



Study period: February 24, 2022 – August 31, 2023

STRATEGIES FOR SPREADING RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION

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- Ukraine"

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ THE REACH OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA HAS SUFFERED FROM RESTRICTIONS IMPOSED BY WESTERN PLATFORMS.
- ✓ THERE IS A GRADATION OF PROPAGANDA SHARING NETWORKS: FROM GREATER REACH TO MORE OUTRIGHT LIES.
- ✓ PROPAGANDA THEMES CHANGE WITH THE RUSSIAN STRATEGIC NARRATIVE.
- ✓ IN THE CYRILLIC SEGMENT, ALL RUSSIAN CAMPAIGNS HAVE THE WIDEST REACH WITHIN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION.
- ✓ WESTERN SPEAKERS IN THE CYRILLIC SEGMENT ARE ONLY AN AUXILIARY METHOD.
- ✓ PROPAGANDA IS MOSTLY BASED ON NEGATIVE EMOTIONS.
- ✓ MIXING TRUTH AND LIES: THE TECHNIQUE DOES NOT LOSE ITS IMPORTANCE.
- ✓ PRESUMABLY, THERE IS AN ORGANIZATION THAT SIMULTANEOUSLY PLANS RUSSIAN CAMPAIGNS IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES, CHOOSING SPECIFIC ARGUMENTS FOR EACH ONE.
- ✓ AN IMPORTANT WAY OF MASS DISSEMINATION OF THE SAME INFORMATION ARE REPOSTS, THE ROLE OF COMMENTS HAS DECREASED DUE TO THE POLICY OF WESTERN PLATFORMS.
- ✓ THE GENDER OF BOTS IS USUALLY CHOSEN BY RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN ACCORDANCE WITH GENDER STEREOTYPES.

HIGHLIGHTS (CONT 'D)

- ✓ BOTS ARE OFTEN USED IN THE SAME COUNTRIES WHERE OPINION LEADERS ARE INVOLVED. BUT SOME CAMPAIGNS HARDLY USE BOTS AT ALL.
- ✓ RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA HAS SEVERAL CHANNELS OF INFLUENCE ON UKRAINE, BUT THEIR EFFECTIVENESS IS LIMITED.
- ✓ SOMETIMES, AN ALREADY PROMOTED MESSAGE BECOMES SELF-SUFFICIENT, AND IS USED FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

TYPICAL STRATEGIES:

- ✓ THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS IS TO CREATE CHAOS.
- ✓ IF THERE IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO PREPARE EVERYTHING WELL, CONSERVATIVE CAMPAIGNS ARE USED.
- ✓ SOME OF THE “FAVORITE” TOPICS OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA PROVIDE NEWS HOOKS FOR NUMEROUS SEPARATE, VERY DIFFERENT CAMPAIGNS.
- ✓ TOP SPEAKERS ARE INVOLVED ONLY IN THE MOST IMPORTANT CAMPAIGNS, AND USUALLY, WITH SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE.
- ✓ INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGNS ARE MORE SUCCESSFUL WHEN THERE ARE STATEMENTS FROM RESPECTED INSTITUTIONS AND SPEAKERS, EVEN IF THEY ARE FAKE.

CONTENTS

Purpose and methodology of the study	5	4. The theme of the destruction of Western weapons in Ukraine	89
Topic Comparison: Overview	7	4.1. Top Posts	91
Topic Comparison: Top Posts	8	4.2. Viral posts and bot attacks	102
Topic Comparison: Viral Posts and Bot Attacks	15	5. The topic of resale of weapons provided to Ukraine	112
1. Denial of Russian crimes in Bucha	19	5.1. Top posts	114
1.1. Top posts	21	5.2. Viral posts and bot attacks	125
1.2. Viral posts and bot attacks	33	6. Theme of Volodymyr Zelensky's illness	136
2. Negativity about refugees and IDPs from Ukraine	44	6.1. Most popular posts	138
2.1. Most popular posts	46	6.2. Viral posts and bot attacks	150
2.2. Viral posts and bot attacks	58	Conclusions	160
3. Fake news about the sale of Ukrainian children	68		
3.1. Top Posts	70		
3.2. Viral posts and bot attacks	80		

GOAL AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The goal of the study is to identify the strategies by which pro-Russian propagandists exert their informational influence, especially on Ukrainian citizens through the media, social media, and messengers. By analyzing six cases of Russian propaganda, we have found out:

- How propagandists select **messages** for propaganda campaigns.
- The approach to organizing **news hooks** as part of campaigns.
- How key **authors** are selected to spread propaganda messages.
- How much attention is paid to **argumentation**.
- The role of **bots** in spreading propaganda themes.
- The role **emotions** play in the dissemination of propaganda content.
- The **accounts** that are most often involved in propaganda campaigns.

Sampling of cases. For the study, the topics promoted by Russian propaganda on the topic of the war in Ukraine were selected, based on our previous research on the [discourse of fake news and fact-checking in Ukraine](#). Among all the mentioned topics, six were selected according to several parameters: the theme of the campaign, its scope and focus.

As a result, **6 themes** were selected:

- Denial of Russian crimes in Bucha (military-humanitarian, large-scale, aimed at all audiences);
- Dehumanization of Ukrainian refugees and internally displaced persons (humanitarian, large-scale, aimed primarily at Russian and Western audiences).
- Selling Ukrainian children to pedophiles and transplant surgeons (humanitarian, relatively small scale, aimed at Russian and Ukrainian audiences).
- Destruction of Western weapons in Ukraine (military, medium scale, aimed at all audiences).
- Resale by Ukrainians of weapons that come from allies (political-military, medium scale, aimed at all audiences).
- Illness of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky (political, medium scale, focused on Russian and Ukrainian audiences).

Using queries with keyword markers for each of these topics, the YouScan monitoring system collected all publications that were publicly available on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, VK, TikTok platforms. Posts, comments and reposts in Ukrainian and Russian languages were included. In total, these arrays contained 8.2 million messages.

Based on this data, two **samples of publications** were created for each topic:

1. Publications with the largest audience reach. They are most often written by well-known bloggers, politicians, or media sites.
2. Publications that were repeated with unchanged text, and therefore were either the result of bot attacks or viral sharing of publications.

The first of these samples was formed as follows: analytics manually processed a thousand messages with the highest coverage, rejecting irrelevant ones (those that are not related to the topic or do not share the pro-Russian position). If the result was 400 or more relevant posts, the coding was limited to them. If not, the subsequent posts were coded until 400 relevant posts were obtained.

The second sample was formed according to the following principle: with the help of a specially compiled program, texts were selected that were repeated unchanged the most often. The analyst coded the resulting array, starting with the most repeated texts, until 250 relevant texts were obtained.

In addition to determining relevance, **manual coding of the data** was performed to define the following types:

- Speakers quoted by the authors of publications;
- Messages that promoted propaganda posts;
- Arguments used by the authors of publications to justify propaganda messages;
- News hooks that caused the appearance of posts;
- Emotions expressed by post authors.

After that, the array statistics were processed, diagrams were created and qualitative discourse analysis was conducted.

COMPARISON OF TOPICS.
GENERAL OVERVIEW OF ALL
THEMES

COMPARISON OF TOPICS.
GENERAL OVERVIEW OF ALL
THEMES

COMPARISON OF TOPICS.
MOST POPULAR POSTS
(MOSTLY OPINION LEADERS AND
WELL-KNOWN MEDIA)

GENERAL COVERAGE OF THE THEMES

The advantage in covering the issue of **refugees from Ukraine** is provided by numerous video materials of **YouTube** channels with millions of views; the peak of their attention fell in the first month of the full-scale war (after that, probably against the background of "getting used" to the topic, the excitement subsided). Both **pro-government** (**Russia 24, Solovyov LIVE** – until they were blocked) and **opposition** (**TV Rain, Editorial Board**) resources are involved in the issue. The issue of refugees looks less like a pinpoint information attack (or a series of such attacks), than one of the leading narratives of the war, dedicated to new experiences: people fleeing abroad, their behavior may contrast with the behavior of the locals, they are difficult to adapt to the new environment, they are not cared of. Russian propaganda tells its version of this story.

The issue of **arms smuggling** was the focus of attention of pro-Russian Telegram channels in Ukraine (**Resident, Legitimate**; in total, it was 20 million contacts with the audience, or 1/7 of the total reach), which consistently had many views (an average of 500,000). Popular bloggers on YouTube (**BesogonTV, Yu. Shvets, E. Myslyvets, M. Dulskiy**) produced various analytical reflections – about corruption in the Ukrainian authorities, and the growing tension in relations with allies because of it.

There was a massive increase in the attention of top propagandists to the topic of **Bucha** (**V. Solovyov, A. Kots, Yu. Podolyaka, M. Onufrienko**, etc.; speaker **A. Bocquet**), supported by reposts in numerous chats and other Telegram channels, which received the lion's share of coverage. It was preceded by a more chaotic spread of messages through pro-war Telegram channels, with no less intensity, but with much less reach.

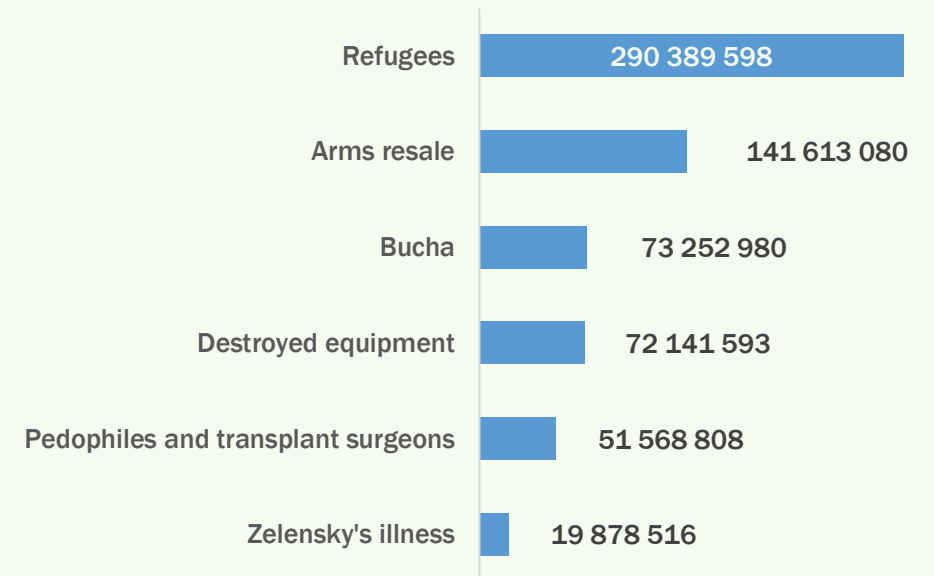
The audience in the propaganda case of the **destruction of Western equipment** (HIMARS, Patriot) was simultaneously provided by various Russian top news Telegram channels and "war correspondents" (**Ria Novosti, Readovka, Colonelcassad, Voenkor Kotenok**, etc. and even pages of opposition publications such as **Meduza**).

Resources of the "second echelon" (**Ukraina.ru, Oleksandr Semchenko, Ostashko! Important, MRIYA**) with a smaller total coverage, spread messages about the problem of **pedophilia and black transplant surgery**, which was created by the war in Ukraine (or even one that existed long before the large-scale war).

The case of **V. Zelensky's disease** was promoted more often by marginal authors or open propagandists (**Tsargrad TV, Donetsk Z**, etc.) with relatively lower coverage, sometimes with the connection of Russian Taro readers, fortune-tellers or something else (in parallel, messages about Zelensky's disease were spread by pseudo-experts). From time to time, top authors were involved (**Legitimate, Tamir Sheikh**, etc.) – for example, when informing that V. Zelensky was in intensive care (July 2022, a hacker attack on radio stations).

Topics covered by the accounts of top Russian state propagandists at the beginning of the war have the highest coverage rates. The community of Russian military bloggers has a slightly lower reach. Pro-Russian Telegram channels in Ukraine have significant reach mainly due to the constant repetition of messages. Finally, propagandists who spread outright fake news have the lowest reach. YouTube's audience has decreased significantly after YouTube corrected its policy, and since then the communication has become more focused on Telegram

(number of contacts with the audience)



DYNAMICS OF POST SHARING IN DIFFERENT INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

The first months of the full-scale war were accompanied by increased attention to humanitarian issues (on the one hand, migration flows; on the other hand, disinformation about civilian casualties in Bucha); later, the agenda of Russian propaganda began to focus more on military-political issues (the state of health of V. Zelensky, arms smuggling by Ukraine; after all, 2023 was the year of the "renaissance" of the theme of destroying of Western weapons after the first deliveries of Patriots). In addition, after the change in YouTube policy, it became more difficult for the Russians to gather such an audience as they did at the beginning of the invasion

(number of contacts with the audience; segments i.e. topics in which these authors were involved; communication channel in social media is mentioned in brackets)



LEADING POST AUTHORS

The authors who talked about refugees have the largest cumulative reach; YouTube was their leading communication channel (especially in the first days of the full-scale war). The rest of the information campaigns mainly involved the leading news Telegram channels in Russia (SOLOVYOV, Readovka) or pro-Russian anonymous channels in Ukraine (Resident)

(number of contacts with the audience; segments i.e. topics in which these authors were involved; communication channel in social media is mentioned in brackets)

In the first days after February 24: the statement that the West does not care about Ukrainians, only the Russian Federation can receive them, and the majority of Ukrainians prefer to flee to Russia. Accusations (especially from the Russian authorities) that the Ukrainian Armed Forces were interfering with humanitarian corridors during the evacuation of people, undermining communication routes, etc.

Stories about the departure of refugees in both directions: to the West and to Russia (mostly from the Donbas); considerations about the aggravation of the migration crisis; later videos are about the attitudes in Bryansk toward Ukrainians (one people, politicians set people against each other), the placement of people from Kharkiv region in Belgorod (after the Russian retreat from there)

Stories about the first days of the Russian attack, with an emphasis on Europe, which actively accepted Ukrainian refugees. Afterwards, reflections on how Ukrainians are helped and others are forgotten.

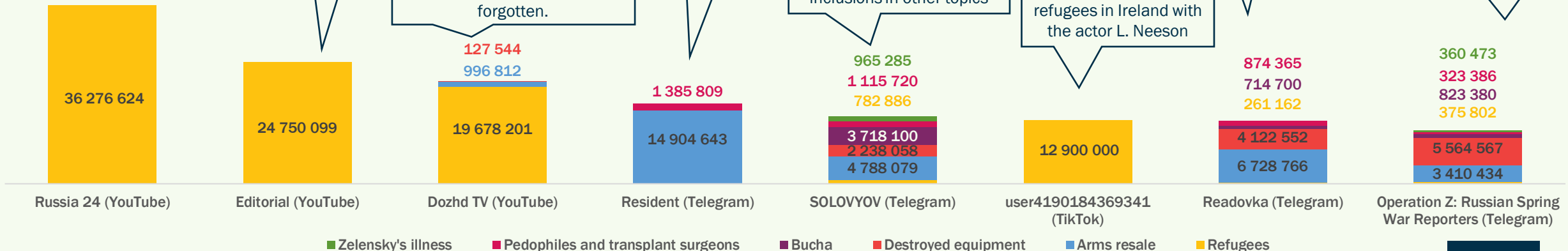
A wave of posts about the discovery of weapons on the black market, Ukraine's attempts to silence the scandal, the involvement of the Ukrainian authorities in the smuggling (K. Budanov, Ministry of Defense, OP), talking points about the sale of weapons to Africa etc. Several posts on international concerns about pedophilia and black transplant surgeons (e.g. in the OSCE)

Reports of destroyed HIMARS and Patriot, "provocations" in Bucha, arms trade on the Darknet (along with statements from various speakers in the West or the Global South), occasional inclusions in other topics

Official reports on the destruction of HIMARS, Patriot or other equipment; own ("investigations") and borrowed materials on the black market in weapons and the Darknet, sales to third countries (and statements by Russian officials)

Viral video about the meeting of Ukrainian refugees in Ireland with the actor L. Neeson

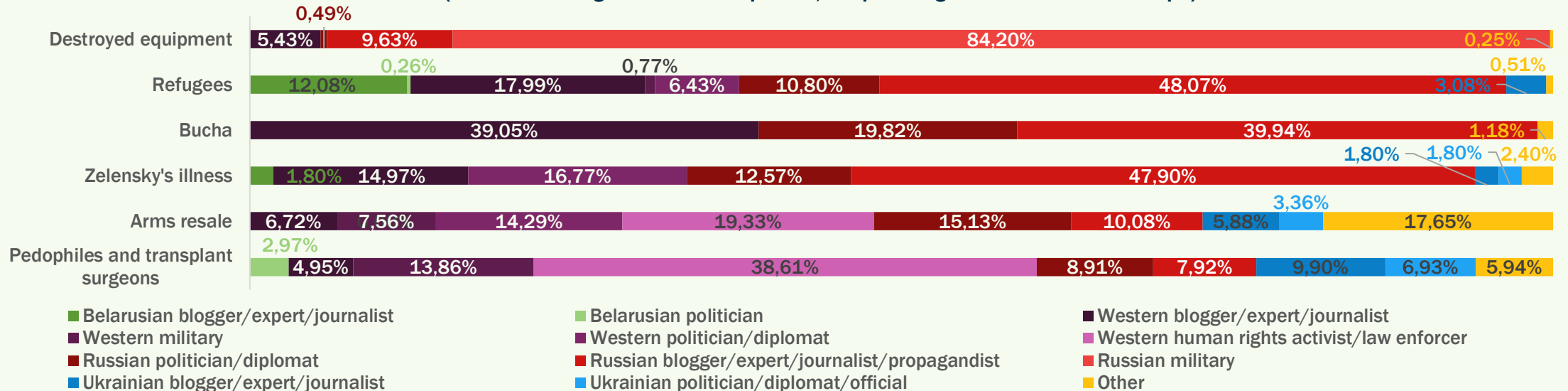
Statements by the Russian Ministry of Defense on the destruction of HIMARS, published footage of the alleged destruction of Patriots by Kinzhal missiles (or reports of serious damage and the need for repairs in the USA). Talking points from various speakers (from Western law enforcement officials to a Ukrainian soldier) about the risks of smuggling or alleged cases of selling weapons received from allies.



DISTRIBUTION OF ATTENTION TO THE TYPES OF SPEAKERS INVOLVED IN EACH TOPIC

Often it is enough for the propaganda to build a campaign based on the statements of its own politicians and bloggers. Western or Ukrainian speakers are involved in two cases: when there are statements by conscious politicians that can be taken out of context or used in their entirety, or when there is a need to influence the Western audience - then pro-Russian but formally Western experts are involved

(number of messages with recorded speakers, as a percentage of the total within each topic)



The Russian military (representatives of the Russian Ministry of Defense) have a dominant position in the discourse on the destroyed weapons received from the allies; they fill the information space with statements about it (in connection with Patriot, HIMARS). They are hardly involved in other campaigns..

