

# **War— and the War for Attention**

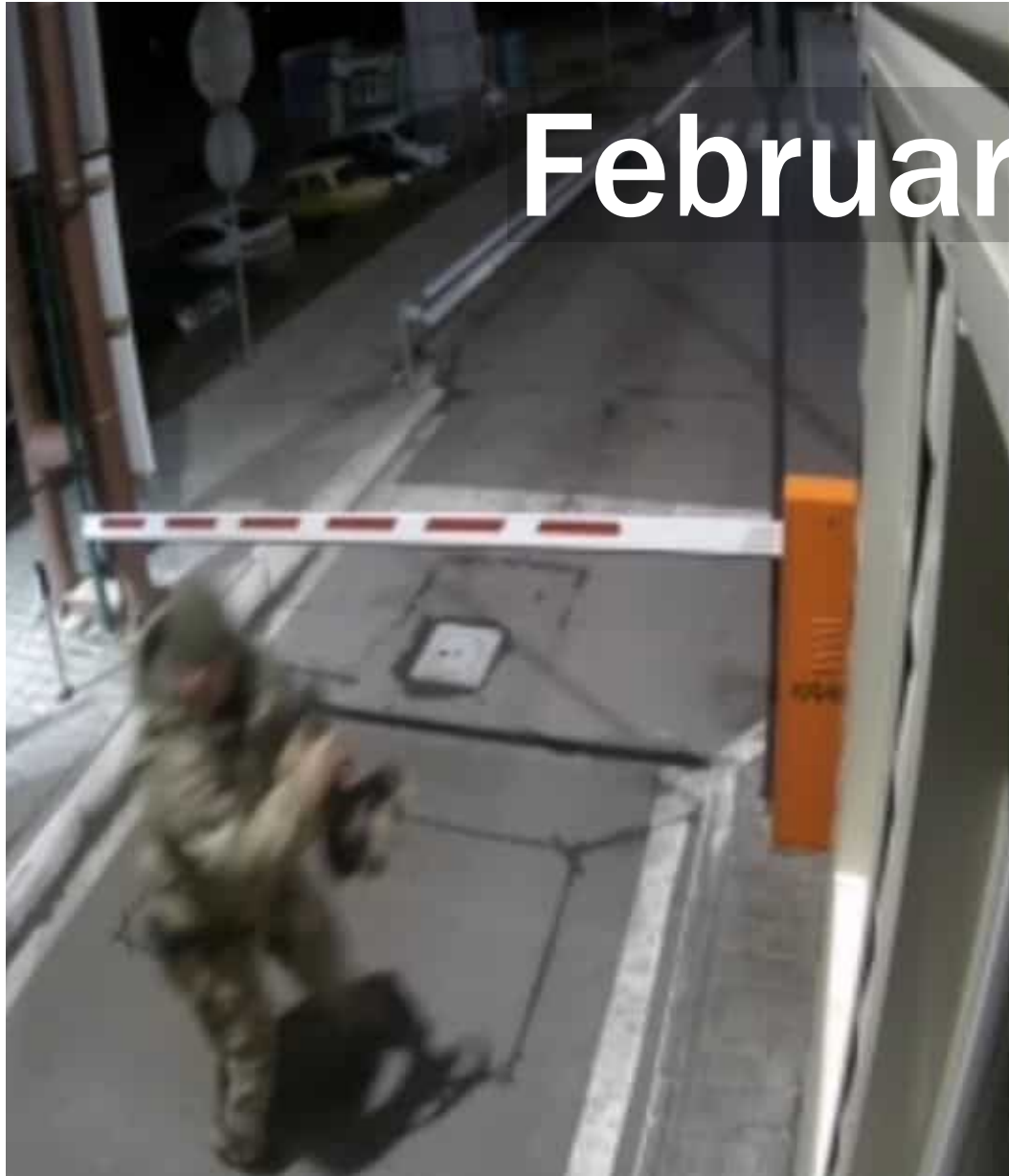
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February 24, 2022





MFA of Ukraine 🇺🇦 @MFA\_Ukraine · Mar 7

Ukraine government organization

In the **bomb shelter**, a girl plays a Ukrainian song composed by Mykola Lysenko "Nich yaka mislachna / What a moonlit night"



Liubov Tsybulska  
@TsybulskaLiubov

Russian army entered Kherson, but something went wrong. Brave Ukrainians climb on their tanks on the go with UA flags.



