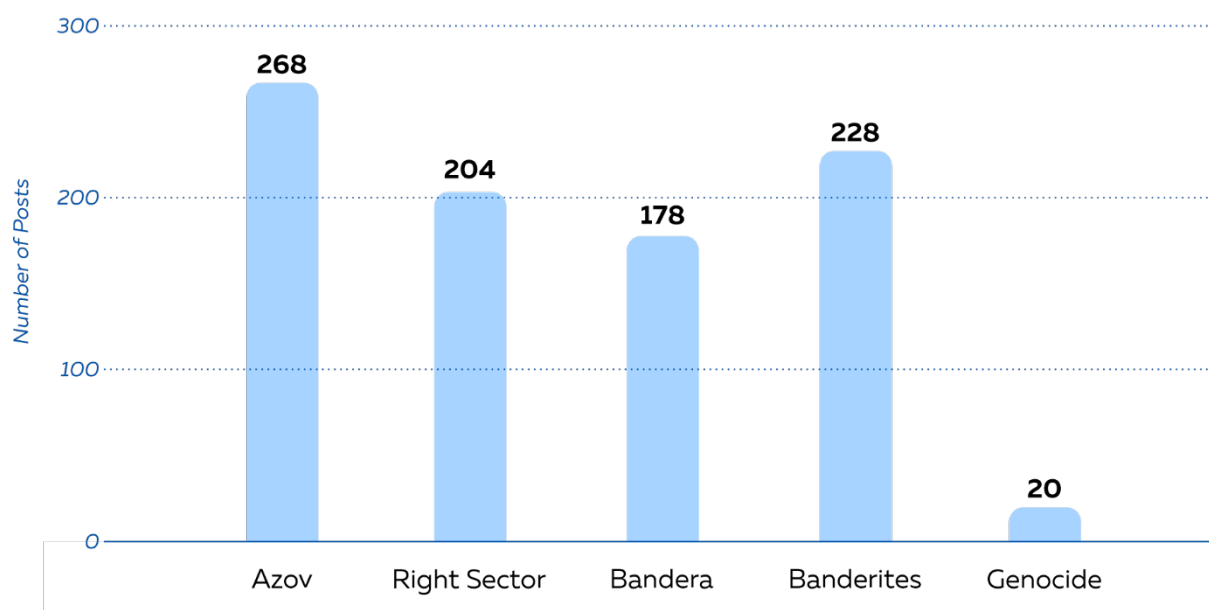
Graph 9: Number of posts by keyword categorization. Data collected via CrowdTangle.

The results show that the frequency of use of the selected keywords was relatively stable over the period under study. A significant increase occurred only in 2022 after the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, we see a few exceptions. The first is the appearance of the term Right Sector in the first two years of the Donbas war (2014-2015). During this period, Right Sector was one of the most important volunteer groups involved in the fighting in Donbas and also engaged in the political struggle in 2014. Right Sector ran as a political party in the Ukrainian parliamentary elections in October 2014, and its leader Dmytro Yarosh ran for president in May 2014. Right Sector was also involved in organizing various protests in 2014-2015, also in the context of the signing of the Minsk peace accords in February 2015, which it actively opposed. Slovak actors have thus reacted to these events. After 2015, mentions of the Right Sector reached the level of other selected keywords. The year 2019 brought, in turn, an increase in posts with the keywords Bandera and Banderites, a reflection of the adoption of the law on granting veteran status to UPA fighters in December 2018. We then see a significant increase in the use of these terms in 2022 as a justification for the Russian invasion. We see the most significant increase in the case of the term Azov. This increase started already in 2021 and continued its steep rise in 2022. The actors studied chose Azov, with its far-right background, to represent the Ukrainian side of the conflict in order to present the Ukrainian side as far-right.

Number of Posts with Keywords per year
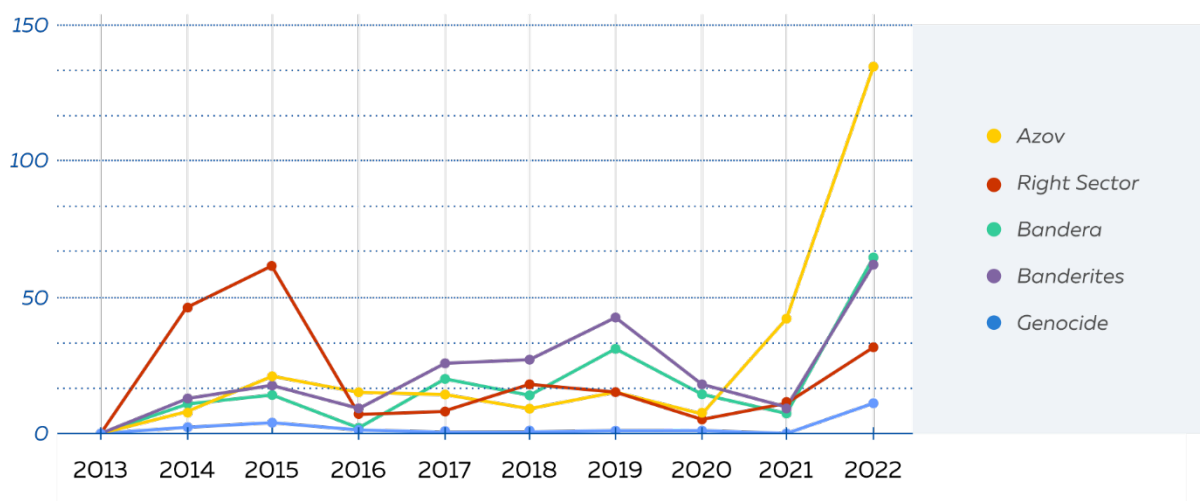
Graph 10: Number of posts by keyword categorization by each year of the period under review. Data collected via CrowdTangle.

In the case of keywords Azov and Right Sector, narratives about the criminal activities of these organisations and their involvement in the fighting in the war in Donbas prevail. For Azov, the third most frequent narrative is that of Western support for Ukrainian radicals, while for Right Sector it is the narrative of the Ukrainian political elite supporting far-right organizations in Ukraine, which is precisely related to the political activities of Yarosh and Right Sector. The keyword genocide appeared most frequently in relation to the narrative about the far-right's involvement in the war in Donbas. With the terms Bandera and Banderites, the narrative most frequently found in the posts contained historical revisionism with reference to the events of World War II and the actions of Bandera and the Banderites in it. The notion of Bandera was further linked to narratives of high support for the far-right in Ukrainian society, manifested mainly in the marches on the anniversary of his birth, which were seen by the actors studied as evidence of Ukrainian society's "natural" inclination towards the far-right. The terms Bandera and Banderites are strongly associated with the narrative of the far-right nature of the Ukrainian political elite (the third most numerous narrative for the word Bandera, the second for Banderites). Actors used this combination of keywords and narratives to accuse Ukrainian politicians of sympathising with the far-right, as they claim they are trying to rehabilitate the "Ukrainian fascists" of World War II. The third narrative most closely associated with the term Banderites was the narrative of Slovak politicians relativising and defending alleged far-right tendencies in Ukraine. In the discourse of the actors under study, the term Banderites is a generic term used to refer to Ukrainian political elites, soldiers, or ordinary Ukrainian citizens who stand against Russian influence in Ukraine.

Narratives in Posts with Keywords
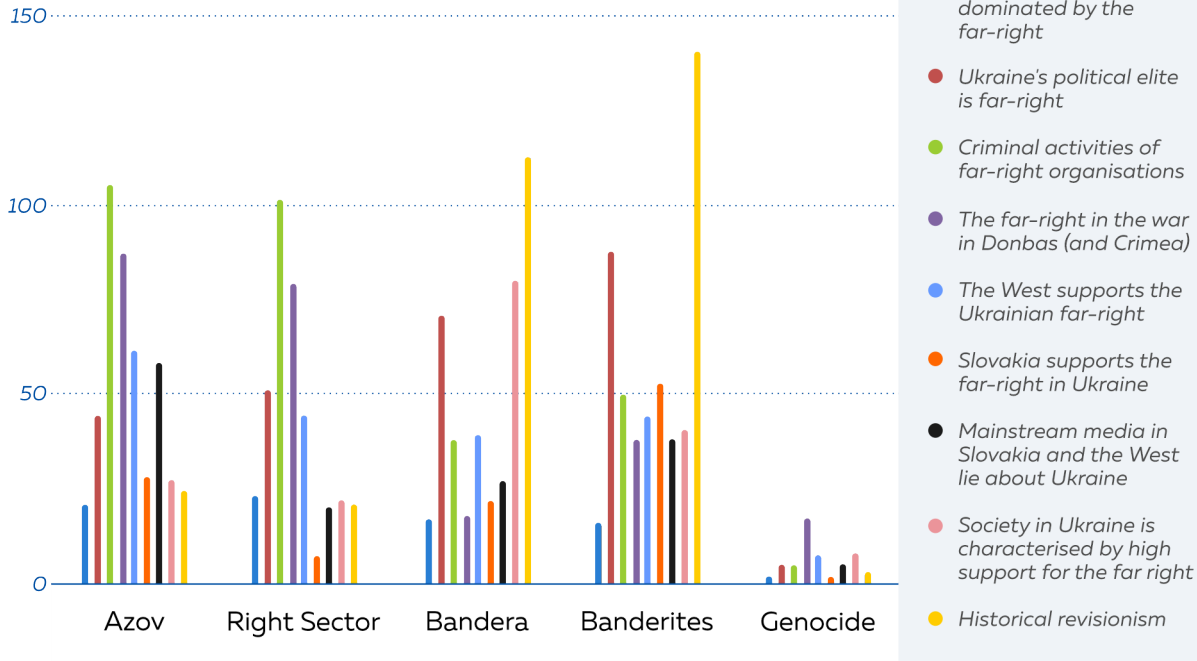
Graph 11: Number of posts by categorization of keywords and their relation to the narratives under study. Data collected via CrowdTangle.

The bogeyman of the Ukrainian far-right in the discourse of Slovak pro-Russian actors

In this chapter, we focus on the qualitative content analysis of the research material, which consists of 1,203 posts. We divided these into ten categories based on the identified narratives they contained (a single post could also contain multiple narratives). In total, we thus identified eight narratives and a specific category of historical revisionism. The last category is the "Other" entry, dedicated to posts in which we did not find predefined narratives, but which were relevant to the study of the metanarrative.

The chapter is divided into ten subsections based on the categories of narratives mentioned above. These have been ranked in descending order of the number of posts in which the narratives in question occurred, so the chapter begins with the narrative with the most frequent occurrence. The individual subchapters focus on identifying the topics, events and rhetoric used in the communication of the actors under study. The subchapters focus on the analysis of the manipulative techniques used, the presence of sentiments, and the objectives pursued by actors in the dissemination of these narratives.

We supplemented the analysis of the posts with quotations from the actors under study in their original text. We analyse the given quotations in subsections, enriching their interpretation with the statements of the Slovak historian Michal Šmigeľ, PhD. and the Czech historian Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. We consider the presentation of expert insight on specific topics and issues to be a suitable means of confronting the disseminated narratives with factual reality, especially in the case of narratives focused on historical revisionism.

Criminal activities of far-right organisations

The content which communicated information about the criminal activities of radical organizations can be seen as one of the fundamental pillars for supporting the legitimacy of the metanarrative about the Ukrainian far-right. At the same time, it formed the basis for the argumentation of other sub-narratives we focused on in the study. In particular, it was closely related to the war in Donbas, while forming the core of the argument for explaining the need for the "denazification" of Ukraine as one of the main reasons given for the full-scale war started by Russia. Like most Russian propaganda and disinformation, the sub-narrative of criminal activities relied to some extent on factual data, though it was hyperbolized, manipulated, and ultimately taken out of context. Sub-narrative's logical structure is particularly linked to another sub-narrative of the study, which also accuses the Ukrainian government of radicalism and the presence of fascism or Nazism. In each year of the period under study, the sub-narrative of criminal activities formed a substantive part of the captured content. It appeared continuously, resonating especially in relation to events that were critical for Ukraine's development after 2014. Its

dissemination intensified during 2022; it constituted the largest part of the captured content in the given time period.

The purpose of these claims was to discredit the Ukrainian army, which, according to the disinformers, included criminal detachments, mercenaries and Nazis, who were also referred to by pro-Russian actors as "Ukropatriots" or "Euromaidanists". Already in 2014, the Russian embassy in Slovakia claimed that Ukrainian soldiers were attacking civilian infrastructure and that their activity had caused civilian casualties. The embassy claimed that Kyiv's political elites did not reflect this, and even increased funding for the military. Part of this rhetoric was the argumentation of the event in Odessa on 2 May 2014, where allegedly *"radicals from the right-wing fascist organisation Right Sector and the Svoboda party, taking advantage of the passivity of the Ukrainian law enforcement authorities, took (...) action to prevent the Ukrainian singer Ani Lorak from performing. They argued that the popular performer had previously performed in Crimea and won a Russian music award."*

According to the embassy, "Euromaidanists" and "armed rebels" from Svoboda and Right Sector were responsible for countless other attacks on Russian journalists, activists, humanitarian aid centres, as well as ordinary Ukrainians. In 2018, Ukrainian soldiers and police forces allegedly tortured civilians in Donbas, as documented by (unverifiable) testimonies of witnesses and torture survivors. According to another allegation, initially, in the war, Ukrainian soldiers were to be sent to kill their own civilians.

There has been frequent abuse of the 2 May 2014 incident at the Odessa Trade Union House (present in 55 posts), which pro-Russian actors interpret as the sole responsibility of the Ukrainian far-right. In fact, it was a building fire that broke out after street battles between pro-Ukrainian unity activists and pro-Russian pro-federation activists, presumably as a result of Molotov cocktails being thrown. These were used by both sides of the conflict and it is, therefore, impossible to determine who started the fire. Forty-eight people lost their lives in the incident, with many pro-Russian actors claiming that Ukrainian nationalists herded people into the building and burned them alive. Several sources directly refute these claims.

Similarly, an incident in Mukachevo, where in July 2015 there was a shootout between police, members of Right Sector group and another gang, was exploited by pro-Russian actors. The reason for the dispute, according to Ukrainian media, was the proceeds from smuggling. The Facebook page *Názor občana* responded to the events by saying, *"The Ukrainian army, and indeed the entire leadership of the power structures, is divided. After the shooting in Mukachevo and Right Sector's attempts to remove Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, many volunteer battalions sided with him – against Right Sector."* Allegedly, this led to a split among the battalions in Ukraine. Pro-Russian actors have sought to amplify the situation and portray Ukraine as a state full of gangster groups with ties to foreign affiliates that could threaten peace in Slovakia as well.

Pro-Russian actors have sought to paint a picture of frequent attacks on civilians by the Ukrainian army and radical groups after 24 February 2022. The narrative consisted of accusations of using civilians as human shields. However, there is no evidence that Azovstal defenders in Mariupol used civilians as human shields. Accusations of detaining civilians in camps near Mariupol to use them as human shields, which have been widely circulated in the Russian propaganda media, have also been refuted by fact-checkers.

"Nazis and nationalists fighting for Azov and other neo-Nazi battalions in Ukraine" have been used to attack civilians, according to a post by the Facebook page *Milujeme Rusko*. The claim that neo-Nazis were fighting in the Ukrainian army was present in pro-Russian rhetoric as early as 2015 and was allegedly confirmed by Ukraine's ambassador to Germany, Andriy Melnyk. In an interview with German television, he said that after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, various volunteers who were coordinated by Kyiv volunteered to fight, therefore they could not act beyond the scope of their duties. Melnyk was vague about the submitted photo showing members of the Azov unit with a swastika and a Nazi gesture: *"We cannot verify or prove whether it is genuine or not."* In the interview, he drew attention in particular to the coordination of volunteer groups by the General Staff in Kyiv, as well as the fact that there were no far-right political parties in parliament after the last elections (at the time of the interview). However, pro-Russian actors used his words as evidence that the Ukrainian army is providing space to neo-Nazis.

The basis of many posts about radical organisations in Ukraine was formed by a reference to the actions of members of the Azov movement (the keyword Azov appeared in 268 posts in the dataset). Their violent actions in the Donetsk region were to be illustrated, for example, by a photograph of a man with a disfigured back. According to a post on a pro-Russian page *Alexander Ivanovič Možajev*, swastika patterns were carved on his back while in captivity *"with the pro-European peacekeeping Azov troops in Mariupol."* However, the photo was not accompanied by any credible source or detailed verifiable information.

Such posts seek to create the perception that Ukrainians have an entrenched tendency to support far-right groups, which is closely related to the sub-narrative of a society characterised by high support for the far-right. The *niejetotak.sk* article included the assertion that *"neo-Nazi sentiment in Ukraine came to life during the Maidan protests, which culminated in the overthrow of the legitimate Ukrainian regime and the flight of President Viktor Yanukovych in 2014. Radical nationalist parties such as Svoboda and Right Sector have gained considerable influence and popularity, their members and Nazi sympathisers having taken part in the massacre in Odessa and the war in Donbas as part of the Azov and Aydar battalions. Examples of similar attacks and harassment of groups and individuals with different ideological and value orientations are not unique in Ukraine."*

> *"The facts speak clearly. In 2016, the aforementioned Azov underwent a major reform, so its units consisted of various soldiers who had in common, above all, the defence of Ukraine. The other statements also fit the narrative of Russian propaganda; it was only the forceful intervention of the army of the Russian Federation and its unacknowledged presence from the beginning that brought war and the associated casualties to Donbas. Russian interference has been represented here by people like Igor Girkin Strelkov, who is not even reluctant to speak openly about it. The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the outbreak of war in Donbas a month later are the beginning of a war that has now lasted almost nine years."*
>
> **Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. (University of Defence in Brno)**

Far-right violence in Ukraine has been presented as "business as usual" and part of a "degenerate Western democracy" that the Slavic brothers have no desire for. An otherwise peaceful Ukraine is said to have been [dragged](#) into the war by members of radical organisations such as Azov or [Right Sector](#), who serve the needs of the West. The same narrative has been spread about the alleged training of Ukrainian children in camps: *"There is a brainwashing of the youth that is strikingly reminiscent of the one in Nazi Germany when an equally mentally ill creature trained his superior youth."* There have indeed [been](#) camps of right-wing groups in Ukraine in the past, but pro-Russian actors are exploiting this fact to exaggerate the far-right underbelly in the state, where in fact Russian troops and mercenaries are massacring civilians, deporting children and committing other war crimes as part of unprovoked military aggression.

> *"It should be noted that at the time of the Russian occupation of Crimea and Donbas, the Ukrainian army was in disarray. It was also a result of long-term Russian efforts to militarily weaken Ukraine, which is why immediately after the aggression, Ukraine was practically saved by volunteer battalions. These underwent a distinct "cleansing" after the conflict was defused and only subsequently were incorporated into the Ukrainian army. At that time, the volunteer battalions, together with the combat-ready remnants of the Ukrainian army, prevented Russian troops from occupying the entire Donbas. If they had attacked the civilian population of eastern Ukraine, which is complete nonsense, we would have seen a refugee wave. However, this was only triggered after February 2022, when Putin's troops invaded Ukraine to "defend" the Russian-speaking population. Surprisingly, it was this largely East Ukrainian population that began to flee en masse from Putin's "liberators" to western Ukraine and the countries of democratic Europe. In millions..."*
>
> **Michal Šmigeľ, PhD.**
> **(associate professor at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica)**

Pro-Russian actors neglected the fact that Ukrainians also helped to defeat the Nazis in World War II, as well as the fact that the Nazi rampage also impacted Ukraine. The roots of the Azov Regiment, to which a number of fabricated events are attributed within Russian propaganda, can be traced back to nationalist ideology. Azov emerged from Andriy Biletsky's Patriot of Ukraine organisation (founded in 2005), which indeed promoted far-right nationalist and anti-immigrant ideas. Later, however, the movement split into a political wing called the National Corps (founded in 2016) and a part that was incorporated into the National Guard under the Ministry of Interior. After the Azov section became a regular combat unit (as Ambassador Melnyk pointed out), the battalion parted ways with its original ideological ties. Despite this fact, disinformation and propaganda actors do not distinguish between the different branches. The will of the Ukrainian population to defend its independence after the unleashing of Russian aggression cannot logically be confused with Nazi ideology.