Russian media workers are actively involved in disinformation campaigns about refugees, Bucha and V. Zelensky's disease. Thus, the "war reporter" A. Kots is the leading author of the arguments about why the massacre in Bucha is a performance (bodies move, Ukraine shelled the city). Similarly, Russian bloggers are often mentioned in the search for the "symptoms of illness" of V. Zelensky.

The most noticeable involvement of **Western media people** in connection with Bucha, but this is due to the extremely active quoting of a single French propagandist A. Bocquet; he was used to legitimize the news about the "Bucha provocation" in the West.

Western politicians (pro-Russian or neutral, whose messages were exaggerated) were a propaganda tool in campaigns on military-political, not humanitarian issues: the Speaker of the Hungarian Parliament L. Kever talked about the poor health of V. Zelensky, and the deputy V. Spartz talked about arms smuggling.. **Western military** (retired officers and generals, deserters, prisoners of war) were also involved in the second theme.

Western law enforcement officers and human rights defenders were seen with statements about cases of resale of weapons and pedophilia; Russian propaganda relied on them to confirm its messages, given their status and statistics.

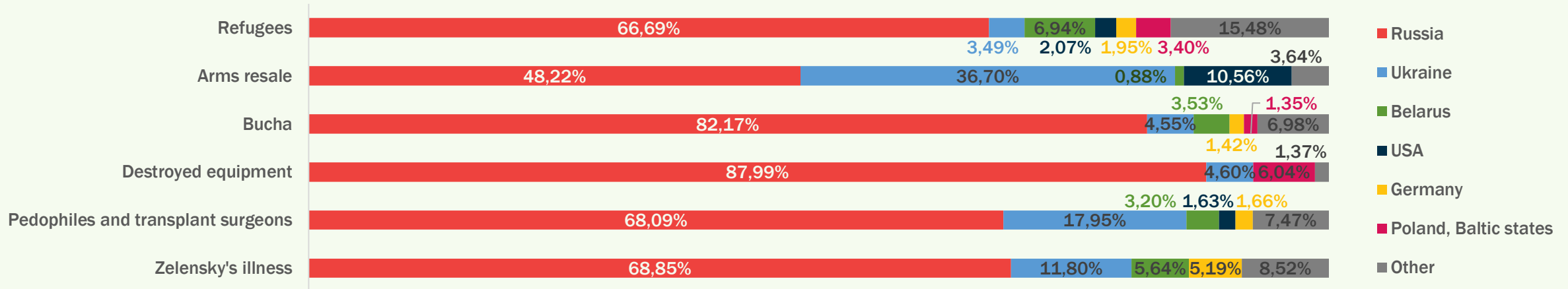
Ukrainian authorities and media were occasionally quoted in the form of out-of-context phrases or statements recognizing the problem (for example, cases of mistreatment of refugees).

Speakers of the "other" type are mainly **representatives of the Global South**. They were the most active on the issue of arms resale, as some states (China, Turkey, African countries) expressed concern about the proliferation of arms around the world.

KEY COUNTRIES OF AUTHORS WITHIN EACH TOPIC

Russian accounts have the largest share in all topics, and a significant share of Ukrainian accounts is in those topics where propagandists hope to play on the dominant narratives of Ukrainians. Some formally Western accounts also target these two audiences (such as Yu.Shvets from the US). Another part is diaspora publications, including opposition ones, which do not completely refuse to quote propaganda

(number of contacts with the audience of Cyrillic posts, as a percentage of the total number within each topic)



The main target audience of most (dis)information attacks is **Russia**. Top Russian propagandists or propaganda media (Readovka, SOLOVYOV, Ria Novosti), which reproduce, among other things, official reports of the Russian Ministry of Defense and other agencies, have significant reach. Others are "war reporters" and military "experts" (A. Kots, Ye. Poddubny, B. Rozhin).

Ukrainian accounts (such as Legitimate, Resident, ZeRada, D. Vasylets, M. Dulsky) are involved in the campaigns where they hope to play on the mistrust that is already widespread in Ukraine: dissatisfaction with the actions of the authorities (as in the case of the resale of weapons) or misunderstandings between different regions (the issue of refugees).

The US is the next important place to send messages about smuggling. This is mainly due to the wide reach of the YouTube

videos of Yuriy Shvets, who gained the trust of Ukrainians, especially on the wave of Victoria Spartz's statements about A. Yermak, but he also spread purely Russian messages (about "surplus" weapons in Africa). The influence on the American Russian-speaking audience should not be excluded, as it strengthened the voices for the reduction of military aid.

The most variable geography (**Belarus, Poland, the Baltic countries, Germany**, etc., and not only Russia or Ukraine) in the refugee issue, as this issue concerns various countries where Ukrainian diasporas have formed or expanded. Therefore, some propaganda-like messages were spread by the relocated Russian opposition (Meduza in Latvia), foreign broadcasters (DW, BBC, Turkish broadcaster TRT and others), Belarusian pro-government (ATN: news of Belarus and the world) or even opposition resources (Belsat, VOT TAK, NEXTA Live).

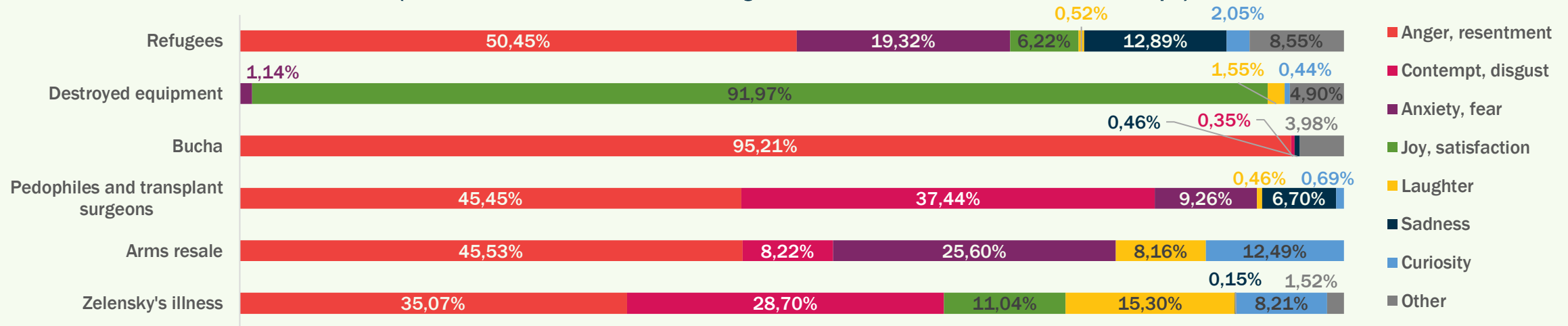
In the case of **Germany**, the Russian diaspora was also active, using its resources (in particular, YouTube channels such as Voice of Europe) to discredit refugees from Ukraine (they say that Ukrainians are ungrateful, untidy, irresponsible, parasites, and a burden for everyone).

In addition, there is a high share of the **Baltic** segment in the disinformation about the destruction of Western equipment: Meduza relayed the statements of the Russian Ministry of Defense. Although it was on a par with Ukrainian statements (under the guise of a balance of opinions), yet this media did not solve the standard dilemma of "quoting two sources, one of which is lying."

KEY EMOTIONS THAT WERE BROADCAST WITHIN EACH TOPIC

Positive emotions are an exception to the rule for Russian propaganda (to boost morale with reports of destroyed Western equipment). The most common emotion is anger, which is supposed to mobilize Russians to fight. The second most common are demobilizing negative emotions: contempt and disgust (typical in relation to the "younger brother") and fear and anxiety (often directed at Western audiences to scare them about the consequences of war)

(share of the number of contacts of messages with emotions with the audience within each topic)



Most propaganda campaigns use negative emotions (anger, neglect, disgust, etc.) as the main tool, except for statements about the destroyed equipment, where **joy** dominates instead. Messages aimed at the Russian society were intended to raise its morale, to ensure that there was no threat to Russia's position in the war.

The basic **anger** against the objects of the information attack is based mostly on the message about Bucha: it is directed against the "organizers of the provocation" (they allegedly try to quarrel Russia with the rest of the world, deliberately imitating war crimes).

But the publications on refugees and the resale of weapons were often characterized not only by anger, but also by **fear/anxiety**. The public (often in the West) was afraid of the possible negative consequences of war migration flows (for the labor market, crime, especially trafficking in children or smuggled weapons).

Contempt or disgust is used as a tool to devalue the enemy: Ukrainian society, the authorities, or the collective West. This is most evident in the disinformation about problems with pedophilia and transplant surgeons. The fixation on the external and internal unattractiveness of the Ukrainian leadership is

noticeable in the topic of V. Zelensky's alleged illness or drug addiction.

Laughter not only emotionally relaxes the consumers of Russian propaganda, but also increases contempt (most often in connection with the "drug addict Zelensky").

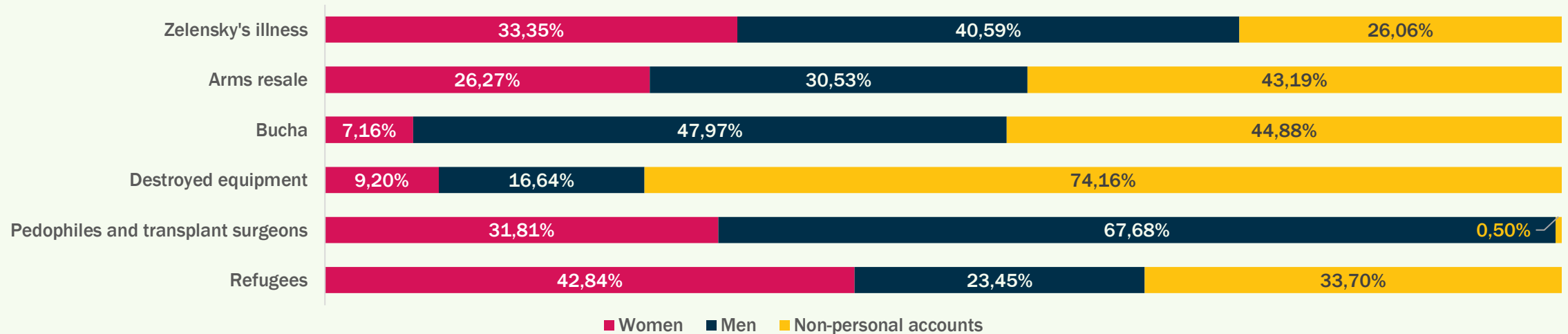
Sadness is sometimes used in humanitarian issues: children victimized by pedophiles, refugees from Ukraine. These demonstrative victims serve to highlight the criminality of the Ukrainian authorities.

COMPARISON OF TOPICS.
VIRAL POSTS AND BOT ATTACKS

DISTRIBUTION BY POST AUTHOR TYPE WITHIN EACH TOPIC

Russian propaganda usually selects the genders of bots according to gender stereotypes: female accounts are used for emotional messages on humanitarian issues, male accounts for geopolitical and military considerations in the format of "armchair expertise". The highest share of non-personal accounts is Telegram channels in the spread of "official" reports on destroyed Western equipment in Ukraine, as well as OK household communities on the topic of Bucha

(number of repeated messages, as a percentage of the total within each topic)



Non-personal accounts are used in two formats: either thematic sites on OK and other social media that initially attracted audiences as sites about everyday life, or a network of pro-war sites and military bloggers that massively shared the same messages. This gives the impression that this information is everywhere and is probably intended to increase confidence.

The highest percentage of **women** was recorded in the amplification of publications about the problems of

Ukrainian refugees. The posts are short, with a pronounced emotional component (for example, short descriptions of the video with stories about the "crimes" of Azov fighters told by refugees from Mariupol who moved to Russia). Women showed emotion when complaining about the rudeness of the refugees, when they resented such behavior.

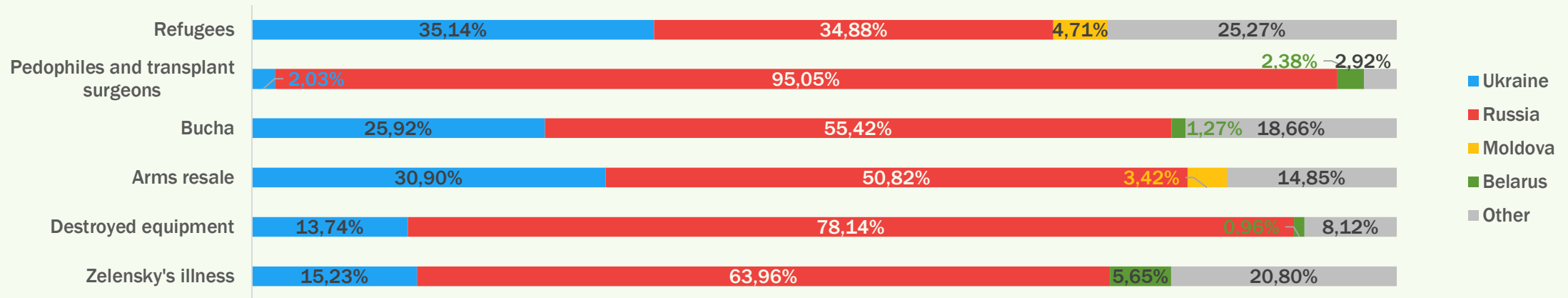
The role of **men** is more pronounced in purely political issues - resale of arms, V. Zelensky's disease - as well as in

some humanitarian issues (Bucha, pedophiles and black transplant surgeons): if they were mostly discussed not in the humanitarian and emotional dimension, as in the case of refugees, but in the context of political analysis, then they had frequent references to materials in foreign media or information from law enforcement agencies, statements of politicians of various kinds. In this sense, the male segment acted more like a team of "armchair experts" than a group of sympathizers.

GEOGRAPHY OF MESSAGES WITHIN EACH TOPIC

For "international" issues (refugees are a good example), the share of formally Russian participants is less significant; instead, people from the countries concerned (and from Ukraine, where the issue of refugees/IDPs is relevant) are involved. Ukrainians were also active in sharing information about the "resale" of weapons, and the same pattern was observed in the segment of opinion leaders.

(number of repeated messages, as a percentage of the total within each topic)



The share of **Russian** users is the most significant in the spread of manipulations about pedophilia and black transplant surgeons in Ukraine. Here, in addition to active quoting of articles of various Western media or statements of local speakers, great attention was paid to purely Russian speakers (the statement of the Russian Investigative Committee on the involvement of the Red Cross in the sale of children for organs, the angry speech of V. Volodin about what is wrong with the "Kiev regime"). A high percentage of messages from the Russian Federation is recorded in the topic of destruction of Western weapons, although this is mainly the activity of various pro-war public pages (OK/VK) involved in the dissemination of official statements as part of the campaign to discredit Western weapons (HIMARS, Patriot). For the domestic Russian audience, information about either Bucha or the resale of Western weapons was a purely everyday background that penetrated even the non-political community.

The **Ukrainian** segment of social media is actively involved in viral sharing or even bot attacks over accusations of reselling weapons to other countries. Even Facebook users were quite active - and there was not a single official Russian there, everyone at least pretended to be a patriot, and groups of P. Poroshenko's supporters (Green Woodpecker Reserve, ARMY + 25%) were often involved in the campaign. They are also sometimes seen in connection with information attacks on the state of V. Zelensky, but their messages differ from the Russian ones (for example, regarding the publication of books about Zelensky, he is compared with the late Brezhnev: a patient with narcissism).

Moldovan users (including residents of unrecognized Transnistria) were involved in the disinformation campaign about arms smuggling - through a manipulative interpretation of the statement about the creation of an anti-smuggling center in their country, as

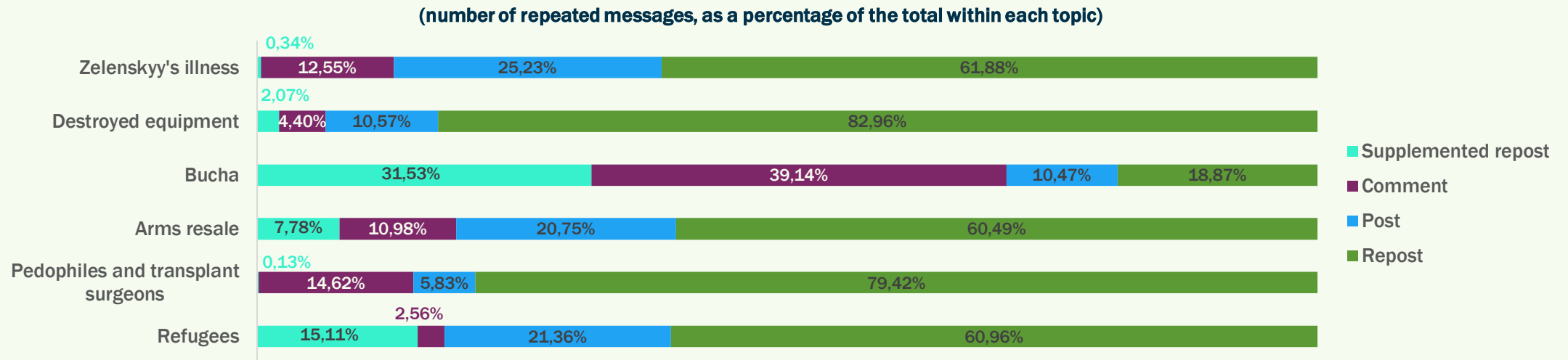
well as by paying attention to the statements of local politicians who support the propaganda.

Along with residents of other countries, they shared publications about Ukrainian refugees - this topic was generally the most "international" in terms of the geography of the users involved (**Italy, Germany, Poland, Israel**, etc.). This wide range of interested countries correlates with the settlement of Ukrainian refugees there. Reports about Bucha often included posts from **Bulgarians** in the local language (including Cyrillic), from a country with historically strong (even among some politicians) pro-Russian sentiments.

The share of international users (and **Belarusians**) is also noticeable in the topic of V. Zelensky's "diseases," but without any particular pattern.

DISTRIBUTION BY MESSAGE TYPE IN EACH TOPIC

Common reposts, and in some cases (such as the refugee campaign) even posts that are mechanical reprints of texts from other accounts, are an important way of spreading information. Propaganda comments were actively used at the beginning of the invasion, under the posts of independent media or well-known patriots, to try to influence people with a non-Russian position, especially on the topic of Bucha. But later this format fell out of use, presumably due to the efforts of platforms to block botnets.



In most of the campaigns, the viral character was created by the **usual reposts**. Information about the involvement of the Ukrainian authorities or Ukrainian citizens in the sale of children was spread in this way by individual users. Instead, information about the destruction of Western equipment was intensively reposted by major pro-war Telegram channels with a large number of subscribers, as well as thousands of thematic communities on OK.

Complementary reposts are practiced mainly in non-political communities on OK, although they almost completely

duplicate the content of ordinary reposts (as in the case of Bucha - about "provocation", "staging", "fake news", etc.), users do not have a clear geolocation and significantly diversify texts about Bucha on social media.

Very rarely, identical texts were shared in the format of **separate posts**: this method was mainly used by major news sources and/or military correspondents. The percentage of posts is twice as high in campaigns about refugees, arms resale, and V. Zelensky's disease.

