

The Invasion of Ukraine. Russia's Influence Campaign on Social Media in South America


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ABSTRACT

Moscow has undertaken an international propaganda campaign against Ukraine, which is wide in terms of means employed and its geography, reaching even South America. Russia's embassies in Buenos Aires, Brasilia, and Lima have used social media to disseminate messages about the war. To investigate this activity, this article combines qualitative and quantitative methods, including document analysis, case studies, and data from the social media research platform CrowdTangle to analyze Facebook and Instagram posts. The findings show that Russian embassies have actively promoted several strategic narratives about Ukraine, including portraying it as a "Nazi" state and blaming NATO "expansion" for the war. The campaign has generated hundreds of thousands of interactions with social media users and, in some instances, adapts its messaging to local contexts. It also relies on partnerships with sympathetic media actors to reinforce its narratives. These findings raise broader questions about the scale and reach of Russian messaging in other Latin American countries and regions of the world across different media platforms.

Keywords: strategic narratives, communications, Russia, Ukraine, social media, propaganda

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La invasión de Ucrania. La campaña de influencia de Rusia en las redes sociales en América del Sur

RESUMEN

Moscú ha emprendido una campaña internacional de propaganda contra Ucrania, amplia tanto en los medios empleados como en su alcance geográfico, llegando incluso a Sudamérica. Las embajadas de Rusia en Buenos Aires, Brasilia y Lima han utilizado las redes sociales para difundir mensajes sobre la guerra. Con el fin de examinar esta actividad, este artículo combina métodos cualitativos y cuantitativos, incluidos el análisis documental, estudios de caso y datos de la plataforma de investigación en redes sociales CrowdTangle para analizar publicaciones en Facebook e Instagram. Los resultados muestran que las embajadas rusas han promovido activamente varias narrativas estratégicas sobre Ucrania, entre ellas presentarla como un Estado “nazi” y atribuir la guerra a la “expansión” de la OTAN. La campaña ha generado cientos de miles de interacciones con usuarios de redes sociales y, en algunos casos, adapta sus mensajes a contextos locales. Asimismo, se apoya en alianzas con actores mediáticos afines para reforzar sus narrativas. Estos hallazgos plantean interrogantes más amplios sobre la escala y el alcance de la comunicación rusa en otros países de América Latina y en distintas regiones del mundo a través de diversas plataformas mediáticas.

Palabras clave: narrativas estratégicas, comunicaciones, Rusia, Ucrania, redes sociales, propaganda

1. INTRODUCTION

“No mercy to the Ukrainian population!”¹ Those were the words of Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's Permanent Representative to the International Organizations in Vienna, on Twitter (X) during the first months of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Kika, 2022). Around the same time, leading Russian state TV personality Margarita Simonyan affirmed that the Ukrainian state should cease to exist (Cole, 2022). Meanwhile, a large billboard in Moscow belonging to Russian state news agency TASS displayed an image of Putin with his quote: “Russia's borders do not end anywhere” (Cole, 2022). While such comments from Russian officials and state media attracted international criticism, Moscow has communicated about the war through a more sophisticated and organized global social media campaign. Although geographically distant from the conflict, South America has also been targeted by this campaign, which has been implemented at the regional and local levels by Russian embassies and their partners.

¹ This social media post was deleted. It is possible that other posts referenced in this article have been or will be deleted, which is why screenshots were taken during the research stage.

In November of 2023, signalling its concern about this development, the United States (US) Department of State affirmed that Russia undertook a campaign to undermine support for Ukraine and spread an anti-American and anti-NATO sentiment in Latin America. This raises the following question: how has Russia communicated about its invasion of Ukraine on social media in South American countries?

This article examines how Russia has conducted a communication campaign aimed at justifying its large-scale invasion of Ukraine, undermining Ukraine and its allies, and adapting its narratives to audiences in South America. Given the size and diversity of the region, the article focuses on the case studies of Argentina, Brazil, and Peru. These countries were selected because they represent two of the region's major powers and a medium-sized state where diplomatic competition between Russia and Ukraine is present, as both Moscow and Kyiv maintain embassies there. The analysis draws on data from CrowdTangle, a social media research platform owned by Meta, which was used to identify, quantify and analyze Facebook and Instagram posts published by Russian embassies between February of 2022 and February of 2024.

2. CONTEXT

2.1. Russia and Public Opinion in South America

Moscow's war against Ukraine started in the context of an unfavourable public opinion in South America regarding perceptions of Russia. In April of 2022, a few months after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (2022) and *Nueva Sociedad* magazine commissioned *Latinobarómetro* to carry out a public opinion study on Latin American perceptions of Europe, the US, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and Russia. Tracking opinions on countries, the survey asked respondents in different Latin American countries if, given the choices of the US, Germany, the PRC, and Russia, which country they viewed most positively. Generally, Russia placed last, behind the US, Germany, and the PRC.