# Attention Is All You Need

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The modern internet enables near-costless content creation and mass transmission. The limiting factor is attention. The result is the **attention economy**.

This battle for attention is a contest of psychological and algorithmic manipulation, **fought through competing viral events**.

Advertisers, activists, and long-lost acquaintances each seek the same pool of limited attention. **So do national militaries and intelligence agencies.**



# The War for Attention = War

Information War

Soft War

Netwar

Strategic Communications

Cyber-Enabled  
Influence Operations

LikeWar

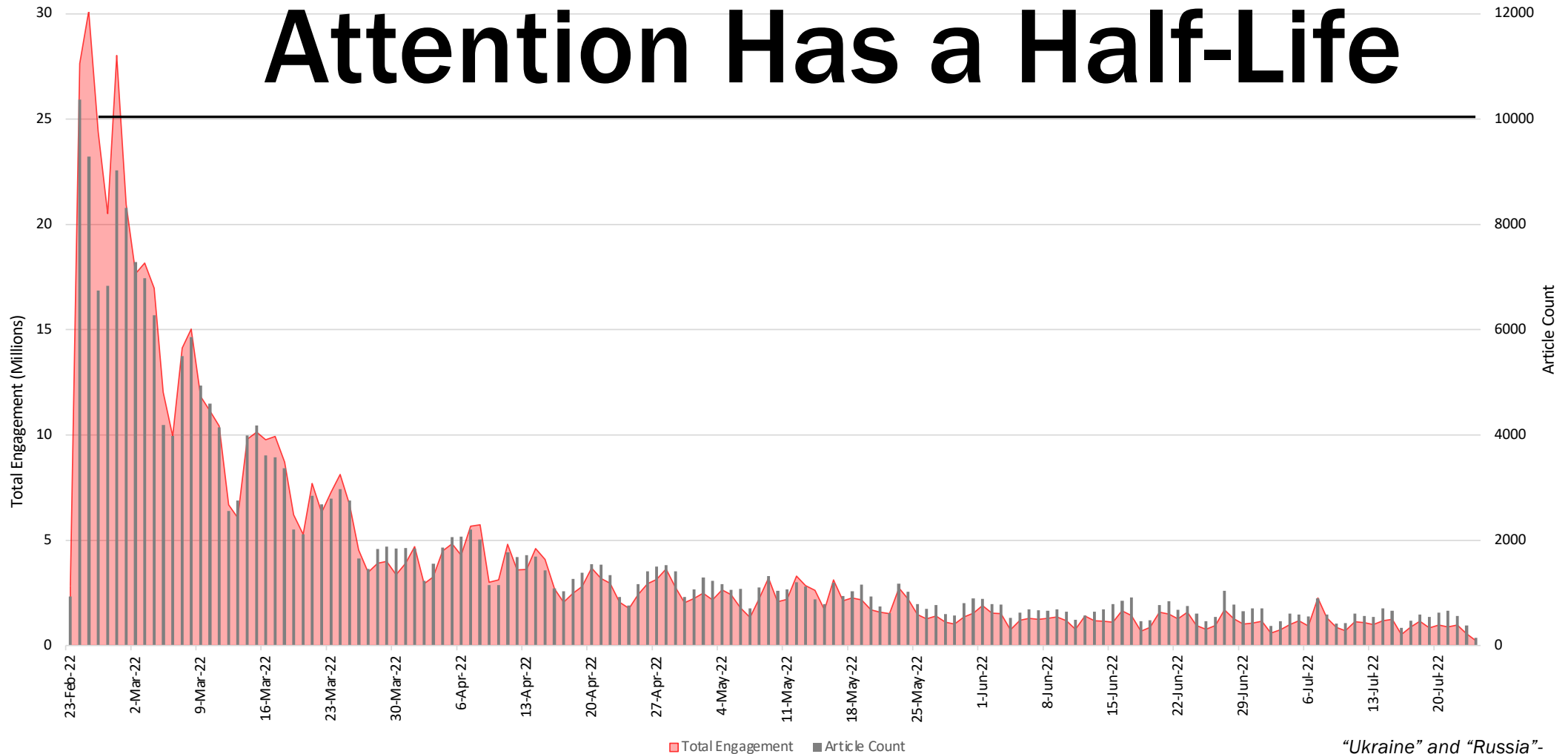
Information Jihad

Cognitive Warfare

Narrative Warfare



# Attention Has a Half-Life



Mapping English-Language Attention in the First 150 Days of Russian Invasion

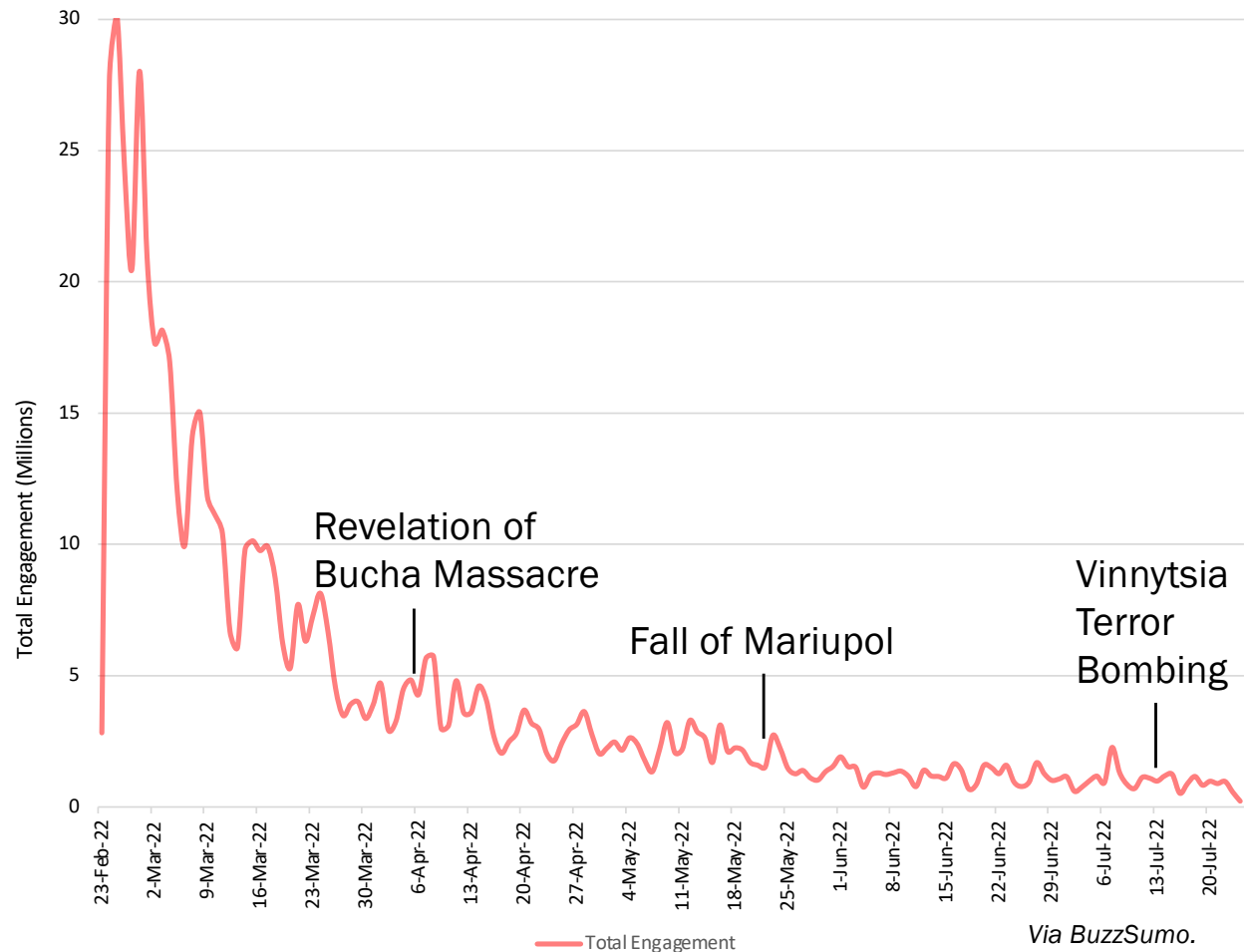
*"Ukraine" and "Russia"-  
associated content above  
sharing threshold ( $n > 100$ ).  
Via BuzzSumo.*