The involvement of bot **comments** under the news posts of

opinion leaders or media (especially pro-Ukrainian or Russian anti-war ones, such as D. Komarov, Meduza, BBC News Russian) on Facebook and their videos on YouTube was active about Bucha, so at the beginning of the full-scale invasion the Russians hoped desperately to convince the other side of their rightness by attacking their "info bubbles" with arguments about the alleged fabrication of war crimes. Later information campaigns were less likely to use the comment format without trying to reach opposing audiences.

1.

DENIAL OF RUSSIAN CRIMES IN BUCHA

DENIAL OF RUSSIAN CRIMES IN BUCHA

General Topic Description

The analyzed period is March 1, 2022 – August 31, 2023.

Russian propaganda immediately reacted to the publication of the photo "Bucha massacre": on April 3, 2022, the Russian Ministry of Defense issued a statement denying the involvement of Russia in the atrocities, and at the same time pro-war public pages and military reporters joined this propaganda. (War with fakes, Kotsnews, D. Bezsonov). On April 4, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called Bucha a threat to international security. The next peak of the bot campaign was on May 10, 2022. Then, blogger Adrien Bocquet denied the crimes committed by Russians in Bucha on French radio. His statements were picked up by Russian propaganda, and two months later they called on him to repeat the accusations against Ukraine on Russian television. In 2023, the Russian authorities, speaking at international organizations, continued to call the Bucha crimes faked.

There were few unique posts in the analyzed sample; usually, arguments in favor of the Russian point of view were launched in the information space by "opinion leaders". Later, they were reposted to chat rooms and pro-war communities on social media. Most often, Telegram was used for this "copy-paste", as large Telegram news channels are convenient for deploying bot campaigns.

Propagandists make arguments in their posts without verifying the truth. To make it harder to believe the truth than the lies, the Russian strategy is to create multiple versions of events. Thus, propagandists simultaneously say that actors are playing corpses (D. Bezsonov, an edited excerpt from the Espresso story); that the corpses are real, but moved from other places (A. Bocquet, I. Kyva); that the corpses were not moved because people were shot down by Ukrainian artillery (O. Kots, "The War on Fakes"); there is even an argument that it would be a disadvantage for the Russians not to remove the corpses (I. Bobrov). They also manipulate the statements of Ukrainian politicians, complaining that the mayor of Bucha was silent for 4 days about the atrocities in the city (statement of the Russian Defense Ministry, V. Nebenzia) - and therefore the Ukrainian authorities were preparing a performance for the Western media at that time.

1.1.

MOST POPULAR POSTS
(MOSTLY OPINION LEADERS AND
WELL-KNOWN MEDIA)

DISTRIBUTION OF ATTENTION BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION CHANNEL AND POST GEOGRAPHY

Telegram is the main platform for spreading Russian disinformation about the crimes in Bucha, using mainly top bloggers and targeting mainly Russian audiences. YouTube is primarily a tool for spreading official quotes. The other channels are mainly used to reach a specific target audience (Ukrainians, young people, etc.)

(number of contacts with the audience in the Cyrillic segment of social media)



Telegram: in Russia, the platform is popular among propagandists (**Alexander Kots, Boris Rozhin, Vladimir Solovyov**) who write trigger posts with many arguments, which are then disseminated through popular pro-war Telegram chats and public websites. Significant coverage of the fake is provided by the **War on Fakes** and **Reporter Rudenko V** channels. The argumentation is not based on any authoritative sources; it often shares quotes from the interview of the Frenchman **Adrien Bocquet**. **Ukrainian pro-Russian** authors are involved in the dissemination of posts by Russian opinion leaders with the talking point of persecution of Ukrainians, calling Bucha a fake of the Ukrainian authorities (Dmytro Vasylets, Sheikh Tamir). In **Western** countries, Russian publications are shared in local chats.

YouTube: Russian official channels are the most effective in spreading Russian news (interview with **Sergei Lavrov** and his speech at the UN, statement by **Maria Zakharova** at the Foreign Ministry briefing). Bloggers are also involved in the propaganda: both political (**Pavel**

Ivanov) and popular science (**Evil Ecologist**). **Ukraine:** M. Zakharova's statement is spread by the anti-war **AMON RA**: she called the Western media accomplices of the crime in Bucha. Russian émigré Ivan Bobrov (now living in **Germany**) argues that the crimes in Bucha are faked because it would be a disadvantage for the Russians not to remove the bodies.

VK: The **Russians** are circulating a video in which syrup - the "blood" of the Ukrainian people - is poured on the Russian ambassador in Poland.

Facebook: **Nastoyashchee Vremya** publishes the results of a survey about Bucha among Russians, Kyiv.Live spreads a quote by Lavrov about provocations and threats to national security.

TikTok: edited excerpts of interviews with Sergei Lavrov and Adrien Bocquet; propaganda videos edited as "debunking fakes".

DYNAMICS OF POST SHARING

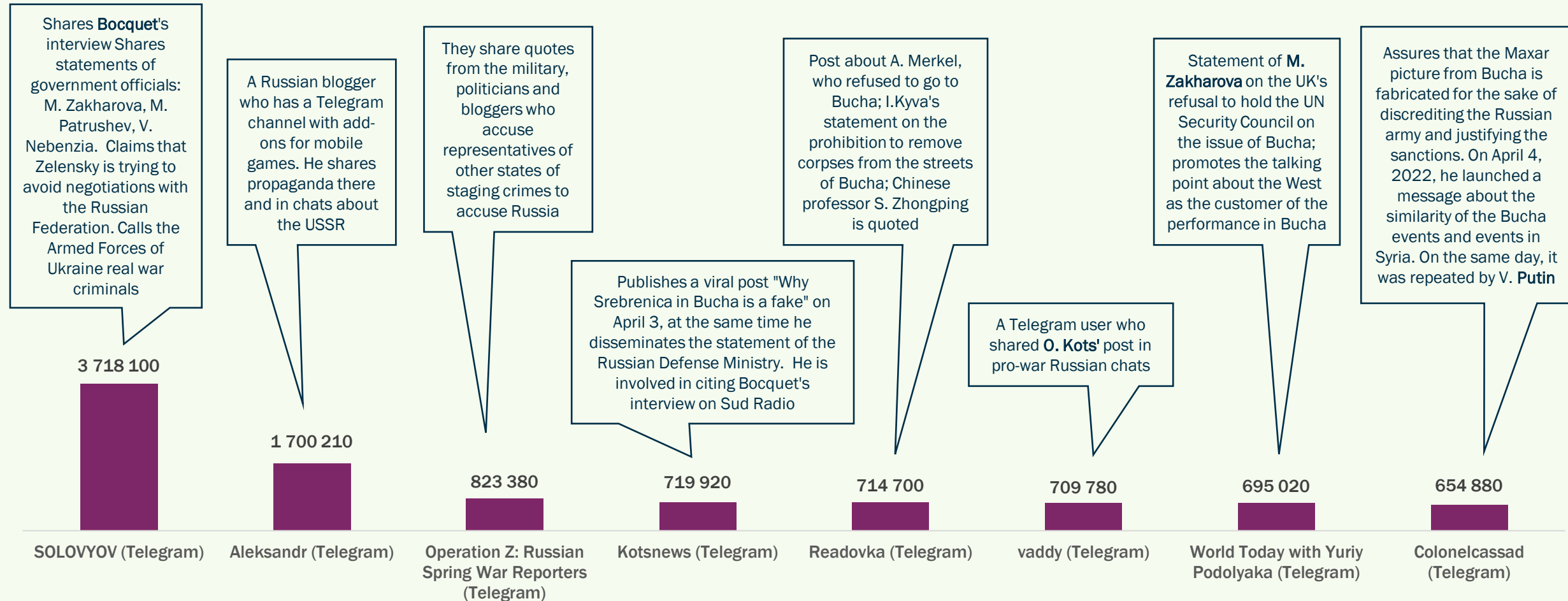
The first wave of publications came after the publication by Ukrainian and Western media of the atrocities in Bucha on April 3, to which the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation responded, after which propagandists and bots in Telegram joined the wave. The second wave came after the blogger A. Bocquet spoke on Sud Radio on May 10. Quotes from Bocquet's interview were taken up by all possible channels: well-known Russian propagandists (V. Solovyov), pro-war public websites, and large Telegram chats. The second wave had fewer posts, but was more prepared



KEY CONTENT CREATORS

The main authors are well-known propagandists, who themselves generate many arguments in favor of the Russian version of events. Misinformation is spread in groups by involving accounts similar to bots

(number of contacts with the audience; authors' communication channels in SM are in brackets)



MAIN GROUPS OF QUOTED SPEAKERS

Western blogger/expert/journalist. The main speaker of this type is the former French military **A. Bocquet**. He gave 2 key interviews (Sud Radio, Solovyov Live), where he accused Ukraine of Nazism.

Russian blogger/expert/journalist. The most notable author is V. Soloviov, who accuses other states of falsifying crimes in Bucha. B. Rozhin **takes a similar stance**. **O. Kotz** promotes the message of the humanity of the Russian military.

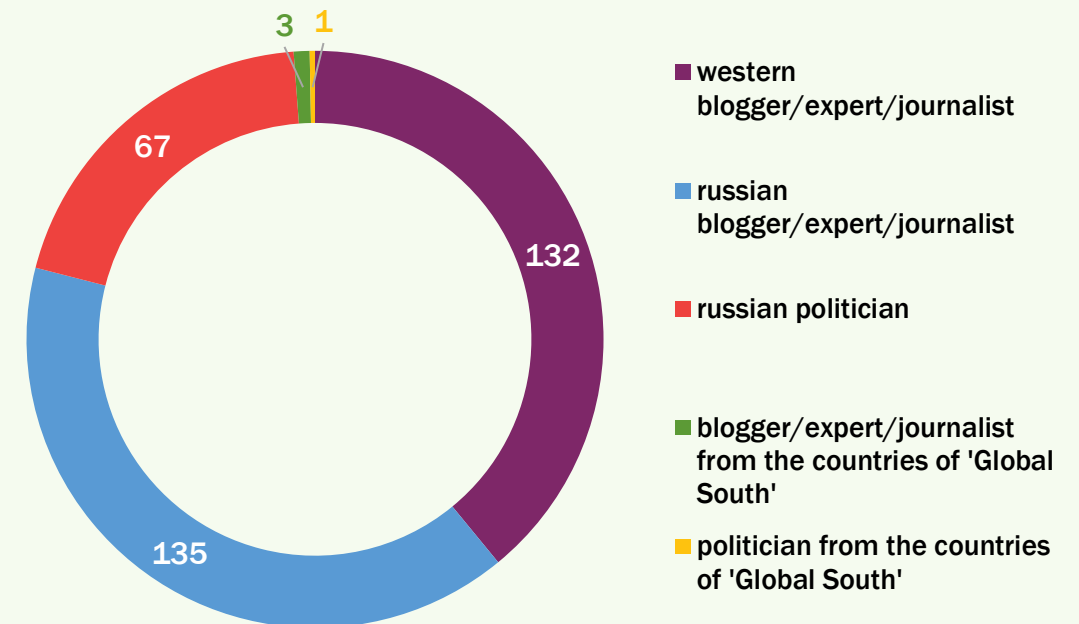
Russian politician. **V. Putin** and **S. Lavrov** call Bucha crimes staged. **V. Nebenzia** in his speech at the UN Security Council called Ukraine a terrorist state.

Blogger/expert/journalist from the countries of 'Global South' – Chinese professor **S. Zhongping**. He said that the President of Ukraine was an actor in the past – that's why there is a big performance in Bucha.

Politician from the countries of 'Global South': the leader of the Turkish nationalist party **D. Bahceli** mentions the invasion of Iraq as an example of using provocation to justify military action and believes that Russia was wrongly accused by the collective West

The topic is mainly developed by bloggers and journalists - both Russian and Western - and most of the content is based on their statements

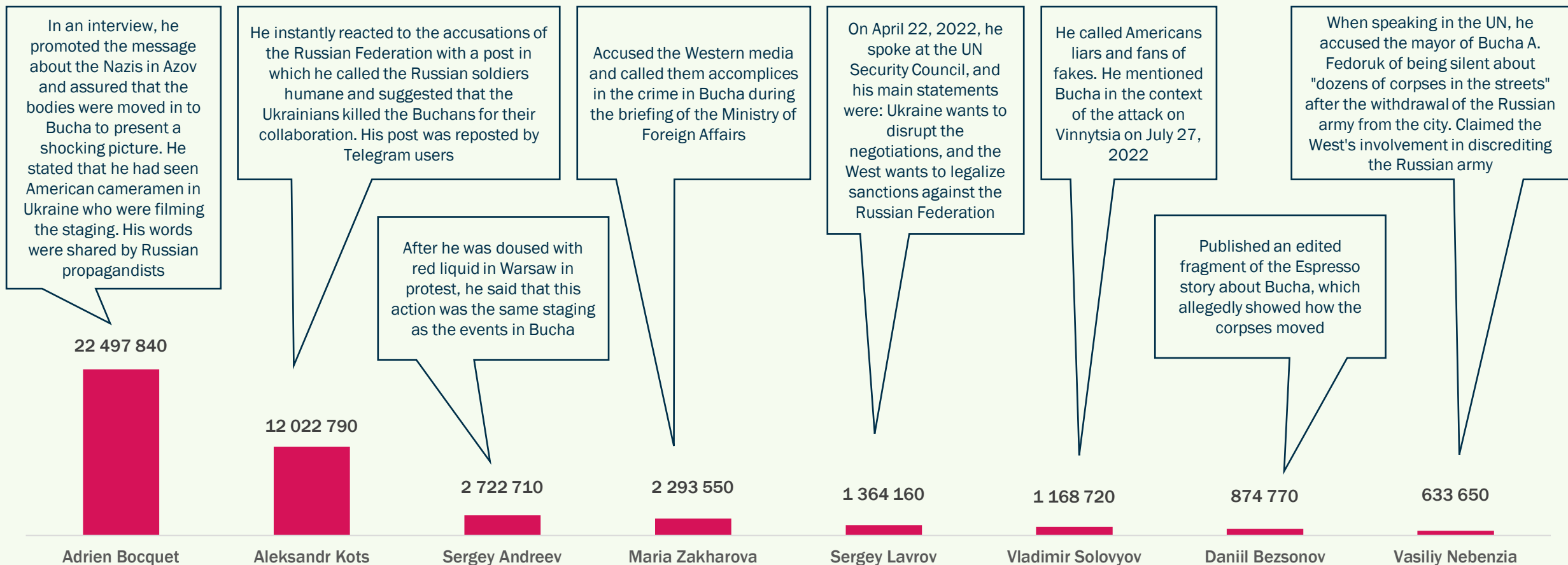
(number of contacts with the audience)



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

A. Bocquet's statements from two interviews worked for Western audiences: the French and Russian media. Official speakers were heard more often and quoted less often in international forums. The propagandists helped to disseminate official statements to the general public

(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION

Pro-Russian authors built a message box with an eye to the West and criticism of its insidiousness, trying to sow doubt about the sincerity of Western support for Ukraine

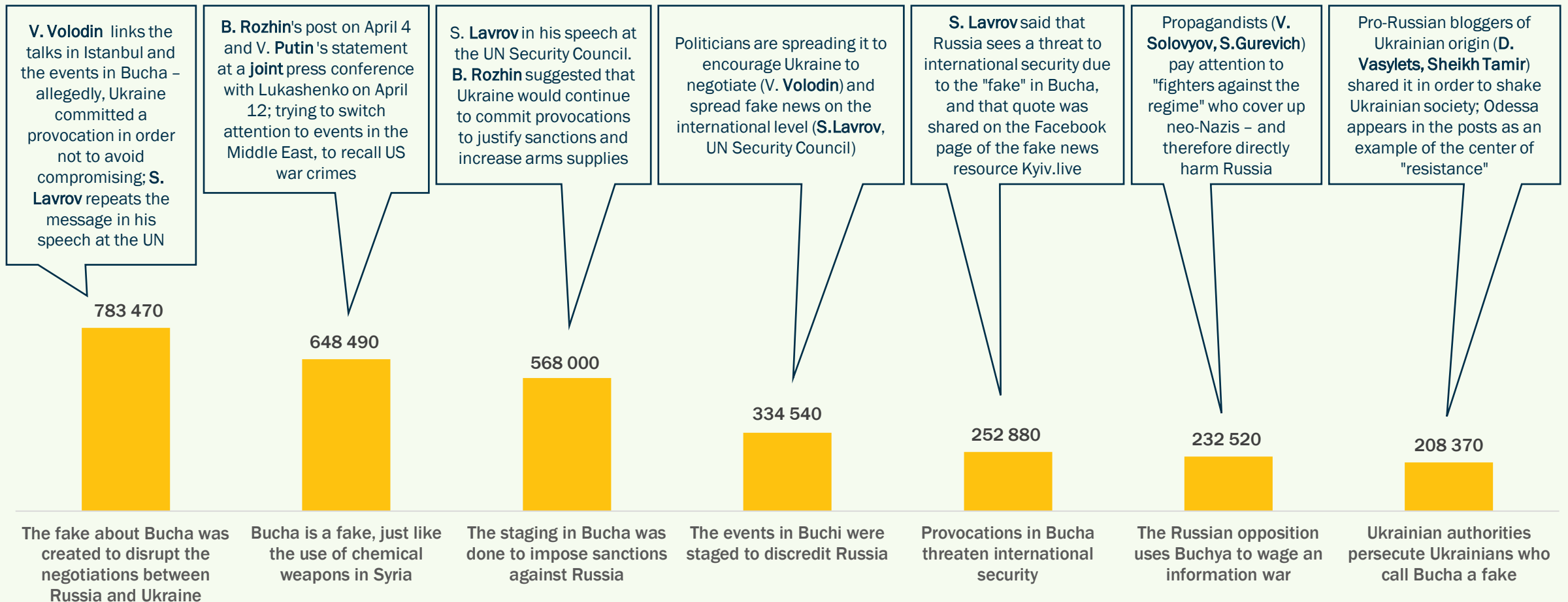
(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

