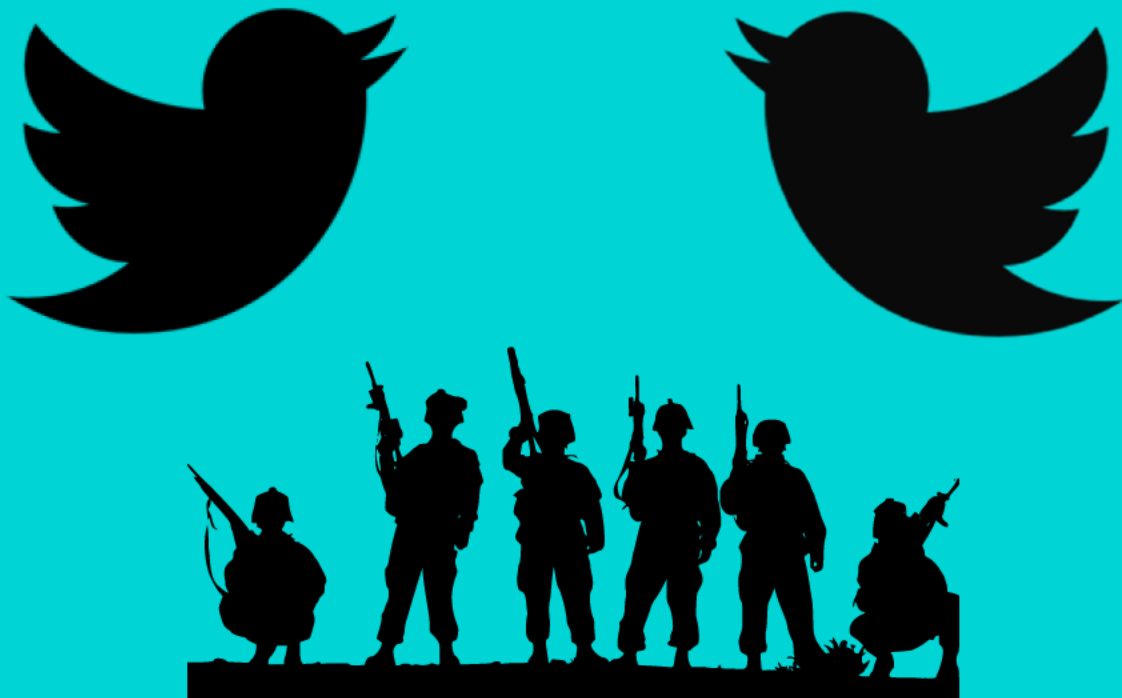


# Analyzing Twitter Disinformation/Propaganda Related to Russian Aggression Against Ukraine

*Report Number 2*



JANUARY 18, 2022

MYTHOS LABS



## INTRODUCTION

Since November 2021, Russia has amassed over 120,000 troops on the border with Ukraine, causing global alarm over a possibility of a new invasion. This show of force is playing out in cyberspace as well, with pro-Russia and anti-US/NATO actors spreading disinformation and propaganda on social media. From November 2021, Mythos Labs leveraged its AI-based MIDAC software, as well as the expertise of local researchers, to identify and analyze Ukraine-related disinformation and propaganda on Twitter. This is the second in a series of reports analyzing Twitter disinformation/propaganda about Ukraine.

## KEY FINDINGS

### **1. Number of Twitter Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda increased dramatically in December and Early January compared to November 2021**

Between December 1, 2021 and January 5, 2022, Mythos Labs identified 697 accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda about Ukraine, compared to just 58 such accounts identified in all of November, 2021. Moreover, the number of new accounts identified each week steadily increased throughout December and early January, except during the winter holiday period. The volume of Ukraine-related tweets by accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda in December also increased by 375% compared to November and by 3,270% compared to September.