The far-right in the war in Donbas (and Crimea)

The war in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea were key to one of the motives of Russian propaganda – to portray the Kremlin as a victim, a protector of the Russian-speaking population, a resistor of oppression by the West, but above all a fighter against Nazism, in this case in Ukraine. The scheme of the sub-narrative analysed focused primarily on the role of radical organisations in the war between Ukraine and the separatist regions in its east, and was, therefore, also very closely related to the interpretation of their criminal activities described above. It seems that a fundamental pillar of the formation of this sub-narrative has been the gradual creation of a black-and-white image of good and evil, which is largely unreflective of reality and inconsistent with the observations of recent years. From Russia's point of view, the key issue is absolving itself of responsibility for its role in the conflict and finding the causes of its initiation mainly in Kyiv's actions or in the participation of radical organisations in the fighting. The given sub-narrative was the second most numerous in the dataset analysed. It resonated especially in 2014 and 2015. The frequency of relevant content resumed during 2021, when it served to report on the escalation of tensions. In 2022, the sub-narrative provided a space for forming analogies with Russia's full-scale aggression, while also partially serving as one of the arguments for manipulative explanations of its necessity. In this regard, the content was particularly dominant, incorporating more specific narratives about the genocide of the Russian-speaking population carried out by the Ukrainian far-right.[7]

The key line of the sub-narrative was the effort to absolve Russia and the pro-Russian separatists of any responsibility for the annexation of Crimea or the conflict in Donbas. Its logical scheme was described quite succinctly in a post on the website of the Russian embassy in Slovakia: *"The blame for the destabilisation of the situation in Ukraine lies*

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[7] The issue of language laws in Ukraine, which are part of this narrative, is addressed in the following subsection.

solely with the United States and other NATO countries, which supported the coup in February 2014. This resulted in the overthrow of the legally elected President and the rise to power of nationalists. The inhabitants of Crimea and Donbas, fearing for their safety, have decided not to live under the rule of the supporters of Bandera and Shukhevich. As a result, Crimea was returned to Russia, the Donetsk and Lugansk regions declared independence, and Kyiv unleashed a civil war against Donbas, which continues to this day.[8] However, the propagators of the pro-Russian narrative have deliberately glossed over the fact that Russia has played a dominant role in the escalation of tensions, including directly through the presence of its troops. One can mention the encirclement of Crimean airports, the seizure of the Crimean parliament or the organisation of the 2014 referendum.[9] According to many actors, the referendum in Crimea was preceded by provocations by Ukrainian radicals. This rhetoric was also emphasised by former President Yanukovych, who claimed that *"if there had been no provocations, there would not have been a referendum in Crimea on joining Russia."*

> **"These allegations also do not correspond to reality, there have been excesses on the Ukrainian side as well, but if we talk about intimidation, the "little green men" started it when they annexed Crimea in March 2014. In Crimea, many locals did not like the course that Ukraine did not take after the events on Maidan, which ended with Viktor Yanukovych's flight to Russia in February 2014, but it was only the forceful intervention from the Russian side that caused another escalated situation."**
>
> **Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. (University of Defence in Brno)**

The role of Russia in the case of the annexation of Crimea was similarly ignored by Eduard Chmelár, who saw Moscow as the culprit of the situation only *"in the last place"*.[10] At the same time, he expressed sympathy for the people of Crimea *"in a situation where armed bandits and neo-Nazis were running around dictating what language they should speak,*

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[8] The website of the Embassy of Russia in Slovakia started publishing its own series of posts trying to "debunk" the so-called Western propaganda. In reality, however, the series fulfilled the purpose of repeating and confirming Kremlin propaganda narratives. This was similarly the case with the "#WeRememberEverything" series, through which the Russian embassy had already focused on building Russia's image as a fighter against Nazism during the 2022 war, particularly in the context of historical revisionism and the legacy of the Banderites.

[9] It should be recalled that the referendum on the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation can be considered illegal for a number of reasons. Apart from the fact that the citizens voted under the supervision of the "green men" from Russia, there was a long-running Russian propaganda campaign on the territory of the peninsula, which was also characterised by the almost exclusive presence of the Russian media. The presence of Russian troops was eventually confirmed by Vladimir Putin. The key reason, of course, is that the referendum was not in accordance with the Ukrainian constitution. The extremely short period (approximately 20 days) during which the referendum was prepared can be also considered a warning sign. At the same time, there were not enough independent observers present at the referendum. Over the years, several reports have confirmed that the referendum results were falsified.

[10] At the same time, he resorted to manipulative whataboutism, comparing the situation in Crimea with that of Kosovo.

where Ukrainian nationalists were stopping buses with Russians and beating them up, where lawlessness was rampant and no one in Kyiv stood up for them, they decided to join Russia, where they feel at home". In addition to the deliberate downplaying of Russia's role in the annexation of Crimea and the legitimisation of the pro-Russian separatists' demands, monitored content was also met with posts approving of Moscow's intervention, often through conspiracy theories. An example is the *Extra Plus* post which [claimed](#) that *"RUSSIA HAS SAVED CRIMEA FROM OCCUPATION BY U.S. TROOPS AND BANDERITES."* The latter was repeatedly [shared](#) during the monitoring period, for example by the *Slovanska unia* website.

In addition to highlighting the role of radical organisations, both the motives and crimes of pro-Russian separatists and their Russian support were continuously ignored. This was similarly the case with Artur Bekmatov's post, in which he [writes](#) that if *"a government sends the army against its own population, as the Ukrainian one did in May 2014, it is fascist. If a government gives full confidence in the fighting to right-wing extremist groups and battalions like Azov, Aydar, Right Sector, like the Ukrainian one, then, yes, it is fascist! If a government bans political parties, as the Ukrainian one banned the Communist Party of Ukraine, such a government is fascist."*

> *"Such claims are the claims of so-called "useful idiots", tribunes of Putin's propaganda and extremist elements fed by the Kremlin in Slovakia. They are obviously (to put it mildly) nonsense and inherently devoid of sound peasant logic. This only reinforces the fact that the "tribunes" themselves lack information and interpret events without even understanding them themselves. The shallowness of the information taken from the Kremlin media leads them to weave nonsensical theories that do not even remotely correspond to what is actually happening, such as the aforementioned "massacre in Odessa", "revolt in Uzhhorod", "murders of communists and Komsomol members", etc. However, their motive is clear – to present to their audience the fact that Ukraine is in chaos, in internal conflicts, and is ruled by "thugs" without a shadow of a doubt. The desire to discredit Ukraine is obvious in this."*
>
> **Michal Šmigeľ, PhD.**
> **(associate professor at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica)**

The Minsk Agreements were also the basis for many of the related narratives, with particular emphasis on the Ukrainian side's failure to abide by them. According to Eduard Chmelár, the media constantly [feed](#) the public with *"one-sided propaganda that Putin is responsible for everything".* According to him, *"we will only move forward in the dispute over who is not complying with the agreement if we carefully read the entire Minsk I and Minsk II agreements and realise what they contain, how many of the 14 points are not being complied with by the Ukrainian side."*

> *"To respond to the mention of the Minsk agreements, not long ago even the Russian negotiator of these agreements admitted that Russia had no plans to follow them. The Minsk Agreements talked about de-escalation of the war in Donbas, in particular, did not work in the long term and as it turned out, no one was consistently happy with this "solution" either, even while the Russians regularly showed themselves to be a completely untrustworthy partner for discussion and negotiation."*
>
> **Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. (University of Defence in Brno)**

The Russian embassy in Slovakia falsely [misrepresented](#) the beginning of the war in Donbas as a legitimate declaration of independence by the unrecognised Donetsk and Luhansk republics. At the same time, Ukraine was consistently [accused](#) of *"unprovoked aggression by the Kyiv regime"* or was blamed for the civilian casualties. Similar rhetoric was [echoed](#) by the Communist Party of Slovakia, which also claimed that *"it was not the people of Donetsk or Luhansk who started the war, however, but the neo-Nazi government of Kyiv."* Russia's involvement was repeatedly omitted and the pro-Russian separatists were portrayed as freedom fighters from the oppression of the Kyiv regime.[11]

> *"If it had not been for Russian military intervention, Donbas would have been pacified quickly, but this could not have happened on the basis of Russian military involvement. In the summer of 2014, it was certainly no longer the Donbas tractor drivers who defeated the regular Ukrainian army at Ilovaisk or in the fighting for the Donetsk airport, but rather the unacknowledged forces of the Russian Federation."*
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> **Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. (University of Defence in Brno)**

The rhetoric of the separatist side, which rejected any use of Russian modern equipment, was also quite limited. Some actors, such as Eduard Chmelár, took the approach of [labeling](#) such accusations as conspiracy theories or part of propaganda. However, the fact is that, according to several reports and evidence, Russia did indeed support the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk Republics not only financially, but also through the supply of

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[11] The European Court of Human Rights underlined in its report (on 25 January 2023) that in the spring of 2014, Russia carried out armed aggression against Ukraine in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In late summer 2014, a large-scale invasion was launched, which Russia still denies. The court proved beyond any reasonable doubt that Russian military personnel had been actively present in Donbas since April 2014. It also found that Russian soldiers fought in armed groups and senior members of the Russian military were present in command positions in separatist armed groups and entities from the outset. The court also found that from 11 May 2014, all areas in the hands of the separatists were areas under direct Russian control. Thus, claims that *"Ukraine refuses to implement the Minsk Agreements and instead of seeking a peaceful solution, concentrates troops in the area in order to militarily subjugate the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics"* can be considered in this light to be completely erroneous and deceptive, as Ukraine was defending its own territory and sovereignty from Russia's proxy aggressors.

weapons and ammunition. Perhaps the most famous case is the downing of flight MH17, in which intent was [confirmed](#) and evidence now suggests that the munition used [was](#) indeed imported from Russia.

Ukraine's political elite is far-right

The "denazification" of Ukraine was stated as one of the motives for the aggression launched by the Russian Federation on 24 February 2022. This means that the Russian government, at least in its public statements, considered the presence of the far-right in Ukrainian government and society to be a legible threat which could justify launching a war on the territory of a sovereign foreign state. The aim of the information war that Russia is waging is to sow doubt in the international community, in particular by manipulating more distant, but also recent, historical facts. Since 2014, Russian propaganda has claimed that Ukrainian politics has been usurped by the far-right. However, these accusations are not at all in line with Ukrainian political reality and are merely a pragmatic tool of the Kremlin to justify aggression, or rather a continuous effort to destabilise support for Ukraine during the full-scale conflict. The sub-narrative was disseminated mainly in 2018 and 2019, and in general, among the actors monitored, it was communicated frequently, especially by the page of the Embassy of Russia in Slovakia. However, its activity and the narratives disseminated were amplified by other actors, in particular the page of the Communist Party of Slovakia, Ľuboš Blaha, Eduard Chmelár or Artur Bekmatov (the messages were subsequently disseminated through the information ecosystem of various alternative websites and Facebook pages).

The sub-narrative began to take shape at the turn of 2013 and 2014. Since then, the rhetoric about Ukraine's internal conflict, which was supposed to take place between the fascist government and the rest of the population, especially those in the east of the country, has continuously prevailed. In the context of the events on Maidan, the presence of Right Sector, in particular, has been invoked, often hyperbolized and manipulatively identified with the overall character of the protests. In other words, the problematic content included, in particular, accusations that deliberately overestimated the role of far-right groups during the Maidan protests and served to create an image of an undemocratic or even "fascist" coup in Ukraine. The line in question can be seen as a fundamental pillar of the rhetoric about the Ukrainian far-right.

For example, Eduard Chmelár, who has long seen the Ukrainian government's policies as a result of pressure from the far-right, has also been involved in this rhetoric. In his post, even in the period just before the outbreak of war in 2022, he [returned](#) to the narrative of the coup and the removal of the president *"in violation of the current democratic constitution"*. In doing so, he ignored the fact that Yanukovych's dismissal by parliament was preceded by an agreement with the parliamentary opposition. Despite the fact that Yanukovych ultimately did not sign it because of his defection, Chmelár took advantage

of the legal vacuum that had arisen to support the problematic narrative. Nor did he mention the fact that Yanukovych had left office and formally announced his resignation before being impeached.[12]

> "Mr. Chmelár's statements are purely consistent with the narrative of Russian propaganda, i.e. not a credible source. His view of the events on Maidan is completely in line with the Russian narrative. After February 2022, it is now definitely clear and obvious that Russia is a state that is seeking to break up Ukraine and that crimes are being committed because of this. The US, as a powerful international player, has an influence on many phenomena in the world, but only the Russian side is applying forceful interference in Ukrainian affairs. Thus, if Mr. Chmelár claims that the USA is responsible for the destabilisation of Ukraine after 2014, he is ignoring basic facts."
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> **Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. (University of Defence in Brno)**

The fact that the Ukrainian government or other institutions are not far-right or do not operate under such far-right pressures is also confirmed by the results of the elections that have been held in Ukraine since the Maidan. At the same time, the results of the various elections refute the narrative of a "fascist" Ukrainian society.[13] However, the captured content often featured a manipulative method of cherry-picking, through which actors selected cases which fit the pre-set narrative of the "fascism" of Ukrainian political elites and institutions (e.g. Dmytro Yarosh in his position as an advisor to the Chief of Staff of the Ukrainian army). Content that relied on generalising the situation also resonated. This relied mainly on the narratives we explain below, but its key feature was the effort to convince the public that neo-Nazism had *"imperceptibly moved to the centre of the political mainstream without weakening or cultivating itself."*

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[12] Yanukovych later withdrew his decision and called the vote on his dismissal illegal. A majority of 328 lawmakers in the 450-member parliament voted to remove Yanukovych from office on 22 February 2014, citing his departure from office and the deaths of more than 80 demonstrators and police officers during the previous chaotic week of violence as the reason. Yanukovych's rhetoric following his dismissal, which he also described as a coup, can be seen as a fundamental source of the rhetoric and Russian propaganda disseminated in the following years.

[13] A political party with a far-right ideology, Svoboda was represented in parliament mostly in the 2012-2014 term, winning 10,44% of the vote and 37 seats. In the 2014 parliamentary elections, Svoboda won only 4,71% of the vote and lost 31 seats in parliament (it had a total of six seats by 2019). In the same election, another far-right party, Right Sector, won only 1,8% of the vote and only one seat in parliament thanks to its victory in one single-mandate constituency. Ukraine's parliament has 450 seats. In 2019, the Svoboda party also took members of smaller far-right parties such as the National Assembly, the Yarosh Government Initiative and Right Sector on a combined list. However, this did not bring them success, as they won only 2,15% of the vote and one seat in single-member districts. Similarly, representatives of the far-right did not succeed in the 2014 presidential elections. Oleg Tyahnybok, chairman of the Svoboda party, won 0,71% of the vote, and Dmytro Yarosh, chairman of the Right Sector party, won 1,16%. In 2019, the presidential candidate of the Svoboda party, Ruslan Koshulynskyi, won 1,62% of the vote.

> *"Ukrainian nationalists who in some form embraced the legacy of Stepan Bandera (and even so they could not be called Banderites, because 80 years ago it was a misnomer) are not represented in any significant positions in the country's leadership. The radicals are marginally represented, for example, at the local municipal level; many years have passed since the events of the Maidan, and Ukraine, unlike Russia or Belarus, has held a number of democratic elections where voters have had the opportunity to clearly express their opinion on the direction they want the country to take. Radical nationalism, however, has completely flopped, and this was most strikingly demonstrated in the July 2019 parliamentary elections."*
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> **Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. (University of Defence in Brno)**

Narratives about the neo-Nazism of Ukrainian political elites have also emerged in connection to the current Ukrainian president. Zelenskyy allegedly [serves](#) nationalist ideological force in this regard, or is *"a continuation of the ideology of collaboration with the sworn enemies of the Jews"*. Even without pointing out the perversity of such accusations regarding the Ukrainian president's Jewish heritage, the narratives in question are a mere attempt to undermine the authority and destabilize the perception of Zelenskyy within entrenched narratives, which are complemented by similarly dubious (and sometimes ridiculous) accusations of drug addiction, incompetence or cowardice.

There was also a narrative emerging at the time that saw the post-Maidan events as the result of Washington's installation of the government. In particular, the role of ultranationalists was repeatedly [invoked](#), with *"violence by Right Sector and other ultranationalist groups"* being *"the basis for the success of the Washington-backed coup"*. Narratives related to conspiracy theories about the Ukrainian puppet government are discussed in the next subsection of the study. However, it is important to say that they formed the backbone of the rhetoric attacking the Ukrainian government, which was to be used by the US to counter Russian geopolitical interests.[14]

This is largely related to the ideological level and political developments after the Maidan, which were marked by efforts to decommunize the state and cut off from historical relations with Russia. The revival of Ukrainian history means a loss of loyalty and dependence on Russia, which Moscow also wanted to avoid by spreading disinformation narratives about the Ukrainian far-right suppressing history or perpetrating the oppression of communists and the Russian population. In 2015, the Ukrainian parliament passed decommunization laws banning symbols of totalitarian regimes as well as public

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[14] In this regard, there was even a conspiracy theory in which the CIA was to ask the US administration to lift the ban on Nazi groups because the US allegedly needed them in Ukraine because of the conflict with the USSR. This is said to confirm that the West and Zionism are not really in opposition to Nazism, but mainly to Russia.

denial of their crimes. Importantly, this law put Nazi and communist symbols on equal footing in this regard.[15]

The Communist Party of Slovakia also [commented](#) on the law in a post dated 17 December 2015, commenting on the rejection of the Ukrainian Communist Party's appeal following its ban.[16] The Communist Party of Slovakia falsely claimed that *"according to the nationalists, Banderites and fascists controlling the Ukrainian parliament and government",* there is a *"democratisation of society"* taking place in Ukraine, which is to be deliberately ignored by the West. Meanwhile, 48% of the Ukrainian population [supported](#) coming to terms with history through the 2015 laws (36% were against).[17] At the same time, the Communist Party of Slovakia ignored the reasons for Ukraine's actions and wrongly and by labelling attributed them to the rampant far-right in society. Moreover, Ukraine is not the only post-Soviet state to officially condemn communist symbols. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, Romania and other countries have similar laws equating and banning communist and Nazi symbols. For each of these states, including Ukraine, severing ties with the communist past is a key step towards self-identification as a sovereign state.

The decommunization laws adopted in 2015 are also related to the issue of the removal of Soviet monuments, which has been widely exploited by the actors under scrutiny to create analogies with Slovakia, or to support the narrative of the presence of the far-right in Ukrainian society and its fictitious approval by political elites. The Communist Party of Slovakia in particular was again active, [seeing](#) a fascist Ukraine behind the removal of the monuments in a number of posts from 2016 to 2019. At the same time, it used rhetoric that [spoke](#) of the destruction of the liberators' monuments by the far-right garrison (or with their approval). The removal of the monuments is [described](#) in one of the posts as *"promoting fascism, spreading hatred, extreme nationalism and heroizing the leaders of the anti-Soviet resistance."*

Similar narratives have also emerged in connection with the so-called glorification of the Bandera and fascism, which was to be carried out on the basis of several laws. Namely, the law granting the honorary status of "fighters for Ukrainian independence in the 20th century" to a number of groups. The law became an easy target for Russian propaganda

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[15] This was mainly because Ukraine was the target of several organised attempts at suppression by the Communist Party, the deadliest of which – the Holodomor – killed millions of Ukrainians over a period of several years. For the Russian regime, Soviet nostalgia is a tool to justify the unity and common past of the Ukrainian and Russian people. As a result, Ukraine's attempts to remove painful memories of the Soviet past from city squares and history books have been unacceptable to many pro-Russian actors.

[16] The post of the Communist Party of Slovakia became unavailable in the time period between the annotation of the data and the writing of the study.

[17] In a December 2022 [poll](#) by the Ilya Kucherov Democratic Initiative Fund, 73,3% of Ukrainians viewed the collapse of the USSR positively and 72,5% supported condemning the USSR as a totalitarian regime that terrorized its people. However, we must look critically at the results of the survey and acknowledge them in the context that the data collection took place during a time of war.

and pro-Russian narratives, as the groups in question included the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). These were, of course, consistently highlighted in the logical schema of the Ukrainian far-right. Despite the fact that the movements were initially founded with the goal of Ukraine's national liberation in mind, their historical role is indeed tainted by Nazi tendencies towards notions of the purity of the Ukrainian nation. It is important to add, however, that the UPA fought against Soviet forces until the 1950s, and in the minds of Ukrainians it may primarily represent a symbol of the struggle against dependence on the USSR or Russia.

A similar situation arose in the case of the law adopted in 2019, which granted the aforementioned groups the status of war veterans. The rhetoric used by the observed actors in explaining this situation relied primarily on techniques of simplification and generalization. The adoption of the laws, in the words of the actors, was supposed to automatically imply the glorification of Nazism and Ukrainian support for the far-right, ignoring not only the questionable nature of some historical statements but also the ongoing proxy conflict with Russia in Donbas. Specifically, an analogy was also used in the Slovak information space that spoke of equating the Bandera fighters *"with participants in the anti-fascist resistance"* in Slovakia in order to provoke negative emotions.

The glorification of Nazism by Ukraine (but also by the West) should paradoxically have occurred during the vote on the adoption of resolutions against the glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to fuelling current forms of racial discrimination, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance. In particular, the 2021 vote, in which Ukraine and the United States opposed the proposal and most EU Member States (including Slovakia) abstained, has come to the attention of the observed actors. In particular, former MP Anna Belousovová was active in communicating this message and the subsequent narrative that *"Nazism went to the US after World War II only to return again to Europe after many years from there… and this time it started not from the West, but from the East – in Ukraine."*[18] However, she and other actors missed the fact that Russia has continuously come up with this proposal every year since 2012. Ukraine abstained in 2012 and 2013, and since 2014 (after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbas) has voted against the proposal. There are several reasons for

this. First and foremost, the proposal is part of Russia's information and influence activities to legitimise certain propaganda narratives (in particular its role as a protector, liberator and fighter against Nazism). At the same time, specifically in the case of Ukraine (not only), the core of the proposal can be seen as hypocritical – Russia is using a double standard by omitting similar crimes caused by Stalin's regime. However, Ukrainian or Western opposition to the draft resolution (especially after February 2022) is an effective tool in the hands of Russian propaganda and its disseminators. Opponents of the resolution are

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[18] Their own role as an amplifier of disinformation narratives was only further confirmed by the sharing of her post by *Sila pravdy* and *Hlavný denník*.

easily portrayed at first glance as Nazi supporters, despite the fact that Russia's proposals reduce the fight against Nazism to a distorted (Soviet) version of history.