In July 2023, over one year after Russian troops invaded Ukraine, Russia still faced unfavourable public opinion in South America both in absolute and relative terms, according to a study by Pew Research (Fagan, Poushter and Gubbala, 2023). In the survey, 57 percent of Argentines and 68 percent of Brazilians did not view Russia favourably.

Further, the study noted that, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, worldwide public perceptions of Russia reached record lows. In this context, from 2019 to 2023, Pew Research measured a drop of 19 and 16 points in positive perceptions of Russia in Argentina and Brazil respectively. Moreover, the poll also gauged whether people

in Argentina and Brazil had confidence in Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky to “do the right thing” regarding world affairs. While opinions on Zelensky were mixed, confidence in Putin was low, with 77 percent of Brazilians and 74 percent of Argentines expressing little or no confidence. Overall, the relevance of these surveys is that they reveal that Russia is operating in a context where it faces unfavourable public opinion; a fact Moscow may wish to change.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Strategic Narratives and Propaganda

Strategic narratives can be understood as a means by actors to construct a meaning for the past, present, and future of international politics to influence domestic and foreign affairs (Miskimmon et al., 2013). According to Freedman (2006), these narratives are strategic because “they do not arise spontaneously but are deliberately constructed” (p. 22). On this, Aspriadis (2023) argues that strategic narratives can be used to justify wars, and that Putin's Russia has used this tool to justify its aggression against Ukraine.

Strategic narratives themselves can form part of propaganda, which the Institute for Propaganda Analysis defines as “the expression of opinions or actions carried out deliberately by individuals or groups with a view to influencing the opinions or actions of other individuals or groups for predetermined ends and through psychological manipulations” (Ellul, 1965, pp. xi-xii). Further, Ellul explains that propaganda is more than just disseminating untruths or lies. Indeed, propaganda may include accurate facts, although they are often manipulated or selected to suit the needs of the propagandist. Moreover, it is important to distinguish between disinformation and misinformation. According to High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation of the European Commission (2018), disinformation: “includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (p. 3). Meanwhile, misinformation is defined as “misleading or inaccurate information shared by people who do not recognize it as such.”

Regarding Russian disinformation campaigns, Bradshaw et al. (2023) argue that state-backed media outlets such as RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik have been key players, communicating to diverse audiences throughout the world through traditional and digital media. Similarly, Cerulli and Rhodes (2022) observe that Russian media such as Sputnik, in their Spanish-language versions, had a prominent role in attempting to legitimize the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and that after the full-scale invasion of 2022, this role was further enhanced. For other academics, a tool that is key to Russia's disinformation campaigns is the use of “undermining

narratives” or “anti” narratives (Wilson et al., 2018, p. 183). These narratives do not focus on offering a version of events, but rather on confusing audiences about the objective truth and delegitimizing adversaries; in this case Western democratic institutions. Moreover, on the topic of public diplomacy in general, Jang and Paik (2012) assert that “the main trend of today’s diplomacy is to pursue national interests by influencing the public opinion of other states” (p. 197). For his part, Cull (2019) notes that the “authority effect” means that audiences will defer to different authorities according to the topic (p. 42).

Overall, understanding concepts such as strategic narratives, propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation is essential for analyzing how these dynamics operate in international politics, including Russia’s influence campaigns in South America. Additionally, the relationship between public diplomacy and public opinion sheds light on why Russia aims to project its narrative to South American governments and publics.

3.2. Russia’s Strategic Narratives for its Invasion of Ukraine

One of the tenets of Russia’s campaign throughout the world has been the labeling of Ukrainians as anti-Russia, fascist, and even Nazis. On this topic, Fortuin (2022) writes that the “anti-Russian” narrative first emerged when Ukraine held its independence referendum in 1991. Here, some Russophone groups crafted the narrative that claimed the majority Ukrainian-speaking state of Ukraine would slowly erase the Russian language and culture. Another pillar of the Russian narrative against Ukraine is its use of the label “fascist”. For Fortuin (2022), this narrative was adopted by the Russian state and media in 2004 after Russia-friendly Yanukovich lost the election the pro-West candidate. Henceforth, the Russian state and media began to employ a narrative which included the term “fascist” to describe politicians not considered friendly to Russia.