Figure 1: Growth in Number of Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda

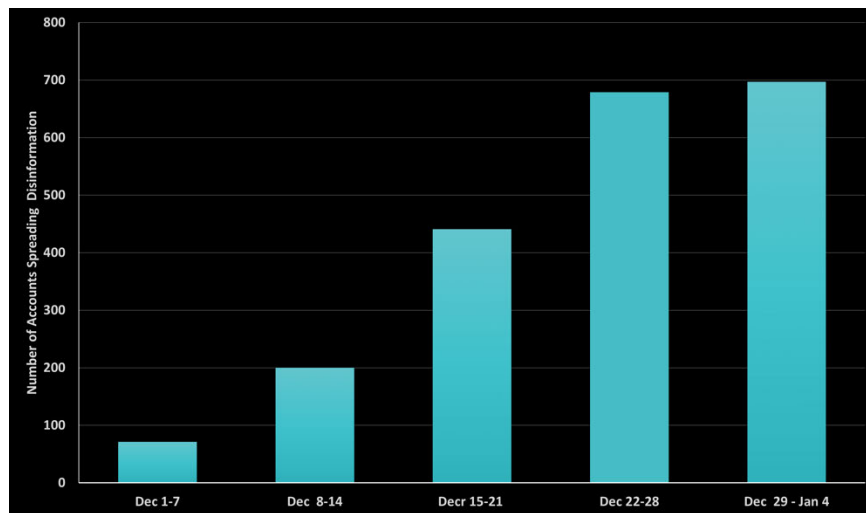
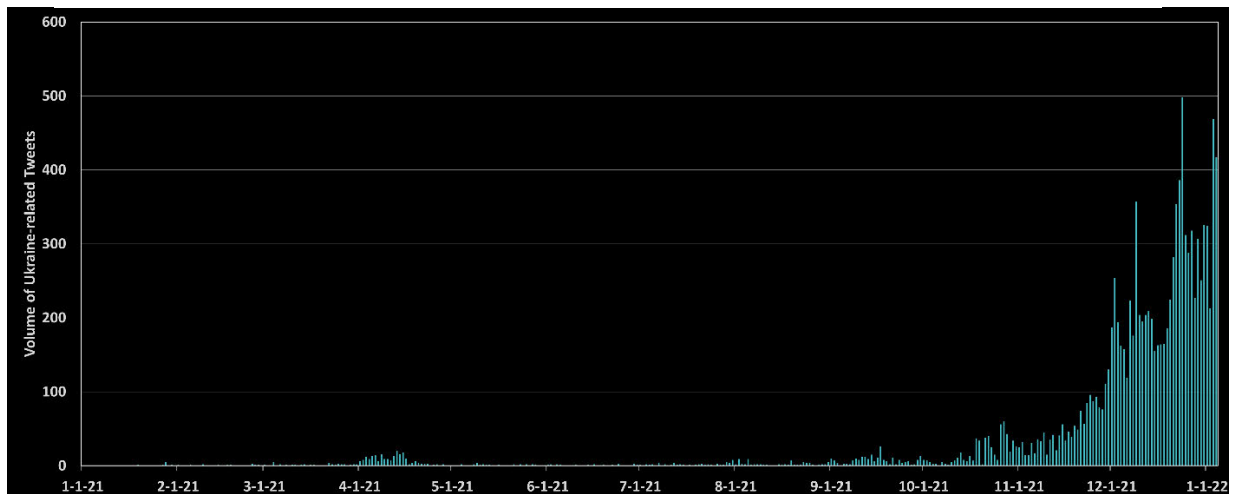


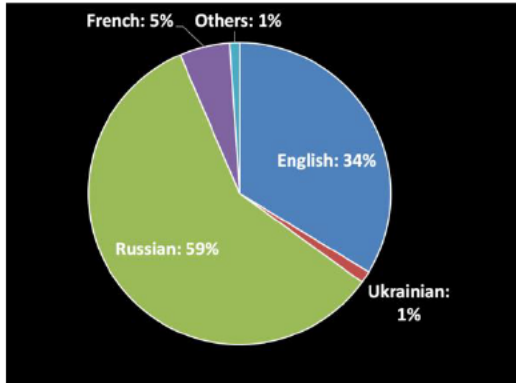
Figure 2: Growth in Ukraine-related Tweets by Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda



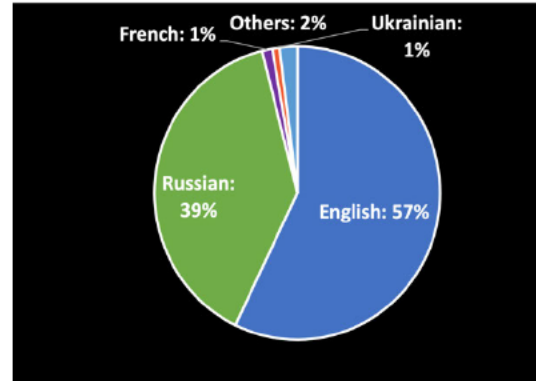
**2. Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda about Ukraine are Shifting their Focus to English-speaking Audiences**