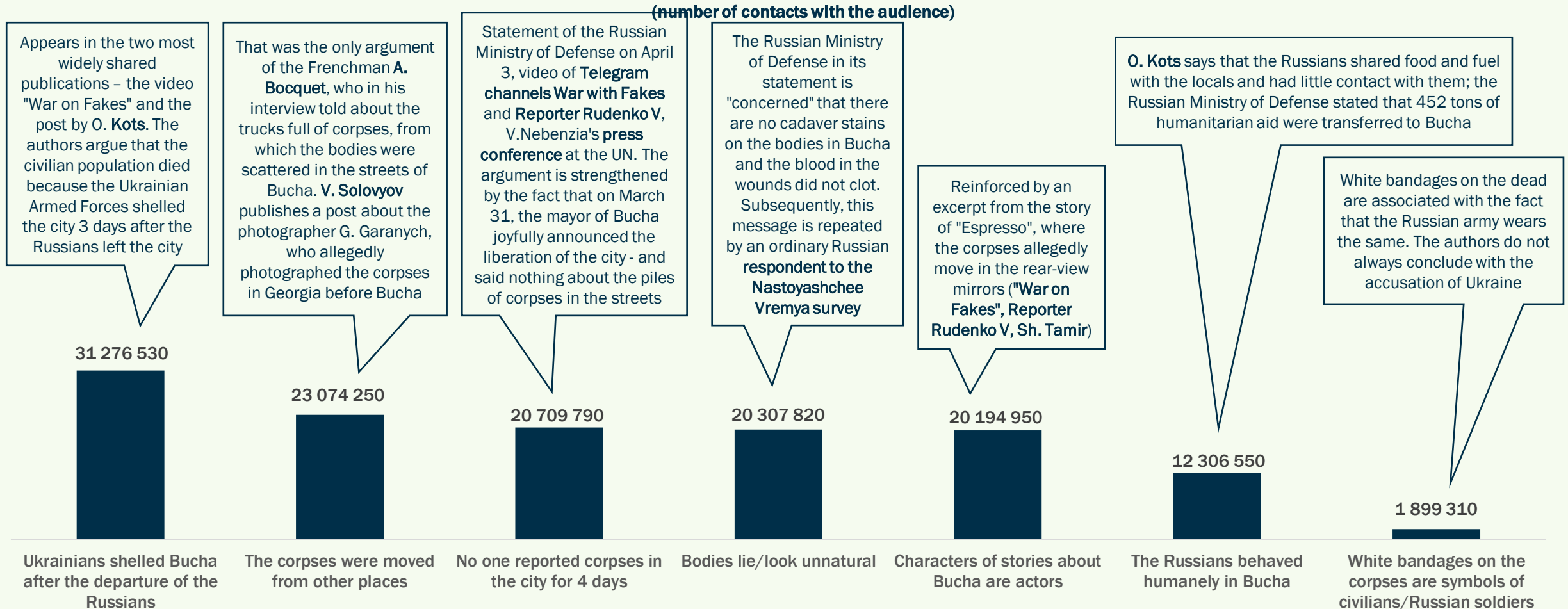
An important, though less frequent, part of the discourse was complaints about how the Russians were being blamed (discrediting their army, punishing them with sanctions, etc.). The focus is deliberately shifted to the aggressor, who is portrayed as the victim

(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY ARGUMENTS

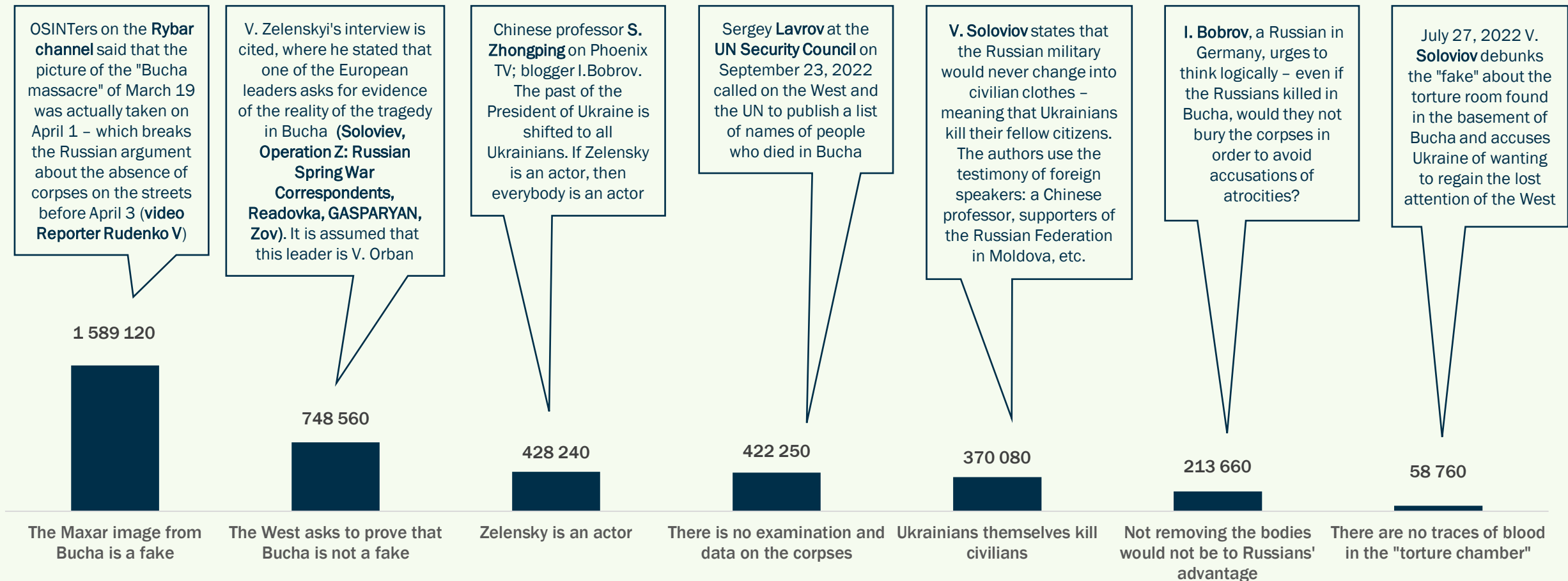
Different, often mutually exclusive arguments are propagated with roughly equal effort. In the first wave, they tried to create the most controversial image possible; in the second wave, thanks to A. Bocquet, they focused on one of them that had not been used before.



KEY ARGUMENTS (CONTINUED)

Less common arguments are as manipulative as possible and have many logical flaws (Zelenskyi was an actor in the past, therefore, everyone in Bucha is an actor). There is no evidence here, only the words of Russians against the words of Ukrainians

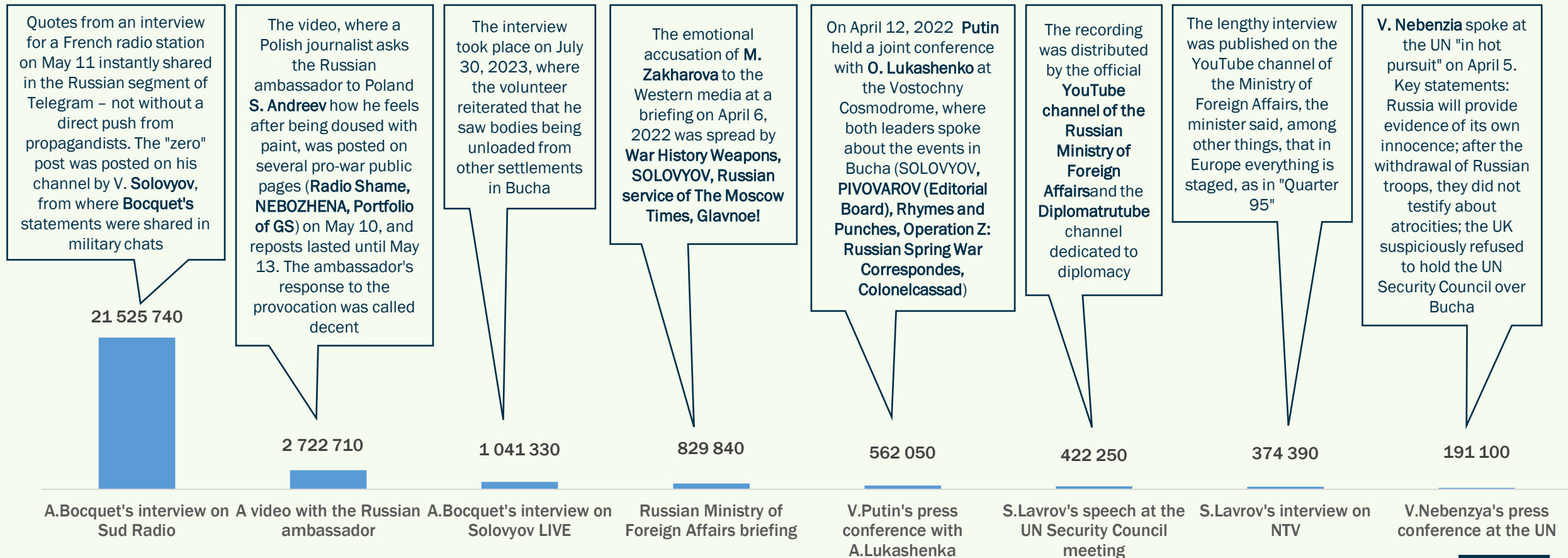
(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY NEWS STORIES LAUNCHED BY THE RUSSIAN SIDE

The case of A. Bocquet looks like a well-planned media campaign on the part of the Russian Federation – V. Solovyov, who began sharing the Frenchman's quotes in Telegram, later invited him to an interview for his own channel, where Bocquet was able to repeat the necessary propaganda talking points. The vast majority of the other news hooks were organized by the Russian side in international venues, and only the paint dousing of the Russian ambassador was not theirs, but actively used

(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY EMOTIONS BROADCAST BY THE AUTHORS

Anger is expressed both by representatives of the authorities (**M. Zakharova**, **V. Nebenzia**) in public speeches, and by "opinion leaders" in posts. It is often emphasized that Ukrainians are Nazis, and representatives of the West (mainly the United States and the United Kingdom) are liars.

The Russians were **proud** of the response of the Russian ambassador to the "provocation" in Poland, the ambassador is called a "patriot" and a "real man"; they write the slogan "Strength is in the truth" in the comments to the video.

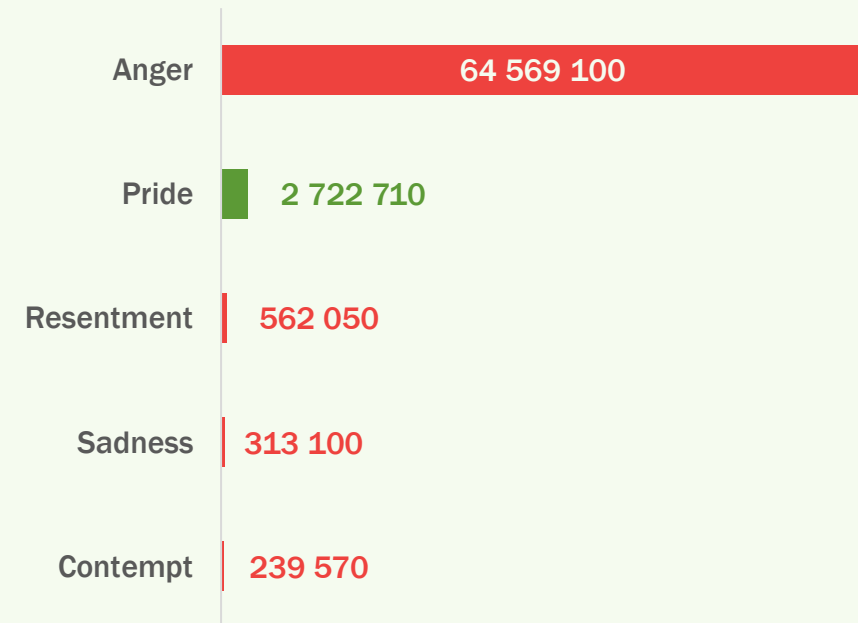
Resentment: V. Putin 's speech at a joint press conference with O. Lukashenko, the Russian President is engaged in "Whataboutism", reminding how American aircraft destroyed Syrian cities.

Sadness: a survey of the **Nastoyashchee Vremya** about the situation in Bucha, some of the respondents share that their "soul hurts for everyone".

Contempt for Americans is expressed by V. Solovyov in a post about the lies and hypocrisy of the United States.

The propaganda mainly promoted anger and resentment against the West and Ukraine, and the authors often used hate speech against opponents

(number of contacts with the audience)



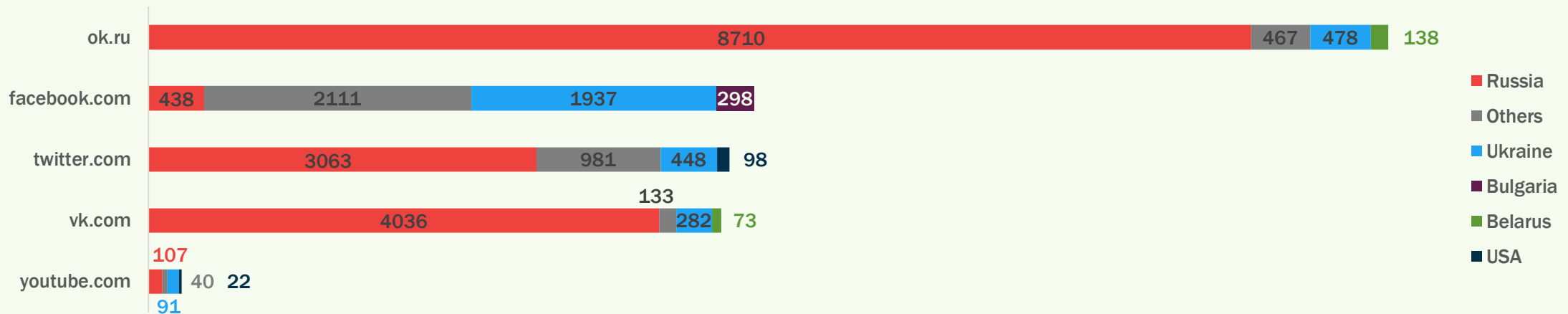
1.2.

VIRAL POSTS AND BOT ATTACKS

DISTRIBUTION OF ATTENTION BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION CHANNEL AND POST GEOGRAPHY

In the Russian and Belarusian segments, Russian social media VK and OK are mainly used to spread disinformation. Posts that are inconvenient for propaganda are deleted there, and the users are not used to fact-checking. But this does not prevent them from using Facebook and Twitter in Ukraine and Western countries

(number of posts in the Cyrillic segment of social media)



OK: in **Russia**, crimes in Bucha are refuted in various thematic groups not related to war or politics, such as "Recipes for all occasions", "Beautiful photos". As a rule, they share videos with the main propaganda messages. Users also share officials' statements on their personal pages. **Ukrainian** authors republish posts accusing Ukraine of killing people in Bucha, and bots massively send out propaganda as comments in pro-Ukrainian communities. In **Belarus**, O. Lukashenko's statement about the British directors of Bucha is popular.

Facebook: **other** countries (Bulgaria, Kazakhstan) share interviews with A. Bocquet, and statements of officials are also popular among pro-Russian Europeans (V. Putin, A. Lukashenko, statements of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation). **Ukraine:** The Nastoyashchee Vremya video with a survey of Russians about Bucha; S. Lavrov's words about a threat to national security – supplemented reposts with indignation. **Russian** authors spread propaganda in the communities of the Russian diaspora.

Twitter: in **Russia**, men are much more active here, accounts with pro-war nicknames (Igor ZOV, Maksym Z Machine Gun) distribute a post about Chinese media that allegedly refuted Bucha. In **other** countries, they distribute the TASS publication, supplementing it with a refutation of the Russian fake in English. **Ukrainians** are outraged by the fact that the daughter of O. Nevzorov called Bucha a fake.

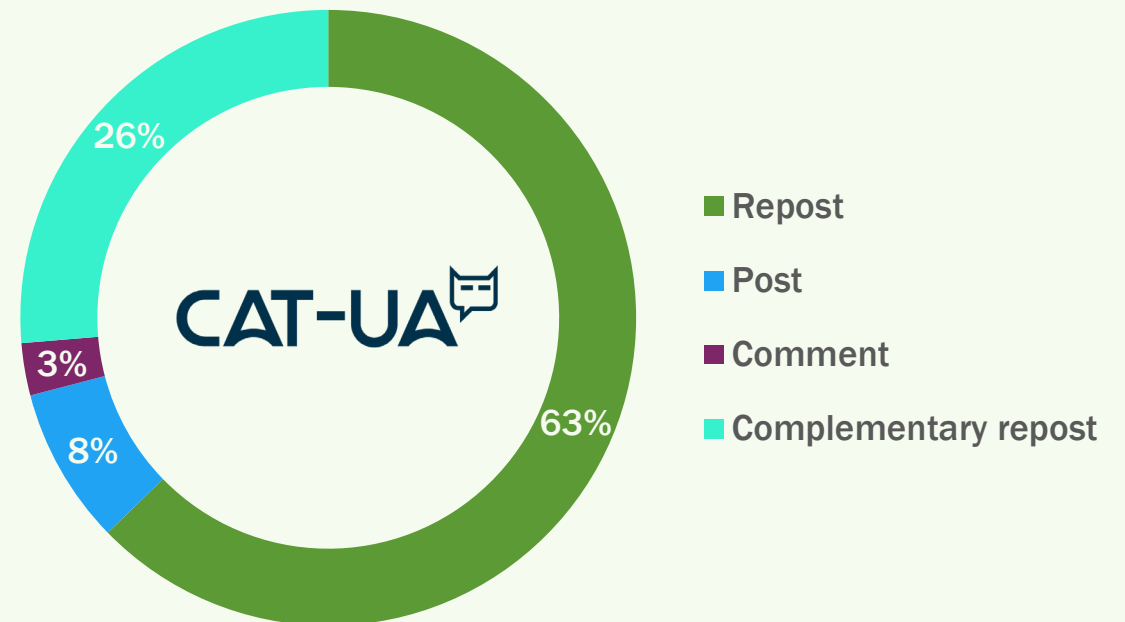
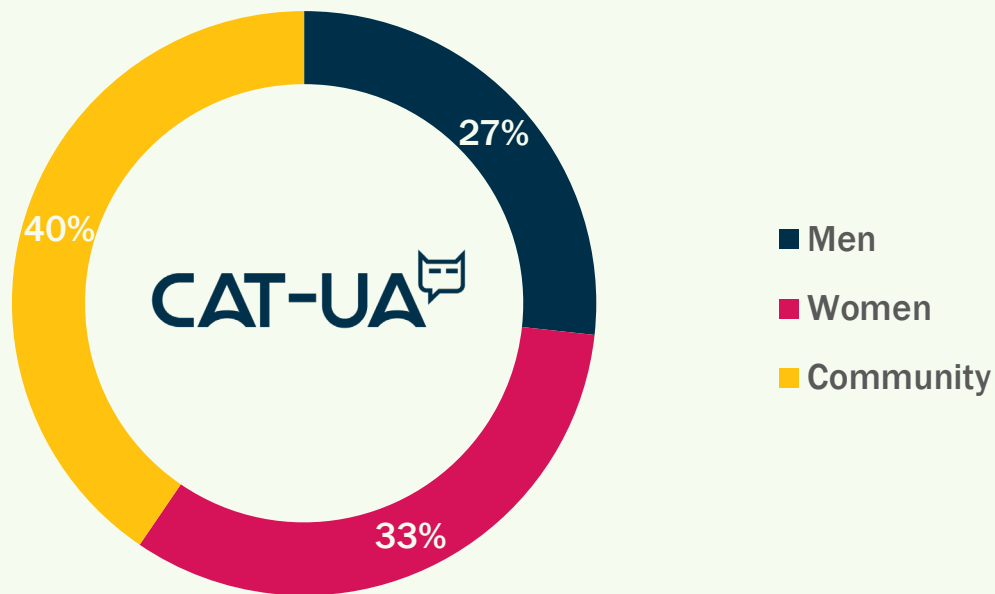
VK: posts about Bucha appear in **Russian** regional communities (*InterestingSochi*, *St. Petersburg* | *St. Petersburg dating work*); pro-war publics also relay information (*Veschlyvye*, *Zlye*, *SVOi*, *Militia of Novorossiia*). In **Ukraine**, A. Bocquet's quotes are shared in the occupied territories (Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk).