Moreover, Tolz and Hutchings (2023) stress that the Russian narrative builds the myth of the supposedly prevalent Nazism in modern-day Ukraine as an alien force that needs to be driven out, much like the foreign “Western” powers that are allegedly controlling the Ukrainian state. In addition, Dudko (2022) mentions that high-ranking Russian politicians, such as Dmitrii Medvedev, former president of Russia and deputy chairman of the Security Council, has endorsed the narrative that charges Ukraine with being a “Nazi” state that must undergo a “denazification” implemented by Russia (p. 5). Further, Dudko posits that “Nazi” has become a convenient term for Russia to apply to Ukrainian political opponents that it seeks to neutralize. For these authors, the label of “Nazi” is useful for Russia to justify the conquest of Ukraine.

According to Fortuin (2022) an important part of Russia's narrative that seeks to portray Ukraine as a fascist or Nazi state is accusing the Ukrainian state of perpetrating ethnic cleansing or even a genocide against ethnic Russians in Ukraine. Here, Russia adopts a narrative where it describes the democratically elected government of Ukraine as a "Nazi", "Russophobic" government that intends to ethnically cleanse the entire country (p. 330). Consequently, the Russian state, after invading Crimea in 2014, draws a red line, affirming that actions by the Ukrainian government it considered to advance said ethnic cleansing of ethnic Russians or Russian speakers would merit intervention. Fortuin points out that a similar political narrative was used by Russia in Georgia, a country which Foreign Minister Lavrov accused of ethnically cleansing Russians. Consequently, the Russian army invaded the South Caucasus country to "protect" the would-be victims (p. 329).

Overall, Fortuin (2022) concludes that Russia obfuscates the meaning of the term genocide, along with terms like "Nazi", by using these terms liberally against its opposition. This simultaneously justifies taking violent action against its opponents (i.e., Ukraine) while also protecting itself from critics that describe Russia as a state with fascist characteristics. Dudko (2022) shares this assessment, describing Russia's narrative around genocide and use of genocidal language as "two-pronged rhetoric" (p. 1).

For Dudko (2022), another relevant political narrative of the Russian state is to deny the existence of Ukraine as an organic nation. Dudko highlights that Putin has claimed that Ukraine is a "Soviet invention created by Vladimir Lenin" (p. 5). This statement has been made in addition to others that imply the Russian president denies Ukrainian nationhood, such as his assertion that Ukraine and Russia are one nation (under Russia) or his derision for the nationalisms that paved the way for the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Azarov et al., 2022). Indeed, Tolz and Hutchings (2023) argue that "the corollary of the absent Ukrainian nation is an illegitimate Ukrainian state" (p. 358). In addition, Russia has destroyed Ukrainian heritage sites in its invasion (Azarov et al., 2022).

On the other hand, there are scholars who share the Russian narrative that seeks to blame NATO for the 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukrainian territory. For example, Mearsheimer stresses that Russia invaded Ukraine because it needed to defend itself from NATO expansion (Mearsheimer, 2014). Consequently, he denies that the invasion is motivated by Russian imperialism and desire for conquest or the destruction of Ukraine. Mearsheimer's interpretation clashes with the opinions of authors like Tolz and Hutchings (2023) and Dudko (2022) who warn of expansionist and genocidal objectives and the rhetoric that supports these objectives.

Finally, Applebaum (2018) writes that Russia is an authoritarian regime where the entire state obeys the wishes of Putin, who has determined that an alternative political model in Ukraine is unacceptable, as it competes with his model. However, she adds that the Russian campaign does not stop in Ukraine but extends to a strategy that seeks to undermine Western democracies by using media such as Sputnik. This not only includes labeling neighbors, such as the Baltic states or Ukraine, as Western puppets with fascist sympathies, but also countries such as Germany as negative forces in the world (p. 29-30). Further, Applebaum argues that the Kremlin strategy is tailored for different audiences and aims to distract them and make them cynical.

3.3. The Ukraine War and the Discourse in South America

The reactions to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine from South American leaders have varied, as Stan and Tasente (2023) state in their analysis of online reaction to Ukraine from South America's presidents. On the one hand, Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva signaled neutrality by limiting his remarks to calls for negotiation and peace, though he drew criticism for suggesting that both Ukraine and Russia had decided to go to war, thereby placing the aggressor and the victim on the same footing (Alves & Hughes, 2023). Meanwhile, Peru's then president Pedro Castillo delegated communications to his ministry of foreign affairs, which condemned the use of force and supported territorial integrity while emphasizing the need for peace. Further, Chilean and Uruguayan former presidents Gabriel Boric and Luis Lacalle-Pou were less timid in their online comments condemning Russia's invasion, while Venezuela's Maduro took the opportunity to criticize the West.