In the context of the legislative steps taken by the Ukrainian government, language laws have often been discussed. These have also been wrongly attributed to a far-right character. The laws have been labelled as a violation of human rights of the Russian-speaking population in south-eastern Ukraine, or have been linked to the narrative of a Kyiv neo-Nazi-directed genocide. According to the Embassy of Russia in Slovakia, they were part of the *"anti-national violent Ukrainisation"* or, according to Eduard Chmelár, the Ukrainian garniture *"took away the linguistic rights of the Russian minority".*[19] In particular, the Law on Education (2017) and the Law on the Protection of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language (2019) have become controversial. In the first case, it should be noted that the rhetoric that has placed the issue in the conflict between the far-right government and the exclusively Russian minority is highly manipulative. We rate it as such, particularly because the law also affected other national minorities in Ukraine.[20] As for the 2019 law, it made Ukrainian a compulsory language for public sector employees. The law provided for certain exceptions for some minority languages, such as English and other European Union languages. Pro-Russian actors particularly criticize the fact that these exceptions did not include Russian. They thus revisited the narratives of the oppression of the Russian minority in Ukraine and the threat to (or deprivation of) their rights. Despite the establishment of Ukrainian as the country's official language and the preference for its use, Russian was not banned. Nor did the law apply to the sphere of private communication or the practice of religious rites. It is therefore not true that *"the country's leadership is adopting discriminatory laws on language, education, on the so-called "indigenous peoples", displacing the Russian language from all spheres of life,"* as the Russian Embassy in Slovakia, among others, has communicated. Both laws were primarily aimed at the development of Ukrainian language and culture. Despite the controversies (especially in the case of the 2017 law), their automatic identification with the rise of the

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[19] The Russian Embassy in Slovakia website's post is one of many examples of content that revisits the war in Donbas and argues the need for Russian intervention in the form of an invasion beginning on 24 February 2022 through already constructed and entrenched narratives about the oppression of the Russian minority in Ukraine. Similar narratives have been communicated mainly by Russian state officials and further amplified not only by the embassy website but also by other pro-Russian actors.

[20] The Law on Education enacted Ukrainian as a compulsory language of study in state schools from the fifth grade, i.e. at the primary secondary and upper secondary level. Education in minority languages in kindergartens and primary schools remained unchanged. The law provoked strong reactions in Hungary, Romania, Russia, Poland, Bulgaria and other countries. The Ukrainian government has made concessions on the controversial school law, with Kyiv extending the transition period for the application of the law's language provisions until 2023. The Venice Commission said the move to all-Ukrainian secondary education might violate the rights of ethnic minorities. It, therefore, formulated seven recommendations to the Ukrainian government to change the law. In 2019, President Zelenskyy confirmed that Ukraine had managed to implement six of the seven recommendations.

far-right in society or its presence in the ranks of the political elite is not only erroneous but also manipulative.[21]

Historical revisionism

The actors under study often used the term "Banderites" to refer to the Ukrainian political elite or Ukrainians in general. The term is used in the literature to refer to members and sympathizers of the OUN-B faction led by Stepan Bandera from 1940 onwards (a term used in 178 posts). The second faction, OUN-M, was led by Andriy Melnyk. However, in the discourse of the actors studied, the term Banderites was loosely used to name all real and imagined members of the Ukrainian far-right.[22]

The term Banderites (228 posts) had explicitly negative connotations in the discourse under study and in many cases was accompanied by descriptions of both real and alleged crimes committed by the Banderites during World War II or during the first post-war years on the territory of former Czechoslovakia.

Although references to the historical events of the 1940s did not form a separate sub-narrative within our metanarrative, they formed a significant part of the content with which the actors under study have shaped the negative image of Ukraine since 2014. The template used is simple – Banderites were murderers and Nazi collaborators, the Ukrainian political elite rehabilitates them, and therefore, it too is far-right. Due to the high number of posts (291 posts) dealing with 20th century events and selectively using them to describe the situation in Ukraine since 2014, we analyse them in this separate category.

The image of the Banderites was reduced in the examined material to that of Nazi collaborators and murderers who killed civilians during and after World War II. This is how Ľuboš Blaha described their activities: *"Anyone who knows the history of World War II knows that "Glory to Ukraine" is a greeting used by Ukrainian nationalists, the so-called Banderites, who collaborated with Nazi Germany and murdered people in both Poland and*

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[21] Of course, several countries have more than one official language. However, it should not be forgotten that Ukraine has faced a threat to its own sovereignty from Russia. Most of the post-Soviet states decided to legally restrict the official and cultural use of Russian after the declaration of independence. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, although they have Russian-speaking minorities on almost the same scale as Ukraine, have been much more forthright in ensuring that all official documentation, media and education are provided only in the state language.

[22] At the same time, a certain liberalisation of the use of the term Banderites could be observed during the period under review. The term gradually lost its original meaning and began to be associated with unrelated topics. The acquired flexibility of the term allowed for the manipulative creation of cognitive links that indirectly contributed to the vilanization of Ukraine. In these cases, the term Banderites figured as a buzzword with negative connotations. At the same time, it contributed to the construction of emotions of fear and insecurity, in conjunction with the communication of critical and socially significant topics. The adoption and application of the term were gradually implemented by several actors under observation, mainly to highlight sentimental colourization and to strengthen the "attractiveness" of their own communication. This rhetoric appeared to a greater extent, for example, during the tenure of former President Andrej Kiska, mainly due to his positive relations with the then Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

Slovakia in a more beastly way than the German Nazis themselves. The atrocities of the Bandera are well known. They murdered tens of thousands of people, threw babies against the wall, cut the stomachs of pregnant women, and left small children in bunches hanging from trees with the words "The road to an independent Ukraine" written on them. In Poland, they will never forget Volhynia. The brutality of the Banderites still sends chills down their spines" (Blaha, 5 March 2022).

> **"The reference to hanging small children from a tree shows where the wind is blowing from. It refers to the 1923 crime of the mentally ill Marianna Dolińska, who murdered her four young children and hung them from a tree. This incident, preserved in photographs, is often mistakenly attributed to the activities of the OUN and the UPA during the 1943 events in Volyn. Of course, this ethnic cleansing of the Polish population in Volyn and partly in Halych was a heinous crime in which a part of the UPA under the leadership of Dmytro Klyachkivsky was involved. To a certain extent, this discredited and burdened the otherwise legitimate efforts of Ukrainian nationalists to achieve Ukrainian independence with unjustifiable violence. Unfortunately, it was the result of a long-standing problematic coexistence between local Ukrainians and Poles."**
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> **Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. (University of Defence in Brno)**

In addition to the events of World War II, the researched actors also interpreted the Bandera's activities in Czechoslovakia between 1945 and 1947 in negative terms without context: *"Even the population of Czechoslovakia was subjected to the terror of the Bandera, and this for three whole years after the end of the war – because the remnants of the Bandera wanted to shoot their way to the Western Allies in the pursuit of a more economical treatment.' The most famous atrocity of that period on our territory remains the massacre in Kolbasov. Here, Banderites killed 11 people, mostly Jews (the women were raped before being killed), who returned home after surviving the concentration camps."* The Communist Party of Slovakia in this quote was describing the events of Kolbasov in 1945. In doing so, it was using the interpretation of the communists of the time, who automatically attributed the event to the Banderites as their enemies. To this day, however, there is controversy in the scholarly community as to whether the Banderites were really behind the Kolbasov killings. Indeed, recent scientific findings point to significant flaws in the communist version of the whole story.

> *"In Kolbasov it was most likely a crime of some criminal gang or military deserters. To this day it is not clear, and we will not know for sure who was behind this crime. This event was mainly handled by communist propaganda as a clear crime of the OUN and the UPA."*
>
> **Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. (University of Defence in Brno)**
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> *"Blaha does not respect the views of contemporary professional historians (Ukrainian, Polish, Slovak, Czech, etc.) and constantly repeats the phrases of communist and Soviet propaganda. The propaganda denigrated all manifestations of anti-Soviet disobedience and resistance (of the Baltic peoples, Ukrainians, peoples of Central Asia, etc.)."*
>
> **Michal Šmigeľ, PhD.**
> **(associate professor at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica)**

In the above quotations, we could notice the rather expressive rhetoric used by the actors in question to describe the actions of the Bandera fighters. The choice of terms such as "bestial manner", "atrocities", "brutality" and "terror" served to evoke negative emotions and to emphasise the described characteristics of the Bandera fighters. To reinforce the image of the Bandera, the actors under investigation, in this case especially Ľuboš Blaha, often used the phrase that the Banderites were more brutal than the German Nazis.

In addition to the image of murderers, the researched actors also formed the image of Nazi collaborators for the Banderites. Similar to Blaha, the Russian Embassy in Slovakia inaccurately and simplistically [identified](link) the Bandera fighters with the UPA and inaccurately claimed that the UPA collaborated with the Nazis during the war: *"Next year the country will celebrate at the state level the 80th anniversary of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. That organisation is known in this country by the common name 'Banderites' and collaborated with the Nazis during World War II."*

> **"The practices of the Soviets in the occupied territories in Eastern Europe after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact were so ruthless that after the German attack, it also led to the fact that the Germans were indeed welcomed by many as liberators. The locals could not imagine that anything worse than Soviet Bolshevism could come. Very quickly, however, disappointment set in. So the UPA also began to fight against the Nazi occupation administration from 1942 onwards.**
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> **Meanwhile, Russian rhetoric overlooks another faction of the OUN, and that was Melnyk's, which was much more servile towards Berlin than Bandera's. But Melnyk's probably doesn't bother the Russians so much, partly because after the war it completely lost influence, and the nationalists who did not reconcile themselves to the Russian occupation of Ukraine were mainly united in the Bandera's faction of the OUN and the UPA."**
>
> **Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. (University of Defence in Brno)**

Other manipulative claims about the Bandera were [made](#) by *Front ľavicovej mládeže* (*Front of Left Youth*), which simplistically claimed that the Bandera fighters *"incidentally helped suppress the Slovak National Uprising"*. The claim was intended to prove that Ukrainians had already fought against our interests in the past and attacked one of the most significant events in modern Slovak history. In reality, however, at the time of the Slovak National Uprising, Banderites had broken relations with the German Nazis and did not suppress the uprising in our country. To suppress the Slovak National Uprising[23], the Germans used the 14th SS Division Galicia, which was indeed composed of Ukrainians but was perceived rather negatively by the Banderites, who saw it only as an opportunity to get weapons and training.

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[23] Slovak National Uprising was military resistance of Slovak opposition against regime of Slovak satellite (collaborationist) state and Nazi control over Slovakia in 1944. German Nazis suppressed this uprising but it helped to create ground for the liberation of Czechoslovakia from Nazis by the Red Army in 1944-1945.

> "The SS Halich Division was recruited mostly from the Melnyk faction of the OUN, and many Ukrainians who served in it saw it merely as an opportunity for a regular ration of provisions, quality training, and weapons."
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> **Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. (University of Defence in Brno)**
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> "I can confirm that the UPA distanced itself from the members of the 14th SS Galicia Division and also viewed them as collaborators. A fitting example is the cemetery of the Ukrainian diaspora near Toronto, Canada - the so-called Banderites refused to be buried together with members of the 14th Division. Members of the UPA have their own section, the others - their own section."
>
> **Michal Šmigeľ, PhD.**
> **(associate professor at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica)**

A common strategy was to create analogies between the Bandera fighters and the representatives of the puppet Slovak state (during the period before and during World War II). The analogies serve to better understand and bring the proclaimed image of the Banderites to Slovak society through a familiar image – the Slovak state. In the following quote from a post by Artur Bekmatov, a left-wing pro-Kremlin activist and current chairman of the Socialisti.sk movement, there was a reference to the fact that a similar ideological current is being promoted by the current Ukrainian political elite, and therefore Russian aggression in Ukraine is understandable: *"I WOULD NOT WANT TO LIVE IN A STATE THAT HEROIZES COLLABORATORS. We do not have to agree with the decision of the people of southeastern Ukraine, we can question whether it was in accordance with international law. However, humanly, we can understand what led them to do so. I, too, would not want to live in a state where there are the squares of Vojtech Tuka or the stadiums of Alexander Mach. And this is the reality of contemporary Ukraine – the heroization of extremists and collaborators for the purpose of maximum derussification of society and the building of national consciousness through the distortion of history."*

As in all countries in the world, Ukraine is experiencing what could be described as controversial interventions into the collective memory of the nation by the political establishment. In Ukraine, however, there is a democratic debate about these interventions, and often such interventions are criticised by Ukrainian historians. Moreover, Bekmatov forgets to add a very important point in his post. In Ukraine, these interventions are taking place during the Russian military aggression, which has helped to stimulate these processes of collective memory formation aimed at getting rid of Russian ideological impositions in historiography.

> *"The influence of Russian military aggression on the formation of the Ukrainian public's view of its own history is significant. In view of this fact, the search for unifying symbols of resistance is understandable, which the UPA and OUN, with their anti-Russian orientation, clearly fulfil. Who will be perceived by Ukrainians as the hero of their history is entirely up to them. The fact that in doing so they can also reach for figures with controversial deeds and overlook them is not at all Ukrainian specific."*
>
> **Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. (University of Defence in Brno)**

The West supports the Ukrainian far-right

The aim of this sub-narrative was to prove Ukraine's alleged international incompetence as a state. Within this narrative, the Ukrainian far-right political elite is portrayed as controlled, supported or at least tolerated by the collective West, in particular the US, NATO and the EU. The aim of this fictitious Western policy is supposed to be political pressure or direct military intervention against Russia. Ukraine is thus allegedly being used in the wider geopolitical struggle by the West against Russia.

Slovak pro-Kremlin actors used several false arguments to legitimise this narrative. The most subtle against the West and Ukraine is that the far-right in Ukraine is ignored, downplayed or tolerated by the West. For example, Eduard Chmelár has expressed himself in this vein: *"There is a government in power in Ukraine that relies on the support of radicals (to put it mildly), and the West tacitly tolerates it."*

In other cases, however, the actors studied used much more expressive (even vulgar) language in describing relations between the West and Ukraine. The Facebook page *Antikiska* endorsed the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in this way: *"This is the end of the Nazis, fascists, Banderites and other Western-fed scumbags in Ukraine!"*

The sub-narrative about Western support for the far-right in Ukraine constructed an image not only of Ukraine but also of Western actors, whom the propagandists of pro-Kremlin propaganda accused of supporting the far-right. For this reason, Western actors such as the US, the EU, NATO or specific states were also characterised using various new terms (Eurofascism) referring to the far-right. As an example, a post from the Communist Party of Slovakia dating back to 2015: *"EUROFASCISM. Even many of our citizens are offended if this does not bother anyone in Europe. IT DOES. First of all, it does not bother the neo-fascist government junta in Ukraine, where the top leaders today are themselves fascists. (Poroshenko, Yatsenyuk, Turchynov, Yarosh....etc) This helps them to carry out the tasks dictated to them by Washington and Brussels. In the European Union, the warmongers against Russia and the Russophobes don't mind either, because they can only keep Ukraine and their geopolitical interests in this part of the world by violence, terror, nationalism and fascism."*

The argument about the EU and US "dictatorship" in Ukraine is also present in the quotation. Antipathy towards both Western actors has also been built up using the last sentence to characterise the "destructive" policies of the EU and the US.

The illegal Russian annexation of Crimea was also interpreted by the actors as a legitimate defence against the US and the Banderites. Extra plus, for example, claimed, *"Russia saved Crimea from occupation by U.S. and Banderite forces."*

Another important argument in this sub-narrative, which includes a post from the Communist Party of Slovakia, says that Western "warmongers" and "Russophobes" desire to wage war against Russia. Propaganda has used similar euphemisms to describe virtually every critic of Russian imperial policy. The aim of these euphemisms is to discredit Kremlin critics on a personal level, not on an argumentative level.

The argument about the military ambitions of the West was developed in more detail by Monika Sofiya Soročinová (former candidate for the far-right party Vlasť in the 2020 parliamentary elections), who uncritically took up President Putin's words: *"President Putin also raised another alternative to escalating tensions in Ukraine, namely by drawing Ukraine into NATO, which would install strike weapon systems there in the future and stimulate some of the Banderites to resolve the issue of Donbas or Crimea by armed means, thus dragging Russia into an armed conflict."*

In this way, pro-Kremlin actors tried to convince audiences that the aggressor in Ukraine is in fact the West, which is using Ukrainians in its war against Russia. The Kremlin is only supposed to defend itself against Western aggression. However, the alleged Western aggression using Ukrainian Banderites has remained in the position of conspiracy theories and without any real evidence of similar Western intentions. The statements of Russian politicians have served to legitimise certain claims, which ideally should be done by some qualified and independent authority. However, in this role, the actors under review placed Russian political leaders responsible for the killing of civilians in Ukraine.

Within this sub-narrative, the actors also focused on the situation in Slovakia. In the interpretations of the studied actors, the US allegedly wanted to drag Slovakia into the war against Russia. This was to be done through the supply of weapons through Slovak territory, financial support or training of Ukrainians in Slovakia. According to Ľuboš Blaha, Slovakia could also become a military target for Russia: *"According to the American New York Times, Ukrainian mercenaries will be trained in Slovakia for a possible conflict with Russia. The Slovak Republic has never been so close to war! 1. This scandalous information was confirmed to the prestigious American newspaper by sources from the US administration. In addition to Slovakia, Poland and Romania are mentioned. 2. Just as the Americans once trained Afghan mujahideen, including Osama bin Laden, they want to train Ukrainian nationalists to fight the Russians. 3. Slovakia would thus become a direct part of a military conflict against Russia, and our territory would become a prime target*

for a possible attack – this is what the Americans want to drag us into!" (Blaha, 17 January 2022).

However, the observed actors did not only [accuse](#) Western actors such as the US, the EU and NATO of supporting the Ukrainian far-right but also independent international organisations such as the OSCE: *"The OSCE helped the Nazi bandits to kill civilians in Donbas. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) deployed hundreds of observers in Ukraine "as if to defuse tensions between the warring parties" in Donbas. The insidious meanness of the Anglo-Saxons dominating the OSCE has also been demonstrated in the "peacekeeping mission" in Ukraine. Instead of taking a neutral stance in the ongoing conflict between the two sides, they illegally supplied information to the Nazi-bandits about the activities, movements and deployment of the DPR army forces."*

Since 2014, the OSCE has led missions and monitored the situation on the frontline in Donbas. Its reports have contradicted Russian arguments about the alleged Ukrainian genocide of the Russian-speaking population in Donbas, which the Kremlin has used as a pretext to invade Ukraine. By discrediting this and other international organisations supposedly under Western control, the actors under scrutiny are thus furthering Russia's goal. This is to undermine confidence not only in integration into Western structures but also in democratic, independent and international institutions. Indeed, they too, through their work, point to Russian lies about Ukraine.

> *"The Kremlin always transfers responsibility to other foreign actors. But the facts are clear. Ukraine has been resisting Russian military intervention for nine years, which has intensified in the last year. The vocabulary used by the quoted authors is misleading, for example, in using labels such as "Banderites" to refer to contemporary Ukrainians. This is similar to the label "fascists' used by Soviet propaganda during and after the Second World War. All those who opposed Soviet policies were labelled "fascists' by the propaganda, and this label, in the Russian sense, is still in use today.*
>
> *If we look at the policy of the West, after the annexation of Crimea, it imposed only symbolic sanctions on Russia and business went merrily on. The reaction was rather weak considering that someone had changed the borders in Europe without a flinch. It was not until the February 2022 invasion that the security architecture was so disrupted that the West became more united, and this unity in support of Ukraine has so far persisted."*
>
> **Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. (University of Defence in Brno)**

Society in Ukraine is characterised by high support for the far-right

The core of the sub-narrative is formed by rhetoric that sees a strong far-right undercurrent behind the development of Ukrainian society, with a demand for such a

policy. The high level of support for the far-right in Ukrainian society was sought to be legitimised by the actors under study through various general phrases, while also falsely using specific events.

The general phrases about support for the far-right in Ukrainian society were in a spirit which is well expressed by the [post](#) of the Facebook page *Spravodajská alternatíva*: *"There is a fascist regime in Ukraine, and many Ukrainians consider the fascist Stepan Bandera their hero."*

One of the underlying general phrases about the spread of Nazism in Ukraine also appears at the beginning of the following [quotation](#). However, the author then goes on to specify that the majority of Ukrainians reject such tendencies, which in turn supports the idea that the Ukrainian nation disagrees with the Nazi political elite that was allegedly supposed to gain power after the Maidan: *"NATIONALISM IN UKRAINE IS REAL, POWERFUL AND SPREADING Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians reject the dictate of the neo-Nazi minority, the brown plague in the country is alive and well and is planning to spread further. Despite its downplaying by several Ukrainian political leaders."*

Within this sub-narrative, we thus identify two lines. The more prevalent one referred to the high support for the far-right in Ukrainian society. The second line narrated society's disapproval of the "Nazi" government. The latter rather served to delegitimise the Ukrainian political elite, which is allegedly not popular. However, unlike in Russia, Ukrainians elect their government in democratic elections, so its position can be described as legitimate.

Among the specific events used by the researched actors to support the thesis of the spread of far-right ideas in Ukrainian society were the marches on the anniversary of Stepan Bandera's birthday. These marches take place annually on 1 January. Although they are predominantly attended by members of the far-right in numbers of around a few hundred or thousand and ignored by the vast majority of society, the actors studied manipulatively used these marches as a typical image of post-Maidan Ukraine.

In 2020, *Slobodný vysielač* [used](#) irony to describe one such march, alluding to the alleged downplaying of the far-right in Ukraine by the West and Western media: *"Dear children. There are no Nazis in Ukraine. Those nice people with the torches, they are freedom and democracy fighters. And lest we forget...they are fighting against the brutal Putin regime."*

Artur Bekmatov [used](#) a historical parallel with Nazi Germany, where the Nazis also organised torchlight marches, to emphasise the alleged far-right character of Ukrainian society: *"RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM EXISTS IN UKRAINE Today is not just the first day of the New Year, but in Ukraine, right-wing extremists are commemorating the anniversary of the birth of Stepan Bandera. To mark the occasion, the now regular extremist torch march, which is eerily similar to the torch marches of the German Nazis in the 1930s, was*

also held this year. This march has traditionally been held with the tacit or less explicit approval of the official authorities."

