

Official Perspectives on the Russia-Ukraine War: A Timeline

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G5 Internet Observatory

team@g5io.org

Office 505, 5th Floor, Evacuee Trust Complex, Sir Agha Khan Road,
F-5/1, Islamabad, Pakistan

www.g5io.org

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Overview:

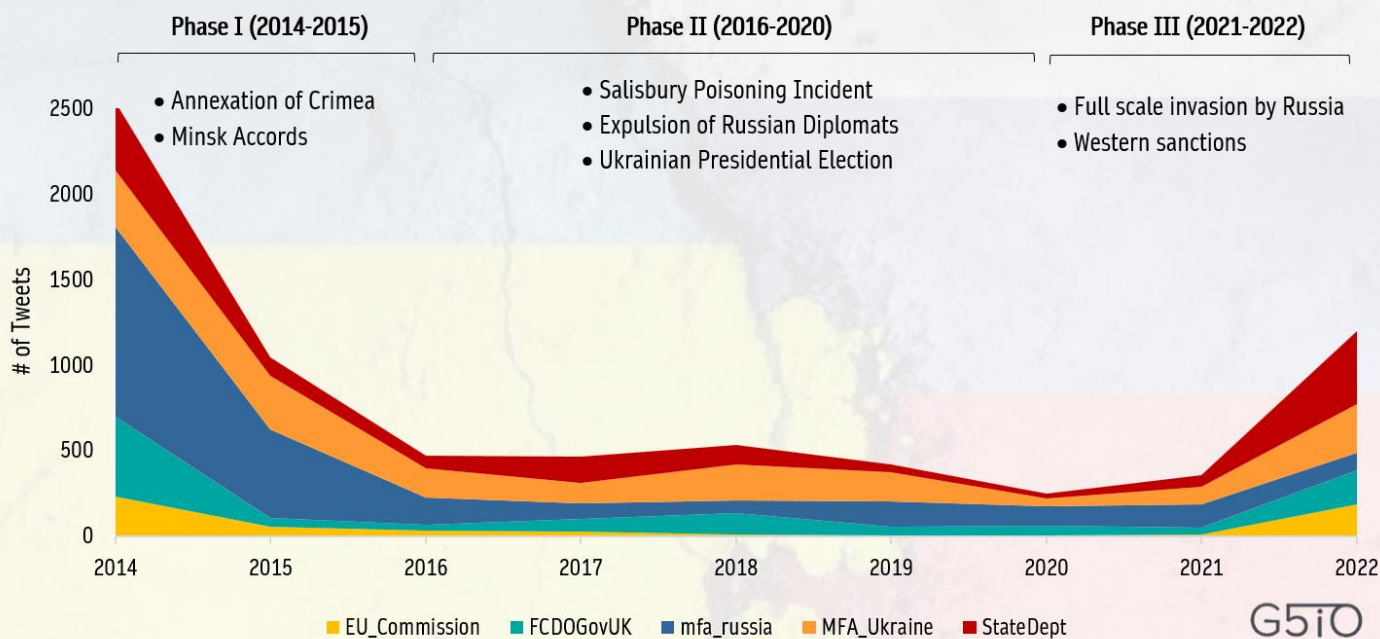
Continuing its analysis on the Russia Ukraine conflict, G5iO conducted a discourse analysis of the Twitter timelines of the US State Dept, the UK Foreign Office and the Foreign Ministries of Russia, Ukraine, and the EU. Starting from the annexation of Crimea in 2014 our aim is to not only provide an adequate context to the ongoing conflict, but to also analyze how official perspectives in these countries have evolved over the last 10 years based on the official tweets of their primary diplomatic offices.

Methodology:

Our analysis is derived from a detailed study of (A) Tweet patterns and (B) a thorough content analysis of 5 officially verified Twitter accounts comprising a total of 96,582 tweets. These were sourced using Twitter's own archive, out of which only those tweets were filtered that directly referred to the Russia - Ukraine conflict. The final data set comprised roughly 5890 tweets that were posted between 1st January 2014 and 21st March 2022.

Building on the above data, we have split our analysis into three key phases. Phase 1 ranges from 2014-15 starting from when Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula. Phase 2 comprises the period between 2016 to 2020 during which the conflict was more or less frozen as part of the Minsk Accords. And phase 3 ranges from 2021 to the current situation in 2022 where tensions between both countries escalated towards a full-scale war since 24th February.