Historically, according to Ortiz (2023), Moscow has exploited the anti-US sentiment in the region to push its interests. Namely, Russia has targeted discontents with the global order, presenting itself as an alternative to what it portrays as a US and Western led order. Further, Ortiz mentions that Russia's propaganda campaigns in Latin America increased with Russia's 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine. Moreover, Russia uses the anti-colonialist sentiment in Latin America to its advantage, which resonates with many people in the region. Ortiz states: "just as the Soviet Union did, Russia portrays itself as a benign or friendly alternative to the US and the existing world order, despite breaching the most basic principles of international law, such as nonintervention in sovereign countries' affairs and nonaggression" (p. 4).

In all, what Stan and Tasente (2023) reveal is that the South American political landscape is diverse, both online and in the real world. Overall, some governments have denounced Russian aggression (to varying degrees and in different tones), while a few support it. Further, Ortiz (2023) points out that Moscow has experience in

communicating its narratives in this region, and that it is aware of political sentiments that abound. All of this indicates that Russia knows that there is a volatile political landscape, where it can convince some players.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

4.1. Russia's Social Media Propaganda against Ukraine in Argentina

Through the platform CrowdTangle, it was possible to find and quantify Facebook and Instagram posts by Russian embassies in Argentina, Brazil, and Peru on the topic of the Ukraine War. Specifically, a series of key words were used to find posts about the war and the broader competition between the countries and their allies.

Starting with Argentina, between February 1st of 2022 and February 29th of 2024, the Russian embassy in Buenos Aires published 264 posts containing the word "Ukraine" on Facebook, where it had around 13,500 followers at the time. After Ukraine, the most prevalent key word was "West", appearing in 176 posts. Further, "NATO" and "United States" appeared in 75 and 60 posts respectively. The third most prevalent key word was "Nazi" or a variant of it, such as "Nazis" or "Nazism". These words were present in 85 posts, and, while they were not always used in reference to Ukraine, they were indeed used for this purpose most of the time. In fact, 58 of these 85 posts mentioned Ukraine, usually in the form of accusing Ukraine or its government of being Nazis or sympathizing with Nazism.

Moreover, other terms that appeared a significant number of times include neocolonialism, colonialism, colony, colonial, terrorist, terrorism, or variants of these. In any case, these terms appeared in Russian embassy in Argentina Facebook posts 44 times. Next, "genocide" appeared in 19 posts, usually in the form of accusing Ukraine of committing genocide against Russian speakers or people in the Donbas region. Furthermore, there were other terms that appeared in multiple posts, albeit in fewer posts than the other key words. For instance, the Russian embassy in Argentina posted on Facebook seven times about corruption. Of these seven posts, four posts mentioned both corruption and Ukraine, usually accusing Ukraine of being a corrupt state.

Regarding interactions, the posts on Facebook mentioning Ukraine garnered over 23,000 interactions, in the form of reactions (like, love, sad, angry, surprised, laughter), comments, and shares. Next, posts on NATO, the West, and the US, usually mentioning these entities in negative terms, produced over six thousand, twelve thousand, and four thousand interactions respectively.

On Instagram, the Russian embassy in Buenos Aires is also active, although it has a smaller following and fewer posts propagating Russia's main narratives on the

invasion of Ukraine. Further, the strategic narratives most prevalent on Facebook were also most prevalent on Instagram, generally. For instance, the key terms “West” and “Nazi” are in second and third place after “Ukraine”. Finally, considering that the Instagram page has fewer followers and posts, the engagement is lower than on Facebook, although posts including key words such as “Ukraine” and “West” do have over 10,000 interactions.

4.1.1. The Falkland Islands: Adapting Propaganda to the Local Context

In the case of the Russian embassy in Argentina, something that sets it apart is the mention of the Falkland Islands in the context of colonialism or neocolonialism and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In fact, in five Facebook posts between February 2022 and February 2024, the Russian embassy in Buenos Aires mentions the Falkland Islands alongside Ukraine and narratives on colonialism (and its variants such as neocolonialism), NATO, and the West. From these posts, the most successful in terms of engagements was published only a few days after the 2022 Russian offensive. The post from the 27th of February of 2022 garnered almost 420 interactions; specifically, it had about 240 reactions (mostly “like” or “love”), over 80 comments and over 90 “shares”.

In this post, the Russian embassy shares a statement from an official of the MERCOSUR parliament, Marcelo Brignoni, who claims “what is happening in Ukraine is what happened in Libya, Iraq, Syria, Yugoslavia—especially in Yugoslavia—and in many other countries in our regions”. He adds “the difference is that this time NATO was not able to impose its will like in *Malvinas* [Falkland Islands].” To conclude he affirms that NATO’s “idea of building a military base in Ukraine”, which is supposedly meant to destabilize Russia, has failed due to the Russian invasion.