Unlike in the past, the majority of accounts spreading disinformation/propaganda about Ukraine are now tweeting in English rather than in Russian. The share of English-language tweets posted by such accounts grew to 57% in December – up from just 34% in November. This signals a change in tactics of pro-Russian Twitter accounts: by targeting English-speaking audiences, they are now primarily trying to undermine support for Ukraine in the West.

**Figure 3:**  
Language Breakdown of Tweets by Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda in November 2021



**Figure 4:**  
Language Breakdown of Tweets by Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda from Dec 1 – Jan 5



**3. Pro-Russian Disinformation Narratives are now Less Focused on Vilifying Ukraine and More Focused on What Other Countries Stand to Lose by Supporting Ukraine against Russia**

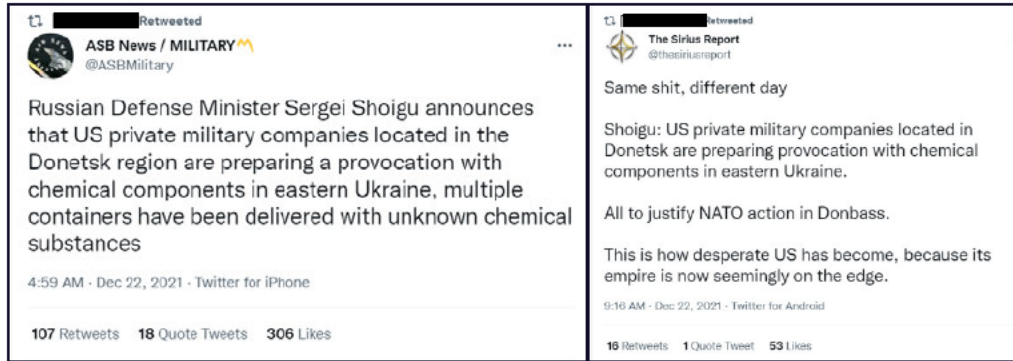
With their primary audience now English-speaking, accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda are less often directly criticizing the actions of Ukraine and more often amplifying new narratives designed to resonate with international audiences. One commonly amplified narrative was that the United States of America should not interfere in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia and that the situation at the US-Mexico border is more important than the crisis at the Ukraine-Russia border. Other accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda amplified criticism of US President Joe Biden, either accusing him of giving up on Ukraine or blaming him for prioritizing Ukraine over domestic matters. The strategic aim of such narratives appears to be to undermine the United States of America, and with it, western support to Ukraine.

**Figure 5**



Pro-Russian accounts also amplified the Russian defence minister’s accusation that Ukraine, with the help of American private military companies, is preparing to launch a chemical weapons attack in the occupied Donbas. This could potentially be an attempt to lay the groundwork for a false flag operation.

Figure 6



Another set of narratives was directed at English-speaking audiences in major non-Western countries such as Turkey and India. Accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda amplified messages urging these countries to either take Russia's side or remain neutral with regards to Ukraine.

Figure 7



**4. There is Indirect Evidence of the Existence of Automated Networks Spreading Disinformation about Ukraine**

A human analysis of accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda identified by the MIDAC algorithm revealed that some of them are using a tweet scheduling software called Amplifr to automatically retweet source accounts. This might indicate the existence of coordinated inauthentic networks linked to Russia that amplify Ukraine-related disinformation on Twitter in an automated manner.