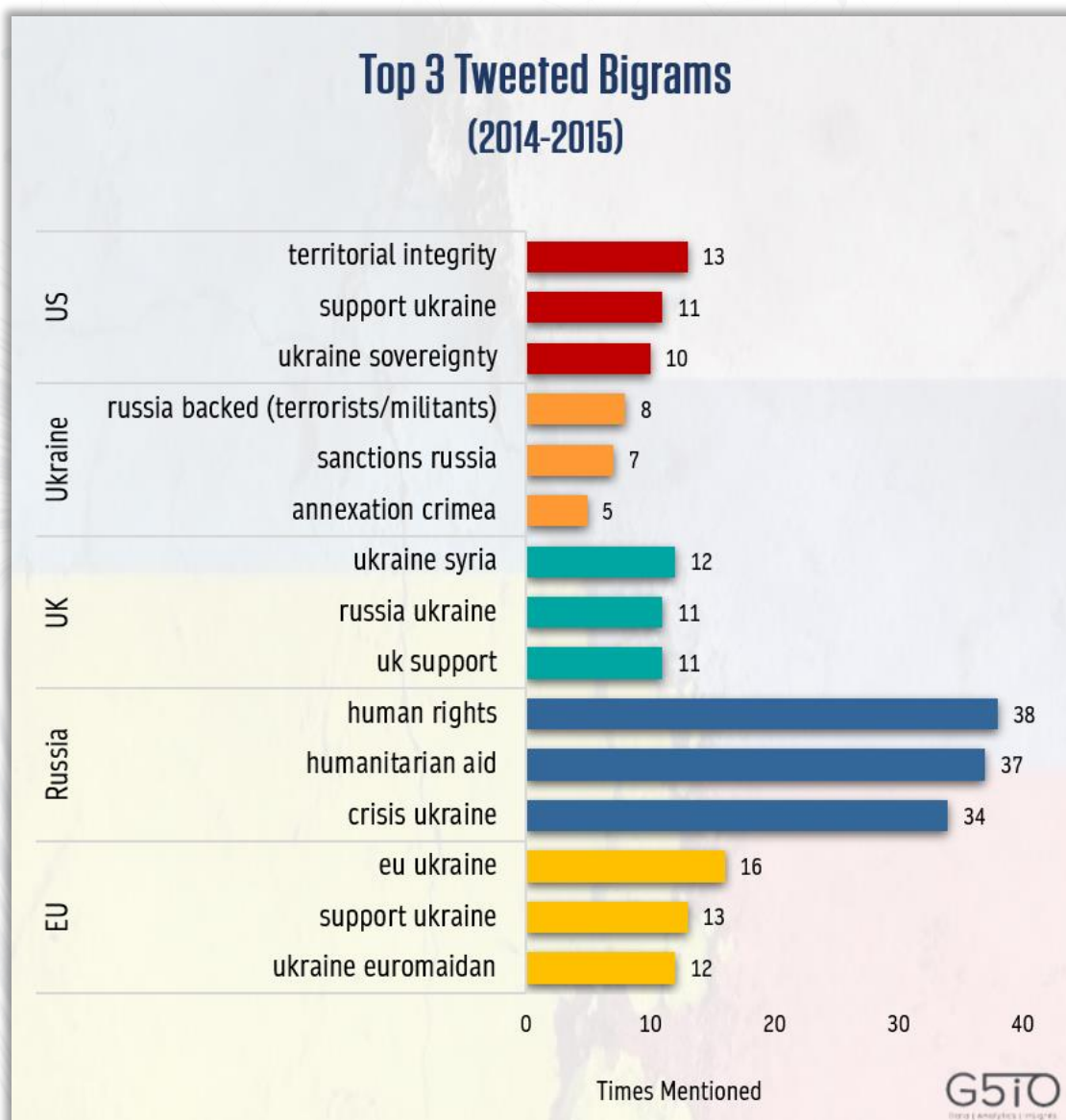
Number of Tweets Referring to Russia/Ukraine 2014-2022



Analysis

Phase 1 (2014 - 2015):

Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in early 2014 led to a clear polarization of narratives not only between Ukraine and Russia, but also between Russia and the 'West'. As the US, UK and EU openly sided with Ukraine, the discourse employed by them as per their official tweets exhibited a similar pattern in terms of their condemnation of Russia and support for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. This for instance is evident in our analysis of the most frequently tweeted bigrams by each country's foreign ministry during this period.