YouTube: **Russians** leave comments about the fakeness of Bucha under the video of Ukrainians.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

Communities on OK are used to spread viral videos that prove the events in Bucha are staged. Most of the groups have nothing to do with political or military issues, but specialize in food, sports, beauty, movies, etc. The videos are accompanied by clickbait texts that encourage users to actively share the content. Female accounts share publications of "opinion leaders" (O. Kots) and authorities (Russian Defense Ministry, S. Lavrov) on Facebook, accuse Ukrainians of Nazism on Twitter, and share quotes from A. Bocquet's interview about Nazis in Azov on VK. Men's accounts are more often used for angry comments on posts, share viral publications in chats in Telegram, and more often than women publish original posts on OK. Reposts are the most popular among both men and women, and supplemented reposts are published on community pages

(share of messages, as a percentage)



DYNAMICS OF POST SHARING

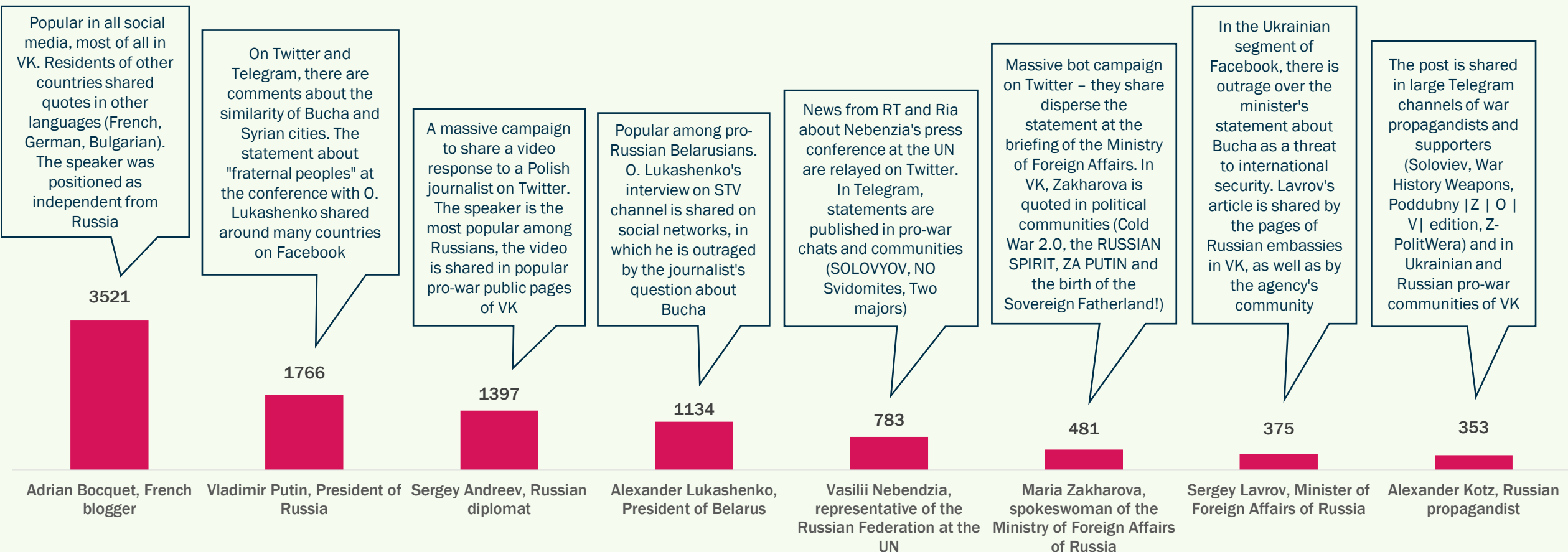
Viral distribution of posts about Bucha started at the same time as the publications of the "opinion leaders" on April 3 – it was these posts that were shared on social media (the statement of the Russian Ministry of Defense, the post of O. Kots, etc.). The campaign lasted until the end of the month. The next wave of spreading was due to A. Bocquet and his interview and video with S. Andreev; most of the publications appeared in Vkontakte, but the intensity was already much lower



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

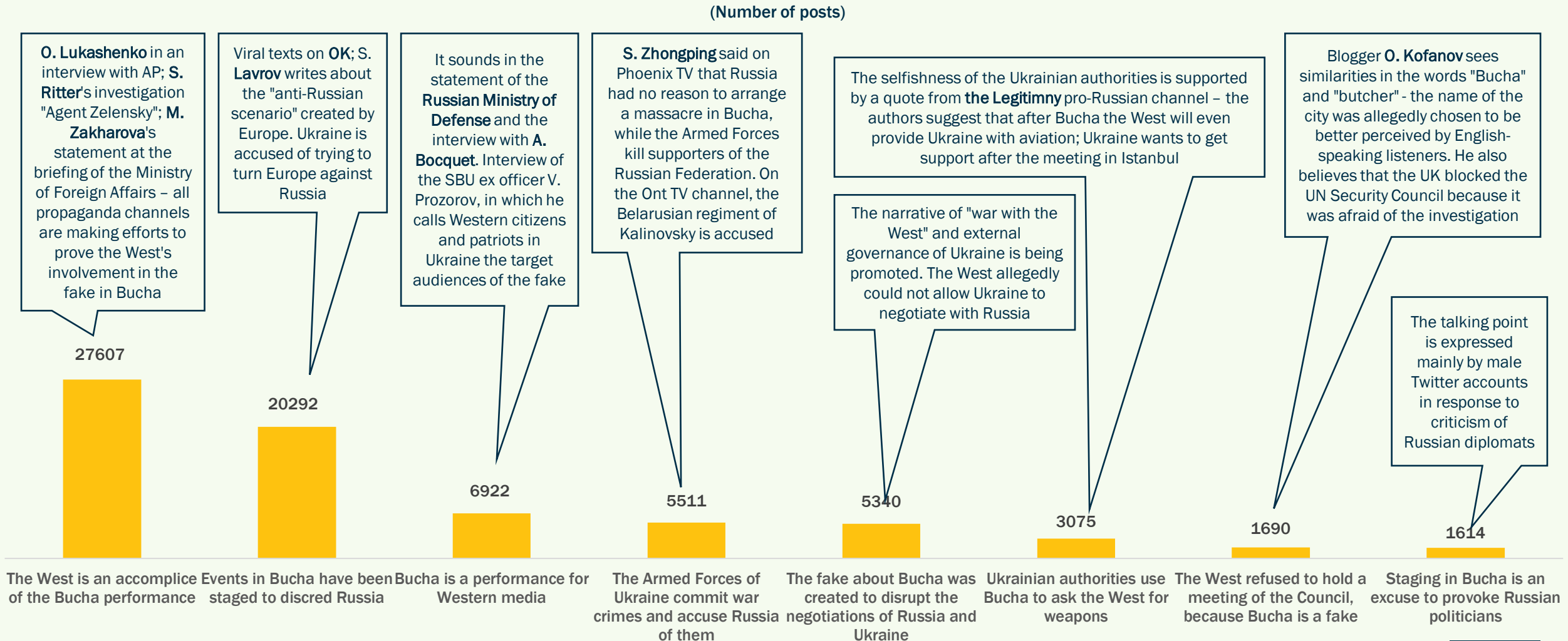
In most cases, the bot attacks did not include quotes from the speakers, but during the second wave of activity, quotes from the French volunteer A. Bocquet were massively used. Russian official speakers were mainly quoted in the format of "vivid quotes"

(Number of posts)



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION

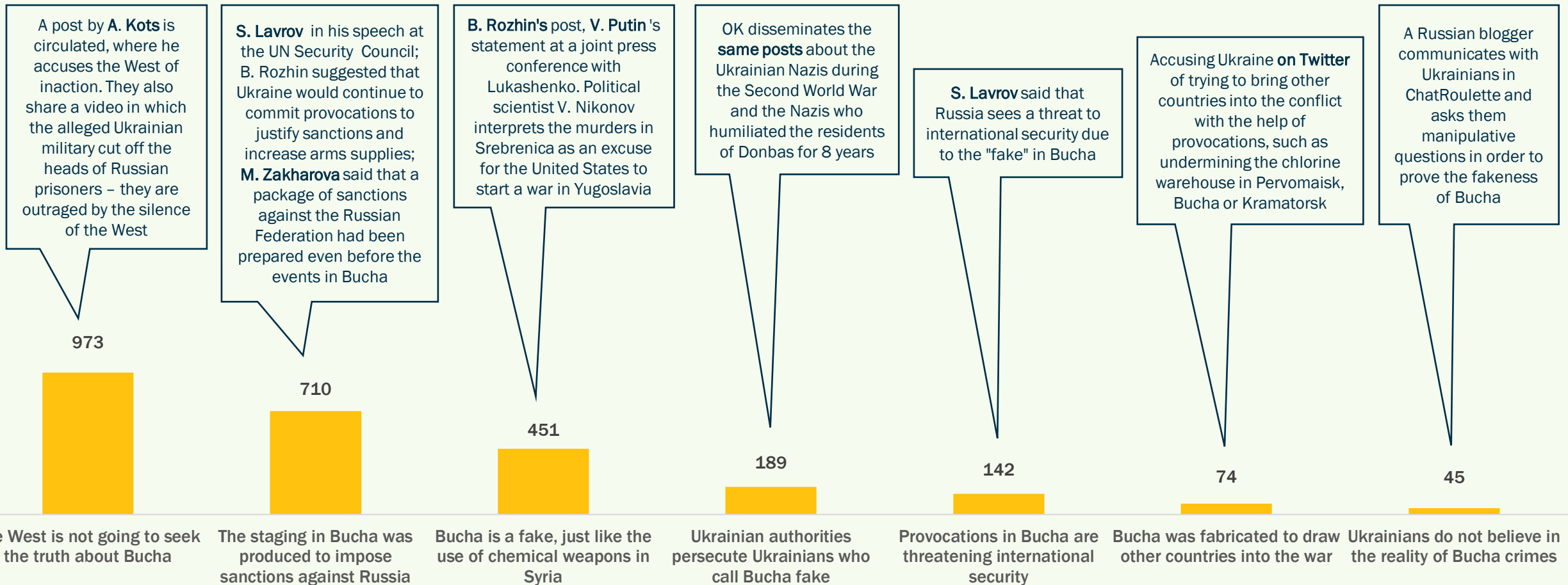
The most popular messages in bot attacks are about the same as in the case of opinion leaders. Western countries are shown as the main culprits and customers of provocations in Bucha, emphasizing the hostile attitude towards the United States and the EU



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

Propagandists use the enmity between Ukrainians to confirm the fake of Bucha. There are parallels with Srebrenica - some bloggers say that Bucha is a completely different case, some say that the events in Kyiv are also fabricated to justify the war

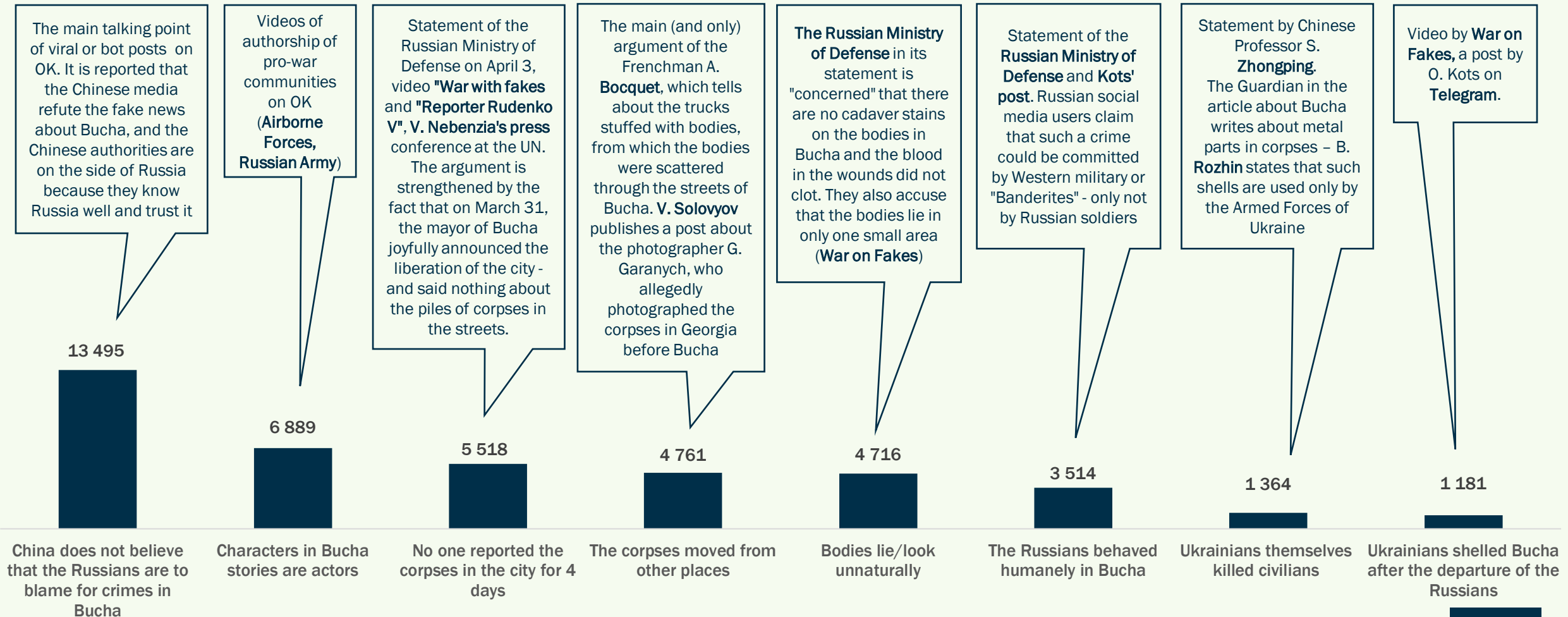
(Number of posts)



KEY ARGUMENTS

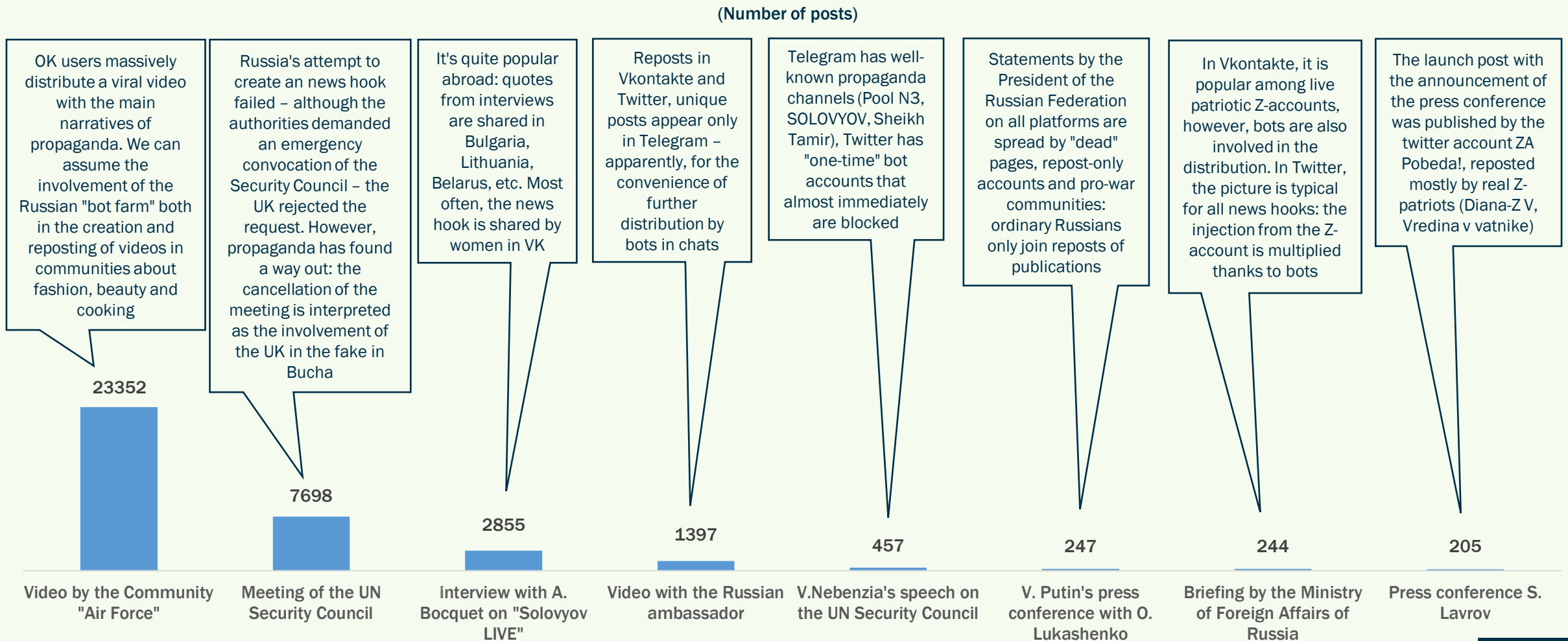
Organizers of bot attacks try to add weight to the arguments by citing a reputable ally - China. The rest of the arguments are the same as those of the opinion leaders

(Number of posts)



KEY NEWS STORIES LAUNCHED BY THE RUSSIAN SIDE

The bot attack centered on a short video made specifically for OK: it was shared multiple times in popular communities, targeting an audience not interested in politics and war. Directly initiated by the authorities, the news hooks were shared by the cheapest "disposable" bot farms, in addition to spreading information about the failed UN Security Council meeting



KEY EMOTIONS BROADCAST BY THE AUTHORS

Anger: Ukraine committed a provocation in Bucha, as well as in the maternity ward in Mariupol (**Russian Ministry of Defense**); Russia will again be sanctioned (**M. Zakharova**); the West is suspiciously actively responding to Bucha (**V. Nebenzia**). The Nazis commit war crimes (**A. Bocquet**). They are trying to slander the Russian army (**S. Zhunping, O. Lukashevich**).

Sadness: a survey of the opposition Russian media **Nastoyashchee Vremya**: some of the Russians repeat the propaganda, some believe in the crime of the Russian Federation and are waiting for retribution.

Pride: the response of the Russian ambassador to the Polish journalist to the statement "The blood of Ukrainians is on you".