# Attention Has a Half-Life

Lower highs, lower lows

Feb 25 peak engagement: ~30m

July '22 average engagement: ~1m



# Attention Demands Novelty

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RUSSIAN SPECIAL FORCES BELGIAN MALINOIS DOG SWITCHES SIDES AFTER IT WAS FOUND ABANDONED AND CLOSE TO DEATH BY UKRAINIAN SOLDIERS (*Daily Mail*, ~396k)



ELON MUSK COMES TO THE RESCUE AFTER UKRAINIAN GOVERNMENT PLEADS FOR HIS HELP (*Daily Wire*, ~433k)



UKRAINIAN BRAVES HEAVY RUSSIAN SHELLING TO RESCUE TEN KANGAROOS TRAPPED IN KHARKIV ZOO (*Express*, ~390k)



# Novelty Is Not Reality

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What sells? “Lone wolf” heroes, recognizable celebrities, impossible odds, and **feel-good animal rescues**.

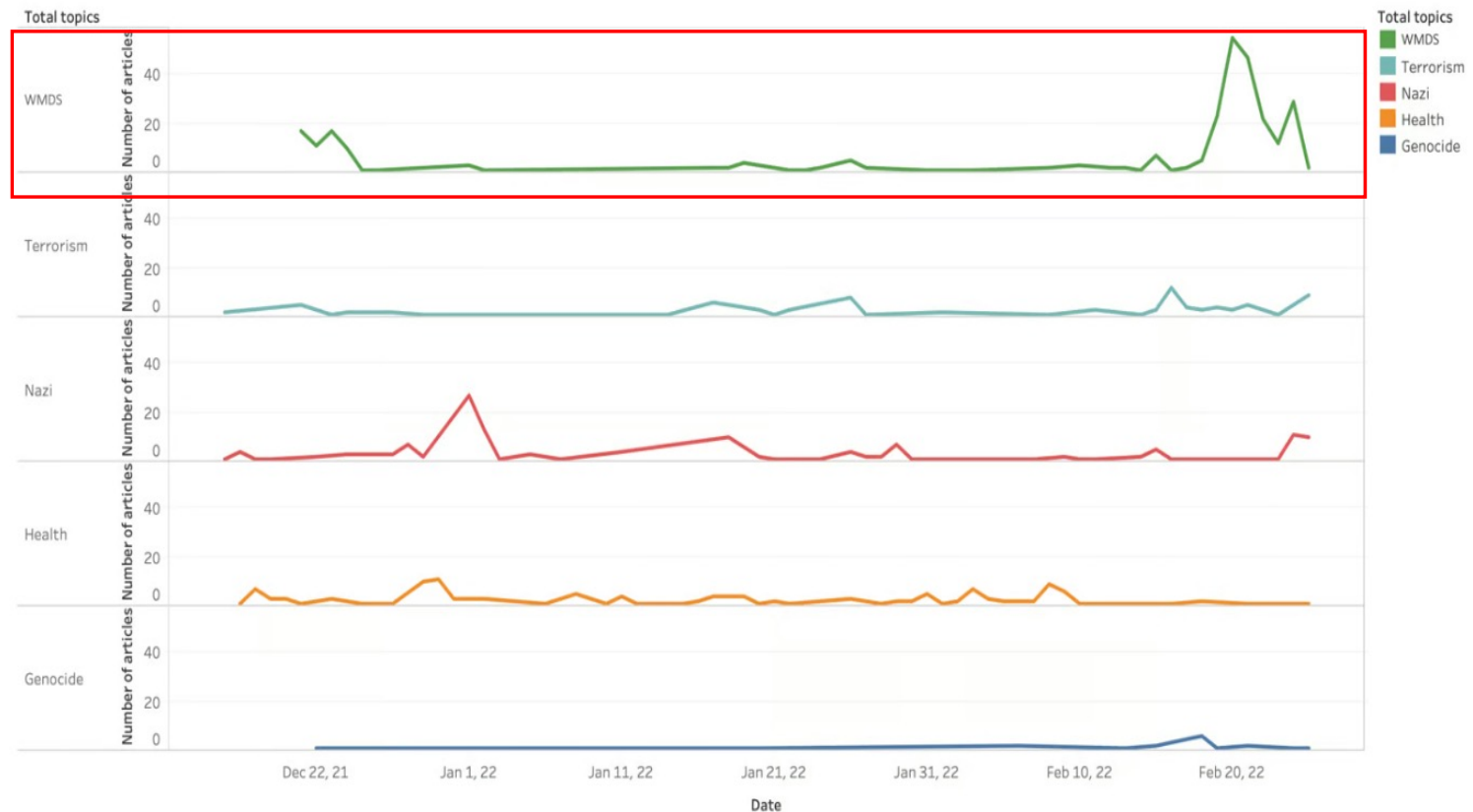
Little evidence that social media correlates with battlefield realities. **No evidence that it correlates with number of war dead.**