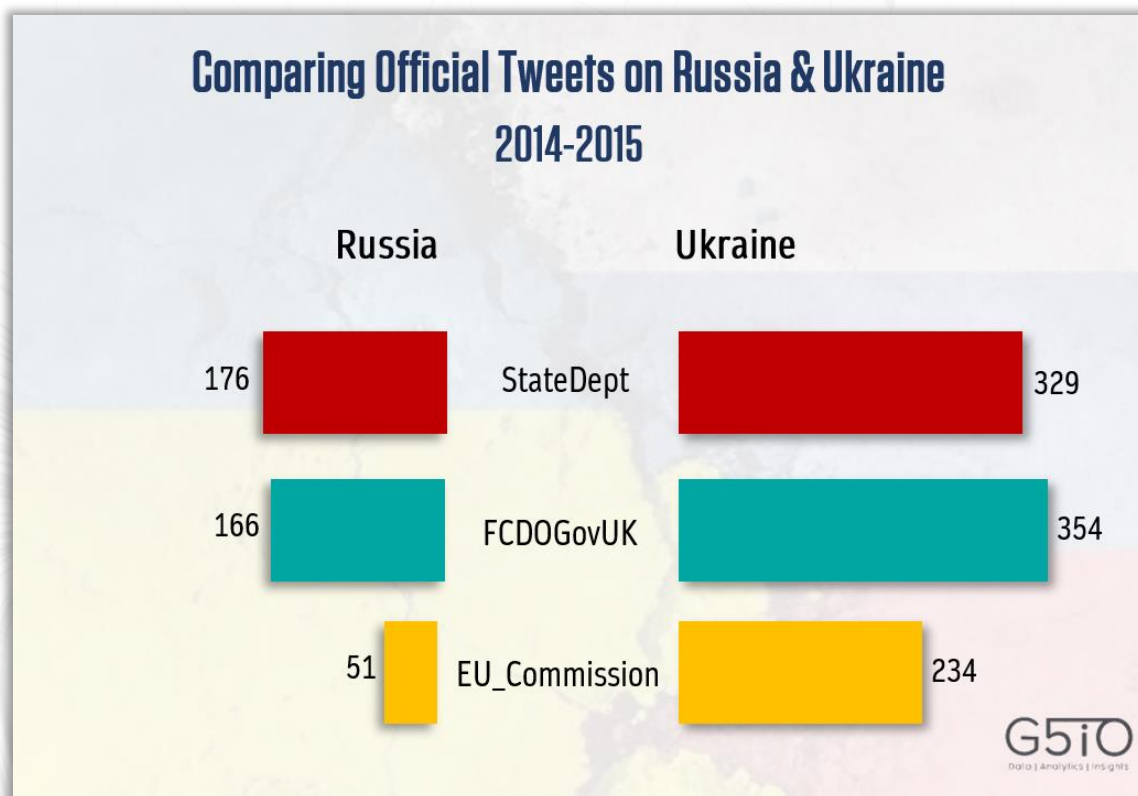
For instance, while the Ukrainian foreign ministry (via its official tweets) focused more on highlighting Russia backed militants and the need for imposing sanctions, its Western partners were keener on emphasizing their ‘support’ for Ukraine. On the other hand, the case being made by the Russian foreign ministry was premised on safeguarding ‘human rights and the provision of ‘humanitarian aid’ within Crimea as a viable *casus belli*.

This emphasis on how the narrative space was contested throughout this period is clearly depicted in the varying peaks and troughs plotted on the following area chart. Showing the number of tweets by each country's diplomatic ministry, we see how Russia continued to consistently push its narrative throughout this phase. In contrast, both the UK and US responded along a similar pattern to the Ukrainian foreign ministry as overall attention related to the crisis decreased over the coming years following the ceasefire agreed to as part of the Minsk Accords.