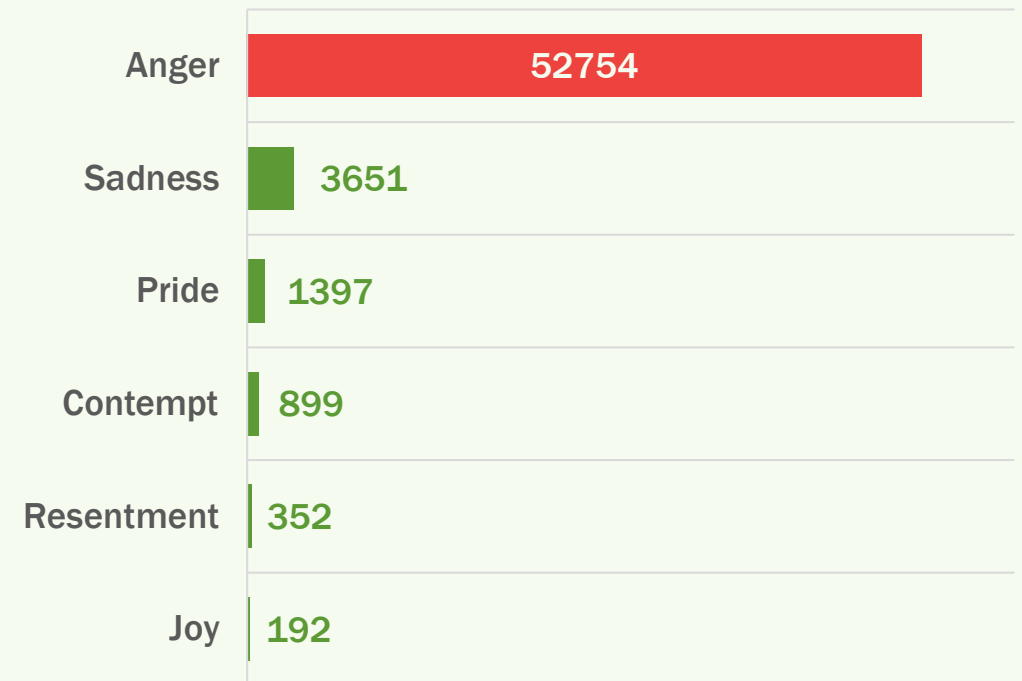
Contempt is expressed as contempt when they describe the ineptness of the Ukrainian "fake" about the crimes in Bucha. They say that the bodies lie incorrectly, the video shows moments of "decomposition" of the bodies. Discussion of a manipulative video with "drunk" Zelensky, who allegedly admitted that Bucha is a fake.

Resentment: V. Putin about the similarity of the fake in Bucha and the "fake" of the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Accusations that the bodies look strange, their hands are tied, people lie chaotically, not next to each other.

Laughter: at actor **Sean Penn**, who supported Ukraine. A joke about the "Oscar" handed over to Zelensky for staging the events in Bucha. The Guardian's accusations, they say, it debunked the fake news about Bucha.

Among viral and bot publications, the spectrum of emotions is a bit more diverse than among opinion leaders, but anger over "unfair" accusations from the West still dominates.

(Number of posts)



DENIAL OF RUSSIAN CRIMES IN BUCHA

Strategy for building an information campaign

The Russian campaign to deny the Bucha murders had two parts, with two separate strategies. The first was a knee-jerk reaction to an international scandal and unfolded with all available means. The second, which took several months to develop, was a well-prepared information campaign.

The first part of the attack was characterized by the use of online tools: opinion leaders in Telegram, as well as bot attacks. These are the cheapest and easiest tools. At the same time, apparently due to lack of time, separate messages were not developed for each of these two tools: bot campaigns simply reinforced the same messages introduced into the information space by top bloggers. In general, the messages used for this phase were as diverse as possible, including contradictory messages. Presumably, the goal was to make it difficult to support any version, including the true one. The talking points were argued chaotically: rather unfounded arguments were used, which were only partially "confirmed" by the edited footage. The official Russian authorities tried to spread these messages primarily on international platforms, choosing the West, not Ukraine, as the main target. Of the high-profile speeches, only the one by Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova was "intra-Russian."

The second part of the attack was much more conservative. It was obvious that it had been carefully prepared by the well-known propagandist V. Solovyov. It was centered on the speech of the French journalist A. Bocquet, who testified about the staging of the tragedy in Bucha. The speech in the French media was very actively taken up by the Russian resources of V. Solovyov, however, it is much less spread by top bloggers or botnets. The message of A. Bocquet was also new: it was not used during the first wave. The argumentation in this case was much more holistic and did not use contradictions.

The emotional palette in both cases was monolithic and focused almost entirely on anger.

2

SHARING MISINFORMATION
ABOUT REFUGEES AND IDPS
FROM UKRAINE

DISSEMINATION OF MISINFORMATION ABOUT REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE

General Topic Description

The time period of the analyzed period: February 24 - September 30, 2022.

The theme of Ukrainian refugees and IDPs in Russian propaganda also began to spread from the first days of the full-scale invasion. The personalization of the stories in it is remarkable: many speakers "from the people", bloggers with versions, even "official" propagandists refer to the stories heard from the participants of the events. The most official are the speeches of S. Lavrov and V. Nebenzia at the UN, the Russian Federation quickly begins to actively communicate to the international audience the suffering of ordinary people and the crimes of the Ukrainian authorities and military against the disadvantaged.

As early as February 24, the news of kilometer-long queues at the borders began to spread, and patriotic Russian channels said that there would be no refugees - Russia would not attack civilians, and only "Nazis" could flee en masse. In early March, the theme of "fake" refugees is supported by a British mercenary, but with the recognition that it is not only military people who are fleeing the country. These narratives are formally initiated by the British "yellow" edition. Refugee issues are particularly popular in March 2022, after which they do not consistently receive much attention. In September 2022, against the backdrop of the liberation of the Kharkiv region, the narrative of shelling columns of refugees traveling to the Russian Federation reappears: Ukrainians allegedly flee from the "regime," and the news about them is almost lexically indistinguishable from that of the spring.

The Belarusian TC ATN began to predict difficulties for Europe due to the refugee invasion in February. Europe, they say, is preparing the infrastructure for Ukrainians and should prepare for difficult times. The climax of the discussion of this narrative is the plot of T. Carlson in August: he predicts a cold and hungry winter for Europeans and promotes stories about Germans who are forced to cut down parks for heating.

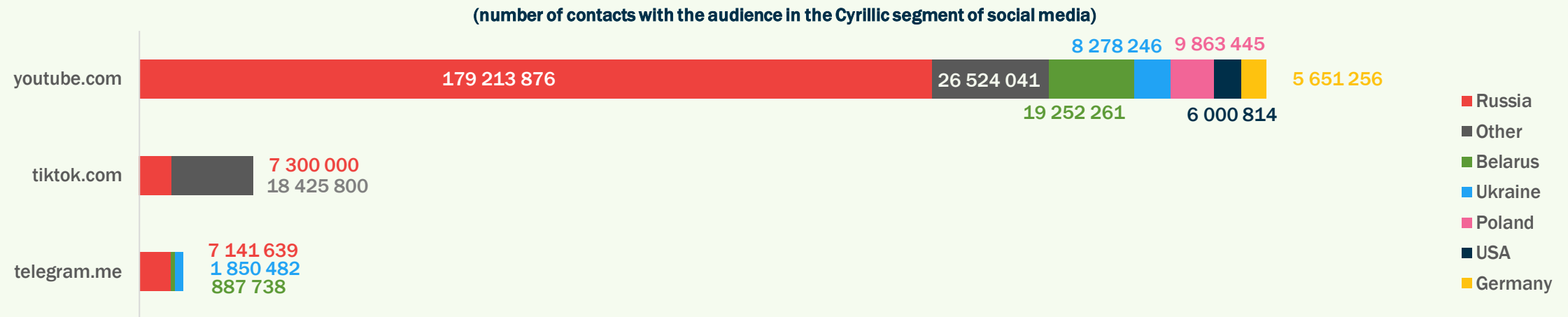
Among the main messages are the deterioration of the criminal situation in the "host countries", the strange demands of refugees, aggressiveness and greed. At the same time, Ukrainians do not want to work and take jobs from locals, they are rich - and depend on social benefits (in March, stories begin to cancel them or even return the money already received).

2.1.

MOST POPULAR POSTS
(MOSTLY OPINION LEADERS AND
WELL-KNOWN MEDIA)

DISTRIBUTION OF ATTENTION BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION CHANNEL AND POST GEOGRAPHY

YouTube is notable for Russian news channels: a large audience, opportunities for producing stories, a professional image. Belarusian channels also provide propaganda mainly on YouTube, while Telegram presents them symbolically and with restraint



YouTube: for **Russians**, Ukrainian refugees become not only a lever of influence on the situation in Ukraine, but also an excuse for the redistribution of power in the Russian Federation. Regional conditional opposition politicians (such as **M. Volodarskyi**) criticize the official authorities for shifting responsibility to ordinary citizens. However, there is not much internal agenda: stories about the border of Ukraine with Poland become important. According to the "British mercenary", many of his colleagues are fleeing Ukraine. **T. Carlson** talks about the problems of the "old world" – he talks about the terrible poverty of Europeans who are forced to collect money for the needs of Ukrainians. **Other** countries: **Turkey** broadcasts family narratives – abandoned children, divorced families. **Belarus** is noticeably concerned about Moldova. **Yu. Uvarov** talks about the noisy behavior and expensive cars of Ukrainian refugees. Generally, **Ukrainian YouTube** channels (Crimean news, **Mriya**, **Strana**, **D. Vasylets**, etc.) mainly talk about the global migration crisis: there are many Ukrainians, it is difficult to go abroad,

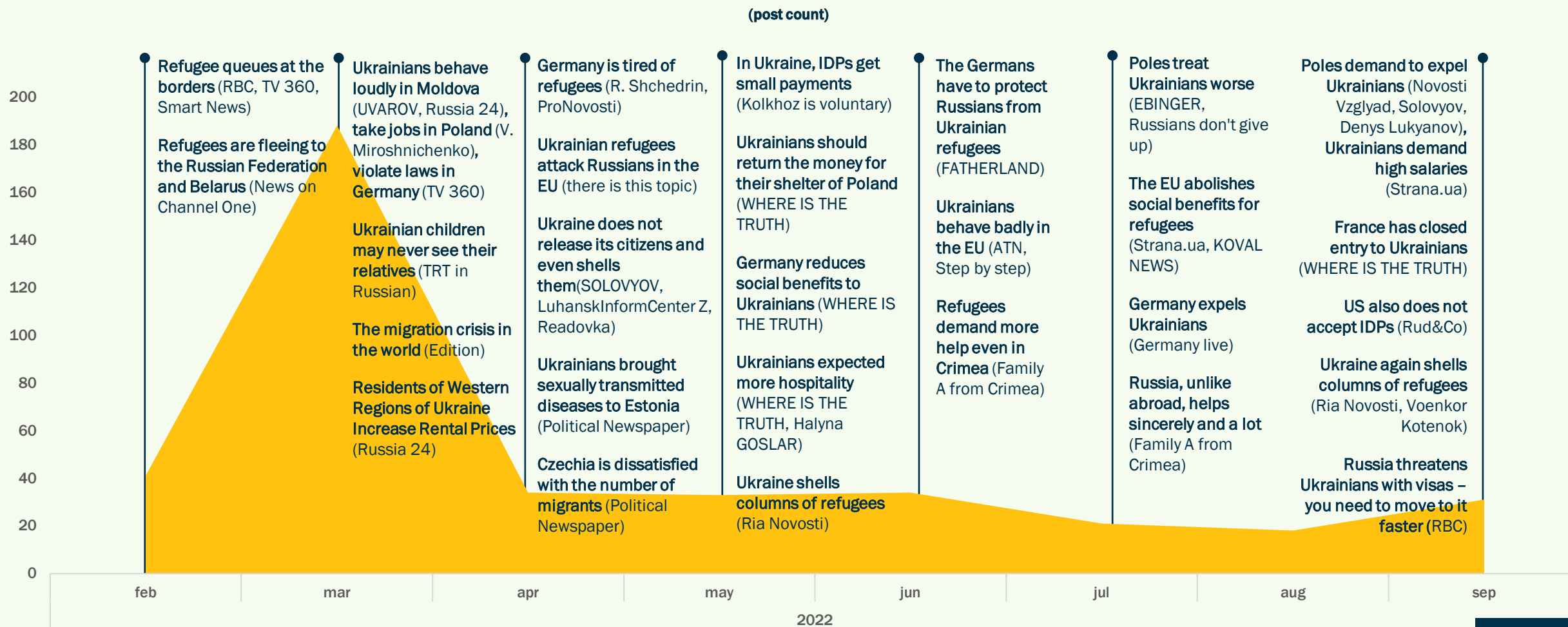
and no one will return home. **Polish channels** also complain about Ukrainians: they say that they are treated better in Poland than their own citizens.

TikTok: **Ren TV** stories about the strange behavior of refugees: they say the world is shocked. Sometimes such videos disappear over time.

Telegram: actively shares propaganda news messages in **Russia**. A large audience is provided by Ria Novosti, saying that the Ukrainian military shells columns of those fleeing from hostilities. **Belarusian** news resources report on the migration crisis – they count Ukrainians who have already left. **Ukrainian** telegram channels like in YouTube, work for the audience on the occupied territories. They also talk about the executions of refugees with reference to the "prosecutor's offices of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics".

DYNAMICS OF POST SHARING

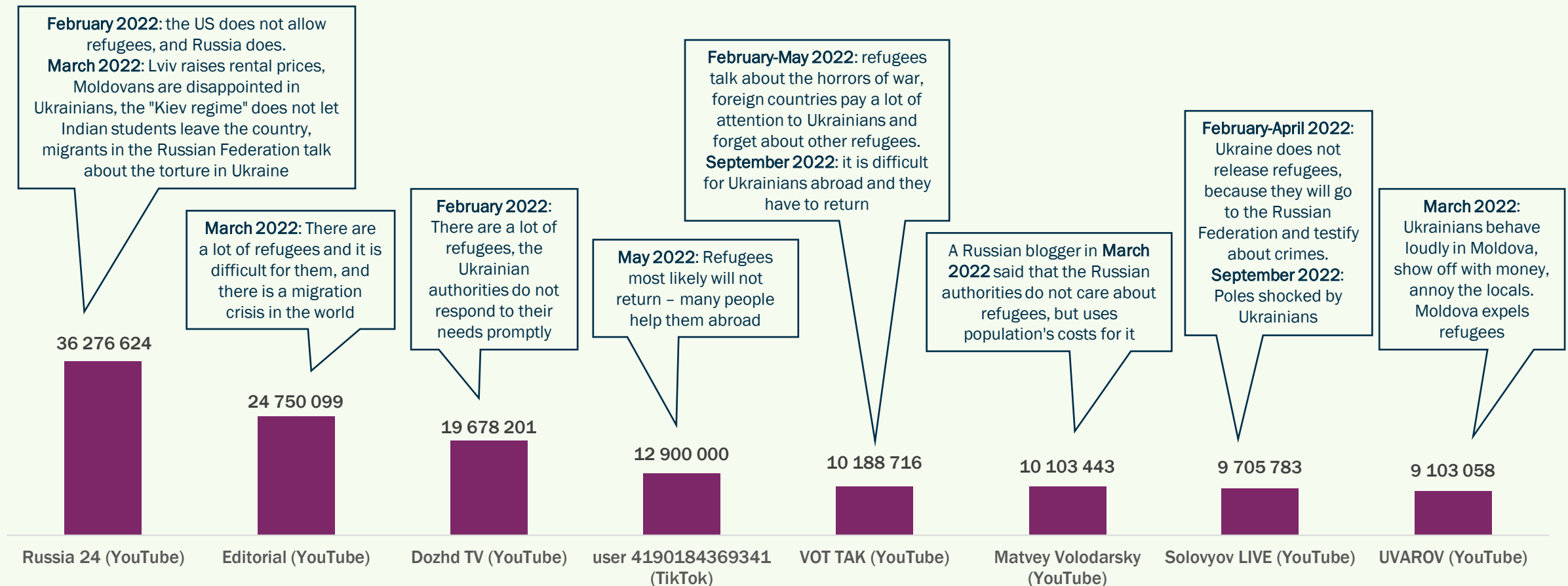
The most active wave of information is noticed in March and coincides with the largest wave of migration. Sources are usually the opinions of individual participants of the events. It is interesting that for a small country like Moldova they share versions about the wealth of Ukrainians, and for a law-abiding Germany - about aggression and violation of laws by refugees. At the end of the study period, news about plans to expel Ukrainians begin to spread - and only the Russian Federation is still ready to see everyone at home



KEY CONTENT CREATORS

Even conditionally oppositional Russian channels criticize the Ukrainian authorities and doubt that Ukrainians will return from abroad. Pro-government writers do not hold back: the Russian Federation is mostly good (except for social messages aimed at Russians), the USA is not helping, and Europe is in trouble. The story with Moldova is told by a Belarusian propagandist

(number of contacts with the audience; authors' communication channels in SM are in brackets)



MAIN GROUPS OF POST SPEAKERS

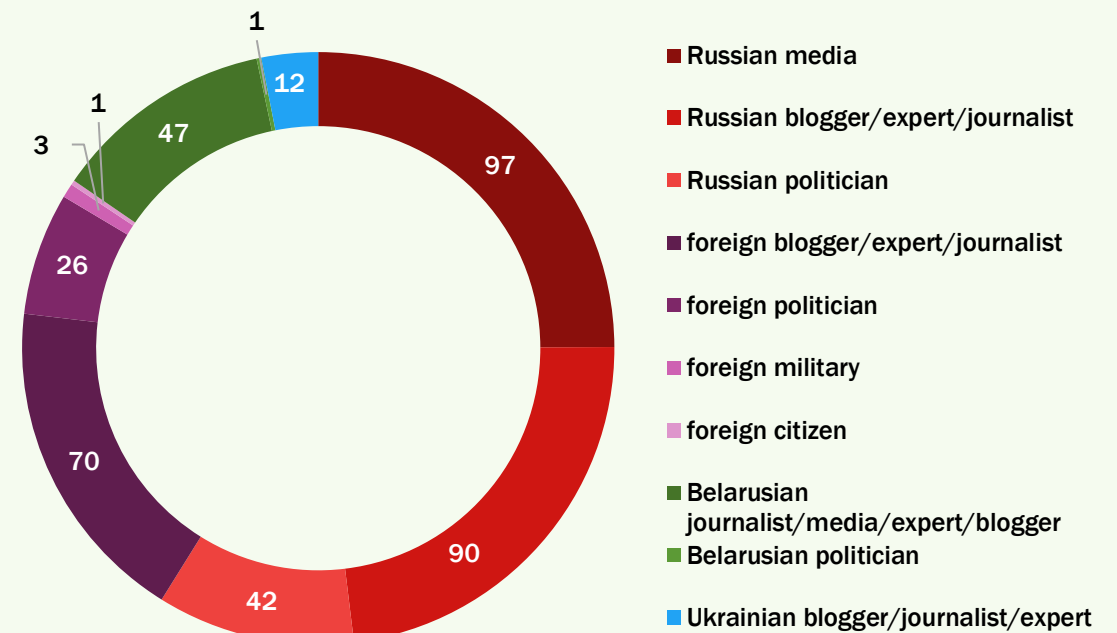
Russian media: the source of information is usually news channels: REN TV, Novosti, Russia 24, 360 TV channel, Editorial office, Editorial office, FATHERLAND, Dozhd TV channel, Novosti on the First Channel. Messages are voiced as news stories on the following topics: foreigners are shocked by Ukrainian refugees, Ukrainians steal, are aggressive, and attack Russians.

