

COMPARING DOMESTIC RUSSIAN AND CHINESE MEDIA MESSAGING ABOUT UKRAINE

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Semantic Visions (SV) has conducted a comparative assessment of Russian and Chinese media messaging about the war in Ukraine, identifying key themes in Russia’s propaganda and disinformation strategy for domestic audiences, and evaluating the amplification of these narratives by Chinese (PRC) media. The analysis covers five topics: 1) the disinformation campaign portraying Ukraine as a Nazi/fascist state, 2) contrasting use of language referring to war or military invasion versus “special military operation”, 3) NATO, 4) the Bucha massacre, and 5) disinformation about Ukraine’s alleged development of biological weapons.

*SV’s military-grade OSINT software specializes in big data semantic analysis and collects 90% of the world’s URL-based meaningful text content across 12 languages. The present analysis of Russian media coverage drew on more than 18.6 million news articles with .ru domains published online over the last year (26 June 2021 to 25 June 2022), derived from approximately 24,500 Russian-language sources. Of these, a total of **1.45 million articles were substantively related to Ukraine (7.8%)**. The Chinese (PRC) analysis drew on approximately 2.35 million news articles with .cn domains published over the same period, of which **42,800 pertained to Ukraine (2%)**. This proportional disparity reflects the contrasting significance of the war for Moscow versus Beijing. In absolute terms, total Russian media coverage about Ukraine over the past 12 months is nearly 34 times higher than total Chinese coverage.*

Our findings verify a significant Russian (dis)information offensive since the invasion on 24 February to justify the “special military operation” with domestic audiences and galvanize public support. Particularly intense is the campaign to dehumanize Ukrainians through false portrayals of Nazism, which constitutes the central component of the Kremlin’s domestic media strategy. Between 24 February and 25 June 2022, a full 15% of articles about Ukraine also include false characterizations of Nazism or fascism.

Officially, the PRC has pursued a policy of neutrality on the war, despite a sweeping Sino-Russian statement of cooperation announced prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, on February 4, 2022. However, while the Chinese (PRC) media coverage of the war is low-volume by comparison to the Russian, our analysis confirms the PRC’s consistent amplification of the Kremlin’s messaging across all five topics, often with rapid (even same-day) reaction time.

1. DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN PORTRAYING UKRAINE AS NAZI/FASCIST

Fabricated allegations of neo-Nazism and fascism have been a central component of Russia’s information warfare against Ukraine for many years, notably dating back to the 2013-14 Maidan protests and the post-Maidan government headed by Petro Poroshenko. The Kremlin framed Ukraine’s pro-democratic, pro-European revolution as a ‘fascist coup’ supported by Western powers (namely the United States) to install a ‘Russophobic Nazi regime’ that threatened

Russia and terrorized ethnic Russians living in Ukraine.

This framing was used, both domestically and internationally, to justify Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas as legitimate ‘defensive’ operations to safeguard Russia’s national security and protect endangered Russian-speakers in Ukraine. Domestically, the Kremlin’s obsession with ‘Nazism’ is a core element of

its historical revisionism and national myth-making around “The Great Patriotic War” (WWII).¹

Despite its longstanding presence in Russian coverage about Ukraine, the ‘Nazi Ukraine’ narrative spiked dramatically on February 24, 2022—the day of Russia’s invasion—with nearly 2,900 articles published that day (a nearly six-fold increase of the daily count of articles in the months preceding the war). Daily coverage invoking this narrative fluctuated from approximately 800-1700 daily articles throughout March and April, approximately 550-1300 during the month of May, and 400-850 during the first two weeks of June. By contrast, in the months prior to the invasion, the daily publication rate of relevant articles ranged from 80-250.

Central to this coverage is the exaggeration of the role and influence of 1) the Azov Battalion and 2) Stepan Bandera. The Azov Battalion is a far-right militia founded in 2014 and subsequently incorporated into Ukraine’s National Guard. Together with its political offshoot, the Azov movement, it has a past record of racist and neo-Nazi views, resulting in hate crime investigations against some former members. More recently, Azov has become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance to Russia’s invasion. A generous estimate places total membership at less than 10,000, with only 1,000-3,000 active members of the Battalion.²

Capitalizing on its controversial history, the Kremlin has made Azov into the chief bogeyman of ‘Ukrainian fascism’, vastly exaggerating and distorting its influence. Russian media describe the Azov Battalion as a widely popular neo-Nazi paramilitary

group that has infiltrated all branches of the Ukrainian state, including the military. Similarly, the Ukrainian ultranationalist Stepan Bandera, who collaborated with Nazi Germany in the 1940s, is invoked as proof of Ukrainians’ contemporaneous sympathy for fascism (hence the slur “Banderas” or “Banderites”).

Meanwhile, Figure 1.2 confirms China’s amplification of the Kremlin’s framing and its justification of the war against Ukraine. Despite no history of references to ‘Nazi Ukraine’ in Chinese media (based on data since 2018), usage of the narrative spiked on February 24 thanks to immediate adoption of the Kremlin’s language to report news of the invasion. The Chinese media’s subsequent propagation of the ‘Nazi Ukraine’ narrative has also focused on exaggerating the influence of the Azov Battalion.³

Despite the parallel trends, it is important to note the major difference in scale of coverage: between February 24 and June 24, Russian media usage of the ‘Nazi Ukraine’ narrative exceeded 119,000 articles (or 15% of all coverage about Ukraine) whereas Chinese media usage came just shy of 2,000 articles (6% of all Chinese coverage about Ukraine).

Based on SV’s historical data and monitoring (dating to 2014), this level of emphasis on a specific disinformation narrative over a multi-month period is uniquely high for Russian domestic media. Accordingly, the campaign to portray Ukraine as a fascist or neo-Nazi country should be understood as the central component of the Kremlin’s domestic strategy to justify the war and maintain popular support.