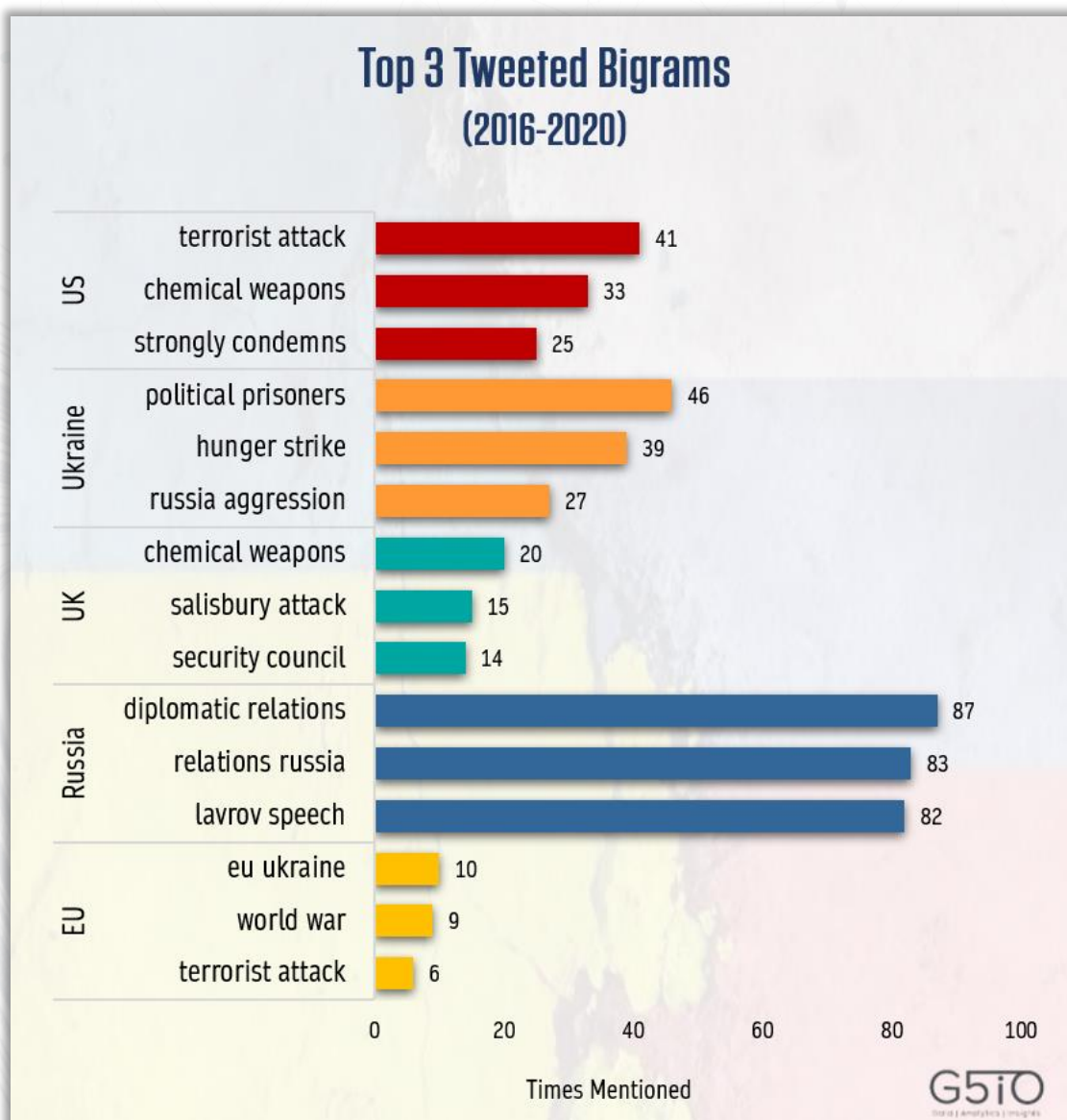
It's also worth noting that during this phase, the US, UK, and EU were more focused on expressing their solidarity and support with Ukraine as opposed to condemning Russia as evident in the following bar chart. This trend is interesting considering how this varying emphasis on both countries by major Western powers has since changed as shown later in our analysis.

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Phase 2 (2016 - 2020):