Russian blogger/expert/journalist: Vitaly Miroshnychenko, who "specializes" in Ukrainians in Poland; Margarita Simonyan tells rumors from supposedly familiar refugees who told her horrors about the Armed Forces of Ukraine; Ruslan Shchedrin spreads the message that the Germans are tired of Ukrainians; Stanislav Vasilyev broadcasts the position that refugees consider other countries free, unlike Ukraine, and talks about sexual violence against refugees; Anastasia Bendesyuk shares the position that the Ukrainian authorities do not care about their citizens, but they are gladly accepted by Belarus; Vladimir Solovyov said that the Armed Forces do not allow refugees to leave; Yevgeny Reshetnev assured that the Ukrainian elite leaves Ukraine without obstacles, while ordinary people are in long queues.

Foreign blogger/expert/journalist: Tucker Carlson says that states that accept refugees are getting poorer; Mikhail Bur and Tatiana Heyder talk about the discontent of Germans with Ukrainian refugees, Mark Bernardi – the same about Italians, Mateusz Piskorski – about Poles; Scott Ritter raises language issues, such as the fact that refugees do not even know Ukrainian; Canadian Alex Brezhnev talks about the selectivity of Ukrainians who are trying to choose a country with the best conditions in search of asylum.

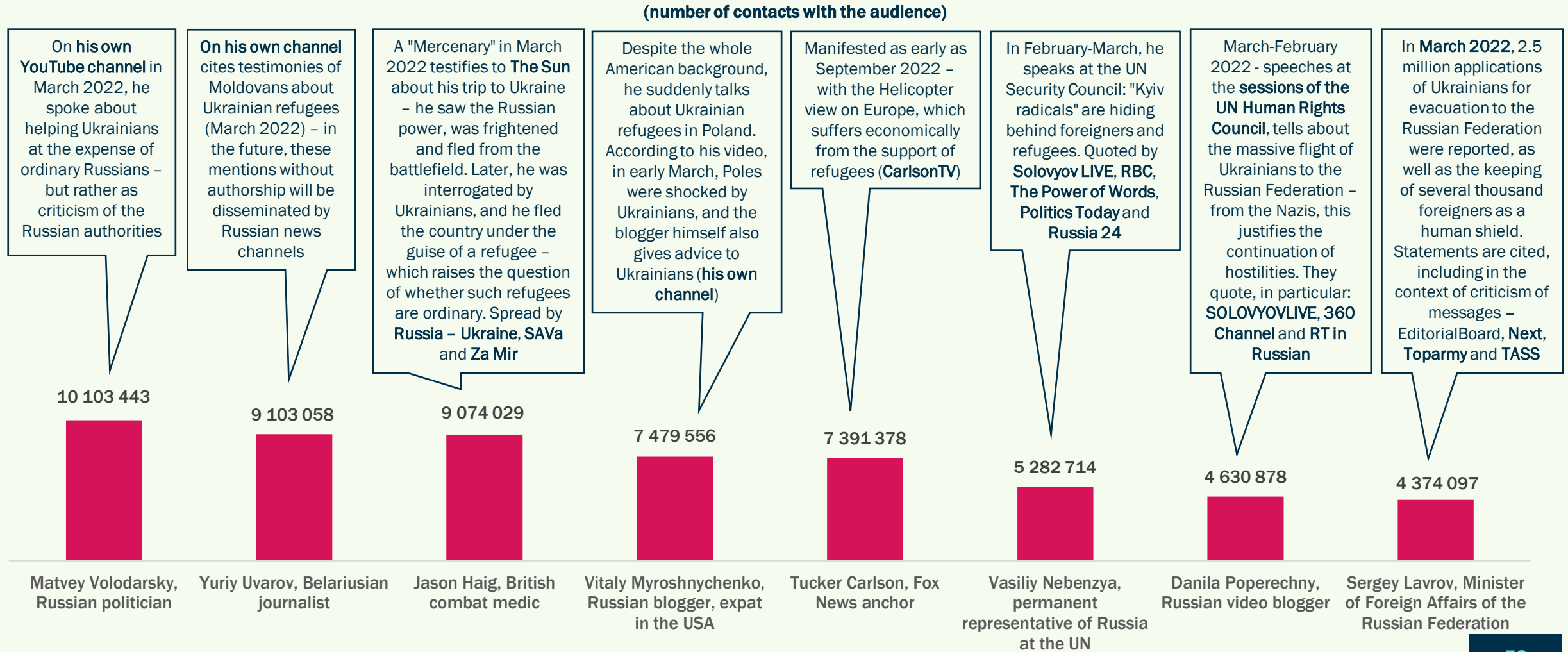
A remarkable "personal" view: bloggers often talk about refugees from their own experience or quote ordinary citizens they know. Even journalists refer to what participants told them on the ground. TV channels do not focus on "refugee" stories separately, they mostly mention them in the context of news about "SMO"

(number of posts)



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

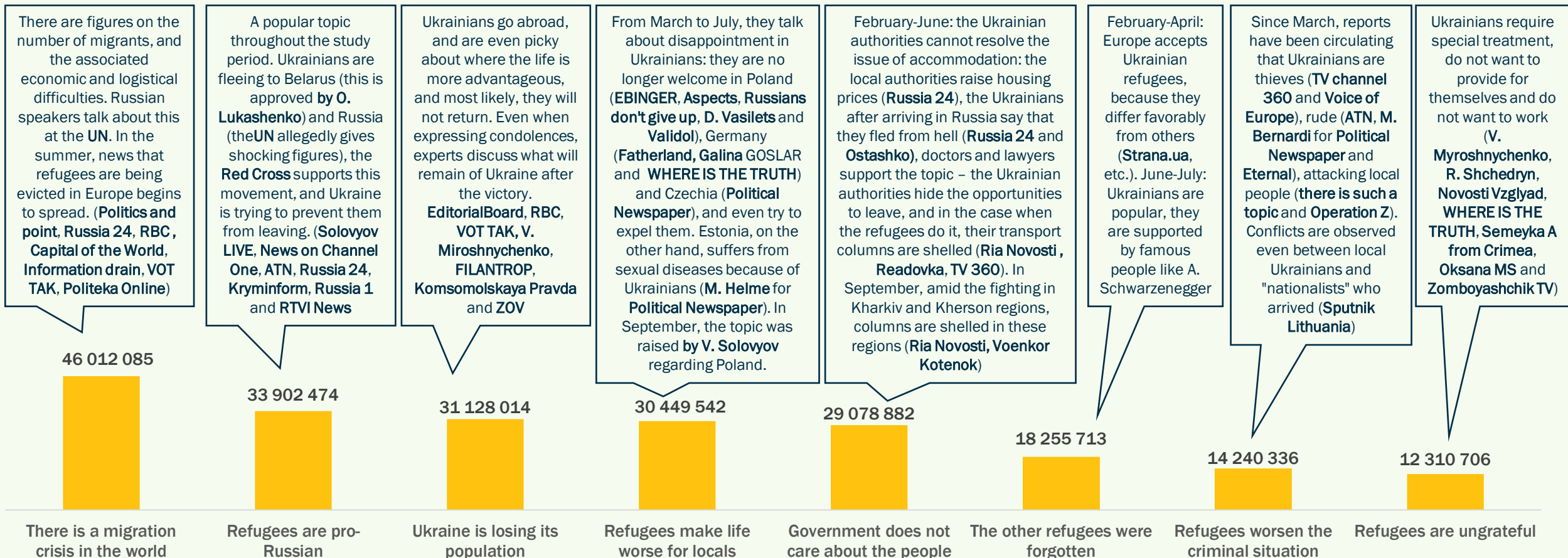
Russian officials speak for external audiences, especially at UN meetings, but they are actively quoted by internal Russian channels. Western spokesmen deliver messages for foreign media. The exception is Yu. Uvarov: narratives about the outrage of the Moldovans are broadcast mainly to the Belarusian audience



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION

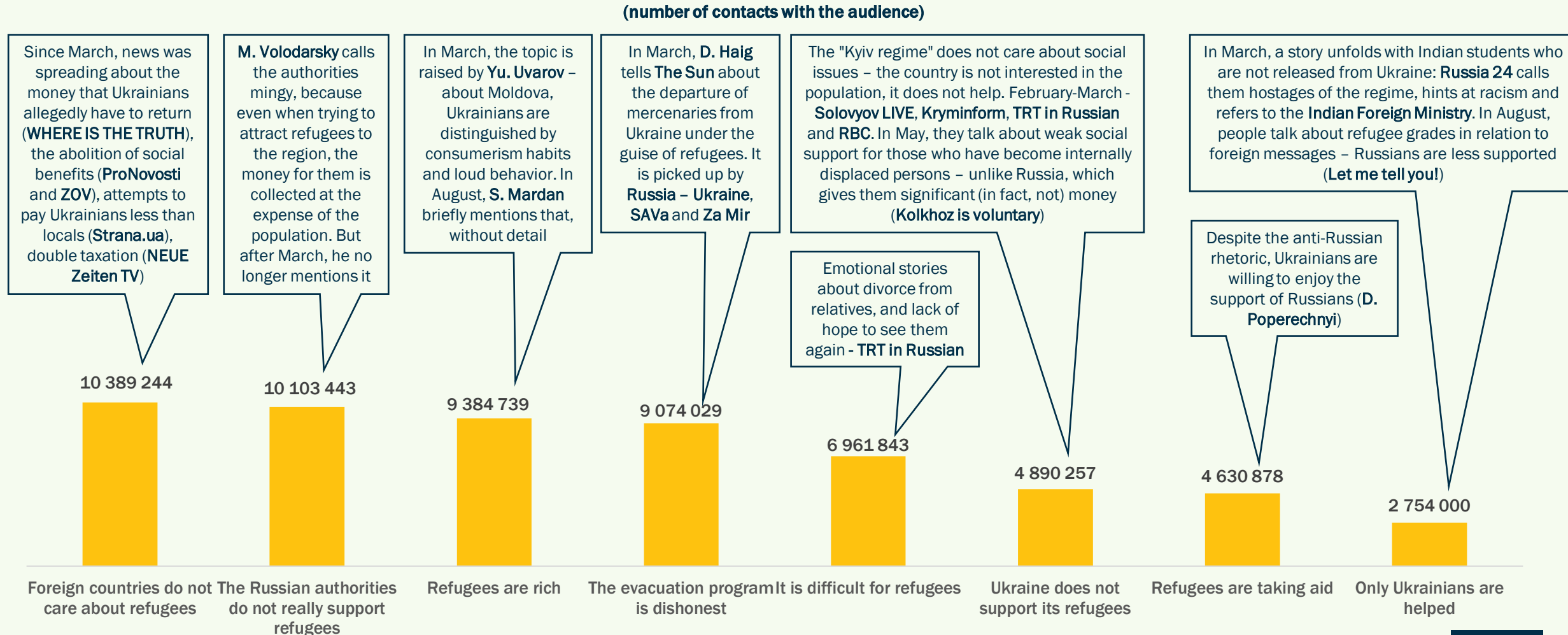
There are contradictory messages here: refugees are both rich and poor, countries both neglect refugees and take excessive care of them. There is also a difference in time: in February and early March, topics about the difficulties of leaving are actively spread: queues, lack of amenities and money, the reluctance of the Ukrainian authorities to release the population, even to the point of shelling them; at the same time, since March, they have been actively disseminating "feedback" from local residents, primarily about the threat to the safety of residents of the occupied territories from Ukrainians

(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

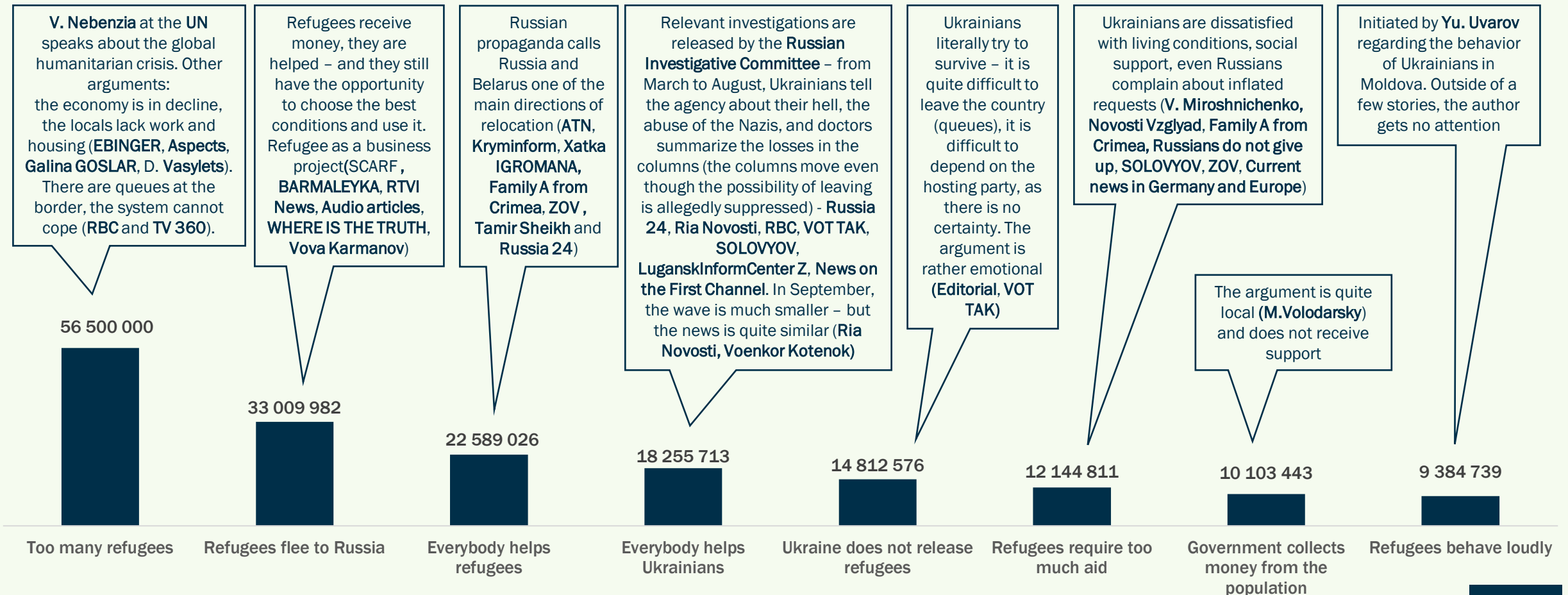
The narrative of rejection and homelessness becomes important – Ukrainians are frightened by the abolition of payments, deportation from partner countries, payment for assistance. Nazism also becomes important for Russian propaganda - Indian students and generally different conditions for different groups cause a lively appeal to so-called European values



KEY ARGUMENTS

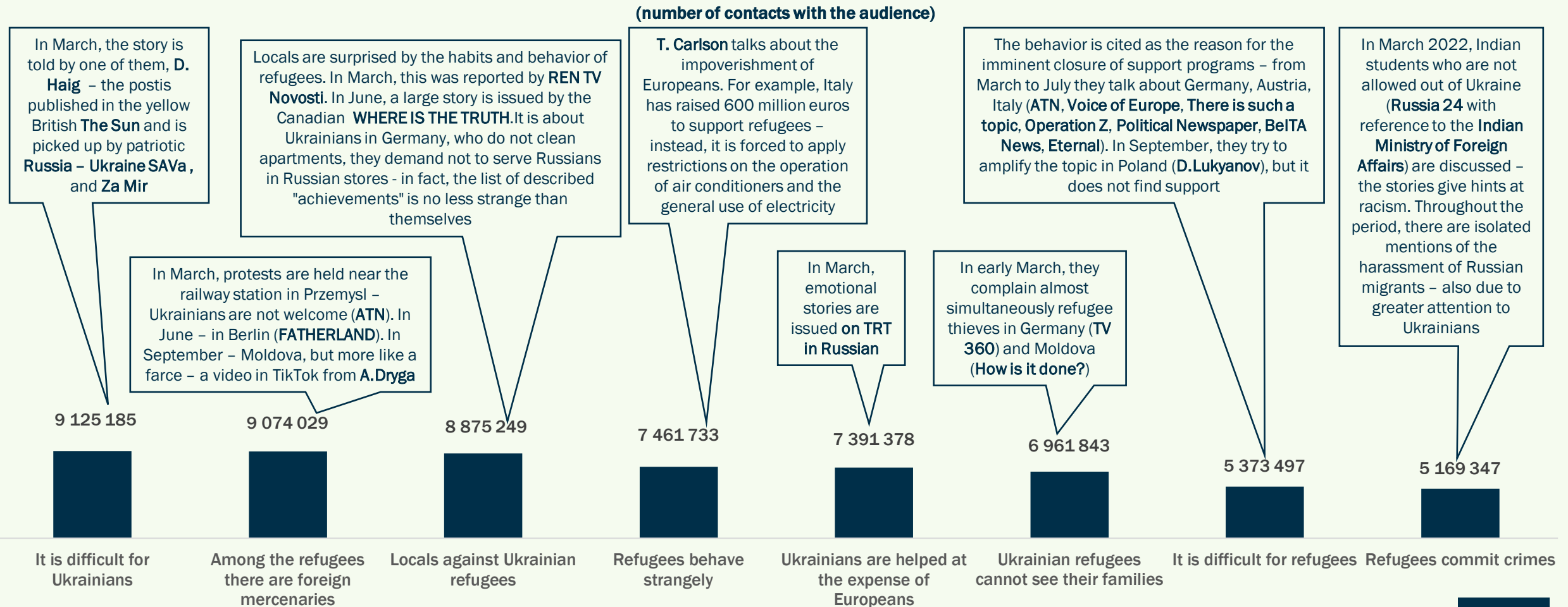
The most controversial argument is that when refugees flee to the Russian Federation, they arouse sympathy and there are no complaints about their behavior, but when it comes to refugees to the West, they behave like savages and become unwanted

(number of contacts with the audience)