¹ “Nazi” framing of the Kremlin’s opponents, aimed at destroying their reputations and livelihoods, is one of the oldest tactics of Soviet disinformation. The strategy was instituted personally by Joseph Stalin after World War II to consolidate his power domestically and undermine notable international opposition to his regime. See e.g.: Pacepa & Rychlak (2013, WND Books). *Disinformation: Former Spy Chief Reveals Secret Strategies for Undermining Freedom, Attacking Religion, and Promoting Terrorism*.

²www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/ukraine/2022/04/why-focusing-on-the-azov-battalion-means-we-are-falling-into-putins-trap

Ukraine’s far right is marginal by comparison to most Western democracies: in the 2019 Ukrainian parliamentary elections, far right parties combined won only 2% of the national vote.

³ Also see: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-nazification-of-ukraine-in-the-chinese-information-space/>

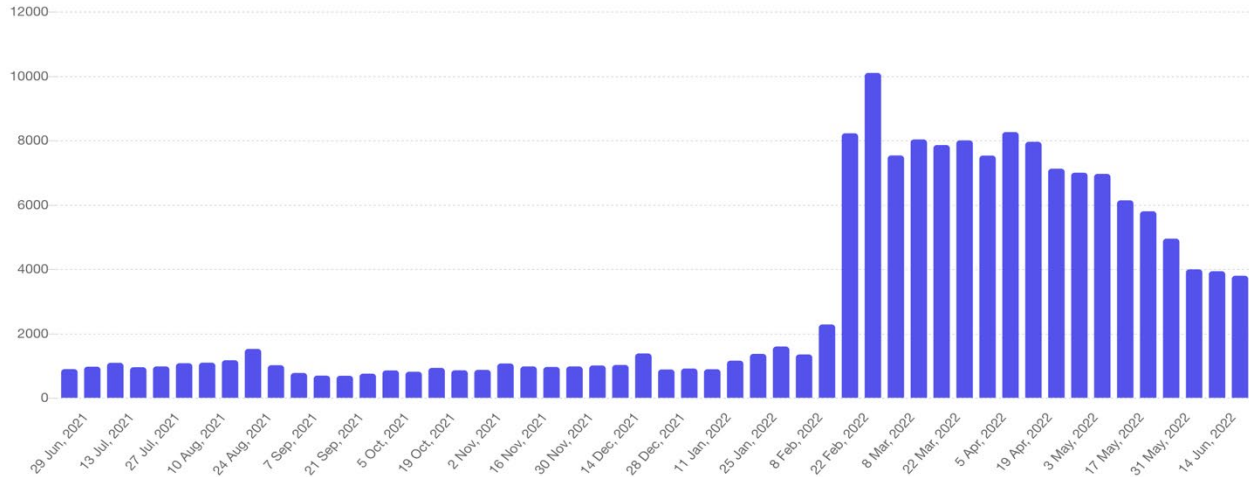


Figure 1.1. Russian (.ru) media coverage invoking allegations of fascism and neo-Nazism in Ukraine, including references to the Azov Battalion (159,606 articles from 6.26.2021-6.24.2022)

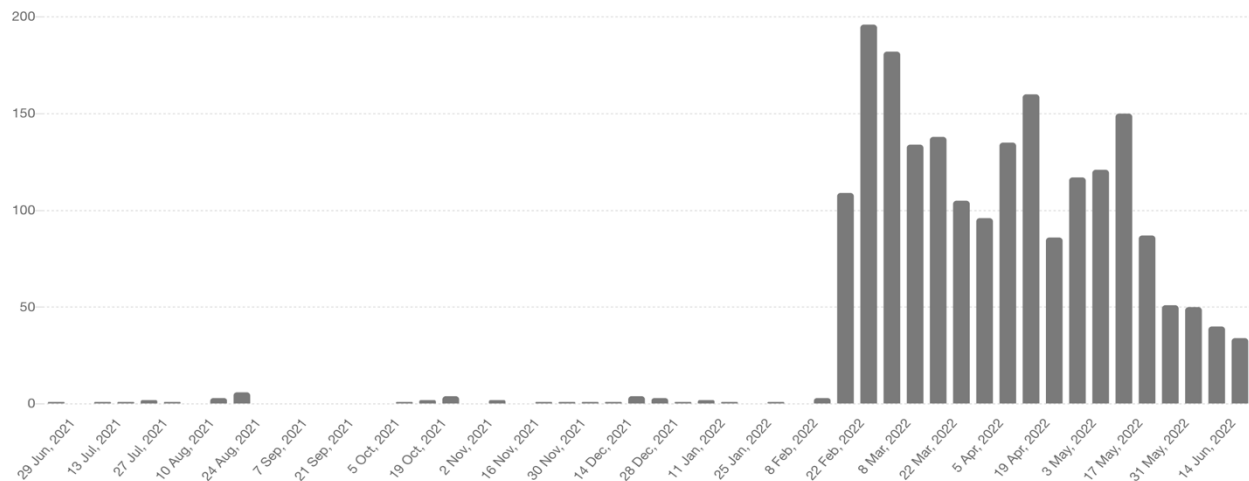


Figure 1.2. Chinese (.cn) media coverage invoking allegations of fascism and neo-Nazism in Ukraine, including references to the Azov Battalion (2,034 articles from 6.26.2021-6.24.2022)

2. CONTRASTING USAGE OF TERMS “WAR” AND “MILITARY INVASION” VERSUS “SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION”

Mentions of war or military invasion were wholly absent from Russian domestic media coverage prior to mid-November 2021.⁴ Throughout the winter months, coinciding with Russia’s military buildup on the Ukrainian border and the Kremlin’s disinformation campaign alleging NATO provocation in Ukraine, references to war, invasion, and military conflict increased,

culminating the week before February 24 with approximately 200-500 articles per day. By February 22, that count dropped to just 100 articles; by February 26, it was 45.