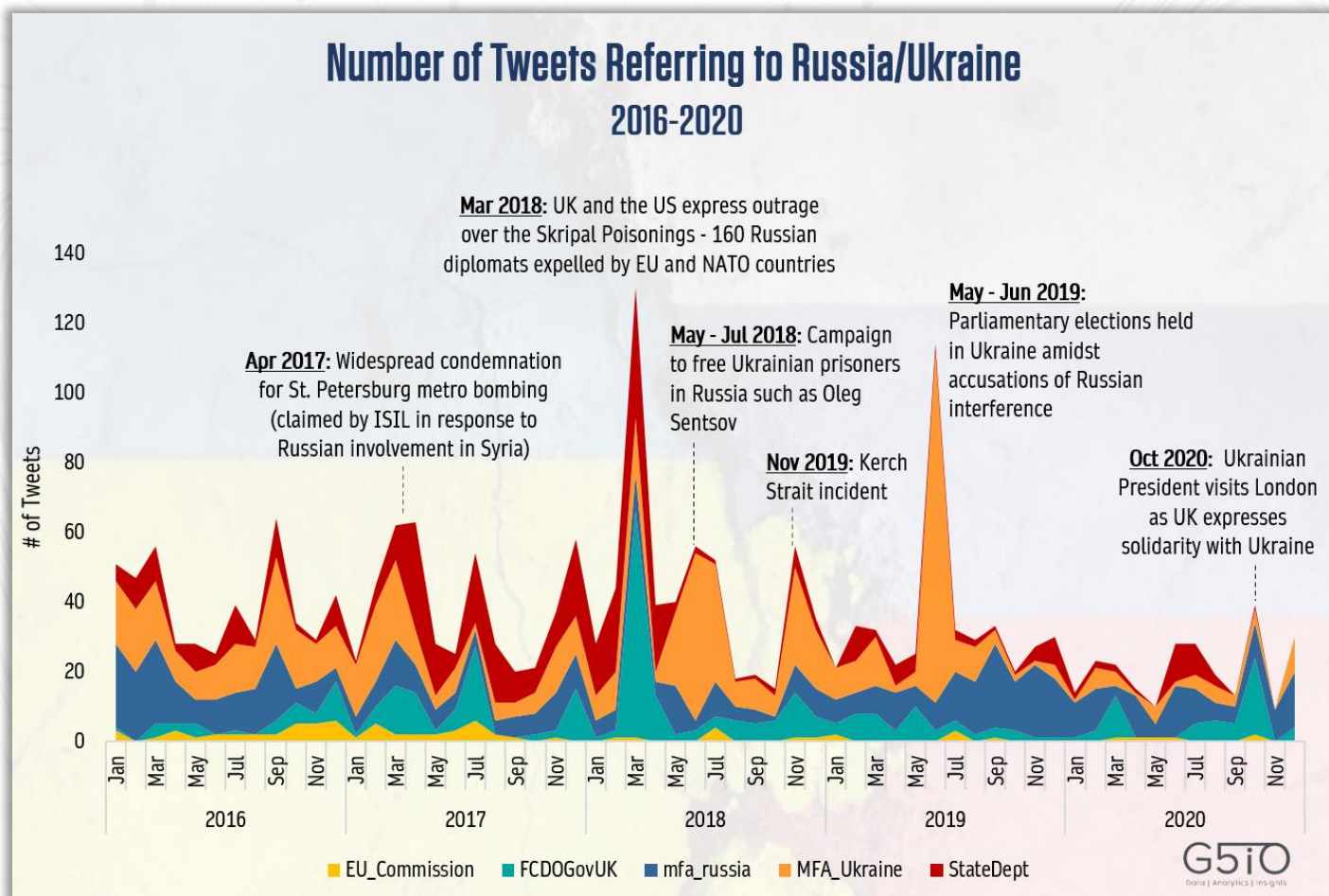
With the decline of open hostilities following the Minsk Accords, the subsequent years saw a shift in focus by Western countries away from Ukraine and more directly on Russian actions elsewhere. This was characterized by Russia's entry into the Syrian conflict in the Middle East, as well as its alleged links to the Salisbury poisonings in the UK. This shift is corroborated in the official tweets of both the US State Dept and the UK Foreign Office where fears of 'chemical weapons' use by Russia in Syria and in 'Salisbury' represented a major concern. While the Ukrainian foreign ministry continued to focus on the plight of Ukrainian political prisoners and their hunger strikes while imprisoned in Russia, the Russian official line was to highlight its own broadening diplomatic efforts and expanding relations as a major world power. All while the EU, highlighted the growing polarization between Russia and the West as a possible precursor to a 'World War'



This phase also saw the hardening of narratives as each side adopted a consistent and synchronous pattern to their official stances to a now frozen conflict. Whereas the previous phase saw the Russian foreign ministry as leading the narrative space in terms of the sheer number of tweets justifying its actions, this phase was led more by Ukraine as it forcefully highlighted Russian duplicity and aggression. Ukraine’s focus thus being on consistently undercutting Russia’s narrative on human rights that was set in the preceding phase of the conflict. This phase also saw a much greater number of tweets from the UK foreign office,