Temporal and subject distortion mean that audiences are left with **little understanding of war realities.**

# Maintaining Attention Takes Capacity

Russian state media propaganda output **did not significantly increase output prior to invasion.**

The exception was “WMD”-related narratives, alleging biological or nuclear violations, which may have been an abortive attempt to establish **casus belli.**



Line charts showing the number of articles containing long-standing pro-Kremlin themes about Ukraine over time. (Source: DFRLab via Event Registry.)

Nika Aleksejeva et al., “Narrative Warfare: How the Kremlin and Russian News Outlets Justified a War of Aggression Against Ukraine” (February 2023), *DFRLab*.

# Manufacturing Attention Takes Time

Russia sought to double down on WMD/bioweapon claims after invasion.

On March 18, 2022, Russia used its UN Security Council seat to present “bioweapons labs documents.”

On May 13, after having accumulated some coverage, Russia forced a UN Security Council hearing on the issue.

NEWS YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO SPEAK ABOUT

THE SECRET AND GEORGIA

Russia Accuses George Soros & Hunter Secretly Funding Bioweapons Lab in Ukraine

US Has CONFIRMED BioLabs In Ukraine, Russia And China Claim US Is Funding Bio Weapons Research

**\*\*BREAKING VIDEO\*\* Russia Tells the US "We Have Found Your Biological Weapons" (VIDEO)**

TIMCAST.COM