On February 24, the Kremlin announced its invasion of Ukraine as a “special military operation” to “demilitarize and de-Nazify” the country. In remarkable contrast to the limited

⁴ This data is based on complex semantic definitions for terms “war”, “invasion”, and “military conflict”, yielding

results that are both more detailed and more precise than a standard keyword search.

usage of ‘war’ language, references to the “special military operation” as the Kremlin’s preferred terminology featured in more than 5,100 articles published on February 24 alone.

This dual trend reflects the government’s extreme censorship of independent reporting about the war in Ukraine, including criminalizing its description as a war or invasion.⁵ Indeed, since March, daily articles containing any mention of war average less than 20 per day, while those discussing the “special military operation” averaged about 2,000 per day in April, down to about 1,500 in May and 1,000 in June. (This decline

reflects the overall decrease in Russian domestic media attention to developments in Ukraine.)

The Chinese media’s near-instant adoption of the Kremlin’s “special military operation” terminology is one of the clearest examples of its promotion of pro-Kremlin disinformation and propaganda, even as Beijing attempts to toe a neutral line on Ukraine. Since February 24, the sum of Chinese media coverage referencing the “special military operation” is 32 times higher than coverage referring to war or invasion.

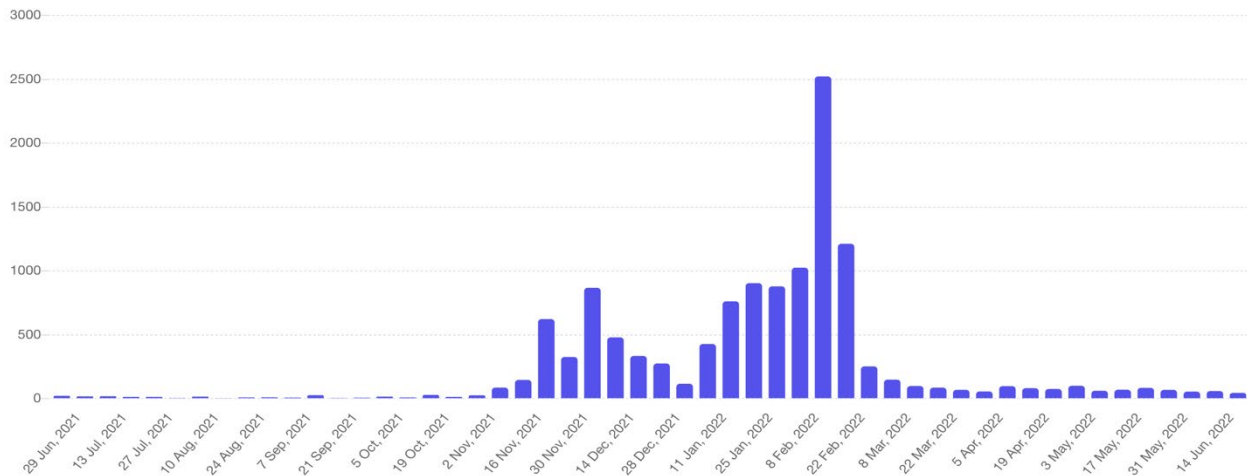


Figure 2.1. Russian (.ru) media coverage referring to “war” and “military invasion” in context of Ukraine (12,787 articles from 6.26.2021-6.24.2022)

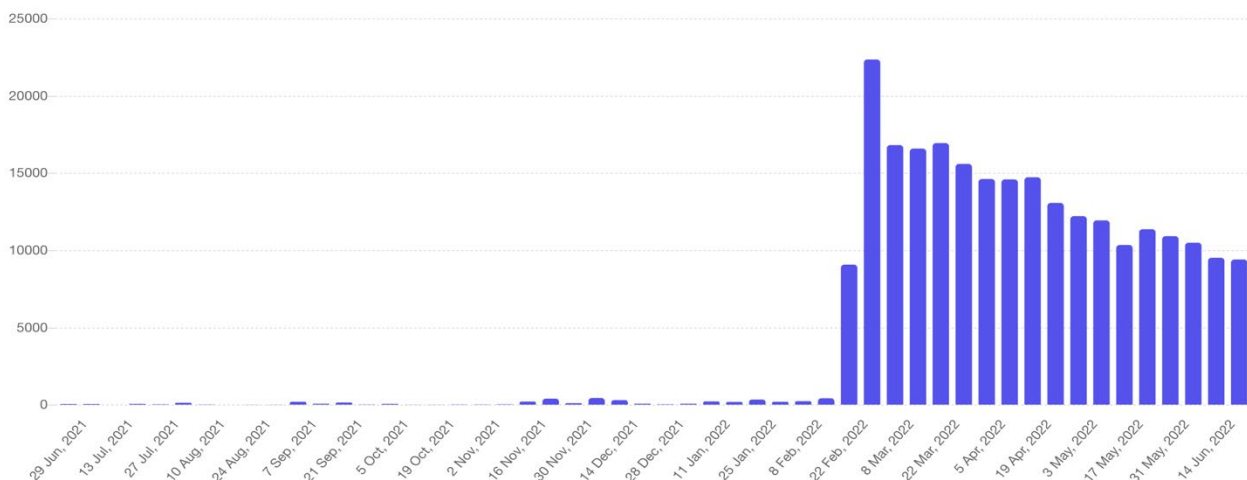


Figure 2.2. Russian (.ru) media coverage invoking the Kremlin-mandated terminology of “special military operation” (245,885 articles from 6.26.2021-6.24.2022)

⁵ On the Russian government’s censorship measures about the war in Ukraine, see:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/07/russia-criminalizes-independent-war-reporting-anti-war-protests>