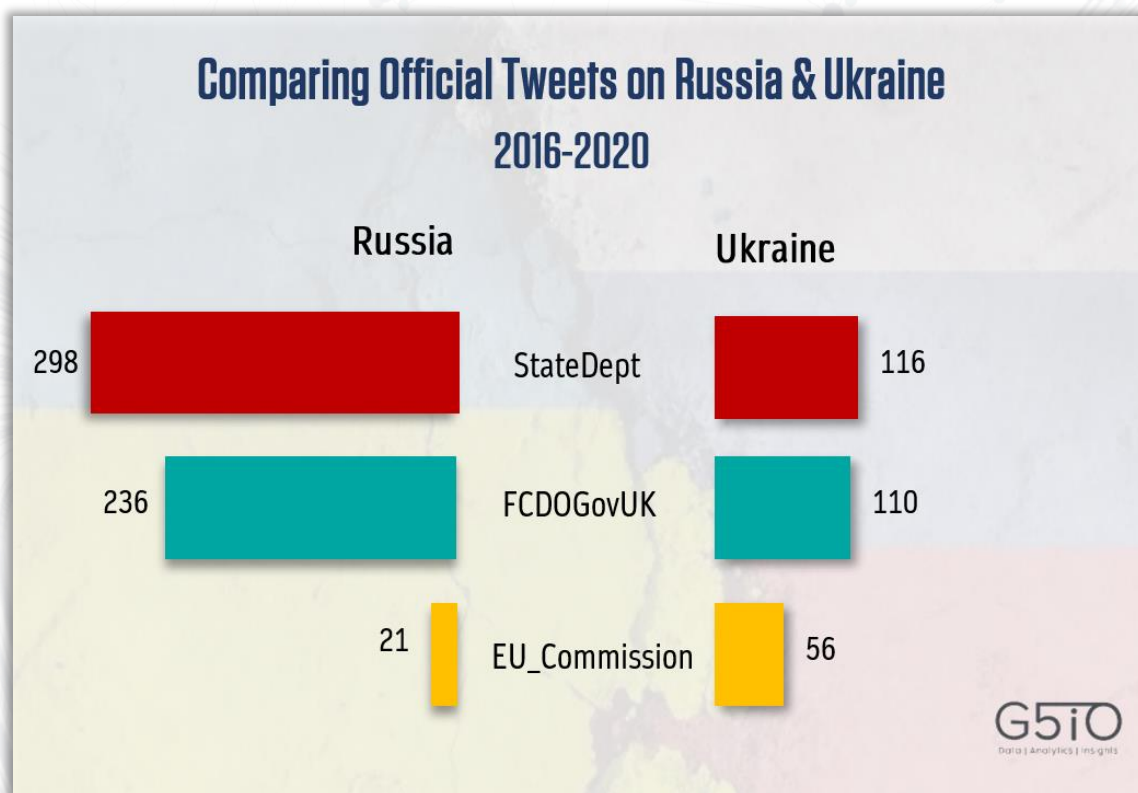
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particularly around the Salisbury incident in 2018. In contrast, both the EU and State Department showed a declining level of tweet activity related to Russia and Ukraine, with statements limited mostly to diplomatic meetings and visits.



Hence, whereas this second phase saw the Russia Ukraine conflict mostly frozen in terms of major hostilities, the West's narrative can be seen as having shifted more towards Russia as opposed to Ukraine as shown in the number of tweets referring to each country in the chart below. This stands in marked contrast to the previous phase where the focus had been more on expressing solidarity with Ukraine as opposed to condemning or calling out Russian actions. This held true for both the US State Dept and UK Foreign Office whose statements comprised of framing Russia in a wider global context.

Whereas the EU Commission in contrast, focused less on Russia per se and more on Ukraine within its official tweets, particularly in the context of pan-European solidarity.