In his last sentence, Bekmatov added that official political representatives also agree with the march, thus automatically identifying the far-right march with the Ukrainian government.

Throughout the monitoring period, the investigated actors spread several reports according to which it is quite common to find publicly displayed Nazi symbols in Ukraine. One such case was the dissemination of a video of the display of a Nazi swastika on the stairs of a shopping centre in Kyiv. The video was intended to show that Nazi symbols are tolerated in Ukraine. *Infovojna* [wrote](#) about the incident: *"The Ukrainian shopping mall Horodok is located on the boulevard of Stepan Bandera, a Nazi collaborator. Pictures and Facebook images from the mall show a staircase with a large swastika. Shoppers can be seen going up and down the side escalators. In the center are the immovable stairs with a large swastika in the middle of a white diamond surrounded by red, similar to the flag of Nazi Germany."*

However, *Infovojna* did not include the mall's statement in the article, which claimed that it was a hacker attack, after which the swastika was displayed on the stairs for several minutes. However, this was enough for the video of the staircase to go viral and stereotype Ukraine as a country where expressions of support for the far-right are tolerated. The *Infovojna*'s article also failed to mention that after the Maidan, Ukraine passed a law banning the public display of Nazi and communist symbols, and the prosecutor's office launched an investigation into the incident at the shopping mall. This eventually [confirmed](#) that it was a hacking attack.

The alleged spread of neo-Nazism in Ukraine [was presented](#) as a danger to Slovakia and the rest of Europe by the monitored actors, thus trying to instill fear in the Slovak audience about the alleged events in Ukraine: *""New Democratic Ukraine" is educating neo-Nazis beyond our borders. Do you think that immigrants and radical Islamists are the only problem? You are very much mistaken because if the spread of neo-Nazism is not stopped in Ukraine, it will also be the starter of problems in Europe."*

The alleged upbringing of neo-Nazis in Ukraine is also related to another argument supporting the thesis of ingrained Nazism in Ukrainian society. In fact, several reports by the investigated actors sought to [highlight](#) the alleged education of children to far-right ideology. Based on their rhetoric, this is supposed to be a common phenomenon in Ukraine: *"Our children spend their summer holidays in summer camps, Ukrainian children in military ones, under the direction of the fascist AZOV collection!!!"*

In some content, attempts to portray the problems of Ukrainian society with far-right ideology in as much complexity as possible can be found. Branislav Fábry wanted to [show](#)

the fascistization of Ukrainian society by selectively choosing events for the *Slovo* website. Thus, in his article, he wrote about the aforementioned marches of the far-right, the renaming of streets after members of the OUN and the UPA, the adoption of laws, the erection of monuments to members of the OUN and the UPA, the naming of hotels after them, the organisation of various festivals, public runs and events named after members of the OUN and the UPA.

The author's conclusion is clear, Ukraine has a problem with the far-right. As to why some Ukrainians since 2014 have latched on to historical figures who fought against the Russians, communists and Nazis, the author no longer seeks answers.

> *"Interest in the figure of Bandera has indeed increased over the past year, but because he is a figure with a clearly anti-Soviet (anti-Russian) orientation. So it is an understandable effect. But if we go back to the election results, Ukrainian society is not undergoing any significant radicalisation on the basis of the election results."*
>
> **Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. (University of Defence in Brno)**

Mainstream media in Slovakia and the West lie about Ukraine

Among the institutions that the studied actors tried to discredit were also Slovak and Western mainstream media, which try to provide objective, fact-based coverage of the events in Ukraine. Facts and descriptions of the real situation in Ukraine do not suit the pro-Kremlin propagandists because they show the brutal consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine. The aim of the pro-Kremlin actors is, therefore, to undermine confidence in the standard media and, ideally, to divert the audience's attention to their discourse.

The actors studied thus discredited the work of the standard media on several levels. They accused them of [ignoring](#) (declared by pro-Kremlin propaganda) the rise of the far-right in Ukraine: *"Notice how silent the Slovak media are about the renaming of streets in Ukraine. Have you read anything in the Slovak right-wing press about the fact that Kyiv wants to rename the street of General Vatutin, who was killed by the Banderites during World War II, to Shukhevych, who was the deputy commander of the Nachtyhal, a unit subordinate to the SS, a Nazi who organised mass purges against Poles and Jews in Ukraine? No, neither SME nor Denník N write about it. And Slovak television will not show footage of contemporary Ukrainian Banderites, Nazis and fascists furiously beating up demonstrators protesting against the name change."*

However, the opposite is true, both Slovak and Western media regularly covered the events in Ukraine and did not forget about the phenomena that the Slovenský zväz

protifašistických bojovníkov (Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters) wrote about in the post quoted above.

On another level, the standard media were supposed to outright lie about the situation in Ukraine: *"Telling that there is no Nazism and ethnic cleansing in Ukraine while there are tens of thousands of marches with Nazi symbols and pictures in support of the Banderites, who also murdered in Czechoslovakia… this is so worthy of the Slovak media."*

On the third level, the mainstream media were supposedly directly supporting the rise of the far-right. To prove this argument, Ľuboš Blaha chose an interview with historian Michal Šmigeľ for *Aktuality.sk*. Journalist Stanislava Harkotová spoke with Šmigeľ about Ukrainian radical nationalism during World War II and the activities of OUN-B and UPA members in Czechoslovakia between 1945 and 1947.

Blaha wrote the following about the interview, in which the historian Šmigeľ described the topics in question and tried to explain them without the overlay of communist propaganda, on the basis of his expertise and the results of modern scientific research: *"I like how yesterday Aktuality.sk wept over the victims of the Holocaust, but immediately today they publish an article in which they defend the Banderites, Ukrainian fascists who massacred women, children, old people on ethnic grounds… They might as well have written an ode to Hitler, it would have had the same effect* (…) *Lest it be forgotten, the Banderites also brutally murdered in Slovakia. Jews too, even those who managed to escape from German concentration camps. They were massacred in Kolbasovo by those wonderful, brilliant Banderites, about whom they write so lovingly on Aktuality.sk."* (Blaha, 28 January 2019)

Blaha has created a false dilemma with his rhetoric. When *Aktuality.sk* or the historian Šmigeľ did not accept his version of events, they automatically supported fascism. The Kremlin is using the same rhetoric to shape public opinion, presenting anyone who disagrees with its aggression against Ukraine as a Russophobe or a supporter of the far-right.

Blaha, however, in his status dedicated to Aktuality.sk, went further and fabulated about the motive why *Aktuality.sk* "defend the Banderites". According to Blaha, the reason is that the Ukrainian nationalists referring to Bandera are today fighting against Russia: *"Have they gone completely mad in Aktuality.sk?! After all, they are on the dime of promoting fascism! Banderites are regular war criminals, fascists, pigs. And just because they are from Ukraine and are followed by Ukrainian fascists, who are now fighting against Russia, they now go looking for understanding for the Banderites – well great! And what will happen next? WILL YOU DEFEND MENGELE TOO, YOU IDIOTS! Will Aktuality.sk give space to folk historians to chat about how patriotic Alexander Mach actually was and how Vojtech Tuka fought against the "Judeo-Bolsheviks"? Or are we going to denigrate Slovak fascists and celebrate only Ukrainian ones?"*

The second part of Blaha's quote brings us to another strategy of discrediting the standard media. This is presented by the common accusations of using a double standard, according to which the Slovak mainstream media criticise the Slovak far-right, but remain silent, lie or support the Ukrainian one: *"The attitude of Slovak politicians and especially the Slovak media towards Nazism is ambiguous and opportunistic. They are very zealous when it comes to condemning M. Kotleba in Slovakia, but at the same time they support O. Tisza's admirers in Ukraine, and at the same time downplay the admirers of S. Bandera. In this way, they create the idea of good and bad right-wing extremists."*

In addition to the media, the investigated actors accused analysts who professionally deal with events in Ukraine and comment on them for the media of downplaying, deceiving and supporting the Ukrainian far-right: *"We have repeatedly learned from our analysts that Putin may be acting like Hitler in Munich, but on the contrary, the Banderites cannot be blamed for the crimes of World War II."* The goal of this strategy is the same as that in the case of the media – to discredit any analyst who relies on facts and does not spread pro-Kremlin propaganda.

Within this sub-narrative, the actors studied created their own image of the media based on the erroneous assumption of the media's positive relationship with the Ukrainian far right. Pro-Kremlin propagandists subsequently criticized the image they themselves had created. However, this failed to correspond to reality. It is a key strategy running throughout the research material – to create a false image of a "fascist" Ukraine and then to criticise it.

Slovakia supports the far-right in Ukraine

Robert Fico, chairman of the SMER-SD party, is one of the most vocal and influential disseminators of Russian propaganda today, and also a critic of Slovak and Western military aid to Ukraine. When he was the Prime Minister during our monitoring period (2013-2018), his government was also criticised for allegedly helping "Ukrainian Banderites". However, the opposition leaders at the time, such as the OĽANO or SaS parties, which have been part of the government since 2020, were criticised to a greater extent.

In 2017, during the government of SMER-SD, SNS and Most-Híd, which was chaired by Fico and in which SMER-SD was the numerically strongest party, the website *Milujeme Rusko* wrote: *"Yes, there were Banderites in Slovakia too and they had fun here. Today, our government is supporting precisely those in Ukraine who represent the legacy of the Banderites, while swearing at Kotleba... How ironic, isn't it? The Banderites wanted to go to the West because they knew they would be comfortable there. Fortunately, the conscious Bandera and co. were finished...".*

Since 2014, pro-Kremlin actors have been spreading the thesis that not only the US, the EU and NATO are supporting the far-right in Ukraine, but also Slovakia. Slovak politicians are supposed to express their support and assistance to Ukraine through their verbal speeches or concrete political decisions. The aim of this sub-narrative is to discredit Slovak politicians who criticize Russia for its actions and support Ukraine (according to the examined actors, the far-right) or the pro-Western direction of Slovakia.

Until 2019, the actors surveyed were most critical of then-President Andrej Kiska's (who was replaced in office in 2019 by Zuzana Čaputová) support of Ukraine. The surveyed actors often criticized Kiska in a very aggressive and vulgar way: *"Usurer, sun worshipper, tax and election cheat, traitor, an admirer of Ukrainian fascists, the first American president of Slovakia, pharisee, liar, a hypocrite who does not respect and violates the law, a ferret and a disgustingly ugly creature with three greasy hairs. What else is there?"*

Among the specific political decisions for which propagandists criticised selected politicians were, for example, permits for alleged transfers of weapons and military equipment through Slovakia to Ukraine, which the West was supposed to use to escalate the conflict: *"The authorization of heavy weapons transfers by unidentified carriers heading through the territory of the Slovak Republic to Ukraine, to an area of a conflict situation threatening war, is an unprecedented example of the hypocrisy of our political and governmental officials. Supporting the war, supplying the fascist Kyiv junta with weapons at a time when the situation is escalating, is an insult to the citizens of Slovakia, but also to the peace-loving citizens of Ukraine and Russia, who are striving to ease tensions and settle the conflict peacefully. Arms dealers, militarists and warmongers are also getting the green light in our country."*

However, at that time, no weapons from Western partners for Ukraine were routed through Slovakia. These were mostly transfers of Slovak equipment within Slovakia, or of allied equipment during exercises within NATO. Thus, the actors under study constructed their own reality, to which they then reacted. With this quote, the Communist Party of Slovakia was spreading a conspiracy theory about the West being to blame for the war on Ukraine (although it is not explicitly mentioned in this quote by the Communist Party of Slovakia) and thus exonerating Russia. Slovakia, by allowing the transfer of equipment and weapons, supposedly became part of this escalation by the West.

After the assumption of office by President Zuzana Čaputová in 2019 and the governments of Igor Matovič and Eduard Heger in 2020 and 2021, respectively, these politicians have become the main targets of criticism by the surveyed actors. For example, Štefan Harabin commented on Čaputová and Heger as follows: *"Čaputová and Heger support the Nazi practices of the Banderites in Ukraine, which destroy human dignity."*

According to Ľuboš Blaha, some Slovak politicians, such as President Čaputová, are so devoted to helping Ukraine that they have promoted "fascism": *"When the President of*

the Republic, in a globally broadcast speech, utters a symbol used by the Banderites at a time when they were murdering tens of thousands of Poles or Jews, this is the textbook promotion of fascism. This is not just an expression of sympathy for the Banderites. This is also about promoting a symbol that every average educated person knows was part of the Bandera outfit" (Blaha, 5 April 2022).

> *"The very greeting "Glory to Ukraine!" and the initial recorded response "All over the earth glory!" originated under the influence of the national revival in the Ukrainian student milieu of the Kharkiv University of Technology (now Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute) in the late 19th – early 20th century. Its roots go back to the works of Ukrainian national revivalists and romantic poets of the 19th century. Later, the greeting spread and became more widely known at the time of the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917-1919 (in the context of the revolution in the former Russian Empire, or Russia). In the streets of revolutionary Kyiv at that time, the chant was often heard: "Long live free Ukraine!" and "Glory to Ukraine!" The articles of contemporary periodicals testify to this.*
>
> *"Glory to Ukraine!" and the reply "Glory to the heroes!" was born in the interwar period in one of the emigrant organizations of Ukrainian war veterans and Ukrainian students who settled or studied in Czechoslovakia (!). At the founding assembly of the Legion of Ukrainian Nationals, held in 1925 in Poděbrady, the participants of the assembly adopted a proposal to reply to the greeting "Glory to Ukraine" with "Glory to the Heroes!"*
>
> *In addition to the Ukrainian emigration the salute "Glory to Ukraine!" began to be used in the mid-1920s by Ukrainian youth in Volyn and Halych in what was then eastern Poland. These were members of the youth organisation "Plast" (Ukrainian Scout organisation), which was educated in the Ukrainian patriotic spirit, mostly by veterans of the Ukrainian revolution. Thus, it became widely known, and it is, therefore, not surprising that it was also used in the 1940s by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (the so-called Banderites) fighting (in the next phase of the struggle for the revival of Ukrainian statehood) under the conditions of World War II and especially in the post-war period against the Soviet government in Ukraine."*
>
> **Michal Šmigeľ, PhD.**
> **(associate professor at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica)**

The Maidan was organised and dominated by the far-right

The 2013-2014 protests, known as Euromaidan or Maidan, which ended with the Revolution of Dignity in February 2014, are a turning point in Ukrainian history. From this period onwards, Russia's intensive informational presence in Slovakia (and not only) really began. One of the aims of this action is to discredit Ukraine as a state, its political elite and its society. The narrative of Maidan as a far-right coup d'état appeared regularly

throughout the period under review as one of the basic lines of communication to legitimise Russian policy towards Ukraine.

The Maidan was the very first event we captured during our research, and it was the subject of the first post in our research material. The [article](#) from the *Slovanský svet* website is dated 23 January 2014 and the author wrote in it, among other things: *"The Ukrainian Nazis have already occupied two cities in Ukraine... This is not distant Egypt, this is not distant Syria... This is what you have at your back. The media here have started to warn neighbouring countries --> If civil war breaks out here, think three times about who will be hit first!... This concerns Slovakia more than you might think... And with the Banderites (Ukrainian Nazis) it's no joke. They would kill everybody / Russians, Slovaks, Poles... They don't care... Plus it's obvious how it's all paid for, organized, and artificially crushed by the West... There are organizers going around the towns encouraging people to go to the Maidan."*

The author of the article emphasized the urgency of the situation, which could also concern Slovakia, and thus tried to provoke fear of events in Ukraine in the Slovak audience. This was based on the assumption that the far-right was taking power in Ukraine. The author made Ukrainians out to be killers who have no scruples and are capable of killing everyone, including Slovaks.

The paper in question offers us two basic lines of argument within the Maidan narrative. The first is the generalisation of the protesters as members of the far-right and the second is their support from the West. It is a fact that there were also members of far-right organisations, such as Right Sector, whose fighters were active in the struggles against the police and special forces (Berkut) on the Maidan. However, identifying the protesters only with the far-right is a manipulation. On the Maidan, protesters belonged to different social classes and were adherents of different ideologies. The far-right was a vocal and visible, but nevertheless, a minority group.

Using the metanarrative under study, Maidan and the Revolution of Dignity were [presented](#) in the discourse under study as a coup d'état (or putsch) of the far-right supported by the West, mainly the US and the EU: *"Since February 2014, Ukraine has been ruled by representatives of the so-called Euromaidan, who came to power after a coup d'état in which, in addition to the domestic fascists, the US and the EU played an active role."*

Reflections on the West's involvement in supporting the far-right in the Maidan even went so far that *Milujeme Rusko* [blamed](#) Poland for training the Banderites: *"Ukraine and the Maidan in Kyiv is a nice example because it is clear now that people with professional training in fighting against Ukrainian forces, especially the Berkut, were sent there. It is discussed that these nationalists/gangsters were trained and sent from Poland and the Baltic States."*

Given the historically hostile relationship between Poles and members of the OUN and the UPA, this claim seems absurd, but it fits into the conspiratorial logic that the Maidan was organised from abroad.

The narrative of the Maidan as a coup d'état of the far-right served as an argument to legitimise Russian policy in Ukraine throughout the monitoring period. Efforts to push this argument culminated in 2022 during the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has been allegedly controlled by neo-Nazis since 2014. The latter is supposed to pose a danger to Russia. It repeats a long-standing Russian mantra, going back to World War II, that Russia always fights the Nazis. For example, *Armádny magazín* [wrote](): *"A state that ceased to be democratic in 2014 as a result of a neo-Nazi coup. There is no democracy in Ukraine. The so-called pro-Russian President Yanukovych was the last democratically elected president. And he was not pro-Russian, because if he had been, he would have suppressed the Maidan, and he would have destroyed the neo-Nazis. He was not pro-Russian. Since then the country has been in the hands of neo-Nazis and oligarchs."*

The Maidan was perceived in the examined content as a certain turning point, which, due to Ukraine, negatively changed the relations between Ukraine and Russia. At the same time, it was supposed to justify Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine.

On the one hand, the Maidan was the period that accelerated and stimulated the longer-term tendencies of Ukrainians to [rehabilitate]() the Banderites: *"Although in Ukraine, after the collapse of the USSR, some groups have always tended to sympathise with the Banderites or the Ukrainian SS, it was only after the victory of the Orange Revolution in 2004 that these reactionary tendencies intensified – especially in the western part of the country – and after the victory of the Maidan in 2013 that these reactionary tendencies were given the absolute green light."*

On the other hand, these tendencies, according to the actors studied, [provoked]() a legitimate reaction from Russia, which was the annexation of Crimea: *"We recall that the Crimeans' decision to reunite with Russia was a reaction to the coup d'état and the unconstitutional overthrow of the legally elected government that took place in Kyiv, both staged and financed by the West, as well as to the threats of militant nationalists to impose their own rules on Crimea and to perpetrate repression against those who disagree with them."*

In this quote, it is important to recall that this was not a "decision of the Crimeans" because the referendum was not legal and legitimate. No free decision and no referendum vote can take place during a military occupation without genuine international observers. In no way did Russia, in its occupation of Crimea, create the conditions for a free referendum to take place.

> *"During the Maidan protests from November 2013 to February 2014, more than a million people turned out. Radicals, often from western Ukraine, also featured in the protests because they too were dissatisfied with Viktor Yanukovych's corrupt policies, which culminated in his failure to sign Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU.*
>
> *Despite the tragic events and the marginal presence of radicals in society, the Maidan was first and foremost a nationwide expression of opposition to the then political establishment and the direction of Ukraine under its leadership. The situation eventually escalated so much that no agreement was possible, and subsequent events were strongly influenced by Yanukovych's flight to Russia.*
>
> *Ukraine is a vast country with a numerous population and a sizeable foreign diaspora. So it is clear that there are diverse currents of opinion present there, including radical ones. Given Ukraine's tragic history and its unhappy present, it is remarkable that the frustration of society leading inevitably to radicalisation is not much more marked."*
>
> **Tomáš Řepa, Ph.D. (University of Defence in Brno)**

Other

During the period under study, topics and narratives that could not be categorised according to the set methodology of the study naturally appeared in the information space of Slovakia. However, the given opinions and messages, which did not contain a predefined narrative, completed the complex scheme of the formation of the communication of the metanarrative about the Ukrainian far-right. Continuously, these were mainly less viral topics which occurred in smaller amounts or figured as secondary or even tertiary topics that complemented the primary narratives. Compared to the categorised narratives, this strand of communication focused primarily on expressing support for any "anti-fascist" actions by various actors. These were mainly commemorative actions, various records of Nazi symbols, or dubious evidence of crimes committed by radical organizations. Less frequent narratives mentioned in connection with the monitored metanarrative include conspiracy theories about the development and possibility of the use of biological and nuclear weapons by Ukraine. Similar is the case with hoaxes about the use of poisonous substances or white phosphorus.

After 24 February 2022, content with uncategorized narratives focused primarily on supporting Russian aggression through rhetoric containing terms and messages related to the metanarrative of the Ukrainian far-right. Right at the beginning of the invasion, a number of pro-Kremlin actors shared the Russian Defense Minister's order that Russian troops were to treat Ukrainian soldiers with respect and deference. The underlying thrust of the message was to support the argument for the need to "denazify" Ukraine and

promote Russia as a victim that can distinguish between groups of armed nationalists and the regular army. At the same time, it falsely positioned Moscow as an actor that has legitimate interests to protect in Ukraine. The narrative of Russia's liberation of Ukraine from the power of the far-right has been consistently communicated by a number of actors, above all by the Russian embassy in Slovakia itself. Some pieces included accounts of the return to the normal life of the population or published accounts of Ukrainians who rejoiced at the "liberation" and welcomed the Russian forces.