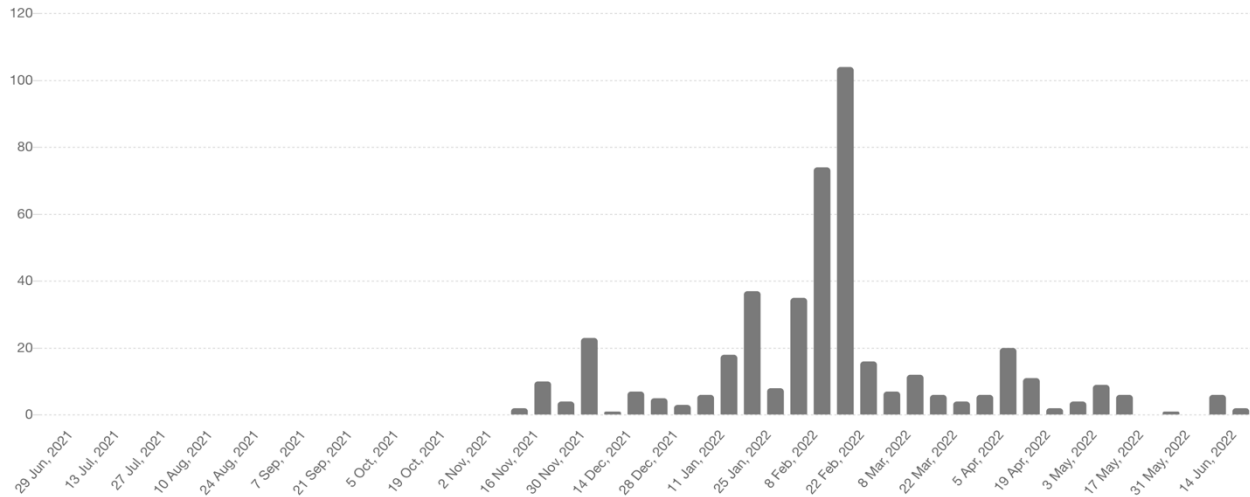


Figure 2.3. Chinese (.cn) media coverage referring to “war” and “military invasion” in context of Ukraine (449 articles from 6.26.2021-6.24.2022)

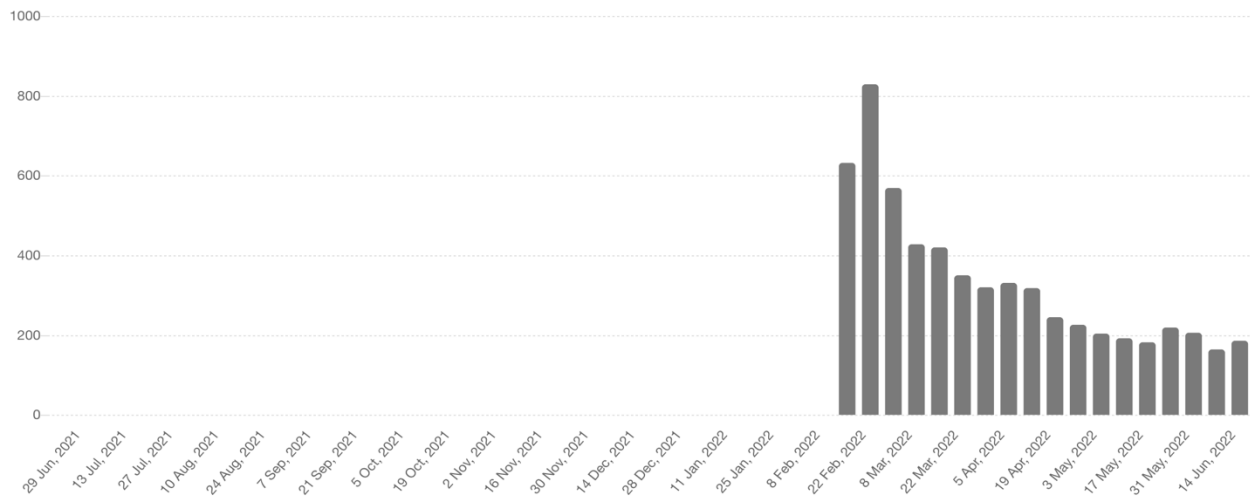


Figure 2.4. Chinese (.cn) media coverage using the Kremlin-mandated terminology of “special military operation” (6,039 articles from 6.26.2021-6.24.2022)

3. NATO BLAME GAME

In the months leading up to the February 24 invasion of Ukraine, Russian domestic media messaging focused heavily on NATO, pushing disinformation about its alleged subversive activities in Ukraine and threat to Russian national security interests.

While the Kremlin’s military mobilization on the Ukrainian border began in November 2021 (following an earlier mobilization in March-April 2021), the campaign to blame

NATO and the United States for escalating tensions in Ukraine began several months earlier, in August and September 2021, as shown in Figure 3.1. Notably, this negative focus on NATO and the United States surpassed hostile rhetoric against Ukraine until the day of the invasion (see Figure 1.1 above for comparison; the ‘Nazi’-centered disinformation campaign against Ukraine began only in February 2022).

Disinformation about NATO and its supposed “encirclement” of Russia has been an enduring feature of the Kremlin’s information strategy, both domestically – to foment fear of an external enemy and thus bolster support for the regime – and internationally, to undermine Western support for NATO.⁶ The Kremlin took this a step further in November and December 2021, using its military mobilization and the threat of war in Ukraine as a bargaining chip to demand security guarantees from NATO and the United States. In mid-December 2021, Russia issued a sweeping list of demands that it said must be met to defuse the situation in Ukraine, including a ban on Ukraine entering NATO and a major troop and weapons reduction on NATO’s eastern flank. Though nearly all of these demands were non-starters for the alliance, Putin reiterated them personally at his annual press conference on December 23, 2021. In this context, the Kremlin and Russian state media framed the tensions over Ukraine as a Russia-NATO security crisis, in which Russia was simply endeavoring to protect its core security interests against NATO aggression and expansionism.