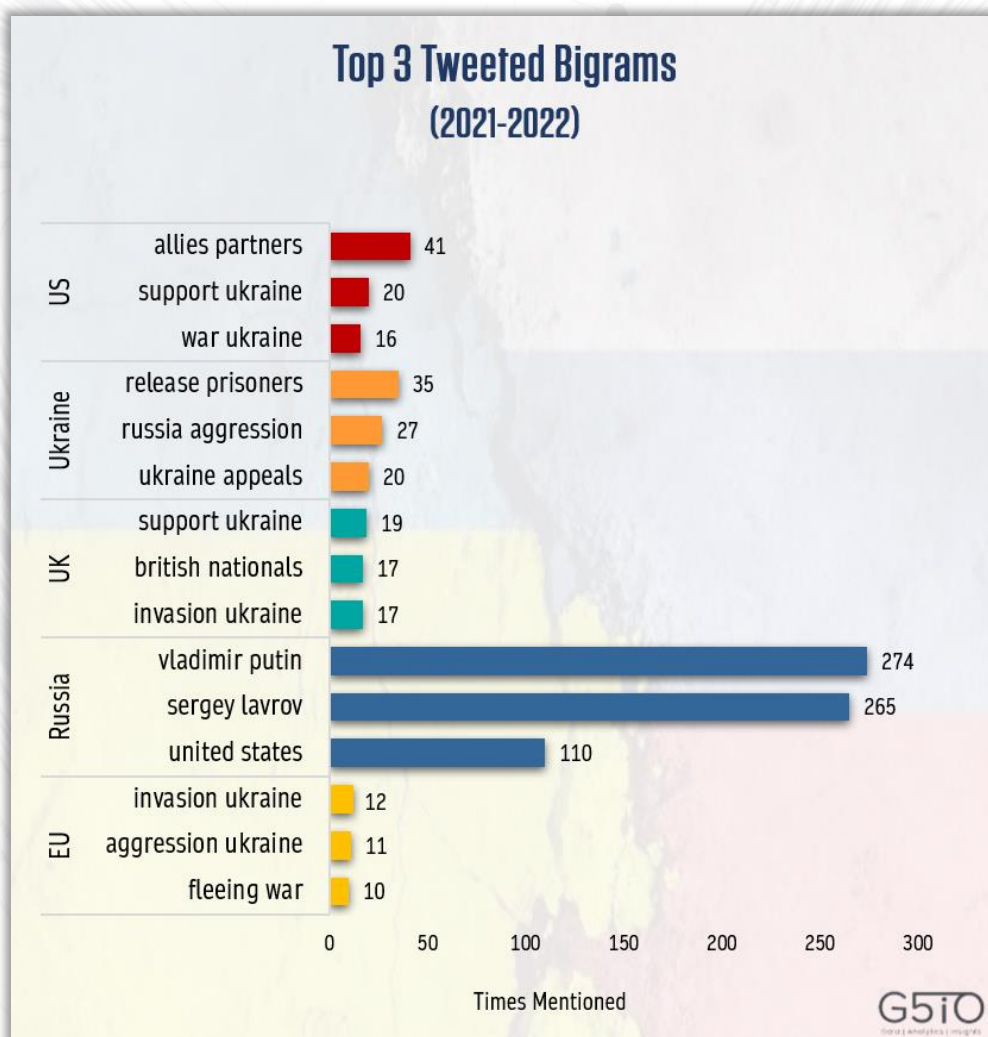


Phase 3 (2021 – 2022):

With tensions in 2021 escalating to the point of open hostilities by early 2022, the latest narratives being employed by each of the 5 key stakeholders stand as perhaps the most polarized. For instance, a look at the top 3 bigrams for 2021 - 2022 show that while both the US and UK were clear in their 'support' for Ukraine, they (along with the EU) were also clear in terming Russia's actions as a 'war' or 'invasion'. This stands in slight contrast to the narratives employed by each of these countries during the annexation of Crimea 8 years ago when the emphasis was more on expressing solidarity with Ukraine rather than more explicitly calling out Russia. Thus, representing how Western narratives towards Russia have increasingly hardened over the last 8 years.

This contrast also evident in how the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has framed the current crisis, Whereas the emphasis in 2014 was markedly on safeguarding human rights as a pretext for Russian military actions in Crimea, the current crisis can be seen built around the central leadership roles played by ‘Vladimir Putin’ and ‘Sergei Lavrov’, both of whom have repeatedly held the ‘United States’ responsible for leading and instigating this crisis.

Another key theme that dominated Western official discourse within this phase was the emphasis on evacuations and fleeing refugees, especially by the EU. This aspect is in itself a highly interesting topic which will be covered in much greater detail in our forthcoming study.