PUNDIT MADE A COMEBACK

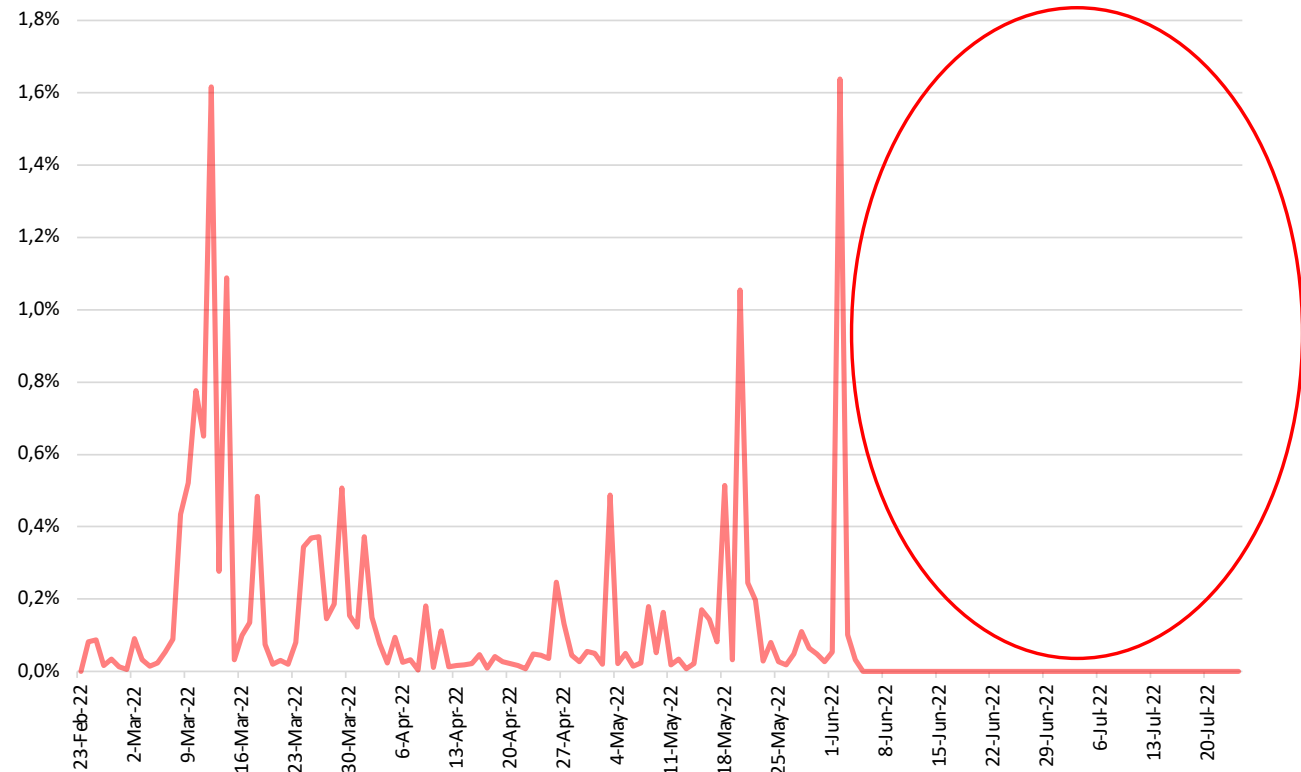
TruthTent

# Manufacturing Attention Is Hard

The disinformation campaign was not immediately effective.

It lacked organic pick-up and required investment of **limited capacity and time to maintain.**


When **organic engagement is high** and there is a **compelling counter-narrative**, disinformation struggles to break through.



Proportional English-Language Attention to “Biolabs” Narratives in the First 150 Days of Russian Invasion

*Adversarial “Bio\*” Content.  
Via BuzzSumo*



An aerial photograph of a suburban neighborhood. The houses are mostly dark-colored, and the trees are bare, suggesting a late autumn or winter setting. A single house with a light-colored roof and walls stands out in the lower right quadrant. The text is overlaid in the upper half of the image.

**“You can have it all.  
Just not at once.”**

**- Oprah Winfrey**



**War for Attention**  
**= War of**  

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**Attrition**

# Ukraine Needs Attention More

Ukraine has received total financial and military support **roughly equivalent to its pre-war GDP**.

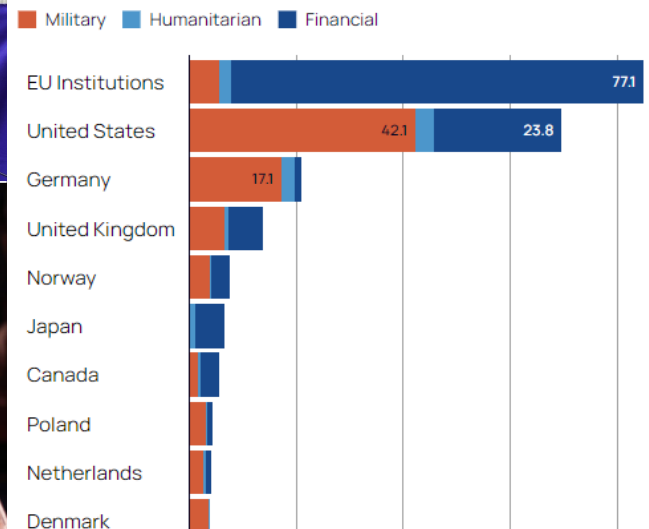
Ukraine has received **military support alone** roughly equivalent to its current GDP.

Fading international support **would endanger Ukraine** in a way that international condemnation has not endangered Russia.