In this 2022 post, there are several strategic narratives of the Russian state at once, like the anti-Western and anti-American narrative mentioned by Ortiz (2023), who argues that this narrative targets the discontents of the US and Western order. While the US and the West are not explicitly mentioned in this post, NATO, which is one of the targets of Brignoni’s critique, is made up of the US, Canada, and other Western European countries (among others). Indeed, the post portrays NATO as a nefarious force, which aligns with the anti-NATO narrative.

As Ortiz (2023) notes, the Soviet Union and Russia have long exploited Latin America’s negative experiences with the United States and Western Europe by highlighting past colonial or neocolonial actions. The post references the Falkland Islands, which are disputed between Argentina and the United Kingdom after the

latter repelled an Argentine military operation in 1982. Marcelo Brignoni, quoted by the Russian embassy, blames NATO for “imposing its will” on Argentina because the UK—one of its members—“occupies” territory Argentina claims. The post suggests that, unlike in Argentina’s case, NATO cannot impose its will in Ukraine because Russia is preventing it from turning Ukraine into a military base. In this framing, Russia is portrayed as a defender against US- or NATO-led Western colonialism, and the embassy reinforces this narrative by invoking the authority of Brignoni, an Argentine voice aligned with Russia’s anti-Western discourse.

4.2. Russia’s Social Media Propaganda against Ukraine in Brazil

Overall, the social media posts of the Russian embassy in Brazil on Facebook and Instagram follow the narratives of the Russian embassy in Argentina, although there are some differences. Again, the most prevalent key words present after “Ukraine” are “West” and “Nazi” (and its variations). These are followed by key words “United States” and “NATO”. To illustrate, on the 9th of February of 2024, an Instagram post from the Russian embassy in Brazil promoted the interview between Putin and American pundit Tucker Carlson, where the Russian head of state took the opportunity to spread many key messages, including denying the existence of Ukraine as an organic nation, portraying Ukrainians as Nazis, and blaming the West and NATO for the war.

On February 24, 2022—the first day of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine—the Embassy of Russia in Brazil’s Facebook page published Putin’s speech announcing the “special military operation”, for its 23,000 followers. This turned out to be the page’s best-performing post on the topic of Ukraine. In the speech, Putin speaks of the “irresponsible Western politicians” who have supposedly threatened Russia and insisted on the “eastward expansion of NATO”. This fits with the anti-Western, anti-NATO narratives identified by Ortiz (2023) as well as the narrative supported by Mearsheimer which seeks to blame NATO for the war. Putin continues by claiming that the problems of Ukraine from 2014 onwards are a result of a “coup” (referring to the removal of Russia-friendly Viktor Yanukovich). Then, he accuses the Ukrainian state of committing “genocide” in the Donbas region. He adds that Ukraine is a country of Neo-Nazis who do not want the people of Crimea and Sevastopol to “freely” reunite with Russia. He then asserts that Russia must launch an operation, in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter, to defend the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic and the so-called Luhansk People’s Republic from the “Kiev regime”.

The key words and narratives in this speech align with the strategic narrative identified by Fortuin (2022), which consists of Russia proclaiming itself as the saviour

of Russian speakers in neighboring countries. Further, it also mirrors the strategic narrative that is employed by Moscow, according to Tolz and Hutchings (2023) and Dudko (2022), which claims that Ukraine is a country with a prevalent Nazism problem that needs to be accordingly “denazified” by Russia. Tolz and Hutchings, and Dudko hold that this is a narrative employed to create a villain in Ukraine and justify violence against the Ukrainian state and people.

4.3. Russia’s Social Media Propaganda against Ukraine in Peru

The Facebook page of the Russian embassy in Peru, with about 27,000 followers at the time, published, between February 1 of 2022 and February 29 of 2024, 369 posts with the word “Ukraine”. Over 25 months, the Russian embassy in Lima posted about Ukraine nearly once every two days.

Overall, the most prominent key words in posts by the Russian embassy in Peru follow a pattern like that observed for the Russian embassy in Argentina. “Ukraine” appears most frequently, followed by “West”, with “Nazi” ranking third. However, the use of “Nazi”-related terms differs somewhat between the two cases. Whereas posts from the embassy in Argentina most often explicitly linked these terms to Ukraine, the Russian embassy in Lima was less explicit. Although such terms appeared in 111 posts, only 43 of them contained a direct reference to Ukraine. In other instances, the term “Nazi” appeared in alternative contexts, such as commemorations of the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. “NATO” ranked as the fourth most prominent key word, followed by “United States” in fifth place. As in the Argentine case, references to “terrorism” and “neocolonialism” appeared with comparable frequency: “terrorism” and “terrorist” were present in 19 posts, while “neocolonialism”, “colonialism”, and related variants appeared 16 times.