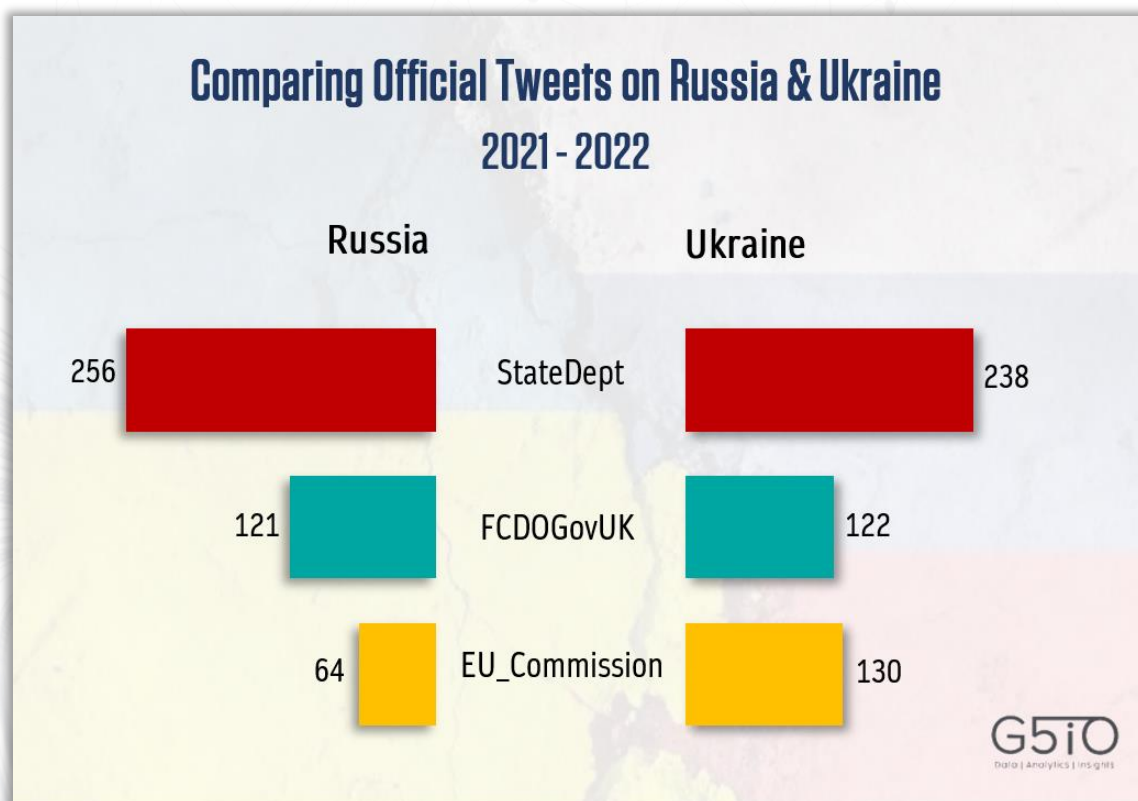


With regards, to how each country timed its official tweets in the context of escalating tensions, the US state department can be seen as actively pre-empting the invasion from

December 2021 onwards. This is exactly a month before the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs dramatically increased its tweet activity along with the EU and UK. In contrast, even though the Russian MFA also exhibited a marked increase from Jan 2022 onwards, its overall presence within the narrative space (in terms of tweet numbers) is still relatively lesser than that of the other countries analyzed. This also stands in marked contrast to how vocal the Russian MFA had been 8 years back during the annexation of Crimea compared to the current escalation of hostilities.



With regards to the varying attention given to Russia and Ukraine within official Western diplomatic statements, the leading role played by the US state department is clear. As of 21 March 2022, the number of tweets by the US State Dept referring to Russia and Ukraine stand as almost double the number of tweets by the UK Foreign office. Similarly, while both the US and UK are balanced in terms of the number of tweets referring to Russia and Ukraine each, the EU Commission is once again more focused on referring to Ukraine as opposed to Russia.



Conclusion

With the Russia – Ukraine crisis still in full force at the time of publication of this study, we feel that our data and insights provide a highly unique way to look at this conflict. By comparing how official diplomatic discourses of some of this conflict’s main stakeholders have evolved over the last eight years we found that:

- There has been an increased focus on condemning and calling out Russia by Western powers
- There has been a trend of growing sophistication and improvement by Ukraine in the use of narratives and rallying Western support
- The EU’s consistency in expressing support to Ukraine while refraining from openly condemning Russia (on the US’s or UK’s scale), stands out as a notable difference despite claims of the West ‘Standing Together’

Authors



Abu Bakar Naeem is a Data Insight Specialist. His work stems from unveiling patterns of polarization and bias across a diverse range of online discourses



M Waqas Jan is a Senior Analyst with an interest in discursive approaches to peace, conflict, and security studies.



Asra Malik is a Senior Analyst with an interest in mapping and understanding digital behaviour, trends and evolving norms online.



Noman Khan is a Data Scientist who is consistently innovating approaches to statistical analytics within a variety of data environments