The pre-invasion emphasis on NATO more so than Ukraine also makes sense retrospectively, given what we now know about the

Kremlin’s maximalist plans to take over all of Ukraine in a so-called ‘national liberation’. The Kremlin expected rapid military success – Kyiv falling within a matter of days; Russian soldiers facing little local resistance and even being welcomed as ‘liberators’ – which it planned to sell as a ‘brotherly reunion’ between Russians and Ukrainians. In preparation for this outcome, the domestic information strategy prioritized attacks against NATO. It was only when the invasion did not go according to plan and met a formidable Ukrainian defense that the Kremlin and Russian domestic media switched gears to a wholesale disinformation campaign targeting Ukraine. While disinformation about NATO has persisted since the invasion, the quantity is a fraction (ranging from one quarter to one third) of the current “Nazi”-focused campaign against Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Chinese media first began amplifying Russian claims about NATO escalation in Ukraine at the beginning of December 2021. This coverage reached a crescendo in February 2022, corresponding with Russia’s invasion, and has decreased to nominal levels as of June 2022. For the three-month period from December 2021 through February 2022, Kremlin-aligned disinformation and tendentious rhetoric about NATO constituted 13.6% of overall Chinese media coverage related to Ukraine.

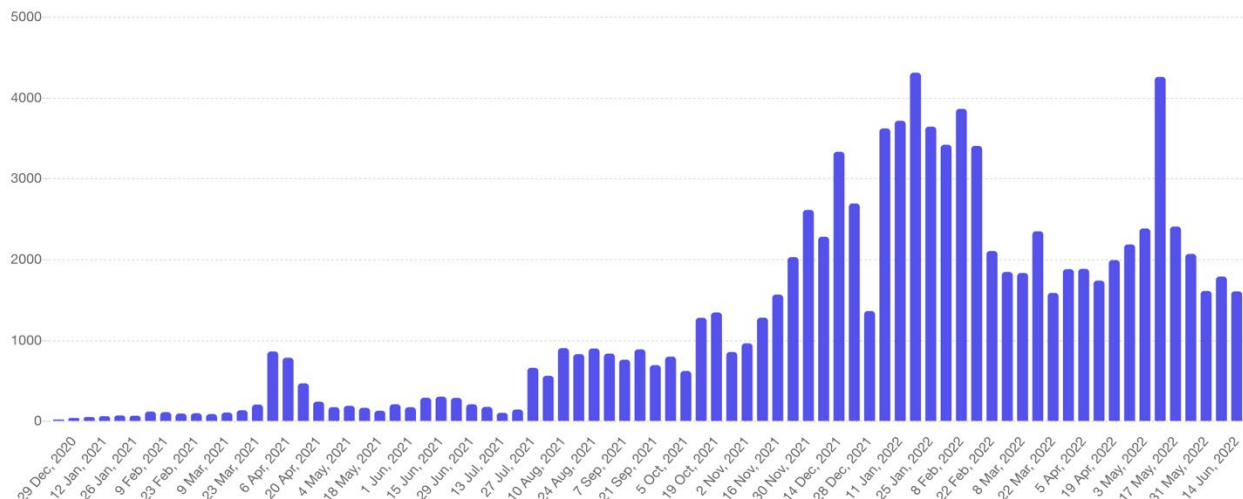


Figure 3.1. Russian (.ru) media coverage tendentially framing the conflict in Ukraine as escalation by NATO (97,964 articles from 12.25.2020-6.23.2022)

⁶ Russian disinformation about NATO is well-documented, including by NATO itself. See for example:

https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/10/pdf/2110-russia-top5-myths-en.pdf

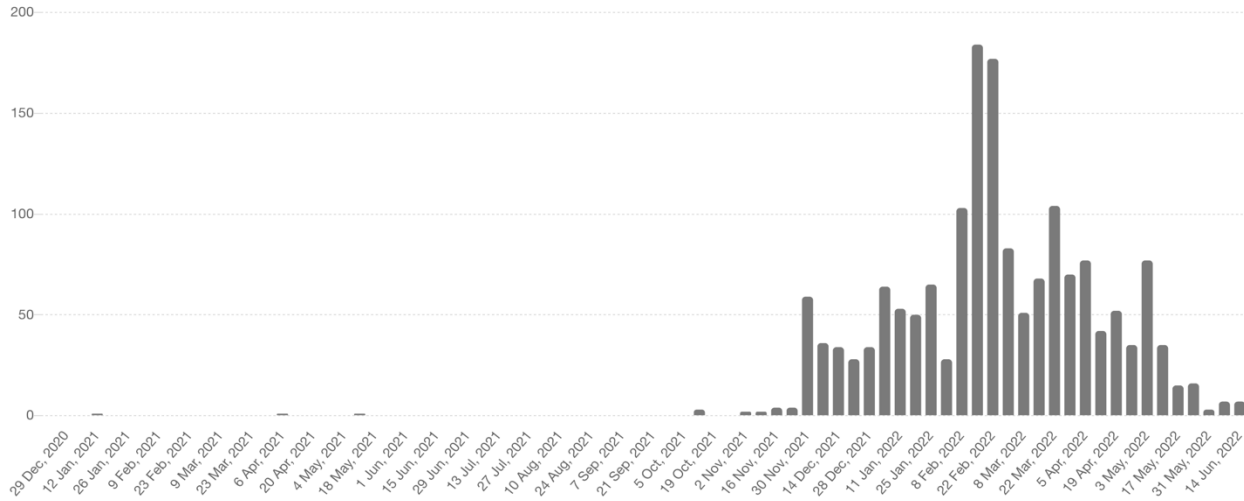


Figure 3.2. Chinese (.cn) media coverage tendentially framing the conflict in Ukraine as escalation by NATO (1,675 articles from 12.15.2020-6.23.2022)

4. DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN ABOUT THE BUCHA MASSACRE

Evidence of Russian war crimes in Bucha first began to emerge between April 1 and 2, following the withdrawal of Russian troops from the area between March 31 and April 1. However, in Russian domestic media, there was no reference to the Bucha massacre until April 3, when the Russian Ministry of Defense issued a statement claiming that the photos and videos from Bucha were another “staged provocation by the Kyiv regime”.⁷ The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs joined in on April 4, accusing Ukraine of staging the massacre to undermine peace negotiations and escalate the conflict, and blaming the US/NATO for fabricating the footage. The corresponding surge in coverage on April 3-4, which amplified these official claims and propagated further disinformation about Bucha, demonstrates the Russian media’s high degree of dependency on direction from the Kremlin.