One post also referenced a conference held at the Russian cultural centre in Lima, Casa Rusa, where Russia’s ambassador and other participants discussed the “neocolonialism” of the collective “West” in Ukraine. This suggests that the centre functions not only as a venue for cultural activities, such as promoting Russian language and art, but also as a platform for messaging directed against Ukraine and its allies. As in the Argentine case, “genocide” followed the key words in terms of prevalence in the embassy’s Facebook posts, while references to “corruption” were primarily used to portray Ukraine as a corrupt country.² The embassy’s Instagram posts displayed key words and narratives broadly like those found on Facebook. However, the embassy’s

² While the Russian government seeks to portray Ukraine as an exceptionally corrupt state, the Corruption Perceptions Index (2025) ranks Russia as a country with more prevalent corruption than Ukraine.

activity on Instagram was more limited: the number of posts was lower, the follower base smaller, and levels of interaction generally considerably lower than on Facebook.

Russia's Embassy in Lima Propagates the "Russia as a Victim" Narrative

In Peru, Russia's embassy has, at least in one Facebook post, shared the narrative of Russia being a victim of "Russophobia". This post shares an article written by Peruvian pundit Ricardo Sanchez Serra, who portrays Russia as being 'unfairly' treated, but ultimately prevailing. The post, which garnered an above-average 401 interactions, reports on the attempted cancellation of a Russian musical event in Lima. Here, Sanchez Serra writes that the Ukrainian embassy pressured Lima's mayor to call for the cancelling of the cultural event, but that it was ultimately carried out. This, in the words of Sanchez Serra, represented an unacceptable effort by the Ukrainian embassy to suppress Russian cultural expression, thereby promoting "Russophobia". He adds that this behaviour represents an outrageous intervention by the Ukrainians in the internal affairs of another country. In this context, it is worth mentioning that in 2023, Sanchez Serra received the "Honest Vision" award in Moscow for his "impartial" coverage of Russia (La Razon, 2023). Further, it is worth noting that, according to the CrowdTangle search, Sanchez Serra was cited in 12 Russian embassy in Peru Facebook posts during the 25 months between February 1 of 2022 and February 29 of 2024.

Overall, the post and article shared by the Russian embassy in Lima attempt to portray Russia as a victim of irrational hatred or "Russophobia". While Fortuin (2022) and others write about the strategic narrative that seeks to portray Russian speakers (as a linguistic minority) in Ukraine as victims, this narrative illustrates the Russian state and its representatives (cultural in this case) as victims. In this case, the would-be victims are the Russian musical band and the Russian embassy that supported them, who almost had their event cancelled.

4.4. Analysis of the Content of Russian Embassy Social Media in Argentina, Brazil, and Peru

First, having presented the data collected on the activities of the Russian embassies in Buenos Aires, Brasilia, and Lima, it is possible to make several observations. In all three countries, since the subject is the Ukraine war, the key word "Ukraine" was the most used in the posts researched. While not surprising in terms of prevalence, this does show that in all three cases (Argentina, Brazil, and Peru), the Russian embassies are talking about Ukraine, a country Russia is invading and occupying, openly and actively. They are not trying to avoid the subject but are employing strategic narratives to justify Russia's invasion. This aligns with the general Russian strategy crafted

in Moscow, which, as Fortuin (2022), and Tolz and Hutchings (2023) argue, actively tries to justify the invasion.

Further, a constant in all three countries is that the “Nazi” narrative is one of the most prevalent narratives used by Russian embassies on social media in Argentina, Brazil, and Peru. However, it is worth mentioning that the terms “Nazi”, “Nazis” or “Nazism” are not always used explicitly in reference to Ukraine. In many posts, the “Nazi” terms are used to highlight Moscow’s role in the WWII, portraying itself as the principal force that defeated the Nazis (which it did with the help of its former Western allies). Indeed, this narrative of Russia being the victor over Nazi Germany is useful to the strategic narrative of Russia’s crusade to “denazify” Ukraine.³ Further, in all three cases, the Russian embassy in each country has made a significant number of posts where it is using these terms to portray Ukraine as a Nazi or Nazi-friendly country. Overall, in the posts where Ukraine and Nazis are mentioned, the strategic narrative aims to justify the Russian invasion of an independent state as a righteous battle against “Nazis” in Ukraine.