The Slovak information space also included reports that continuously informed about the development and course of the fighting on Ukrainian territory. However, this content did not appear to be impartial in describing the situation; on the contrary, it mainly highlighted the achievements or technology of the Russian army. It identified the Ukrainian army with nationalist groups. The publication of similar content was mainly done by pages *Armádny magazín* or *Slovanské noviny*. The Russian embassy's page followed a similar pattern, which over time intensified the accusations of terrorism against the Ukrainian side in addition to the narrative about Ukrainian neo-Nazis.

The painting of the Slavín[24] memorial in early March 2022 also aroused passions in the Slovak information space. The situation was exploited by the website of the Russian Embassy in Slovakia, which described the act as a desecration of the memory of those who *"gave their lives for the liberation of their homeland and Europe from Nazism"*. The Russian side once again put itself in the position of the victim and evaluated the clear anti-war message as the result of anti-Russian propaganda or ideological sympathy for Bandera.

Last but not least, various conspiracy theories have been spread, many of which were produced by the Russian side and over time have become part of the Kremlin's official rhetoric. These included, in particular, accusations that Ukrainian forces were planning to use poisonous substances (or biological weapons) against their own population or to produce nuclear weapons. At the same time, Russia worked hard to spread narratives and

conspiracies that brought into the discourse an element of the West as the actor behind the war. For example, secret documents for Ukrainian nationalists were to be found in the occupied territories, which were to be developed in cooperation with US NGOs such as the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House or IREX. Although Russia did not offer any relevant evidence to back up its accusations, the narratives nevertheless contributed to reinforcing the information chaos and destabilising the perception of the real aggressor and victim.

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[24] During the night from 2nd to 3rd March 2022, an unknown perpetrator painted a historical monument Slavín in Bratislava with blue and yellow color (referring to Ukrainian flag). The Slavín monument is devoted to Soviet soldiers who liberated the territory of Czechoslovakia at the end of the World War II. from Nazi occupation. Incident was a protest against Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Ukraine

Russia's preparations for war against Ukraine went on for a long time prior to the full-scale invasion that began on February 24, 2022. In 2014, the Russian Federation launched an attack on the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, initially by annexing the territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, and later by starting aggressive actions and armed conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions. Ukraine has, for a long time, been under the influence of hybrid attacks from Russia: a common border with Russia, intentions to join the EU, taking a course towards European integration, and open statements regarding NATO membership from the side of Ukraine. In parallel with the direct armed aggression, an active information war is being waged against Ukraine, the main means of which is the dissemination of propaganda narratives pedalled by Russian mass media outlets, among which social networks are the most influential, media that spread disinformation unhindered and, in a short period of time, creating a distorted image in the audience. And in the ninth year of the war, Ukraine remains one of the main targets of the spread of disinformation and propaganda, the task of which is not to convince or prove, but to lower the level of trust, discredit the Ukrainian government, politics, economy, etc. through the spread of false, biased news with a hostile political purpose.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 was the culmination of the past 8 years of the Kremlin's hybrid war against the country and decades of disinformation campaigns in and about Ukraine. The war was met with high levels of support from Ukraine's allies and, for the most part, strong condemnation of Russia's actions. The outrageous and bloody invasion appeared to have finally dampened pro-Russian sentiment among most of the world's leading democracies, as no amount of disinformation could cover up the fact that Putin's forces had carried out an unprovoked attack on a sovereign state. In the first weeks after the start of the war, global security experts and the media even claimed that Ukraine would win the information war by holding off a massive "physical" invasion.

For a long time, Russia's disinformation activities have been aimed at reducing the world's resolve to help Ukraine by actively discrediting the country and its people, shifting the blame for the consequences of the war onto Ukrainians and even openly dehumanising the Ukrainian people and implying that they deserve to be "wiped off the map".

Since February 24, Russian disinformation has become an even more important part of Russian hybrid aggression than it has ever been. However, Ukrainians have become more aware of Russian disinformation and, therefore, Russian propagandist actors and channels have increased the use of "gray" disinformation narratives that combine truth and lies to promote ideas that spread despair and hopelessness in Ukrainian society.

Ukrainian far-right often show "along with reports of intolerance, discrimination, pogroms or threats": narratives in numbers

Ukraine remains one of the main targets of disinformation attacks by Russia. The Russian propaganda machine tries to discredit Ukraine and opposes the deepening of Kyiv's cooperation with its European partners, NATO and the USA. To do this, propaganda creates an image of Ukraine as an enemy, an aggressor, which is cultivated on the basis of adhering to far-right views, and Ukrainian society is „radical, fascist and neo-Nazi". At the same time, Russia's disinformation campaign is creating the grounds for justifying a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine.

Over the period from 2013 to May 1, 2022, Internews Ukraine identified 7,583 posts on Facebook that contained the mentioned key words for analysis of the spread of Russian propaganda on Ukraine.

Number of publications, by keywords
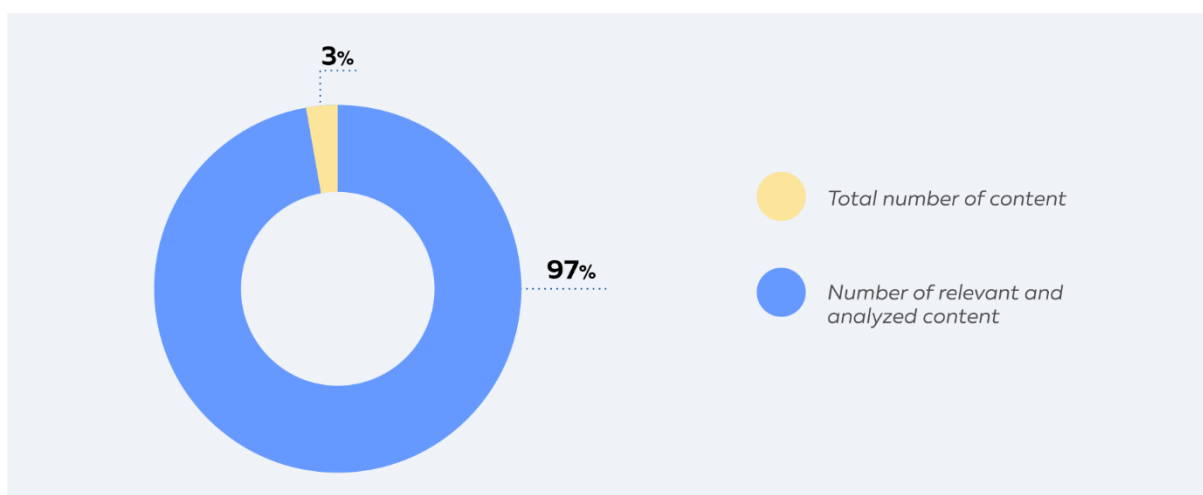
Graph 12: The number of relevant posts comparing to the number of posts containing keywords from 2013-2022 (May 1)*. Data obtained via CrowdTangle.

* pro-Russian propagandistic sources were not accessible as their pages of origin were blocked by Meta following complaints made by Ukrainian media organisations and civil society

Temporal dynamics

No relevant publications were found in 2013 – 2014. The first publications containing key words were only spotted in 2015. Since then, their number grew gradually up till 2019: from 15 in 2015 to 98 in 2019. In 2020, there was a slight decline in the number of publications (72), with a rise in 2021 showing the highest number over the whole period being analyzed (115). In 2022 we identified 20 such posts in the first four months, till April 30.

Even though commemoration events in honor of OUN-UPA and nationalist figures were held every single year even before 2013, in the last years of the period under review they were mentioned more often. Even secondary events became publicized. A surge in mentioning UPA in 2021 can be explained by the "Our Father Bandera" flash mob launched that year. After 2018 the activities of far-right groups in Ukraine increased, so they attracted more attention from the actors.

In light of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, there are two reasons that explain the trend in the gradual growth of propagandist publications through the years 2015-2021. Namely, the political destabilization of Ukraine and preparations for the full-scale invasion.

After Maidan, Russia tried to destabilize the political situation in Ukraine and undermine the presidency of Petro Poroshenko. Thus, their propagandist machine started gaining momentum so as to weaken Ukrainian society's unity and spread dissatisfaction with the government among Ukrainians.

This tendency did not change much after the 2019 presidential election, with Russian propagandists continuing to disseminate the meta-narrative of "far-right Ukraine" during Zelenskyy presidency. As is shown in the graphs below, the use of all the key words in this the study grew proportionally till 2019. They also similarly dropped in 2020. However, this fall was likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift in media coverage towards that topic. That being said, Russia had no evident political prerequisites to ease its propagandist grasp on Ukraine. Thus, the growth of disinformation and propaganda messages in 2021 proved that suggestion.

It is hard to define the events within Ukraine itself that caused or were related to the increase in propagandist posts each year separately. However, the general trend and the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 lead to the assumption that Russia had stepped up its propaganda closer to the date it invaded. Russia used that meta-narrative of "far-right Ukraine" as one of the key reasons to "justify" its war and aggression against Ukraine.

Number of posts, per year
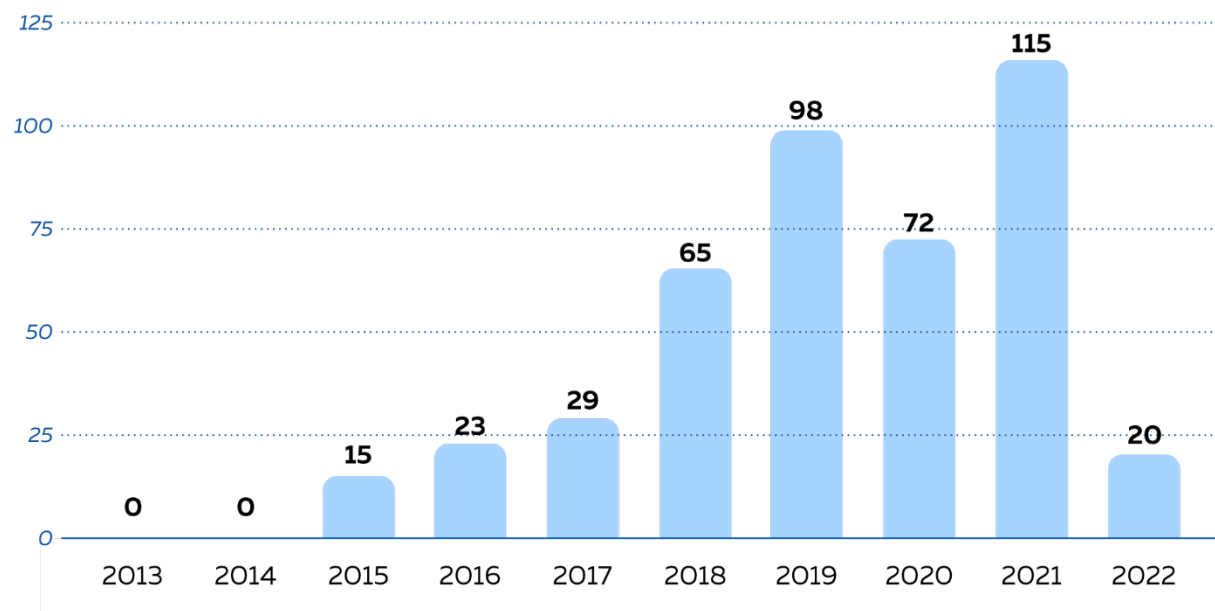
Graph 13: The number of posts comparing each year from 2013-2022 (May 1).

Posts with related content, per year
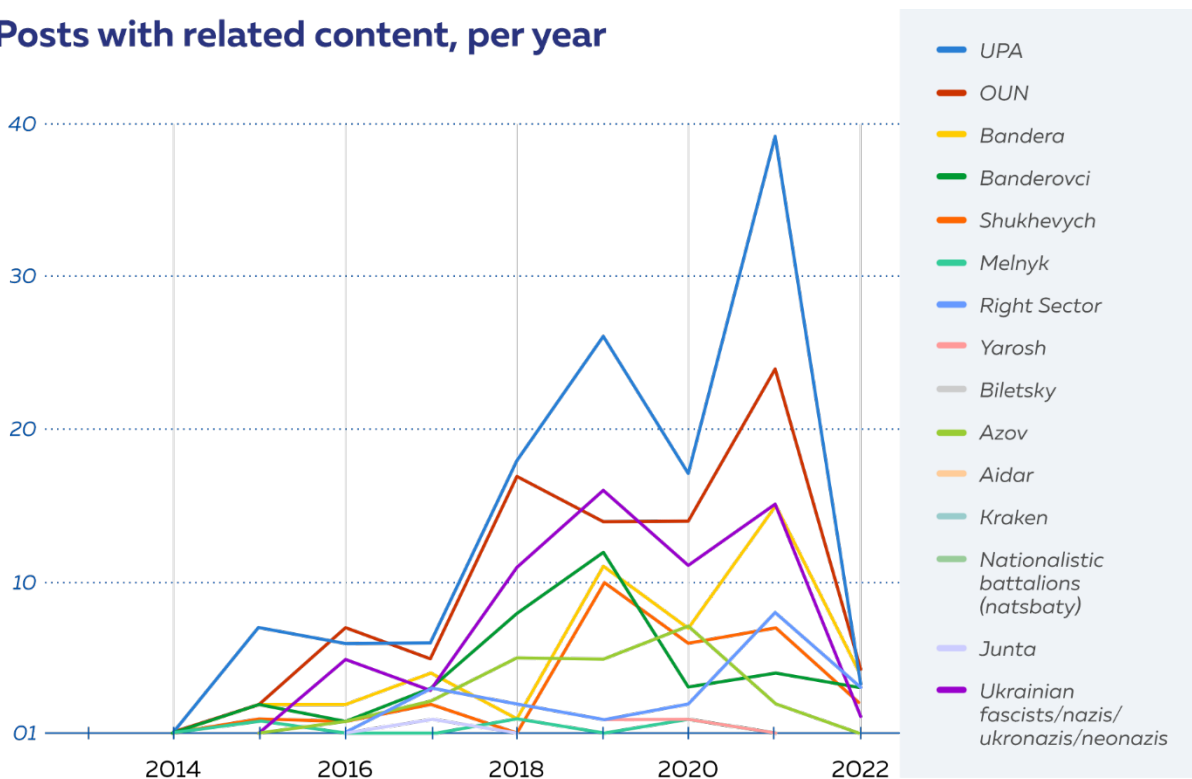
Graph 14: The number of posts containing key words comparing each year from 2013-2022 (May 1).

Narrative analysis

Historical confrontation of the past, which encompasses posts about Stepan Bandera, OUN, UPA, issues between Ukraine and Poland and U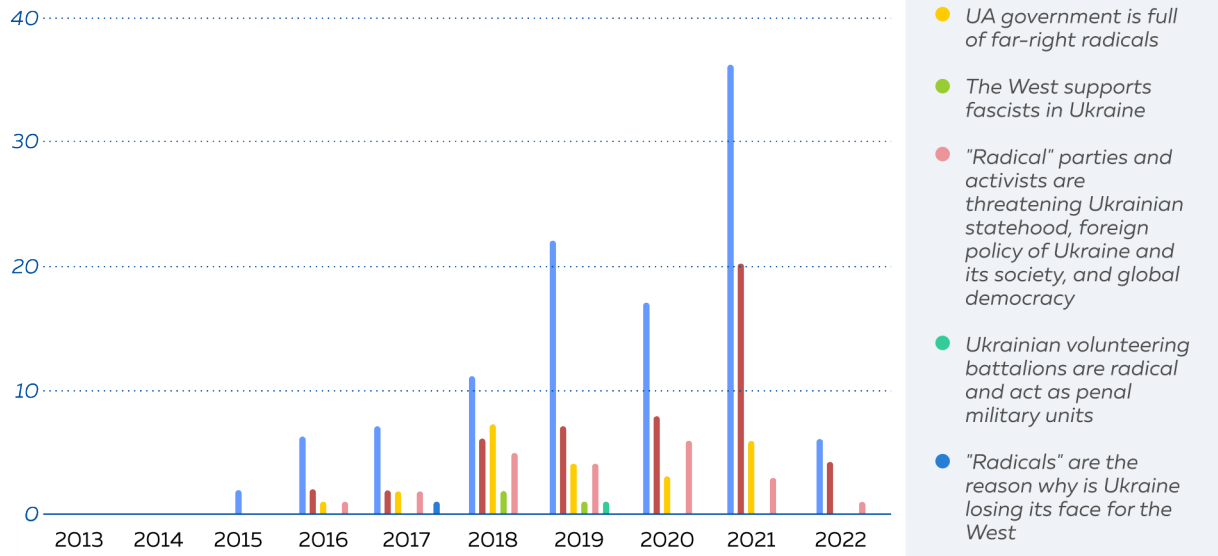kraine and Israel, Holocaust, the idea of artificial origin of the Ukrainian national identity). This was the most common narrative (found in 107 posts out of 207). Given the attempts of the Russian Federation to discredit Ukrainians, pro-Kremlin mouthpieces spread narratives that "Ukrainian society is radical, fascist and neo-nazi". This included messages that far-right sentiments were promoted in schools, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine supports radicals, the spread of modern antisemitism. This was the second most common narrative and discovered in 49 posts. 23 posts were found which related to the statement that the Ukrainian government is full of "far-right radicals" (promotion of nationalistic sentiments). "Radical" parties and activists are threatening Ukrainian statehood, the foreign policy of Ukraine and its society, as well as global democracy (found in 22 posts). The West "supports fascists" in Ukraine (nationalist movements in Ukraine are organized "by the West", found in 3 posts). Ukrainian volunteer battalions are "radical and act as penal military units" (namely, Aidar, Kraken, Right Sector). Found in 2 posts. "Radicals" are the reason why "Ukraine is losing its face for the West" (found in 1 post).

Total number of posts with narratives during each year
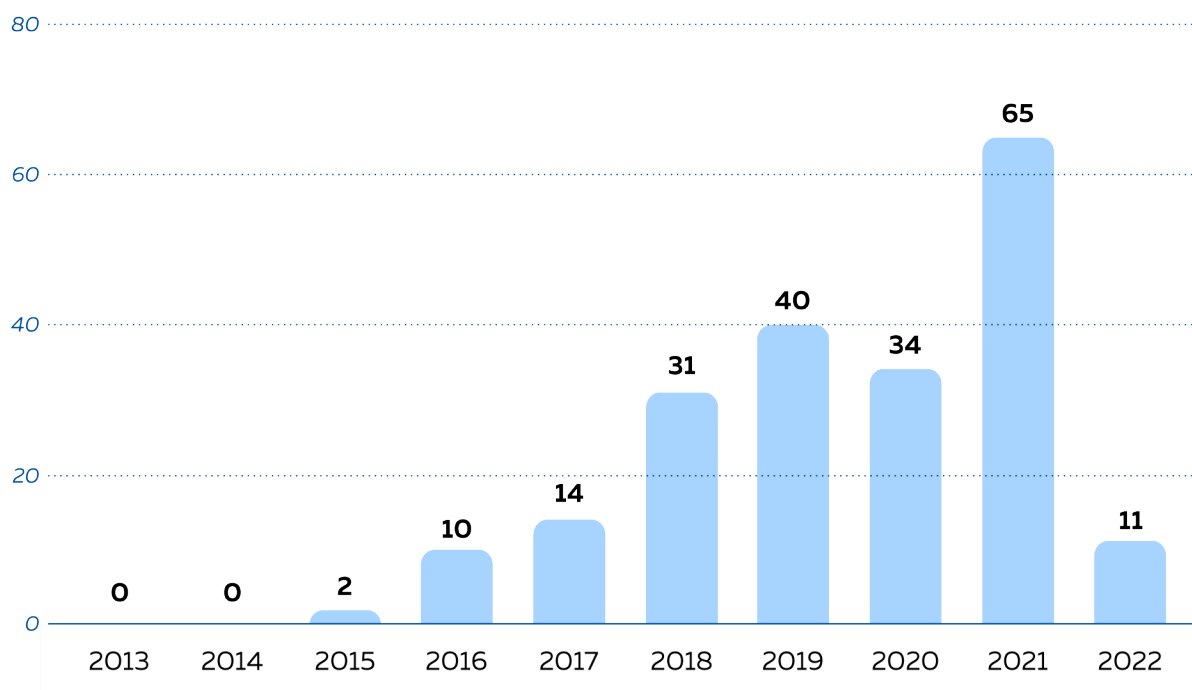
Graph 15: The number of posts containing narratives comparing each year from 2013-2022 (May 1).

Number of posts with selected narratives during each year

Legend:
- Historical confrontation
- UA society is radical, fascist and neonazi
- UA government is full of far-right radicals
- The West supports fascists in Ukraine
- "Radical" parties and activists are threatening Ukrainian statehood, foreign policy of Ukraine and its society, and global democracy
- Ukrainian volunteering battalions are radical and act as penal military units
- "Radicals" are the reason why is Ukraine losing its face for the West

Graph 16: Posts with separate narratives comparing each year from 2013-2022 (May 1).

The special attention of Russian propaganda was dedicated to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, with a drastic increase in 2018–2019 and the highest number of posts in 2021. By the way, in December 2018, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted the law granting the UPA veterans status of combatants for the Ukrainian independence and thus providing them with relevant social welfare. The law became effective in March 2019. Also, since 2015 the decommunization campaign has been gaining momentum in Ukraine which meant the removal of Soviet monuments from public sphere, however some monuments of WWII figures (such as General Vatutin) or Red Army soldiers were protected by the law and remained in place. A lot of publications were concentrated on events related to commemoration of the Ukrainian nationalists and the anniversaries of historic events, births, deaths etc. Some of publications speculated on the alleged anti–semitism of Ukrainian nationalists with comments by Eduard Dolinskyi, Director of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee.