Figure 8: An example of a retweet posted via tweet scheduling software Amplifr

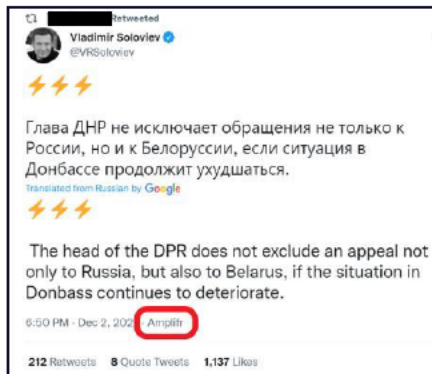
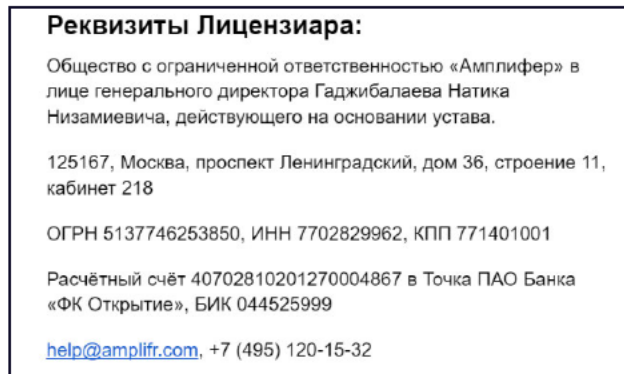


Figure 9: A screenshot from the Amplifr license agreement, indicating its registration in Moscow, Russia



**5. Strategy of Accounts Tweeting Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda is Shifting from Amplifying Inauthentic Accounts to Amplifying Legitimate Actors who Voice Pro-Kremlin Talking Points**

In November, accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda about Ukraine were almost exclusively amplifying inauthentic, anonymous source accounts or those belonging to Russian state media. While they continued doing so in December and early January, they also began to amplify legitimate actors with sizeable Twitter followings who advocate against Western support for Ukraine. This makes their messaging seem more mainstream, more credible and less obviously disinformation.

For example, one prominent voice being amplified by accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda is Australian journalist John Pilger (@johnpilger). With over 210,000 Twitter followers, Mr. Pilger is a well-known journalist who regularly spreads messages resembling Russian disinformation, such as accusations that the United States of America overthrew the Ukrainian government after the Maidan revolution in 2014, or that the USA promised Russia NATO will not expand to Eastern Europe. His tweets were retweeted by 87 accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda about Ukraine. Another prominent individual being amplified by pro-Russian accounts is Congressman Matt Gaetz (@mattgaetz), who has 2.6 million followers combined on his two Twitter accounts. His tweet advocating American non-intervention in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia was shared more than 2,600 times, including by 12 accounts known to spread pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda about Ukraine.

Figure 10

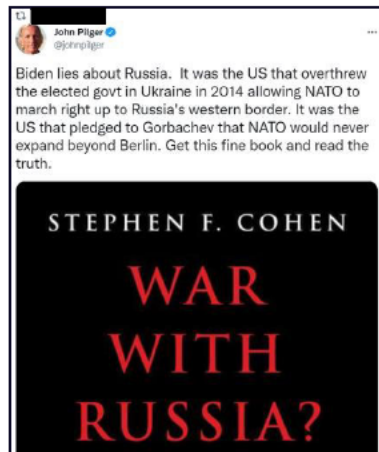


Figure 11



Far-right American journalist Jack Posobiec (@JackPosobiec, 1.5 million Twitter followers) was also amplified by 21 accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda about Ukraine, as was popular journalist Glenn Greenwald (@ggreenwald, 1.7 million Twitter followers).

Figure 12



## **NEXT STEPS**

To build on the afore-mentioned key findings, Mythos Labs will undertake the following research activities in subsequent reports:

- 1. Continue Monitoring Volume and Narratives of Tweets by Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda about Ukraine**  
This will enable us to identify new narratives, monitor the growth of the network and identify strategic shifts in goals/aims of disinformation/propaganda campaigns.
- 2. Analyze Differences in Messaging by Language**  
A detailed textual analysis of the malign narratives shared by pro-Russian networks in multiple languages will reveal potential differences in messaging directed at various audiences, enabling the development of more targeted counter-messaging efforts.
- 3. Investigate Degree of Coordination among Accounts Spreading Pro-Russian Disinformation/Propaganda**  
To determine if (and to what degree) accounts spreading pro-Russian disinformation/propaganda are acting in a coordinated manner, MIDAC will analyze temporal and behavioral correlations within the network.

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## AUTHORS



### **Olga Tokariuk, Lead Author**

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



### **Priyank Mathur, Co-author**

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

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## ABOUT MYTHOS LABS

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



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