4.4.1. A Brief Denial of an Imminent Invasion

While some strategic narratives from Moscow have been a constant between 2022 and 2024 (and before), others have a more particular timing. One short-lived narrative is the denial of the possibility of the 2022 offensive, weeks before it happened. For instance, the Russian embassy in Lima posted on Facebook on the 15th of February 2022, sharing an interview from Peru’s *La República* newspaper with a Sputnik columnist who ridiculed the idea of an imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine.

In Spanish, the quote reads: “the environment in Russia is enormously different than the alarmism in some [American] and European newspapers, because it’s there that a bellicose environment is promoted”. Similarly, the Russian embassy, through its Facebook page, shared a quote from its Twitter account, where it criticized Western journalists of trying to convince the world that Russia would attack Ukraine.

While the posts from February 13 and 15 are the only explicit denial of an imminent invasion, other posts between the first day of February 2022 and the day of the 2022 offensive mentioned the tension between Ukraine and Russia, sometimes hinting at a supposed Russian willingness to negotiate. On February 22, two days before the “special military operation” began, the Russian embassy posted three times on Facebook about Ukraine. In one of these posts, once again citing Sputnik, the Russian

³ While the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) defeated Nazi Germany along with the allies in 1945, it initially invaded Poland in 1939, at the same time Hitler did, starting the Second World War.

embassy shared a quote affirming that “the real friend of Ukraine is Russia”. Later that day, the embassy shared an interview of the Russian ambassador in Peru, who appeared to shift from a denial to a warning, stating that “if Ukraine does not use force in independent territories [Donetsk and Luhansk] there won't be war”. The denials from the Russian embassy in Peru on its social media platforms ended after Russian troops attacked Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the Russian embassies in Brazil and Argentina did not share the denials of an imminent invasion on their social media pages during the weeks before the “special military operation”. While the Russian embassy in Lima disseminated the Kremlin denials of an imminent attack, the embassies in Buenos Aires and Brasilia adopted a strategy of relative silence on the topic.

4.4.2. Ukraine as a “Terrorist” State

Another narrative employed by Moscow's embassies seeks to portray Ukraine as a “terrorist” state. In these posts, the Russian embassies label Ukraine as a terrorist state for a range of incidents, including Ukrainian retaliatory air strikes in the Russian Belgorod region. For instance, in December of 2023, the Russian embassy in Argentina posted about Ukrainian strikes in Belgorod.

The post described the strikes on Belgorod as a “terrorist” attack by the “Kyiv regime”, portraying the Ukrainian government as “inhumane” and “Nazi” in nature. It also blamed countries of the European Union, arguing that their provision of weapons to Ukraine following Russia's large-scale invasion made them responsible for the attack. The post therefore combines several recurring narratives: the “Nazi” narrative, the anti-West narrative, and, more notably, the attempt to portray Ukraine as a terrorist regime even though it was responding to Russia's invasion. It is also worth noting that the Russian embassy in Lima published an almost identical Facebook post on the same date. One month later, the Russian embassy in Brazil made similar accusations on Facebook.

5. CONCLUSION

Applebaum (2018), Azarov et al. (2023), Dudko (2022), Fortuin (2022), Ortiz (2023), Tolz and Hutchings (2023), among others, identify several strategic narratives employed by the Russian state to justify its invasion of Ukraine. One set of narratives seeks to delegitimize Ukraine by portraying it as a Nazi or fascist state that poses a threat to Russians and Russian speakers. Another narrative accuses Ukraine of carrying out “terrorist” attacks within Russia after Kyiv chose to defend itself militarily. A further narrative denies the existence of Ukraine as an organic nation,

thereby questioning its legitimacy as a sovereign state. Additionally, Russian strategic narratives also target actors beyond Ukraine, particularly NATO and the collective “West”, blaming NATO, Western countries, and the United States for the outbreak and continuation of the war.

Moreover, the search for key words on CrowdTangle confirmed that the strategic narratives identified by the scholars are indeed propagated by the social media accounts of the Russian embassies in Argentina, Brazil, and Peru. In all three cases, the diplomatic missions associated Ukraine with Nazism, fascism, genocide, and terrorism, while the anti-Western, anti-NATO, anti-American, anti-colonialist, and anti-imperialist narratives were also employed in the context of this anti-Ukrainian campaign. A notable exception is the narrative regarding the existence of Ukraine as an organic nation or a legitimate state. The Russian embassies in Argentina, Brazil, and Peru generally did not use social media to openly suggest to their audiences that Ukraine should not exist, which Russian officials and state TV personalities have suggested when speaking to other audiences.