Events analysis

Events, total number of posts during every year
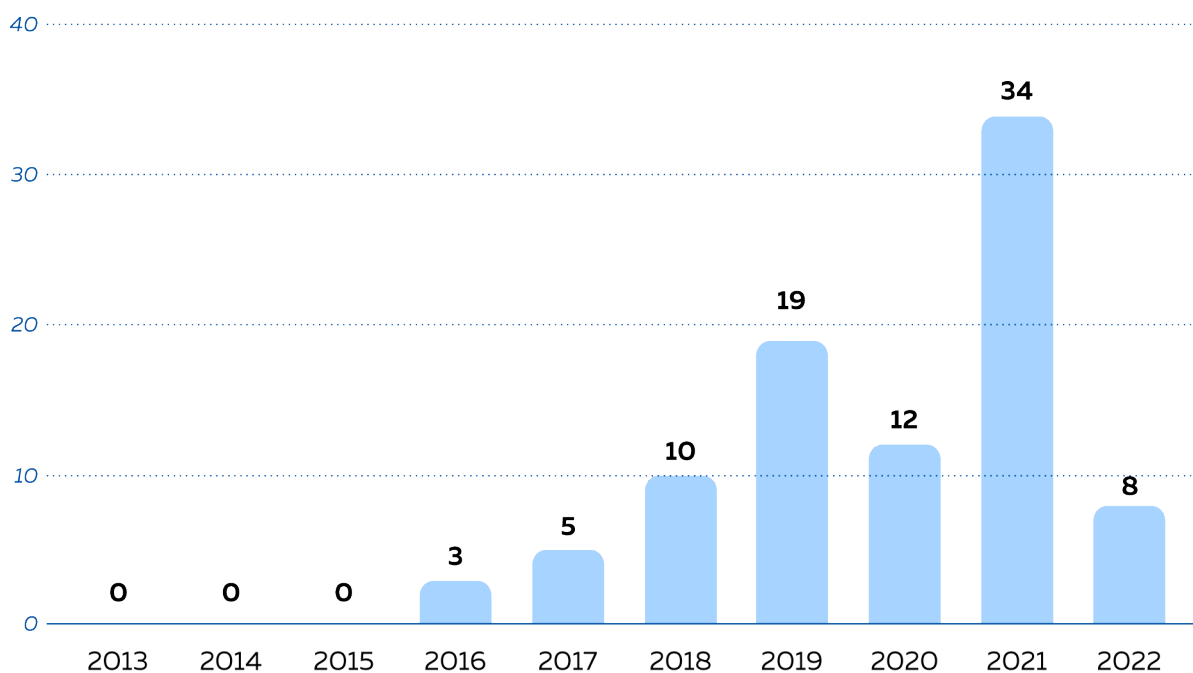
Graph 17: The number of posts related to events comparing each year from 2013-2022 (May 1).

In most cases, Russian propaganda narratives were spread in the context of the commemoration of OUN UPA in Ukraine. Among other events were Bandera's birthday, UPA anniversary, decommunization, the tomos of autocephaly (decree of ecclesial independence) to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and situation in Donbas. In 2021–2022 the TikTok trend with a song „Our Father Bandera" was discussed. It was sparked by a flash mob initiated in 2021 by Lviv school youth who sang this song and then many others joined. In general, Russian propaganda was preoccupied with popularity of Ukrainian nationalists among young people and their engagement to commemoration of these figures.

Events, during each year
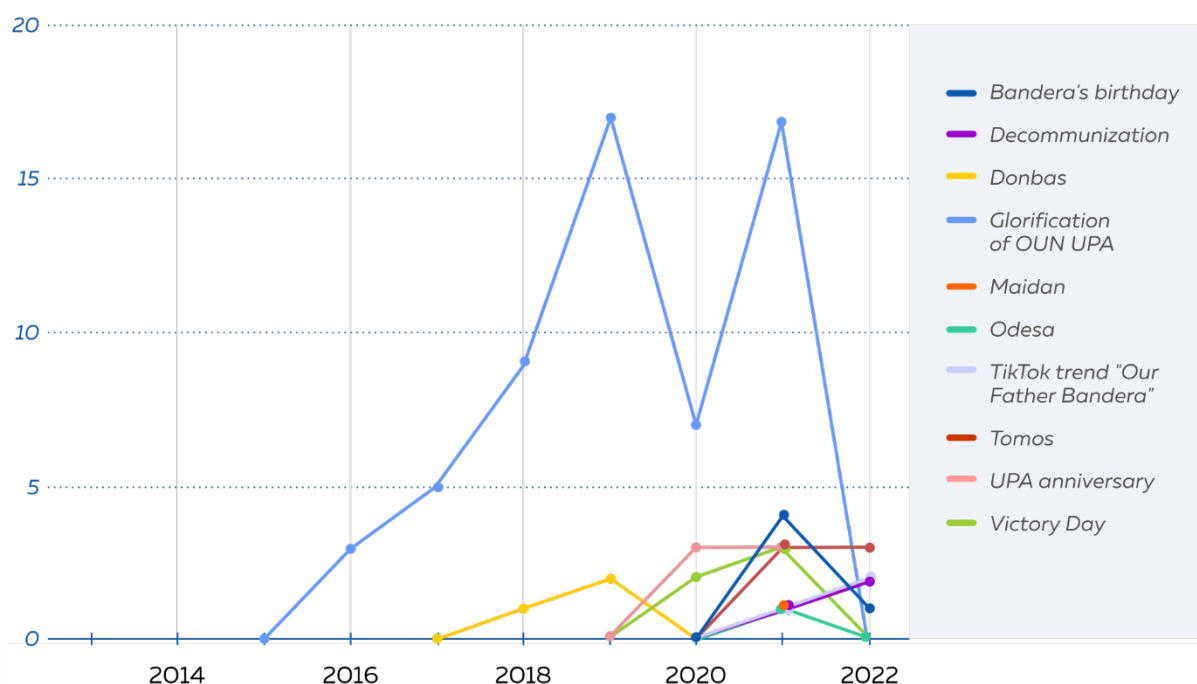
Actor analysis

In total, our research identified 35 active actors who were spreading the narrative of "far-right Ukraine". The most active actors were News of Ukraine [Novosti Ukrainy] (38 posts), followed by the Oles Buzyna Community [Oles Buzina – Soobshchestvo]](31 posts), The First Cossack [Pershyi Kozatskyi] (27 posts), Andrei Ivanov (23 posts), The Victory Regiment [Polk Pobedy] (17 posts) and The Israeli Truth [Izrailskaya Pravda] (13 posts). All other actors had less than 10 publications over the reporting period.

The News of Ukraine page dedicated most effort to criticizing the Ukrainian government and its policy-making, especially in questions related to the commemoration of OUN-UPA. Often their articles aimed to discredit UPA, questioning their role in WW2 and emphasizing their responsibility for the Holocaust. The Oles Buzyna Community posted materials oriented at historical topics. Usually, they described "the real face of OUN-UPA," its leaders, and their role in WW2.

Propaganda narratives related to the tomos of autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and its confrontation with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate, UOC MP) were disseminated often by Pershyi Kozatskyi. Some of their publications also disseminated historic propaganda about UPA and elaborated on how "Ukrainian radicals" like *Right Sector* and *the National Corps* threatened UOP MP.

Andrei Ivanov and the Victory Regiment operated in the same propagandist niche, glorifying soldiers of the Red Army (like Vatutin, Sudoplatov, and Kovpak) and discrediting the soldiers of UPA. The Israeli Truth disseminated narratives about the far-right in Ukraine primarily because of the events related to the commemoration of OUN-UPA and de-communization.

Top 10 Actors, on number of posts
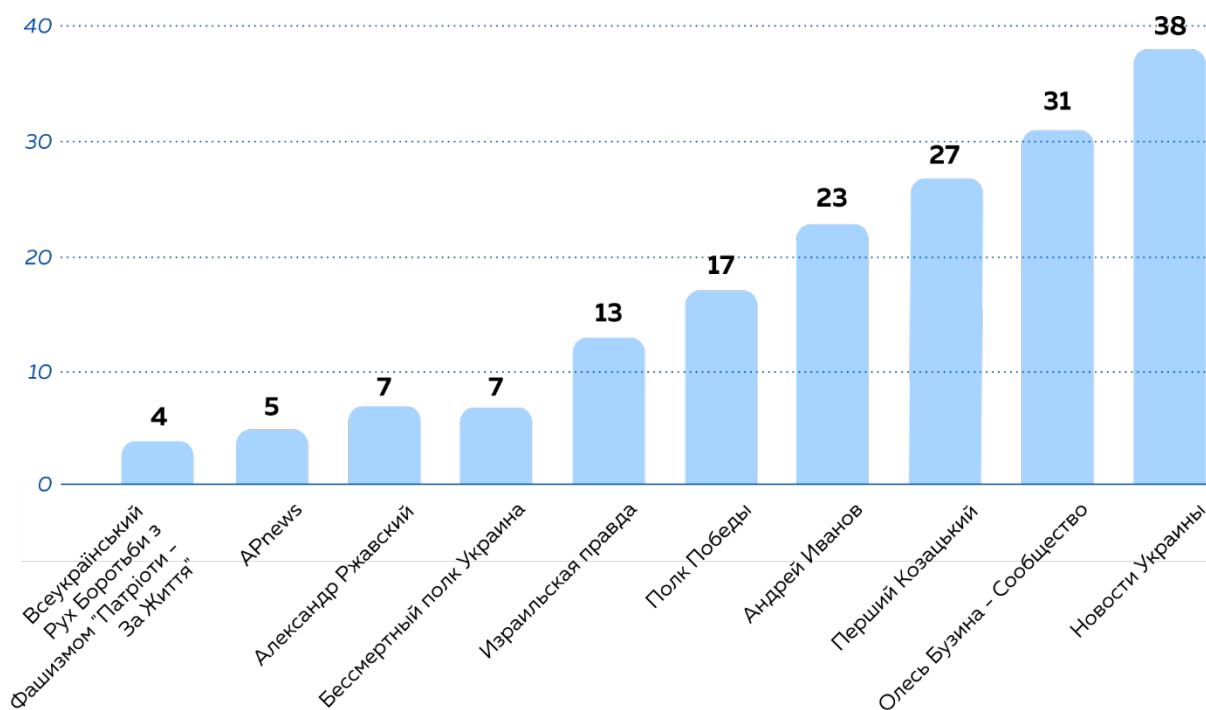
Graph 19: The most active actors based on number of posts.

The News of Ukraine page was created in 2018 and, as of January 2023, had 46,000 subscribers. Its slogan is "News that won't be shown on TV". Even though it was the most active actor it has the lowest number of interactions with its posts.

Interactions with posts

The highest number of interactions (18,637 interactions) was achieved by a of Andrei Ivanov's posts where he informs the audience about the introduction of penalty for demonstrating of the UPA symbolic in Belarus. Andrei Ivanov describes himself as a "Ukrainian Russian" and, as of January 2023, had 85,000 subscribers. His page was created in 2018. The second post with the highest interaction score was one by Sasha Psikh – Politics as it is (16,300 interactions). There are only two posts by this actor in our data set. This page apparently belongs to Oleksandr Kondrusyk who claims to be a psychologist but dedicates most of his attention to politics. The third number in this rating

belongs to a post by the Victory Regiment (5,248 interactions). Overall, we may identify three pages with the highest interaction rate, particularly [Andrei Ivanov](), [Victory Regiment]() and [Oles Buzyna Community]().

The latter is dedicated to a Ukrainian pro-Russian journalist by the name of Oles Buzyna, whose assassination in 2015 sparked a strong reaction both in Ukraine and Russia up to the higher echelons of politics and still remains unsolved.

Most popular actor, by number of interactions

🔵	Андрей Иванов
🔵	Саша Псих – политика, как она есть
🟡	Полк Победы
🟢	Олесь Бузина – Сообщество
🟣	Перший Козацький
🔴	Александр Ржавский
🟠	Бессмертный полк Украина
🟢	Всеукраїнський Рух Боротьби з Фашизмом "Патріоти – За Життя»
🟠	Корреспондент
⚫	Успішна країна

Percentages: 2.0%, 1.4%, 2.0%, 0.4%, 2.2%, 0.4%, 9.3%, 38.1%, 10.8%, 33.5%
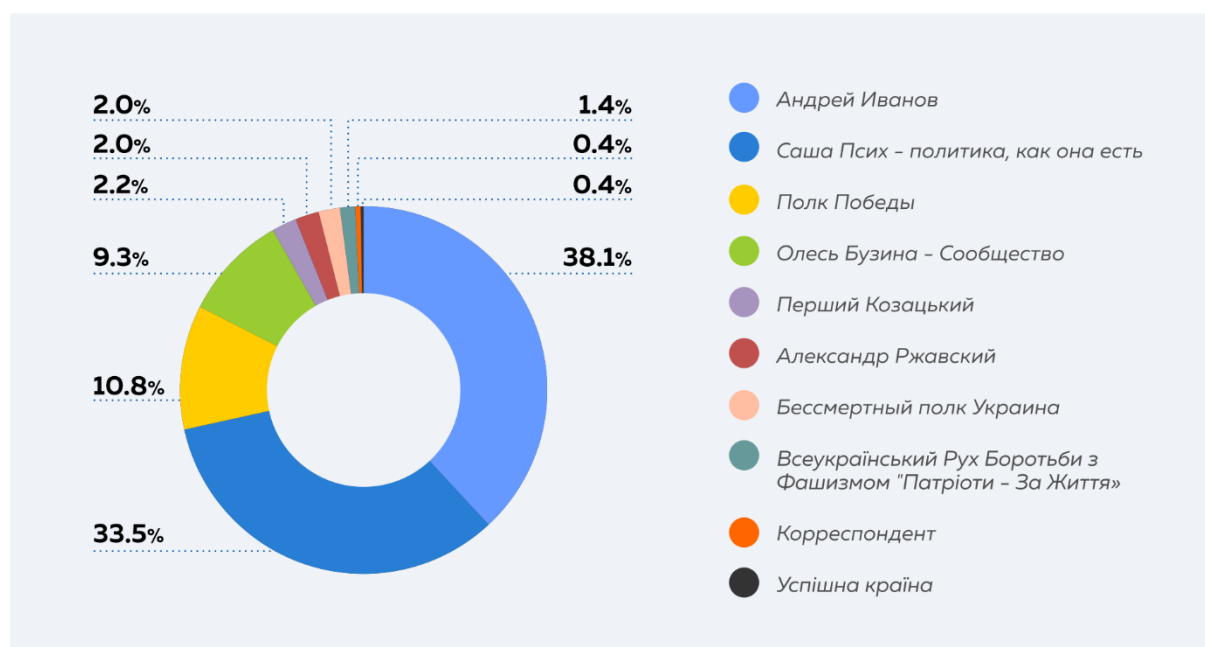
Graph 20: The most popular actors based on total number of interactions during 2013-2022 (May 1).

Interestingly, there are also posts published on the webpages of mainstream Ukrainian media outlets, such as [Obozrevatel](), [RBK-Ukraine](), [Focus](), [Correspondent](). The list of these actors according to interactions reached and narratives can be found in Annex 3.

There is no consistent pattern between the theme of a post and its number of interactions. The latter was rather dictated by the modalities of the pages where it was published. For example, the lowest number of interactions were with posts by the [News of Ukraine]() (Novosti Ukrainy) even though it was the most active actor. Interestingly, its activity was detected only in 2020–2022 with the highest number of posts in 2021 (27 out of 38 posts overall by this actor).

Blocked actors analysis

It should be emphasized that the pages were a place for spreading the main theses of Kremlin propaganda regarding the situation in Ukraine and other countries. In addition, there could also find outright fabrications there. Two main groups of the blocked actors can be highlighted: politicians and media related to the Party of Regions and Yanukovych regime. Among the politicians, it is worth mentioning Mykola Azarov (former Prime Minister of Ukraine (2010–2014)), Olena Lukash (Minister of Justice of Ukraine (2013–2014)), Nataliia Korolevska (Minister of Social Policy of Ukraine (2012–2014), MP (2014–2019)) and Vadym Novynskyi (politician and businessman, MP (2013–2022)). Mykola Azarov was the head of the Ukrainian government from March 2010 to January 2014. During the Revolution of Dignity, at the beginning of 2014, he left the country and now lives in Russia. Regarding Azarov, Ukraine is investigating several criminal proceedings related to the embezzlement of state funds. He is wanted in Ukraine and under the sanctions of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine. On March 19, 2021 the NSDC announced that it had imposed maximum sanctions against a number of former Ukrainian politicians and security forces, who mostly fled to Russia after the fall of Yanukovych's regime. In particular, former President Viktor Yanukovych, former Prime Minister Mykola Azarov. Also, the investigators of the State Bureau of Investigation, in agreement with the prosecutor of the Prosecutor General's Office, were notified of the former Prime Minister of Ukraine Mykola Azarov's suspicion that the latter had committed treason based on a previous conspiracy by a group of individuals. The case concerns the promotion of the occupation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol. During the research period there are also media related to Yanukovych's regime were blocked. Vesti newspaper page and Klymenko Time online outlet are not available in Ukraine. This is because we complied with a legal request to restrict this content. The content isn't available right now from a couple of TV channels on Facebook. In February 2021, the TV channels ZIK, „112 Ukraine" and NewsOne were blocked in Ukraine for 5 years. The President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, implemented the decision of the National Security and Defense Council to apply sanctions against Taras Kozak, a People's Deputy from the „Opposition Platform – For Life" and his companies. In particular, TV channels ZIK, „112 Ukraine" and NewsOne were sanctioned. According to the official version, the reason for blocking the channels was their propaganda, funding from Russia and lack of journalistic standards.

Starting from 2020 propagandist posts made by Klymenko Time were duplicated on the News of Ukraine page. Two actors are related to a blogger Anatolii Sharii (his party's page and his own news outlet ShariiNET). |The Union of Orthodox Journalists is a case in point. Its main focus, as one may conclude from its title, was on the religious situation in Ukraine with a pro-Russian stance. The list of blocked actors according can be found in Annex 3. Concerning the content of the blocked actors, the media by virtue of their specificity

followed mostly current political events such as those related to National Corps, Sternenko campaign, the Right Sector, but also Bandera anniversaries. A bit different situation is with former politicians like, for example, Mykola Azarov who fled to Russia. He used the prism of an external observer over the "fascisation" of Ukraine, dedicating more attention (compared to media outlets discussed above) to the historical background of an actual political agenda.

Kremlin's disinformation campaigns to portray Ukrainians as "Nazis": content analysis

Based on the **207 publications** identified for analysis on the basis of key words, let's elaborate on the results in more detail. Russian historical propaganda claims that historic public figures or organizations related to Ukrainian nationalistic movement like UPA, OUN, Bandera, Banderovci, Shukhevych and Melnyk personify "terror, fear and intimidation in history, and now they are actively glorified in modern Ukraine". Using this approach, Russian propaganda attempts to force history to speak as it needs. To start with analysis of listed narratives, it is necessary to update the above-mentioned terms and movements. It is worth mentioning that UPA (Ukrainian and Russian abbreviation for the Ukrainian Insurgent Army) was a military formation founded in 1942, which was engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Soviet Union, the Polish Underground State, Communist Poland, and Nazi Germany. OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) was a political organization established in 1929. Bandera (Stepan Bandera) was a leader of one of the factions of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B), the most famous figure of the Ukrainian nationalistic movement, who was assasinated in 1959. Banderovci (Russian for Banderites) is a colloquial term for members and supporters of the faction of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists led by Stepan Bandera, more broadly – all Ukrainian nationalists and all opponents to the USSR and Russia. Shukhevych (Roman Shukhevych) was a military leader of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and Melnyk (Andrii Melnyk) is figure of Ukrainian nationalistic movement, leader of one of the factions of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-M).

Nationalistic battalions (in Russian – natsbaty) is a general term for Ukrainian volunteer military units created to fight against Russian aggression. Many public figures or organizations representing modern Ukrainian nationalism are volunteer battalions formed at the beginning of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine in 2014, including [Right Sector](), right-wing Ukrainian nationalist organization originated in November 2013 which participated in clashes with riot police during the Revolution of Dignity (Maidan), then transformed itself into a political party as well as mentioning [Dmytro Yarosh]() who was one of the leaders of Right Sector in 2013 – 2015. The next battalion is [Azov](), a volunteer paramilitary unit (regiment) formed to fight pro-Russian and Russian forces in the Donbas War, which was formally [incorporated]()into the National Guard of Ukraine in 2014. Biletsky

(Andriy Biletsky) is the first commander of the volunteer militia Azov Battalion. It is also worth mentioning Aidar as a volunteer battalion created in 2014 to fight pro-Russian forces and Russian forces in the Donbas War and Kraken as a military volunteer unit formed on 24 February 2022 by veterans of the Azov Regiment, one of the more high-profile volunteer units in the war.

In publications about Ukraine, the use of the word "junta" is a sign of Russian propaganda. A junta is usually a military organization that established a dictatorship in an armed coup. The Kyiv junta (Russian: Киевская хунта) is a propaganda designation of the government and power in Ukraine after 2014 as a whole, created and replicated by Russian mass media, politicians and officials. The Revolution of Dignity was caused by the attempts of the regime of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych to curtail Ukraine's European integration course, systematic violations of the rights and freedoms of citizens and ineffective social and economic policy. The Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament) managed to gather a new majority and appoint a new government in accordance with the formal procedure. From the point of view of the Constitution of Ukraine and the relevant laws, in the reformatting of the ruling coalition no violation of legislation was noted. Although over the past few years, Russian media and speakers have not called the Ukrainian government "a junta", and there is less talk about a "coup d'état" to replace Yanukovych's regime on the Maidan in Kyiv - this is an example of Russia's information war against Ukraine. That is, propaganda in the Russian Federation calls the legitimate government in Ukraine a "Junta" and Ukrainians "fascists/nazis/ukronazis/neo-nazis", which would allow Russia to start an "operation to protect compatriots". This conclusion was justification for the occupation of the territory of Ukraine and the attempt to establish a pro-Russian government.