At the same time, the proportion of coverage devoted to Bucha in comparison to total

media coverage about Ukraine indicates an effort to downplay the significance of the issue. During April 2022, only about 4% of total domestic Russian media coverage devoted to Ukraine also addressed Bucha. By contrast, in global English, that proportion was 14%—about 3.5 times greater.

The Chinese media coverage trend once again mimics the Russian, both in terms of content as well as timing: there are no articles about Bucha published prior to April 3 (despite evidence of the massacre beginning to emerge internationally two days earlier). About 6% of total Chinese coverage about Ukraine during April 2022 is dedicated to news about Bucha, with the majority amplifying official Russian claims about the massacre, occasionally interspersed with “bothsidesism” (i.e., false balance framing) that presents Russian and Ukrainian statements on equal footing.⁸

⁷ See: <https://t.me/MFARussia/12230>

⁸ This article is a good example of how even detailed and supposedly “balanced” Chinese media coverage services to advance the Kremlin’s bottom line:

https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_17480304

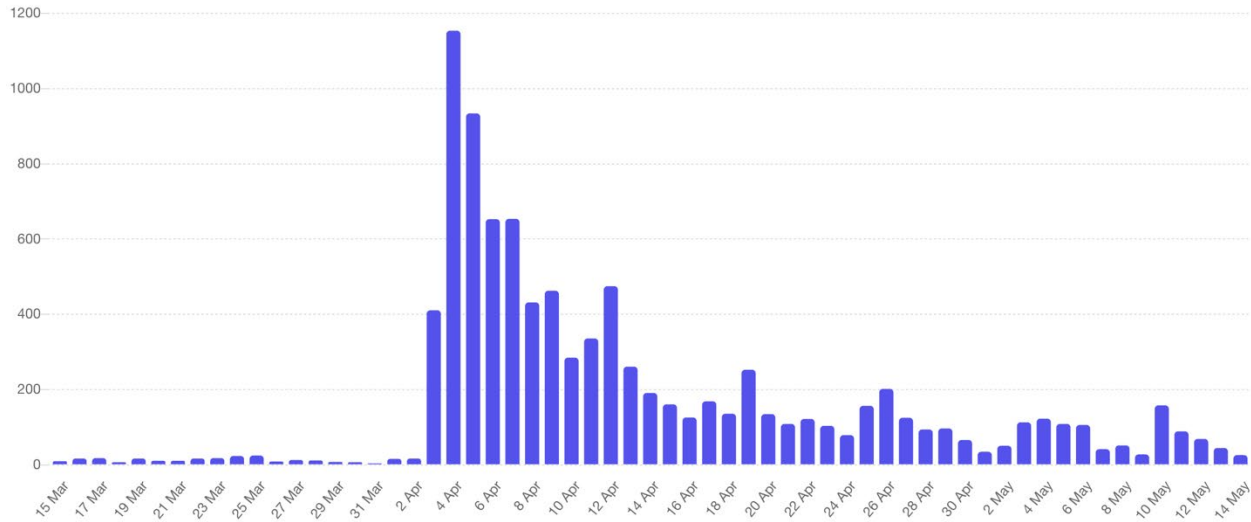


Figure 4.1. Russian (.ru) media coverage about Bucha, following international revelations of Russian war crimes (9,691 articles from 3.15.2022-5.14.2022)

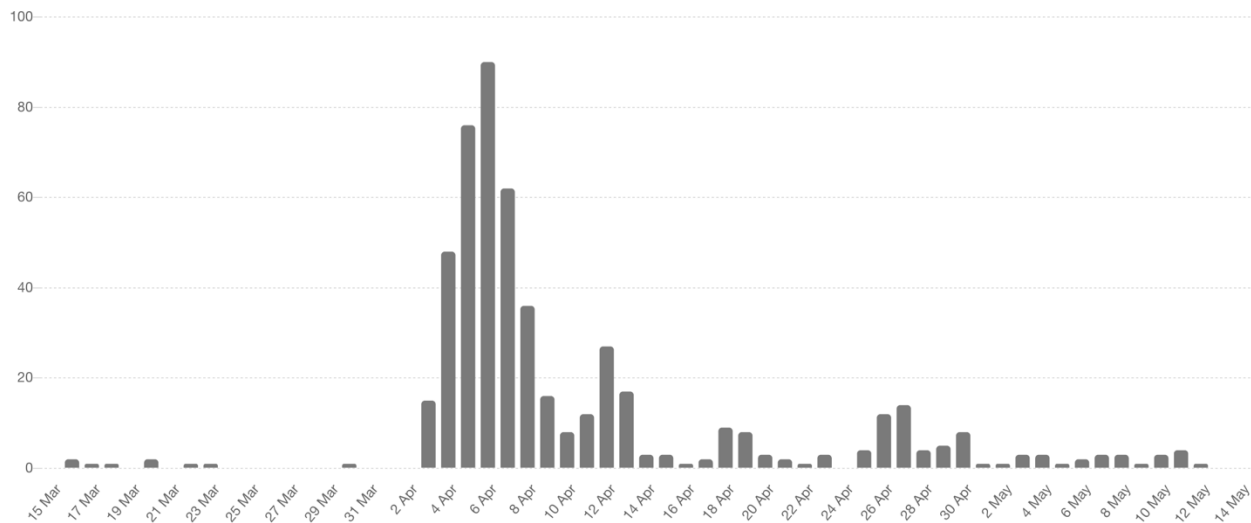


Figure 4.2. Chinese (.cn) media coverage about Bucha, following international revelations of Russian war crimes (524 articles from 3.15.2022-5.14.2022)

5. DISINFORMATION ALLEGING UKRAINE’S DEVELOPMENT OF BIOWEAPONS

False allegations of Ukraine’s development or planned use of biological weapons first emerged in Russian media on March 6, 2022, impelled by an announcement from the Russian Ministry of Defense that Kyiv was attempting to cover up a US-sponsored military-biological development program through the “emergency destruction of

especially hazardous pathogens” including plague, anthrax, tularemia, cholera and other deadly diseases.⁹ Supported by further official statements, this coverage spiked on March 10, 2022, peaking on that day with 550 articles promoting these claims (see Figure 6.3 for day-by-day coverage).