Turning to the operational component, the key word search confirms the prominence of the strategic narratives identified above. The prevalence of these narratives on social media (Facebook and Instagram) was broadly similar across the three countries. Aside from the expected prominence of “Ukraine”, the most frequent key words were “West” and “Nazi” (including variants such as “Nazism”). The embassies also frequently posted content criticizing NATO and the United States, with the terms “NATO” and “United States” generally ranking third or fourth in frequency. In addition, the search confirmed the presence of the “genocide” and “corruption” narratives, although these appeared less frequently.

Another important aspect of the operational component is the adaptation of the strategic narratives to the national audiences. In this sense, an example of the adaptation of a strategic narrative to the audience is that of the colonialism and imperialism narrative to Argentina. In this case, the Russian embassy made posts that mentioned the Falklands War and made a connection to Ukraine. Essentially, it told its Argentine audience that Western countries and NATO are nefarious actors and common enemies, considering that the UK (a NATO member, Western country, and US ally) fought the Argentines in the 1980s, while Russia is fighting the same Western powers in Ukraine, which is supposedly used by NATO and the West to undermine the Russian Federation. Likewise, considering Ortiz’s (2023) analysis of Russia using anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism to appeal to sentiments historically present in Latin American, it is evident that this tactic continues to be used in South America today and has been adapted to the Ukraine invasion debate.

In addition, while discussing the adaptation of a message to target audiences, it would be remiss not to mention public opinion. According to Pew Research and the *Latinobarómetro*, general perceptions of Russia are not positive. Also, trust in the leadership of Putin is lower than trust in Zelensky. In all, this can help understand why Russia is using as many channels as possible, including social media, to fight an uphill public opinion battle which has only become more difficult with its 2022 large-scale assault on Ukraine. Further, Latin America has a varied political landscape with some politicians who support Russia (i.e. Nicolas Maduro) and others who are relatively neutral. Consequently, Russia can try to influence some governments directly or indirectly (by influencing the public).

In terms of communication channels, Facebook was generally the most used and most engaging platform among the two social media platforms analyzed. However, the Instagram account of the Russian embassy in Brazil has a considerably larger following than those of the embassies in Argentina and Peru. Conversely, the Russian embassy in Peru had the largest Facebook following in absolute terms, which is notable given Peru's smaller population compared to Brazil and Argentina. The analysis of posts also revealed additional narratives. For example, the Russian embassy in Lima decried "Russophobia" after the Ukrainian embassy attempted to have a 2023 Russian cultural event cancelled, illustrating a "Russia as victim" narrative; the post linked to an article in which a Peruvian pundit made these accusations. Similar practices appear in other posts sharing interviews or articles from RT or Sputnik, reflecting an operational strategy in which Russian embassies rely on external commentators to reinforce their messaging. This aligns with the "authority effect" described by Cull (2019), whereby an actor strengthens the credibility of its message by citing individuals perceived as having greater authority or expertise.

Furthermore, another noteworthy detail is the timing of some narratives. For example, there was a short-lived denial of the possibility of invading Ukraine by the Russian government. Indeed, the Russian embassy in Lima decided to share this denial in the first weeks of February, before Russia invaded on February 24, 2022. Naturally, this denial could not continue after Russia invaded. In addition, it is notable that only the Russian embassy in Lima replicated this narrative, while the embassies in Argentina and Brazil stayed quiet. This likely speaks to the operational reality of embassies, where public diplomacy officers and ambassadors choose how to adapt the messages their state wants them to share. Here, it appears the ambassador in Lima thought the denial worthwhile, while the ambassadors in Buenos Aires and Brasilia chose not to share this on social media. Finally, another example of specific timing was that of the "Ukraine as a terrorist state" strategic narrative, where the Russian embassies began to share this talking point after Ukraine retaliated.

Overall, evidence collected during the first two years of Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine indicates that the Russian state, acting through its embassies, has conducted a social media propaganda campaign in South America. As seen in Argentina, Brazil, and Peru, this campaign appears intended to undermine Ukraine and its Western allies in the eyes of local populations. The main conceptual component of this campaign is to paint Ukraine as a Nazi, fascist, genocidal, terrorist, corrupt state that is useful to the interest of the "colonialist" and "imperialist" US, NATO, and the "West". These messages sometimes adapt to experiences specific to a country, such as Argentina's Falkland Islands dispute. Further, Russian embassies use pundits to lend more credibility to the strategic narratives that they share. In all, the propaganda effort on Facebook and Instagram alone in Argentina, Brazil and Peru has produced hundreds of thousands of interactions. As such, while the strategic narratives are not unique in content, there is a high-intensity propaganda campaign, considering the frequency of social media posts and the number of individuals reached. While, in the context of populations numbering in the millions this may not appear significant at first glance, the reality is that Russian embassies use other channels, such as newspapers and other forms of traditional and digital media, to share their strategic narratives to justify the invasion of Ukraine.

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