## Government support to Ukraine: Type of assistance, € billion

Commitments Jan. 24, 2022 to July 31, 2023. Data on 42 donors



Source: Trebesch et al. (2023) "The Ukraine Support Tracker" Kiel WP

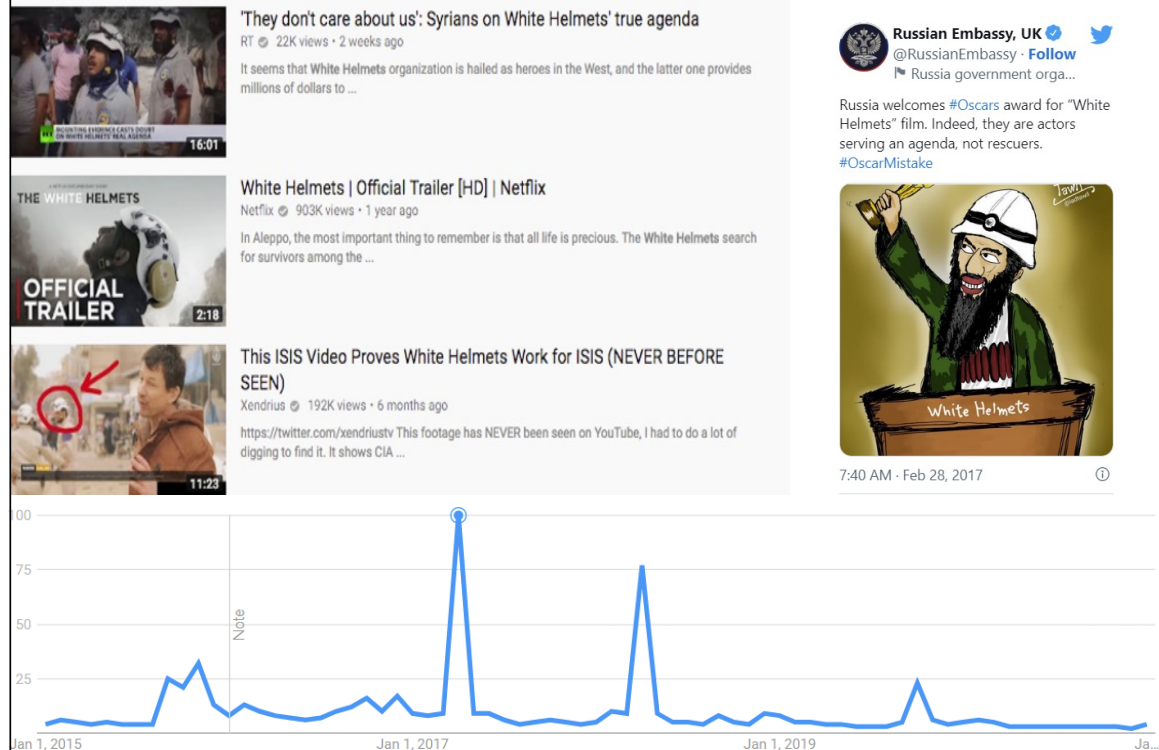
Ukraine Support Tracker/Kiel Institute for the World Economy

# When Attention Recedes, Disinformation Thrives

Russia's delegitimization campaign against the Syrian White Helmets took years, not weeks or months.

It was regularly criticized and rebuked, but it **persisted** as attention turned elsewhere.

The past is never static: old events can be suddenly **rediscovered** and redefined in dangerous ways.



Diminishing Google Search Interest in Syrian Civil War

Via Google Trends.

# Russia Is Winning Wars for Attention, Too

Russia's primary focus has been on domestic propaganda and political control efforts **not** immediately apparent to the West.

Russia continues to suppress and compartmentalize **mass military dissension**.

Russian citizens remain dissuaded against criticizing the war **despite a sharply rising death toll**.

## MoD Russia

All the messages and videos speared in social networks on behalf of E. Prigozhin about the alleged 'strike of the Russian Ministry of Defense against the 'rear camps of the Wagner PMC' are untrue and are an informational provocation.

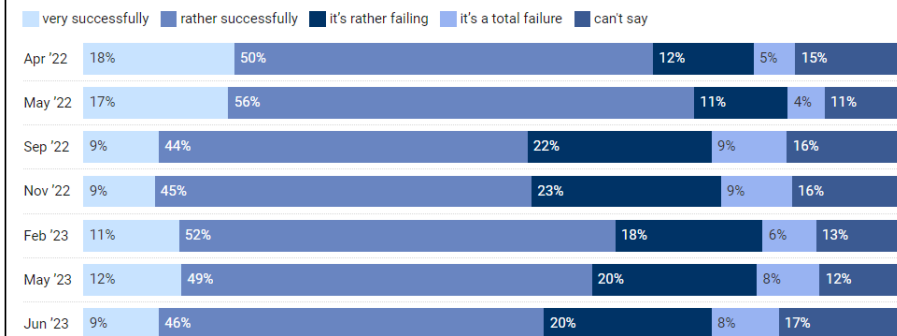
■ The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation continue to carry out combat tasks on the line of contact with the AFU in the area of the special military operation.