The results underline the division in the frequency of using narrative related to public figures or organizations representing Ukraine, and thus inherently Russian propaganda, which has been disseminated in numerous publications.

Historical confrontation

Historical confrontation is one of the biggest and most complex narratives in disinformation about Ukraine. To analyse it, there are three essential aspects to mention. Firstly, it is constructed to make a division of Ukrainians from Western and Eastern parts in the context of the "politics of memory" and speculation around the commemoration of World War II. Secondly, it aims to demonize Ukraine and Ukrainians, creating parallels between Nazis and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Lastly, by manipulating historical facts and appealing to historical memory, it creates a fictional reality where Ukrainians who support the idea of Ukraine's independence from Russia are "Nazi collaborators". Actually, it has become one of the crucial calls in the course of destabilisation processes

activated in Crimea and in the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions in 2014 and then – in 2022, since the beginning of Russia`s full-scale war against Ukraine. Due to its complexity, this narrative was the most frequently shared: in the course of monitoring publications 107 posts were found related to this topic.

Addressing the message about parallels between Nazis and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, it is vitally important to mention that its key aim is to demonize Ukrainians as well as the idea of Ukrainian identity separated either from Russia or the background of the USSR. This message has three aspects worth mentioning. Firstly, it accuses the Ukrainian Insurgent Army of collaboration with the Nazis and war crimes against civilians - though, according to the [decision](#) of the Nuremberg Tribunal they were not recognised as war criminals, and neither were there any cases of UPA serving in Nazi concentration camps. Moreover, many representatives of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists had been imprisoned and killed by Nazis. However, in spite of these facts, the following [messages can be found](#): "*Definitely, some Ukrainians might think that Bandera is a hero. These are mainly people who know nothing about the activity of OUN-UPA [Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists - Ukrainian Insurgent Army] or think that mass killing of women and children is good… I think that it is a crime against morality, memory, humanity and the Ukrainians who are being forcibly equated to Bandera. Though millions of Ukrainians have died fighting against Nazism."* Another aspect here is a narrative that equates the Ukrainian slogan "Glory to Ukraine", which has become popular since 2014, to a Nazi greeting.

The reality is also different – this slogan [appeared](#) at the end of the XIX century in a poem by Taras Shevchenko – a long time ago before the Ukrainian Insurgent Army was founded. Back then it was used during the Ukrainian Revolution in 1917–1922 and in the Ukrainian Insurgent Army as the representation of the idea of an independent Ukraine. After 2014 it united people of different backgrounds and origins with the help of the idea of a better life in Ukraine and its distancing from Soviet background. In 2018 this slogan was legitimised by the Ukrainian Parliament. However, the message about the "Nazi greeting" still exists. For example, as it can be seen in this [post](#) shared by a former Ukrainian Prime Minister who escaped to Russia in 2014: "On the 30th anniversary of Ukraine's independence, *The Kyiv regime has chosen as symbols not talented scientists, inventors, economists or politicians, but war criminals, Nazis and Hitler collaborators… On one side of the medal, there is a trident crushing the Soviet coat of arms and the first part of the Nazi greeting "Glory to Ukraine". On another one - Bandera, Petlyura and Konovalets and the second part "Glory to Heroes". The creators of the medal managed to combine de-communization and nazification of the country".*

Lastly, another part of this message is the thesis about Ukraine, which "forgets about victory against Nazism". Actually, it has become more visible after the processes of de-

Communization and distancing from the Soviet discourse about "The Great Patriotic War" with its essential elements - red Soviet flags, St. George`s ribbons, and stylised Soviet military uniform. These changes, together with the adoption of the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation on 8 May, have created a push to the narrative about persecution of those "who remember the Day of Victory against Nazism and the feat of forefathers". This appeal to emotions - memory, kinship and Nazi crimes - can be seen as an attempt to destabilise the situation inside Ukraine in the context of "politics of memory". For example, this can be seen in this [post](#) – "We are the generation of the city-hero Kyiv of our Ukrainian land, we bleed with the blood of millions, when it is prohibited to take the Victory Flag [Red Flag], St. George`s Ribbon and other symbols of our victory. It is a crime now... We all have to mourn Nazi collaborators and see how their offspring make Nazi salutations, glorify the SS, destroy monuments, name streets after Nazi bastards and spit on graves... It is a big shame, but our ancestors are definitely not proud of us".

To conclude, it should be noted that these manipulations with history were used to promote aggression towards people with pro-Ukrainian viewpoints either in Crimea and occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions or during pro-Russian demonstrations in Ukraine and after the beginning of the full-scale war. There were parallels with Nazism and the narrative about "continuing the feat of the Great Patriotic War". Moreover, the timing of the narratives is also essential, as they were used most frequently back in 2019 - the year in which the presidential election was held and were used as a means for assisting pro-Russian forces to get power using this rhetoric - and in 2021 before the beginning of Russia`s war against Ukraine, whose declared aim was that of "denazification of Ukraine".

Ukrainian society is "radical, fascist and neo-Nazi"

Presenting Ukrainian society as "radical, fascist and neo-Nazi" was the second most common narrative of Russian propaganda. It is a multi-faceted narrative whose aim is to create the impression that Ukraine is "not a democratic state, but rather a far-right one with suppression of any dissent, promotion of far-right ideology at state level (including schools) and lack of freedom of expression"". It also conveys a message that modern Ukraine is praising "anti-semitism".

This complex narrative can be split into two parts: historic foundation and its instrumentalization in describing modern political and social developments. In the first dimension, it relies on the old myths of Soviet propaganda which unequivocally portrayed the Ukrainian anti-Soviet resistance as "Nazi collaborators". Modern propagandists capitalize on this conviction taking this fact for granted, and describing current events through this prism. It is worth noting that the history of Ukrainian nationalism during and after the Second World War is indeed a very complex issue, which requires profound historical research. It was finally made possible only after the fall of the Soviet Union and

the opening of its archives. In this regard, the Ukrainian situation is quite typical for Central European and Baltic countries which have similar discussions. But in 2015 Ukraine condemned the Nazi regime alongside the communist regime at state level by way of a special law prohibiting the propaganda of symbols of both these regimes.

So what is the basis for Russian propaganda to make such claims about Ukrainian society? Due to its adherence to the Soviet interpretation of history, any discussion about Ukrainian nationalists in a positive or neutral tone is interpreted as the promotion of far-right or radical ideas. For example, publications about the annual [torch march](#) in commemoration of Stepan Bandera's birthday, the [museum](#) dedicated to Roman Shukhevych or the court case against [renaming](#) streets in Kyiv after these figures.

Another aspect imported from Soviet propaganda is the alleged anti-semitism of Ukrainian nationalists and society as a whole. Here again, any positive assessment of Ukrainian nationalists is rejected. For example, the Israeli Pravda [wrote](#): *"Misha Asman, one of the many 'chief' rabbis of Kyiv, who supported the Maidan and Ukrainian nationalists in every possible way, invited a Jewish group with Banderite songs of UPA veterans to the Hanukkah holiday in Kyiv, stubbornly refuses to admit that there are Nazis in Ukraine and Jews are less and less tolerated."* The same page [linked](#) the Right Sector flag with Nazis.

The alleged popularity of Ukrainian nationalists among children is another important element of this narrative. In 2021, a group of Lviv pupils launched a social media flash mob about Stepan Bandera, which went viral. The APnews page [wrote](#) about one of the performances: *"It's interesting if everything goes on in the same manner, what will be the performances when these children graduate from school? Burning books? Mandatory torchlight processions?",* hinting that these children will later follow far-right practices. News of Ukraine also [commented](#) on the flash mob: *"And we thought that the imposition of 'heroes' and embroidered shirts should cause rejection among schoolchildren."* So the teaching of history that differs from the Soviet canon and the popularization of national clothing is presented as systematic indoctrination and the imposition of "false heroes".

Moreover, News of Ukraine [reposted](#) an article from the Klymenko Time media outlet, which asserted that young Ukrainian people were interested in Nazi ideology. This conclusion is made just on the basis of a couple of TikTok publications. Thus, false extrapolation is an important tool of Russian propaganda. Even if these publications were real it does not imply the existence of a general trend among young Ukrainian people.

In the second dimension, the narrative that we are analyzing was strongly reinforced due to the pro-European course that Ukraine adopted after the Maidan revolution, which in Ukraine is called the Revolution of Dignity. From the early stages of the revolution, Russian media portrayed the protesters as radicals and far-right. Back then the Russian leadership

had difficulty accepting the outcome of Maidan as it had supported ousted President Viktor Yanukovych.

This narrative provides for the vast popularity of radical ideas and lawlessness in Ukraine. For example, a publication citing Metropolitan Luca of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) of the Moscow Patriarchate who wrote on the occasion of the Constitution Day of Ukraine: *"De jure, it [the Constitution] exists on paper and is even called the Fundamental Law of Ukraine. But de facto it does not exist, it is a mirage, a fantasy that no one has believed in for a long time."* In the publication, he also mentioned the *"armed scumbags"* who intimidate people with a knife and a machine gun because of their language and political opinion. It is worth noting that in December 2022 the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine imposed sanctions against Metropolitan Luca together with other clergymen of the UOC of the Moscow Patriarchate to counter possible subversive activities by it during Russia's invasion.

Church politics is another important constituent of this narrative promoted in the main by the First Cossack channel. It repeatedly reported that the Right Sector attacked churches of the UOC of the Moscow Patriarchate. Other messages related to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). For example, the publication talked about the signing of a memorandum of cooperation between the OCU and the Young Nationalist Congress with mentions of Bandera and Shukhevych. The publication cited an Orthodox publicist called Oleksandr Voznesenskyi who said the following about the commemoration of Bandera by OCU clergy: "*It turns out that vodka and Bandera are closer to them than Christ and carols.*"

Ukraine, like every state, has a whole spectrum of opinions and political movements. Prior to the 2022 all-out Russian invasion of Ukraine, openly pro-Russian parties were represented in the country's Parliament. They used to have powerful media support which demonized Ukrainian nationalists, precluded a more nuanced discussion of the country's past and manipulated facts to convince the audience that Ukrainian society was radical and far-right.

Ukrainian government is "full of far-right radicals"

The narrative that the Ukrainian government is full of far-right radicals was not so popular among actors disseminating Russian propaganda and disinformation. We argue that it was used as a secondary narrative to emphasize the primary one – *Historic confrontation*. In most cases, far-right radicals in the Ukrainian government were mentioned in the context of events related to the glorification of OUN-UPA. Just 23 posts disseminating this narrative were found between 2016 and 2021.

As the idea of the Ukrainian far-right government lacked reasoning, propagandists used historic sentiments perverted by their Soviet predecessors to convince part of Ukrainian

society that this was indeed true. In November 2021, a poster was set up next to Verkhovna Rada depicting the act of restoration of the Ukrainian state, issued in 1941. Announced by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) under the leadership of Stepan Bandera, the act was an attempt to use the attack by Nazi Germany on the Soviet Union as an opportunity to restore the Ukrainian state. The propagandist so-called media outlet *Pershyi Kozatskyi* [quoted](#) Maksym Buzhanskyi, the MP famous for his ambiguous statements that often correlated with Russian propaganda, to show the division in the Ukrainian Parliament. *"It turns out that letters to Hitler are our history and the Great Patriotic War is not? And what if it's not ours but yours [history],"* Buzhanskyi said, emphasizing that some political powers leaned towards far-right ideas.

Another reason for claiming the Ukrainian government to be far-right was the state funding of cultural events. Propagandist sources often labeled such events as nationalist. For instance, *Pershyi Kozatskyi* posted a [statement](#) from Eduard Dolynskyi, the head of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee, arguing that in 2021 the state funding of the Bandershtat festival rose to 2.5 million UAH compared to 400,000 UAH four years prior to that. At the same time, Dolynskyi mentioned that the festival was to commemorate *'nazi collaborator'* Taras Bulba-Borovets, one of the founders of UPA. In fact, this is an art and music festival of the Ukrainian spirit that has nothing in common with Bulba-Borovets.

In 2019, pro-Russian propagandist Aleksandr Rzhavkyi also made a [post](#) blaming the Ukrainian government for spending funds on producing the movie *I am Bandera*. In his post, Rzhavskyi argues that the whole idea of the movie was to justify Bandera for the mass murder of Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews. He also mentioned that *"after Maidan, the nationalist officials have 'privatized' the Ukrainian cultural sphere, and have turned cinematography into the propagandist movies' factory, with enormous state funding."*

In 2018, the pro-Russian propagandist pages of [Andrey Ivanov](#) and [Polk Pobiedy](#) (The Regiment of Victory) posted the same excerpt of Alexandr Lukashenko's interview, where he described Banderites, UPA, and OUN members as murderers and slayers that killed innocent Belarusians during the Second World War He strongly condemned modern Ukrainian politicians and government, who justified and glorified those organization members as fighters for Ukrainian independence. In his speech, Lukashenko asked, *"what kind of attitude towards them [the Ukrainian government] do they expect from Belarusians and not only if they associate themselves with those beasts [OUN, UPA]."*

With such posts, pro-Russian propagandists tried to increase the breach and polarization among Ukrainians, dividing them into two groups: "ordinary and good" Ukrainians, who still had a sense of Soviet nostalgia, and supporters of "the nationalist direction of the country's development." They also tried to evoke society's dissatisfaction (particularly on the part of so-called "ordinary and good" Ukrainians) with the current Ukrainian government and its policymaking, thereby weakening its position.

The West supports "Nazis in Ukraine"

Against the backdrop of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there are statements made by Russian officials and ordinary citizens about the "denazification" of Ukraine, about allegedly developed nationalism, Nazism, and fascism in this country.

The events of the Second World War, the heroic resistance of the Soviet people in the face of the fascist onslaught and the victory over Hitlerism showed the international community the danger of the ideas of National Socialism, which have no place in modern realities.

The authorities and propaganda have not fully decided not only on historical events, but also on terms. On April 19, the Russian First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Sergei Kiriyenko, explaining the reasons for "denazification" to schoolchildren, said that it was necessary to fight modern fascism. "Ten years ago, five years ago it was hard to believe that Nazism, fascism could return to our land," he said. "A Nazi can only be a German," says Yale University professor Timothy Snyder, who specialises in the history of Eastern Europe. In a conversation with Time magazine, the professor notes that the Russian president abuses the term "denazify", since denazification is a historical process in Germany in the post-war period. He became a consequence of the war and not a pretext for its start.

Since 2014, Russian propaganda has devoted much time to building confidence that there are Nazis among Ukrainians. To do this, they exaggerated the weight of the bearers of nationalist views in Ukrainian society, and also promoted the perception of Ukrainian nationalists as those who share views with representatives of Nazi Germany and mock the supporters of Russia. Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russians considered the accession of the former USSR to NATO as a threat to their security. Ukraine's course towards integration into the EU and joining NATO influenced on the Russian authorities. Russians used the information that NATO countries provided aid to Ukraine as an argument in favour of the fact that Russia in Ukraine is fighting not only with "Ukrainian Nazis", but also with its eternal enemy - NATO member states, Western countries, the USA, etc. With this, they tried to justify the Russians the prolonging of the military campaign in Ukraine. What is more, Russian propaganda is actively using the events of the last nine years to convince that "fascists in Ukraine are supported by the West". In one of the posts, *Economist UA* wrote in an article that *"The active participation and assistance of the United States in the development of the Azov Battalion was one of the factors behind the scandalous statement about America's support for neo-Nazis. While Congress is arguing about the legality of the transfer of weapons to the Ukrainian military, Washington is using every chance against Russia, regardless of ideology."*

Commenting on providing supplies for Ukraine from allies, the other media source *Israeli Truth,* on Facebook [wrote](#), *"Canada handed over 56 vehicles to the modern Bandera army of Ukraine. This is quite logical, given that the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada was formed in the 1940s-1950s from the Ukrainian Nazi Bandera from the UPA rescued from retribution",* with a [link](#) on the external website *sharij.net.* This message is part of narratives that mention Bandera as a [representative](#) of the Nazis. However, this news indicated that representatives of the military training mission of the Armed Forces of Canada "Operation UNIFIER" [handed](#) over 56 Ford vehicles of various modifications in 2018 to the training centre of the Military Law and Order Service of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (VSP of the Armed Forces of Ukraine). The Government of Canada financed this project and the total cost will be about 1.2 million Canadian dollars.

At the same time, the head of the 25th training center of the Armed Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Oleh Kernytskyi, [emphasized](#) that the help from Canada will significantly strengthen the capabilities of Ukrainian units: "We have four brands of cars: 10 Ford Transit minibuses for the transportation of personnel, the four-wheel drive Ford Ranger for the needs of special forces units that carry out counter-sabotage tasks and terrorist acts".

By spreading the messages that "the West supports Nazis in Ukraine", Russia is trying to achieve two goals. On the one hand, to reduce the level of support for Ukraine from the side of the allies, because "helping Nazism in the 21st century looks like supporting war and justifying war crimes." On the other hand, a similar narrative, which is repeated by representatives of the political elite of the Russian Federation, enables the ordinary population to get an explanation on the reasons for the full-scale invasion and to show it as a "fight against fascism". In this case, the Russian Federation looks like a country that well remembers the consequences of the Second World War and the awareness of the meaning of the words "never again".

"Radical" parties and activists are "threatening Ukrainian statehood, the foreign policy of Ukraine and its society"

The discourse about radicals threatening Ukrainian statehood focused in the main on the attacks on far-right groups which were interpreted in a specific manner. It aimed to show that Ukraine was a lawless state where far-right activists could do whatever they wanted without fear of being punished. As most of the information pertains to Azov activists or soldiers it is worth clearing out that Azov as a military unit and a political movement are two different phenomena. The fact that in the fall of 2014, the Azov volunteer battalion was integrated into the National Guard as a regiment under command of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine means it can not have any particular ideology. As Vyacheslav

Likhachev, the head of the National Minority Rights Monitoring Group and a member of the expert council of Ukraine's Centre for Civil Liberties, notes "the only possible ideology of the National Guard is the Disciplinary Statute", which enshrines the obligation to respect human rights. Other political projects, such as the National Corps party, which are sometimes referred to under the broader term of "Azov movement" rather exploited the Azov trademark for political purposes, Likhachev argues.

We can begin with the Oles Buzina Community, which reposted the article "The Right to Kill Fellow Citizens" (2018) by journalist Andrii Manchuk, who spread the idea that veterans and servicemen in Ukraine could commit crimes without being punished. He cited, as an example, the court decision that released an Azov soldier who had allegedly killed a man in Mariupol after a conflict on the grounds of political beliefs. However, Manchuk did not provide any specific information about the case. He went on to argue that *"this ultra-right paramilitary unit [Azov], legalized as part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, arbitrarily kept the seaside town [Mariupol] under control for several years in a row, and managed to thoroughly intimidate representatives of the local Themis at that time."* This creates the impression that in Mariupol, a city of more than 400,000 inhabitants, there was no rule of law and it was controlled and intimidated by some far-right group. Firstly, this conclusion is so serious that if that were true it would be certainly mediatized, in the first place by other pro-Russian media outlets, not to mention human rights monitoring organizations. Secondly, it propagates the myth that Azov was a militia unit even though Manchuk himself mentioned that it was part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine.

In addition to this, we found a post from 2017 which informs that two servicemen of the Azov regiment were arrested for murder, referring to the then Military Prosecutor-General of Ukraine, Anatolii Matios. The post emphasizes that the murder was premeditated. But this is further proof that if anybody had committed a crime, he or she would be punished under the law.

Another case happened in February 2020. Veterans of the Azov regiment disrupted a presentation of the National Platform for Reconciliation and Unity in Donbas which was held in Kyiv by Serhii Sivokho, then Advisor to the Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine. They claimed that the event's participants avoided talking about , Russia's role in the war in Donbas. According to Klymenko Time, some of the activists were arrested by the police. Then, the leader of the political party National Corps, Andriy Biletsky allegedly called on his fellows to "come and liberate" the arrested. Klymenko Time released a video clip entitled "How nationalists reconcile with Donbas", which was reposted by the Reconstruction of Donbas page. The description of the video

reads: *"A country that calls itself part of Europe... 'come and liberate'! Maybe enough of these 'liberators'?".* Such wording implies that it is Ukrainian nationalists who prevent peace from being possible in Donbas.

Finally, Pershyi Kosatskyi [posted](#) a video of Czech advocate Čestmír Kubát who claimed in 2020 that Ukrainian nationalists were doing everything so that Ukraine disappeared from the world map. He also called Ukraine a "colony", which was used by the United States against Russia, which has since become one of the main narratives of Russian propaganda during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Ukrainian volunteer battalions are "radical and act as penal military units"

The narrative about Ukrainian volunteer battalions that are "neo-Nazi" and "function as penal military units" has two essential aspects worth mentioning. Firstly, it is constructed in such a way as to create a black-and-white reality where Russia "is defending" people in Donbas Region, while the Ukrainian Army and volunteer battalions, in particular, commit war crimes and terrorise local people because of their origin, religious beliefs and language. Secondly, it also aims to reinforce the bigger narrative about "Nazism" and anarchy in Ukraine after 2014. Though, while monitoring publications, two posts were found in 2019, and this narrative is also related to other bigger ones - especially those that share messages about Ukrainian society and the government as ["radical and neo-Nazi"](#) and the West, which ["supports fascism in Ukraine"](#). Moreover, it is also in tune with the narrative about historical confrontation, as far as there is an approach to draw parallels between the "crimes" of Ukrainian volunteer battalions and Nazis or the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA).