⁹ See: <https://tass.com/defense/1417951>

Chinese state media as well as government officials rapidly band-wagoned on this narrative, which notably echoes related disinformation pushed by PRC authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic: that the virus was a US bioweapon. While the Chinese coverage invoking the Ukraine bioweapons narrative was only about 20% of the Russian,

the data trends in both languages are comparable. Chinese media were about one day behind the Russian in picking up the story, and while coverage peaked in Russian on March 10 and subsequently began to decline, the peak in Chinese arrived a week later, on March 18 (see Figures 5.3 and 5.4).

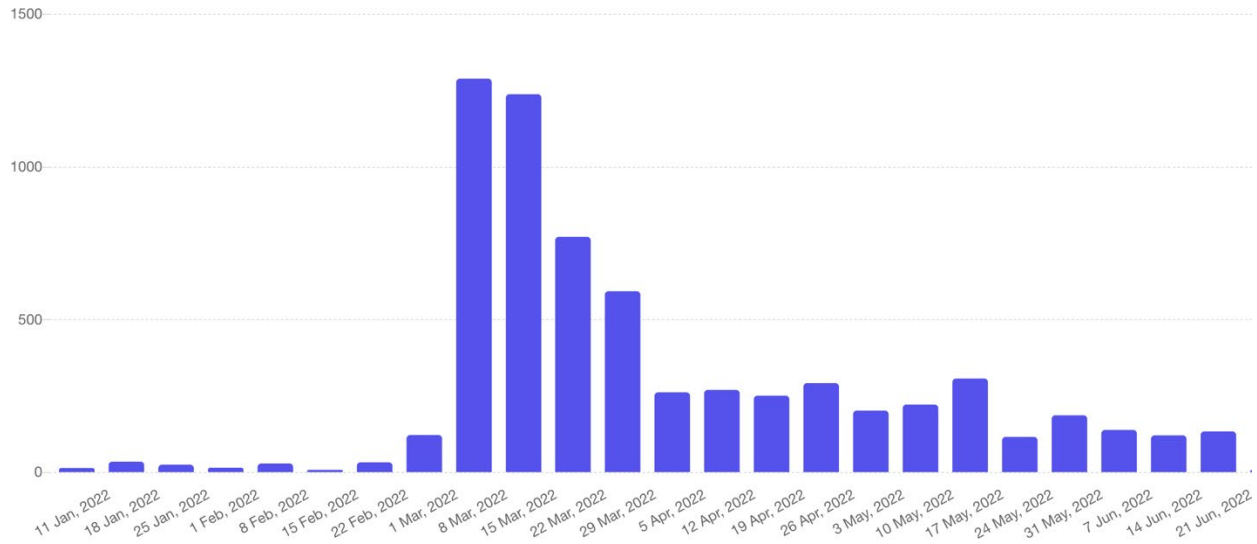


Figure 5.1. Russian (.ru) media coverage alleging that Ukrainian authorities are developing or planning to use bioweapons (6,707 articles from 1.7.2022-6.25.2022)

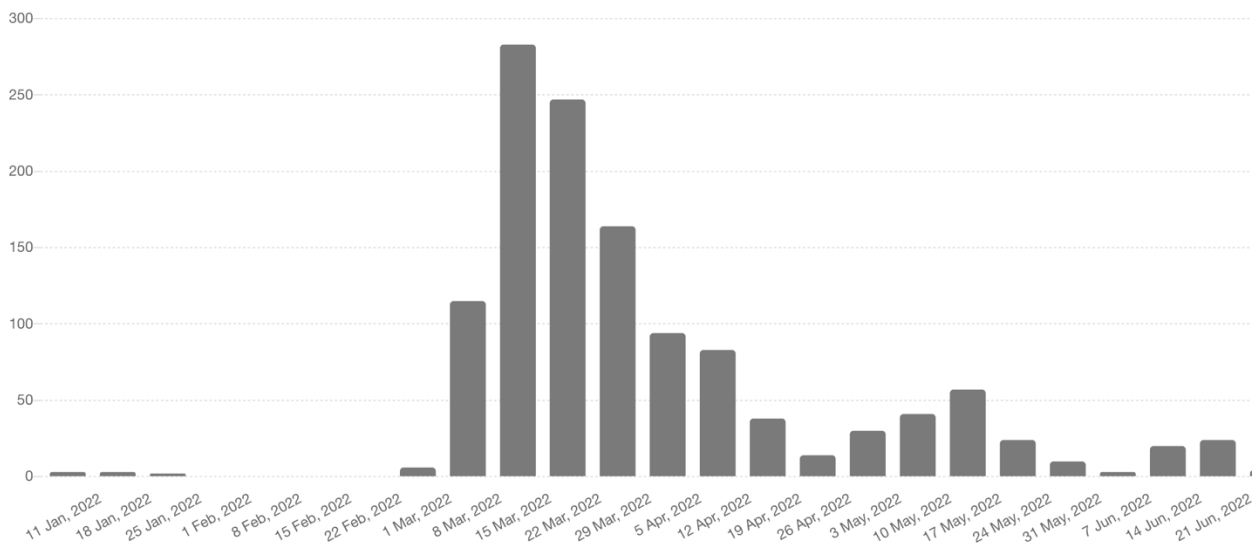


Figure 5.2. Chinese (.cn) media coverage alleging that Ukrainian authorities are developing or planning to use bioweapons (1,265 articles from 1.7.2022-6.25.2022)