 Russian Defence Ministry



## How do you think the "special military operation" of the Russian Army in Ukraine is going?

As % of respondents



НАСТОЯЩИЙ МАТЕРИАЛ (ИНФОРМАЦИЯ) ПРОИЗВЕДЕН И РАСПРОСТРАНЕН ИНОСТРАННЫМ АГЕНТОМ АНО «ЛЕВАДА-ЦЕНТР» ЛИБО КАСАЕТСЯ ДЕЯТЕЛЬНОСТИ ИНОСТРАННОГО АГЕНТА АНО «ЛЕВАДА-ЦЕНТР».

Levada

"And it is this mixture [money and propaganda] that gives rise to a total misunderstanding between the thin layer of those who really lost everything from the war and the overwhelming majority of the population, **which did not lose anything and in fact gained everything.**"

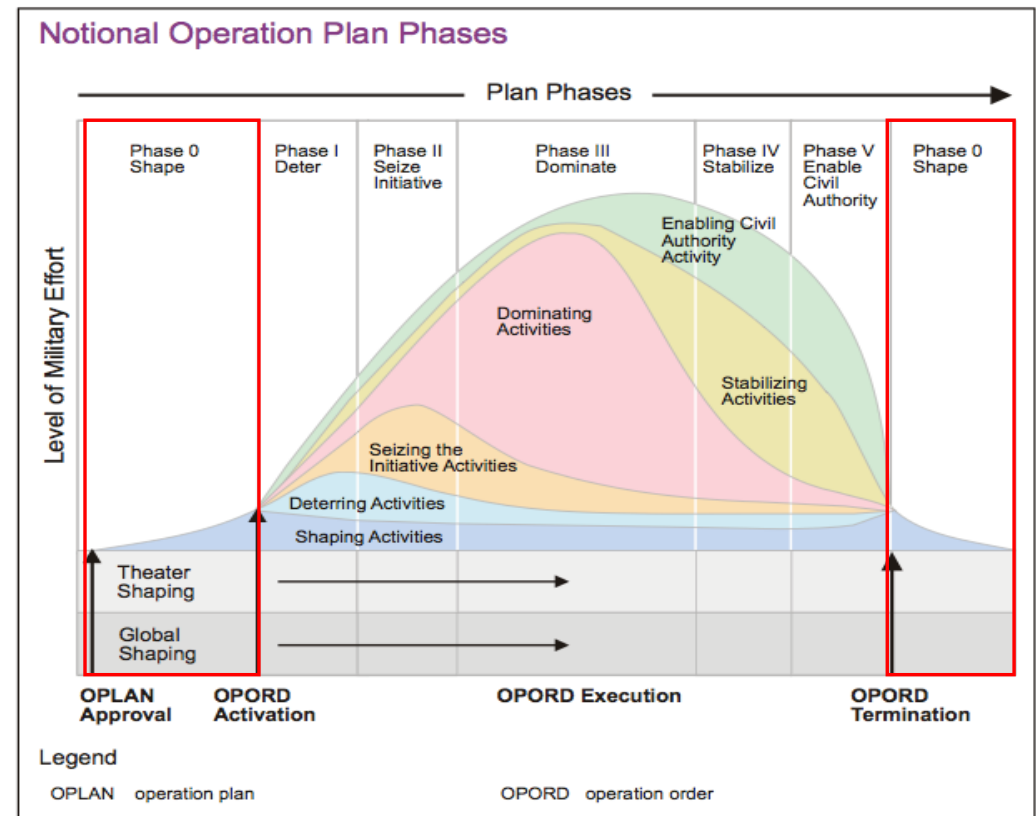
- Sergei Chernyshov, "The Majority Never Had It So Good"

# Next Steps for Attention and War

For years, the role of influence and information manipulation in large-scale conflict was **largely unknown**.

It appears that these efforts **may not be a military priority** when they compete with resources for kinetic operations.

But in “Phase 0” Operations—when conflict has returned to a frozen state—**influence and information manipulation have immense strategic consequence**.



“Joint Planning,” Joint Publication 5-0, U.S. Joint Staff Doctrine (2017).



# Next Steps for Us

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The 2024 “Year of Elections” is likely to center Ukrainian aid and armament in many political campaigns. **Disinformation actors are on the hunt for new opportunities.**

Technology companies do not like their services associated with armed conflict. Absent public pressure, **they may relax enforcement against Russian war propagandists.**

Picking a side does not mean picking and choosing facts. **The transparency and objectivity of our research methods will be more important than ever.**

# February 26, 2022



# **Thank You!**

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