Addressing the message about functioning as penal military units, it aims to appeal to emotions and to legitimising Russia`s support of separatist military groups in Donetsk and Luhansk Regions as well as undeclared participation in combat actions against the Ukrainian Army since 2014. In this aspect the focus of attention is put on the "evidence" of war crimes "committed by Ukrainian volunteer battalions" against local people who "wanted to be with Russia". For example, a [post](#) made by a former Ukrainian Prime Minister who escaped to Russia in 2014 can be analysed here – *"7 years ago neo-Nazi and punishers from the Armed Forces carried out a massacre in Mariupol. They began an assault on a municipal police department blocked by police workers who didn't want to serve the illegitimate Kyiv regime. Local people came to help them, but punishers began to shoot... There was and there is nothing holy for these bastards. Not every fascist would have been capable of doing this."* The de-occupation of Mariupol is represented here as terror against local people committed by the "Nazi" battalion.

Secondly, this narrative also contains messages that represent Ukrainian volunteer battalions as "Nazi". For example, there is a [publication](#) with a message about the Azov volunteer battalion: "*There is direct evidence of rituals resembling those of NSDAP, so we can see the resurrection of Nazi practices in Ukraine. These are not marginals - Azov battalion has been fully legal since spring 2015* and is part of the National Guard of Ukraine, under the leadership of the National Guard's Commander". This message is another part of the narrative – its aim is to create parallels between Ukrainian volunteer battalions and Nazis to discredit them as well as the entire Ukrainian government. It was also used by pro-Russian forces and actors in the West to act as advocates for opposing support for Ukraine because of these accusations of "Nazism" being present in volunteer battalions. Lastly, it was also used as "proof" of a bigger narrative about "Nazism" in Ukraine.

Lastly, it is also essential to focus on the timing of these narratives. According to monitoring, they were shared in 2019, which was a presidential election year in Ukraine. Therefore, it can be presumed that these narratives were also targeting people in Ukraine in attempts to destabilise the situation and clear the path for pro-Russian forces.

Radicals "are the reason why Ukraine is losing its face for the West"

Even after the Maidan in 2014, the Internet began to be filled with articles about "Banderivtsi" and "Ukrainian fascists" in relation to radical nationalists. The historian and the author of the book "From the Maidan to the Right: Revolution, War and the Far Right in Ukraine (2013-2016)" Vyacheslav Likhachev [counted](#) "Right Sector", "Freedom", "National Corps" and Dmytro Yarosh's "Action" initiative as being among Ukrainian radical right-wing political forces.

Likhachev, in particular, notes that the peculiar thing about Ukraine is that the far-right has never enjoyed significant support in the country. In his opinion, the role of right-wing radicals in Euromaidan was a kind of media phenomenon, and not only as a result of Russian propaganda, but also in the Ukrainian dimension - against the background of the passivity of other political forces. The participation of the radicals in the defense of the sovereignty of Ukraine, and in particular, in the [defense](#) of Donetsk Airport (in 2014), shifted the emphasis in their perception by Ukrainian society - from radicalism to heroism. However, according to Vyacheslav Likhachev, polls show that this has not yet been converted into electoral support.

The history of the "Right Sector" movement [started](#) at the beginning of Maidan events on November 28, 2013 as a union of right-wing organizations and individual activists at the initiative of the All-Ukrainian "Trident" Organization named after S. Bandera. The newly-created movement immediately announced the nationalist nature of its association and

its tasks within Maidan: the immediate removal of the anti-people government of President Viktor Yanukovych and the release of political prisoners-patriots. The right-wing activists criticized the liberal leaders of the Maidan movement due to their yielding to Yanukovych, because of the reorientation of the protest participants from the struggle for a just state to the struggle primarily for membership of the European Union and, most importantly, because of their naive pacifism, which did not yield any results. "Right Sector" was among those who played the role of the driver of the uprising, as a result of which Yanukovych fled Ukraine in disgrace. The Maidan became a people's uprising. Thus, Ukrainians faced new challenges: the aggression of the Kremlin, which took advantage of the unstable situation and occupied Crimea and part of Donbas.

Propaganda pick up on any critical comments by some Western countries regarding support for Ukraine. On February 2017, Korrespondent published a post stating that " *Kyiv is playing with fire, closing its eyes to the Right Sector"* with a link to the Korrespondent website citing The Washington Post columnist Jack Losh who believes "that the statements of the Ukrainian authorities about complete control over numerous volunteer detachments do not correspond to reality." In the publication's article, he emphasizes that "despite the promise made by official Kyiv, which announced that it would curb them, rebel fighters continue to fight against pro-Moscow separatists."

According to the charter, starting from 2014 the structure of Right Sector included the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps "Right Sector" (the military segment of the movement), "Right Sector" political party and Right Youth (the youth segment of the movement). **The Ukrainian Volunteer Corps "Right Sector"** (*the military segment of the movement*) takes an active part in the War of Liberation in Donbas and setting itself the task of liberating all Ukrainian lands from Russian occupation. **The "Right Sector" political party** *(the social and political segment of the movement)* primarily conducts "street politics". It campaigns for ideas that will save Ukraine, opposes the internal occupation system and any anti-Ukrainian manifestations by all methods that are currently expedient, and also supports the front (party program).

Right Youth *(the youth segment of the movement)* gives Ukrainian youth opportunities for activism and self-improvement. It is a forge of personnel for other segments of the National Liberation Movement. RY members have since 2021 been determined in their choiced of further activities.

Taking about **the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps "Right Sector"** (*the military segment of the movement*), it should be underlined that the draft law on the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps (2851 dated 14.05.2015) was already registered in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (Ukrainian Parliament). According to this draft law, Ukrainian Voluntary Corps is a voluntary military formation formed on the basis of this Law, which combines subordination to state authorities and public initiatives of Ukrainian citizens to increase

their military and patriotic training and contribute to the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other military formations in the defense of Ukraine, the protection of its sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability, ensuring the security of the state and protecting the state borders of Ukraine. However, the draft law was recalled in 2016 and the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps "Right Sector" (as well as others) wasn't [legitimized](#) as an official military corps under Ukrainian law.

Comparative conclusion

The aim of our study was to identify the development and shaping of one of the key narratives of Russian propaganda about Ukraine - the rhetoric of the "profound influence of the far-right in Ukraine" is regularly presented by Russian officials as the cause of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine.

We conducted our research in the Slovak and Ukrainian information environment, where we identified pro-Kremlin actors and then analysed the content of their Facebook posts, in which we observed different variants of the narrative under study.

During the period under observation, from the beginning of the Maidan (November 21, 2013) to May 1, 2022 in both countries, the narrative played a significant role in the information engagement of Russia and pro-Kremlin actors who spread its propaganda for various reasons.

In both countries, the narrative under study has been a stable component of pro-Kremlin propaganda. However, in the Ukrainian information environment the narrative was more pronounced from year to year, peaking in 2021, in Slovakia, after a decline in 2016, it is possible to see a gradual increase in the narrative (with the exception of 2020, which was dominated by the coronavirus pandemic in the information environment), which fully peaked in 2022, bringing a significant acceleration of its prevalence.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has caused a meteoric rise in references to the Ukrainian far-right in Slovakia. In doing so, pro-Kremlin actors have sought to justify the Russian invasion by pointing to the fight against the supposedly growing Ukrainian far-right.

In Ukraine, on the other hand, 2022 brought a decline due to state interference in the information environment and blocking of certain actors sharing the narratives of Russian propaganda. However, in 2019 and 2021 the number of such narratives increased. This might be due to the following causes: 2019 was a year of presidential and parliamentary elections in Ukraine, therefore, these narratives can be interpreted as a way of influencing voters and giving pro-Russian forces an opportunity to take revenge. In turn, 2021 was marked by Russia᾿s escalation processes and debates about the probability of the full-scale invasion, which actually took place on 24 February, 2022. Therefore, these messages can be also interpreted as an attempt by pro-Russian actors to destabilise the situation inside Ukraine.

While the most active disseminator of the narrative in Slovakia was the Russian Embassy (149 posts), the highest impact in the form of interactions was made by far-left and far-right political actors such as Ľuboš Blaha, Štefan Harabin and Milan Uhrík.

Analysing the actors which were disseminating the narratives in Ukraine, the biggest number of publications was made by the resources "Ukrainian News" ("Novosti Ukrainy") (38 posts), "Oles Buzyna Community" (31 posts) and "The First Cossack" (27 posts). It also should be noted that 2 resources - "Ukrainian News" and "The First Cossack" use labels that are associated with Ukraine and Ukrainian history, which can be also seen as an attempt to represent themselves as Ukrainian media outlets despite sharing quite opposing information. However, the biggest impact was made by pro-Russian blogger Andrey Ivanov, "Sasha Psikh - Politics as it is" and the resource "he Victory Regiment".

In Slovakia, the narrative under investigation was most often disseminated in the form of a sub-narrative about the "criminal activities of far-right organisations", about the "activities of the far-right in the war in Donbas (and Crimea)" and about the "far-right political elite of Ukraine".

In Ukraine, the most shared narrative was related to the historical confrontation, and mostly to Ukraine's fight for independence in the 20th century, activities of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and memory politics of the WWII, especially in the context of the processes of decommunization and adoption of 8 May as the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation. Other narratives are "Ukrainian society is radical, fascist and neo-Nazi" and "the Ukrainian government is full of far-right radicals" - they are interlinked and construct a bigger narrative about Ukrainian society as "neo-Nazi", which is the one most frequently shared by Russian propaganda inside Russia and abroad. Lastly, narratives were also found that "the West supports fascists in Ukraine", "Radical parties and activists are threatening Ukrainian statehood, foreign policy of Ukraine and its society, and global democracy", "Ukrainian volunteer battalions act as penal military units" and "Radicals are the reason why Ukraine is losing its face for the West".

A comprehensive look at all the sub-narratives through which the examined narrative manifested itself in Ukraine shows that the situation is very similar to that in Slovakia, with the exception of the sub-narratives related to the Slovak media and political elites, which is quite self-explanatory.

In both countries, pro-Kremlin actors sought to discredit the Ukrainian political elite, the military and, therefore, the country's defence against Russian occupation through accusations of sympathy for the far-right. The same efforts targeted both Ukrainian society and the West, which allegedly supported the strengthening of the far-right in Ukraine. The narratives also overlapped in describing the criminal activities of far-right organisations and their involvement in the war since 2014.

Another common feature of both discourses was the large proportion of posts dealing with the Ukrainian far-right and events of the 20th century, with an emphasis on the activities of the OUN and the UPA in the 1930s-1950s. The simplistic images of both

organisations, framed in terms of murders and collaboration with the Nazis, served to discredit Ukrainians and their alleged efforts to rehabilitate and glorify "fascism."

The common features of historical revisionism in the Slovak and Ukrainian contexts have been the demonization of Ukrainians as Nazi collaborators and the labelling of Ukrainians who want an independent Ukraine free from Russian influence as Nazis or the presentation of Ukrainians as those (ingrates) who have forgotten who liberated them from Nazism. We explored the continuity with Soviet propaganda in both countries.

However, unlike in Slovakia, in Ukraine historical revisionism fulfilled one more task, namely the division of Ukraine into West and East, or into those who preferred the extreme right-wing direction of the country and those who harbored positive sentiments towards the USSR or Russia. The aim of this strategy of polarization was to weaken Ukraine's internal social and political cohesion.

The presence of religious actors is also an important difference in the context of dissemination of the narrative of the influence of the Ukrainian far-right. Namely, that the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is present in Ukraine, which contributed to the dissemination of the observed narrative of Russian propaganda in the period under study.

The narrative of the "profound influence of the far-right in Ukraine" comes as nothing entirely new, and Putin himself is not the founder of this narrative. Soviet propaganda had already labelled any opponent as a "fascist", and this applied not only to Ukrainians and the Ukrainian resistance, but also to other anti-Soviet movements that have taken place in Eastern European nations.

Putin and today's Russian propaganda continue to follow this "tradition". Of course, they adapt it to current events and use modern technology to influence public opinion. Just as they continued to do after the Second World War in Central and Eastern Europe, they are now aided in promoting the Kremlin view by local collaborators who are happy to convey the image of fascism in the West, in the case of the opposition or in the media. In the engineered black-and-white image which communicates on an axis between good and evil, pro-Kremlin actors artificially hyperbolise the problem of the Ukrainian far-right and pragmatically offer salvation in the form of the Kremlin as the eternal protector against fascism or Nazism.

It is unclear how Russian aggression will affect the spread of the narrative under study in Ukraine in the future. In the context of the enormous human suffering the Russians have caused, it is unlikely that warnings about the Ukrainian far-right and phrases about protecting the Russian-speaking population will be among the dominant communication strategies in public discourse.

On the contrary, in Slovakia (and in other Western states) this narrative still has potential and is still being used by many pro-Kremlin actors in 2023. The ongoing campaign for the

September parliamentary elections will undoubtedly be full of references to the war in Ukraine. It remains to be seen whether the fear spread by some pro-Kremlin actors of Slovakia's possible mobilisation and involvement in the war will be an effective tool not only for scoring political points, but also for spreading Russian influence. The topic of the war in Ukraine may, therefore, be the proverbial balance that will determine Slovakia's future direction in foreign policy.

Slovakia

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MINISTRY
OF FOREIGN
AND EUROPEAN AFFAIRS
OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Annex 1: Keywords

The CrowdTangle monitoring tool was used to find content for subsequent analysis. Data collection was based on a predefined list of actors. The following list of key words was used in the search, which contains the most common terms used in the communication of the observed metanarrative. The list in the Slovak version of the search also contained grammatical variations of the key words used:

UPA, Ukrainian Insurgent Army, Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, OUN, Bandera, Shukhevych, Melnyk, Right sector, Azov, Aidar, Kraken, Yarosh, Biletsky, nationalist battalions, junta, Ukrainian fascists, Ukrainian nationalists, Ukrainian Nazis.

The list in the Ukrainian version of the search included UPA, OUN, Bandera, Banderovci, Shukhevych, Melnyk, Right Sector, Yarosh, Biletsky, Azov, Aidar, Kraken, nationalistic battalions (natsbaty), junta, Ukrainian fascists/nazis/ukronazis/neo-nazis and also contained grammatical variations of the key words.

Annex 2: Tag Definitions

Narratives

- Based on the initial study and the categorization of the research material, the given narratives which resonated in the monitored content during the monitoring period were predefined. The categorization by narratives was used to distinguish content-similar posts. Posts that did not fit the predefined narratives (including historical revisionism) were categorized as "Other".

Events

- The events that the actors being studied described through the analyzed metanarrative in at least ten posts.

Keywords

- The analysis also includes five specific key words tied to specific people, organizations, or events. The reason for their selection was to track their relationship with different narratives and the frequency in which they occur across the period under study.

Annex 3: Monitored actors, number of total posts and interactions

THE MOST ACTIVE ACTORS BY NUMBER OF INTERACTIONS IN SLOVAKIA			
ACTOR	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER OF POSTS	NUMBER OF INTERACTIONS
Ľuboš Blaha	MP and member of the SMER-SD party. At the time of writing, his Facebook profile was blocked.	55	519,308
Štefan Harabin	Former Minister of Justice (2006-2009) and former President of the Supreme Court of the Slovak Republic. Presidential candidate in 2019. Currently chairman of the far-right Vlasť party.	17	69,620
Milan Uhrík · Republika	MEP and chairman of the far-right Republika party.	2	30,493
Armáda Ruskej Federácie	A Facebook page that focuses on the military, military technology of Russia and the USSR. Long characterized by pro-Russian sentiment. Launched in 2015.	11	28,755
Veľvyslanectvo Ruska na Slovensku	Official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Slovakia.	149	21,497
Eduard Chmelár	Founder and honorary chairman of the Socialisti.sk movement. Presidential candidate in 2019.	7	21,145
Slobodný vysielač	Facebook page of the alternative media that started as an Internet radio in 2013.	40	9,879

Slobodný Výber	Facebook page of an alternative media outlet that presents itself as an impartial news outlet.	13	9,835
Juraj Draxler	Former Minister of Education (2014–2016), nominated by the SMER-SD party.	9	9,787
Armádny magazín	Facebook page which publishes content focusing on defense and security topics through the prism of Russian propaganda.	49	9,725
Spravodajská Alternatíva	Facebook page that has long been spreading problematic and pro-Russian content. At the time of writing, it is no longer available.	63	7,268
Artur Bekmatov	Chairman of the Socialisti.sk party. Former chairman of the Left Youth Front and member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Far-left politician who was formerly a writer for the conspiracy media Zem&Vek.	19	6,744
Komunistická strana Slovenska – KSS	Official Facebook page of the Communist Party of Slovakia.	43	5,558
Andrej Danko – predseda SNS	Official profile of the Slovak National Party chairman, who has long promoted pro-Russian sentiment and the need for positive Slovak-Russian relations.	1	4,812
napalete.sk	Facebook page of the media napalete.sk, which is characterized by a mixed factual quality of information.	18	4,244

Hlavný denník	Facebook page of the disinformation media linked to the National Coalition party. It has been spreading disinformation and Russian propaganda for a long time. In 2022, the website was temporarily blocked by the NSA.	11	3,499
Milujeme Rusko	A community Facebook page bringing together fans and friends of Russia. It has long been a space for spreading pro-Russian narratives.	34	3,243
Blog investigatívnej žurnalistiky	A Facebook and Telegram page that presents itself as investigative journalism. In reality, it is an alternative channel spreading dubious information and pro-Russian narratives.	20	3,219
Slovenský zväz protifašistických bojovníkov - SZPB	Official Facebook page of the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters. A civic association which, within the historical legacy of the anti-fascist struggle in Slovakia, today figures as a channel of problematic messages and pro-Russian narratives.	41	2,920
Antimajdan	The original Czech Facebook page, which was created in early 2014 as a reaction to the events of the Maidan. It is listed because of its high reach to the Slovak audience and its direct dissemination of pro-Russian narratives.	38	2,903
AntiKiska	A Facebook page with an anti-government and pro-Russian focus. It describes itself as a satirical platform, but spreads conspiratorial	17	2,631

	content, disinformation and pro-Russian narratives.		
Zdrojj	Facebook page. It focuses primarily on sharing articles from low-fact websites, but also from news agencies and mainstream media.	57	2,611
Som z dediny	Facebook page. It serves as a communication platform for the disinformation website Hlavný denník.	6	2,154
InfoVojna	Facebook page of a disinformation medium spreading conspiracy theories, hoaxes and extremist content. After the NSA was blocked in 2022, the website switched to the Belize (.bz) domain.	7	2,131
Extra plus	The Facebook page of a disinformation media long spreading conspiracies and pro-Russian narratives. It manifests itself through political bias and frequent provision of space for selected political entities.	11	1,891
Odboj V4	A Facebook page characterised by strong pro-Russian and anti-EU sentiment. It publishes disinformation content and Russian propaganda.	23	1,780
Sloveni	A Facebook page characterised by strong pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiment. It publishes disinformation content and Russian propaganda.	12	1,341

Alexander Ivanovič Možajev	Facebook page linked to the Facebook and Telegram platform of the Free Broadcaster Casus Belli. It publishes disinformation content and Russian propaganda.	49	1,321
DAV DVA	Facebook page of a media outlet with a leftist and anti-Western orientation. Its website currently serves as a content archive (it has been transformed into the Veci Verejné website).	8	970
Front ľavicovej mládeže	Facebook page of the youth organisation Left Youth Front. It espouses radical leftist ideas and shares anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives.	25	790
Slovanska unia	Facebook page. It has been dormant since April 2021. It was originally aimed at sharing Russian propaganda.	11	655
Slovanské Noviny	Facebook page of a disinformation medium publishing pro-Russian propaganda, anti-Western narratives and conspiracies.	103	532
Nazorobcana	Facebook page of the magazine Opinion of a Citizen. The page has been inactive since July 2022.	18	428
ISKRA	Facebook page of a source with a far-left, anti-Western and pro-Russian orientation. It provides a space for anti-system political actors.	10	414

Rozhľady	The Facebook page of a source typical of anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiment, spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories. It describes itself as an independent news platform.	9	282
PRAVDA ŤA OSLOBODÍ!	Facebook page. It regularly shares the content of other disinformation and conspiracy websites primarily with an anti-system and pro-Russian focus.	25	244
Slovo	Facebook page for the website of the civic association New Word Club. It continues the activities of the weekly founded during the Slovak National Uprising, characterized by a left-wing orientation.	14	142
protiprudu.org	Facebook page of the conspiracy media. It publishes disinformation content, conspiracies, extremist narratives and anti-Semitic messages. In the past, it was known for its proximity to the political party ĽSNS.	13	73
Socialistický zväz mladých- SZM / Socialist Union of Youth- Slovakia	Facebook page serving as a platform for the united political movements Socialisti.sk and VZDOR - Labour Party.	6	11

Page Name	Total Interactions	1. Historical confrontation	2. UA society is radical, fascist and neonazi	3. UA government is full of far-right radicals	4. The West supports fascists in Ukraine	5. "Radical" parties and activists	6. Ukrainian volunteer battalions are radical and act as penal military units	7. "Radicals" are the reason why Ukraine "is losing its face to the West"
								8 OF THE MOST ACTIVE ACTORS BY NUMBER OF INTERACTIONS and NARRATIVES IN POSTS, UKRAINE
Andrey Ivanov	18500	1						
Sasha Psycho – politics as it is	16300					1		
Regiment of Victory	5248	1						
Oles Buzina – Community	4537	1						
Pershiy Kozatsky	1046					1		
Alexander Rzhavsky	984	1						
Immortal Regiment Ukraine	956		1					
All-Ukrainian Movement to Fight against Fascism "Patriots – For Life"	676					1		