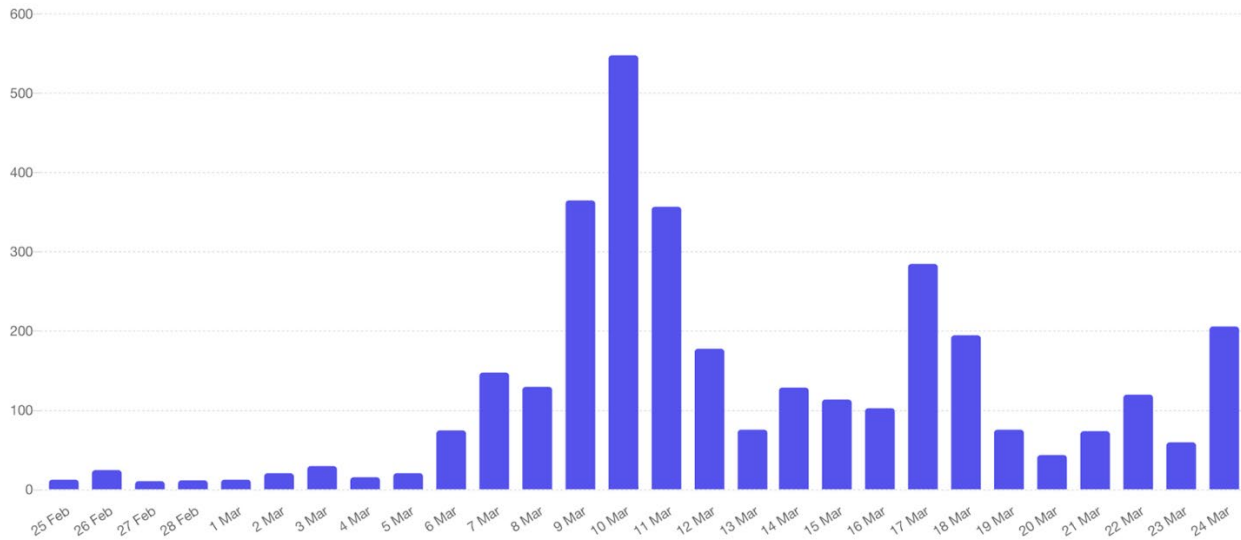


Figure 5.3. Day-by-day view: Russian (.ru) media coverage alleging that Ukrainian authorities are developing or planning to use bioweapons (3,424 articles from 2.25.2022-3.24.2022)

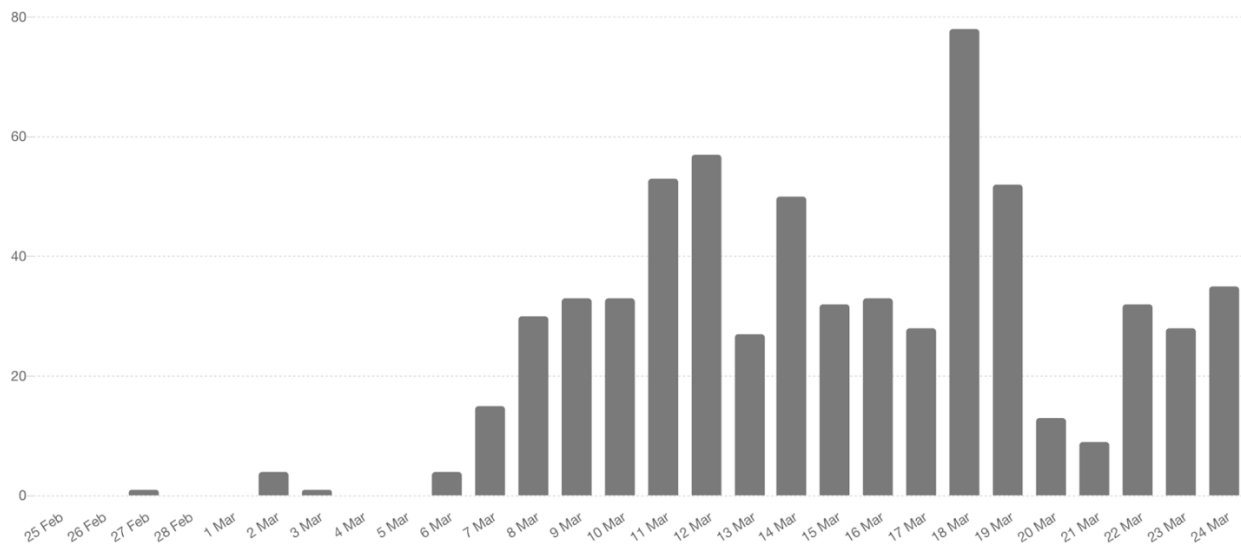


Figure 5.4. Day-by-day view: Chinese (.cn) media coverage alleging that Ukrainian authorities are developing or planning to use bioweapons (651 articles from 2.25.2022-3.24.2022)

ABOUT SEMANTIC VISIONS

Semantic Visions (SV) is a Prague-based data analytics and risk assessment firm that administers a proprietary military-grade Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) system. SV's team has over 15 years of experience in OSINT data collection and semantic understanding of textual information across the world's top languages. SV is one of the world's only organizations to see the big picture of the global online news sphere, emphasizing situational awareness and threat detection. In particular, SV has extensive practical experience in detecting disinformation, propaganda, and related digital threats. In March 2019, SV took first place in the US-UK Tech Challenge for its development of proprietary technology that can identify and track disinformation and propaganda around the globe.