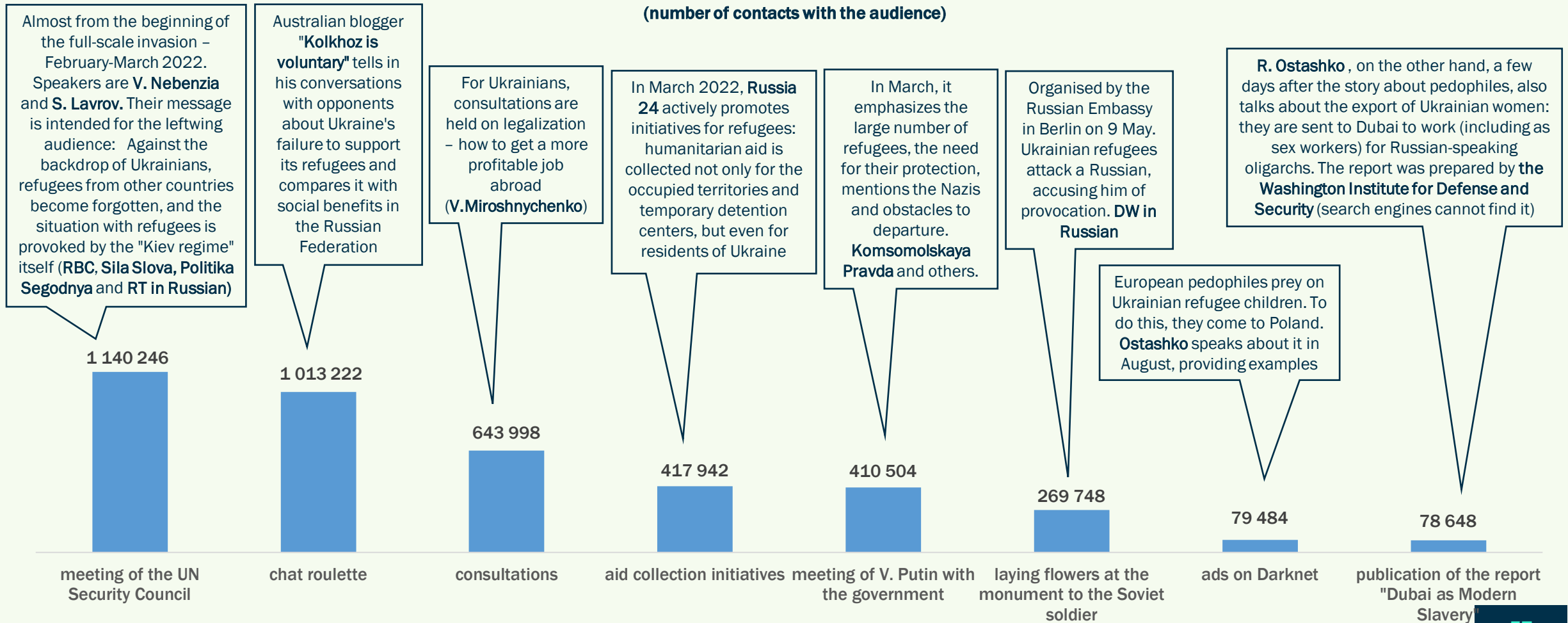
KEY ARGUMENTS (CONTINUED)

Some prominent topics (such as mercenaries instead of real refugees) quickly lose attention - after publication by the primary source, they are picked up by smaller propaganda channels. The official Russian propaganda focuses primarily on the inconveniences for Germany - the criminal situation, inscriptions with feces and other stories that go against the order in the country. There is a synchronous spread of the same arguments in Poland and Germany



KEY NEWS STORIES LAUNCHED BY THE RUSSIAN SIDE

The speeches of Russian diplomats at the UN (at the Security Council and at the Human Rights Commission) are the most prominent events in the news. In general, Russian official statements sound the same: concern for ordinary citizens (it also translates into volunteer initiatives) and the fight against Nazism. The event organized by the German Embassy is embedded in this framework



KEY EMOTIONS BROADCAST BY THE AUTHORS

Resentment: Russian officials do not help refugees (M. Volodarsky), Poles (V. Miroshnichenko) and Moldovans (Russia 24) are shocked by the behavior of Ukrainians, Western Ukraine profits off of IDPs (Russia 24), Ukrainian female refugees destroy European families (Step by step), refugees in Crimea require too much attention (Family A from Crimea), Indians are not allowed out of Ukraine (Indian Foreign Ministry for Russia 24).

Anger: the story of a British mercenary who left Ukraine as a refugee (Russia-Ukraine, SAVa), the noisy behavior of Ukrainians in Moldova (Y. Uvarov) and Germany (TV channel 360, Fatherland, R. Shchedryn, ATN).

Anxiety: for the fate of Ukrainians who cannot leave by humanitarian corridors (Russia 24, TV 360, News on the First Channel), the fate of Ukrainians who came to the Russian Federation; also worried about children (Russia 24 collects aid), the global migration crisis (TV 360, Onliner, Azattyq TV).

Sadness: children will not see their relatives (TRT in Russian), Ukrainians are disappointed in the move (WHERE IS THE TRUTH, Oxana MS), and Poles (EBINGER) and Germans (Galyna GOSLAR, R. Alyabyev) are disappointed in Ukrainians, Ukraine is against the support of refugees by the Red Cross in Russia (ZOV).

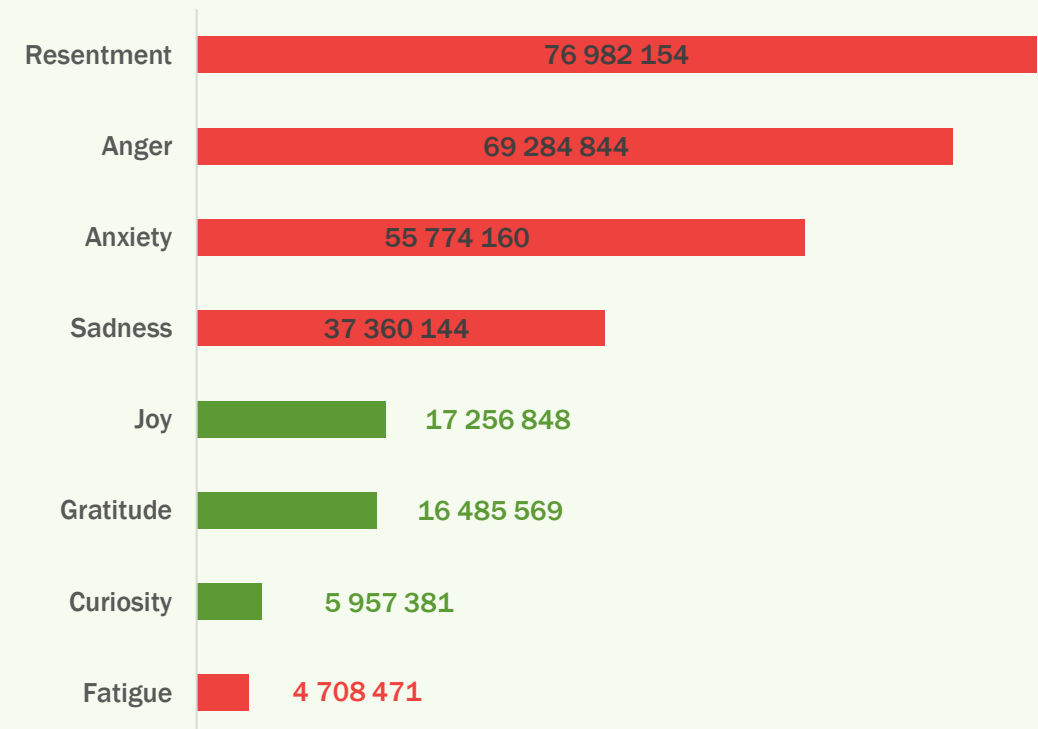
Joy: now Ukrainians are safe in Belarus (ATN, Xatka IGROMANA), Crimea (Family A from Crimea), Russia (RT in Russian, aftershock, News on Channel One), including Russians who are happy that "Ze fainted" (he did not expect this development) – Tamir Sheikh.

Curiosity: about the stories of Ukrainians related to the abuses of the Armed Forces and the authorities (Kryminform), the difficulties of life abroad (Strana.ua).

Fatigue: Ukrainian refugees complain about the hard life during the war, in new places of stay.

Resentment is mostly directed outward - Russia speaks emotionally about its activities to save Ukrainians and the obstacles posed by the "Kiev regime" - even anger at refugees gets less attention than the country's desire to blame others for crimes

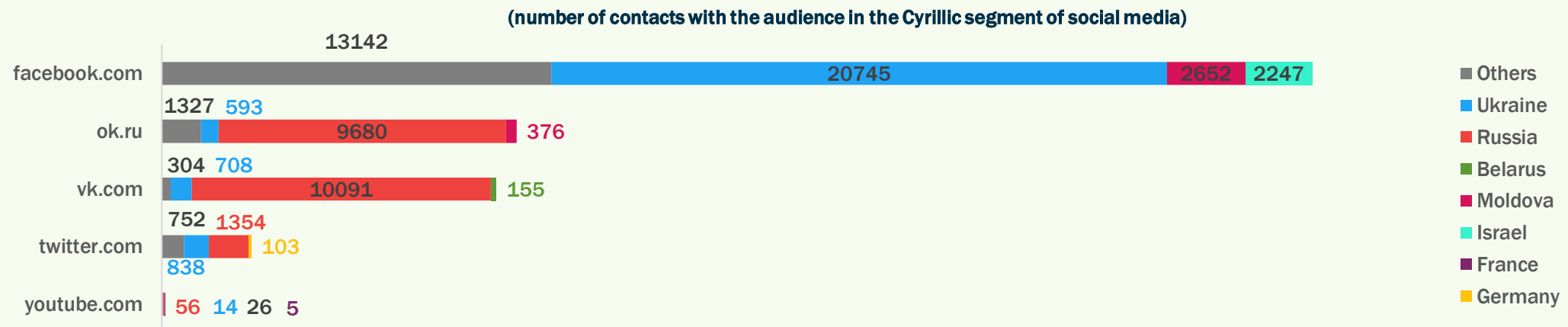
(number of contacts with the audience)



2.2. VIRAL POSTS AND BOT ATTACKS

DISTRIBUTION OF ATTENTION BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION CHANNEL AND POST GEOGRAPHY

Distribution of posts in Ukrainian FB is maximum, and probably at least partially organic. According to VK bots, Moldova is the country most affected by Ukrainian refugees: this is reported both in Russia and in the occupied territories. But this country itself is more visible on Facebook - and there is a call for Ukrainians to behave decently in Poland. Shocking content about Azov's attacks on refugees is most prominent on OK, while these public pages spread humorous and culinary content before the full-scale invasion



Facebook: users from **Ukraine** massively spread calls to behave decently abroad: "you have not come to a resort." The texts first appear on Polish public pages. Often, they are duplicated in Polish and presented as a cry of the soul of both Ukrainians and Poles. At the same time, the **Poles** themselves are spreading this call and debunking Russian propaganda about ungrateful refugees with reference to the Moldovan edition **NewsMaker.md**. Texts are shared mainly by women, often Ukrainian wives of Poles. Posts about Poland are also shared by users from **Moldova**. However, some profiles are no longer available.

OK: in **Russia**, they talk about the atrocities of "Azov" in groups created for "everyday" topics (Slay jokes, Men's Union, Men's World, Cooking duel, VED SMEKH, Beautiful woman, Music in your heart). Pages of users from the **United States** also share these stories, to which they add messages from the briefing of the Russian Red Cross about how refugees are cared for in the Russian Federation (**Eto InTeReSnoZnat**).

VK: **Russians** are worried about Moldova, Poland and Germany, because Ukrainians arrived by foreign-made cars and dictated their rules (**I am a Pensioner**). **Ukrainian** public pages are mostly Crimean. They share a humorous text "Report to V. Zhirinovsky on what news the world has", which also mentions dissatisfied Moldovans, it becomes viral – the authorship is anonymous, but probably belongs to V. **Pavlyuchenkov**.

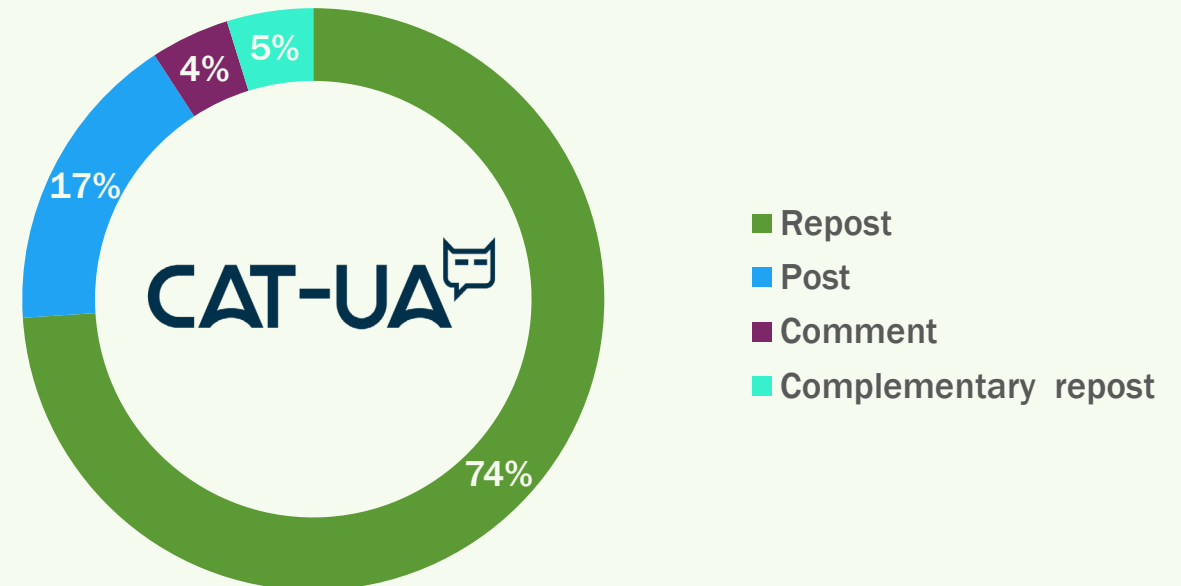
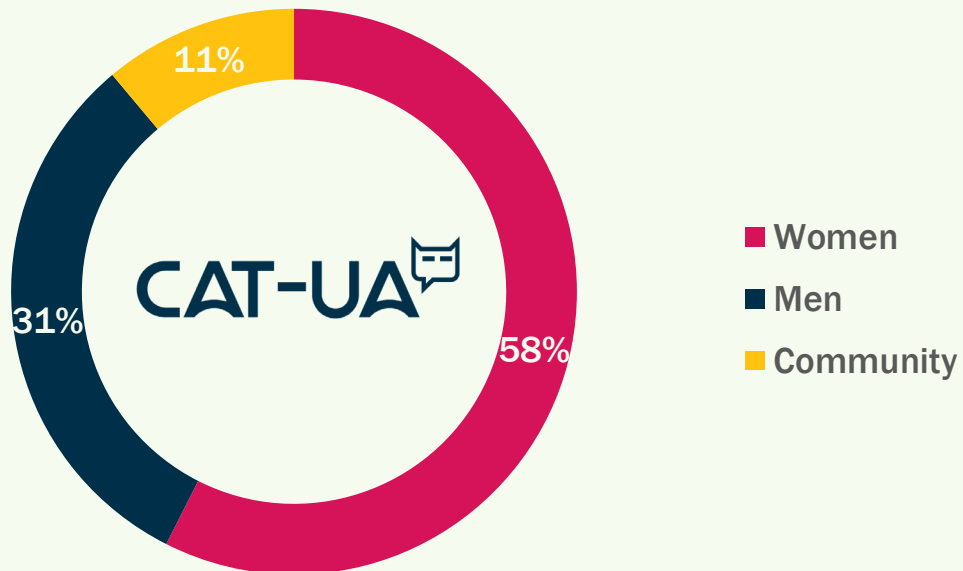
Twitter: In the **Russian Federation**, there are also noticeable trends of *appeals to EU guests*: Ukrainians are urged to be an example for other refugees. The same text is shared by **Ukrainian users**. In both cases, predominantly by men.

YouTube: popular among **Russians** (and unexpectedly in **Denmark**) **Y. Podolyaka**: scattered messages about Ukrainian refugees, which will certainly worsen the situation of the countries that let them in, and thoughts about solving the world's migration problems.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

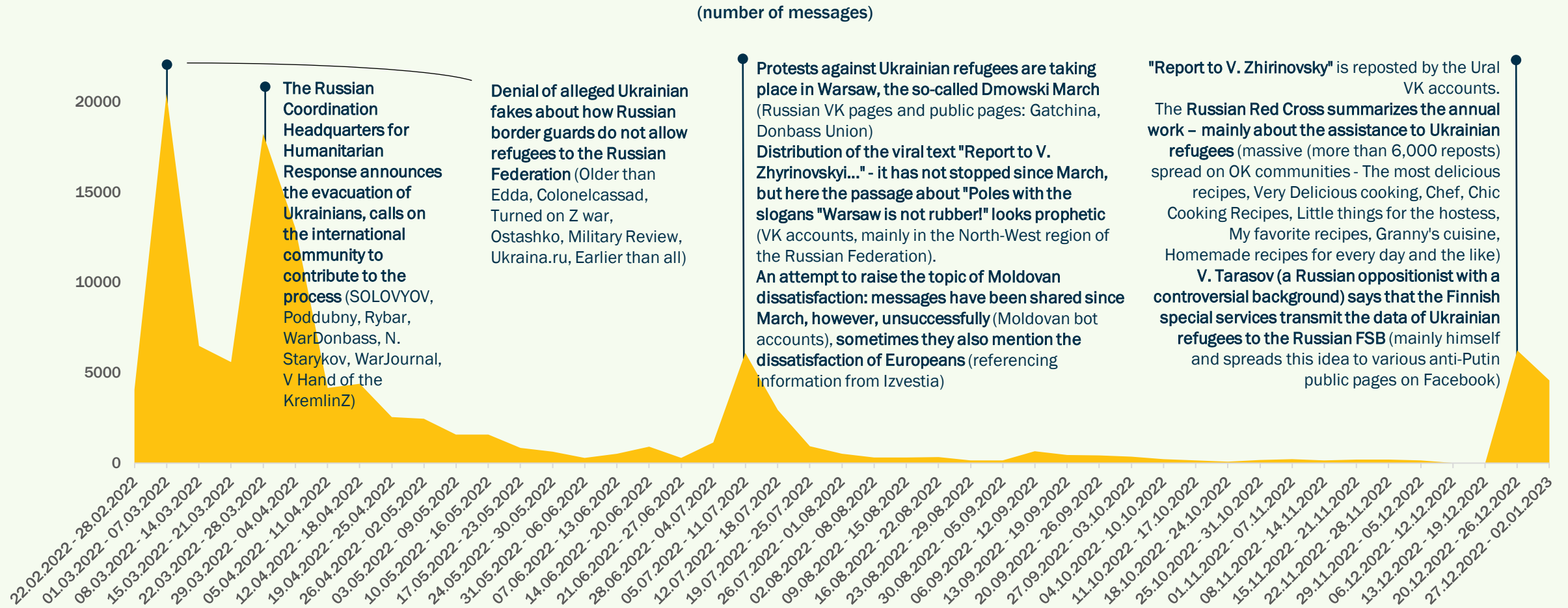
Social media communities are more likely to become sources of fake news, texts are later shared by individual users, and bots are more likely to be created as female profiles. At the same time, the dissemination of narratives in comments is less frequent: comments are more often formally coordinated with posts. The propaganda machine of state channels is working to spread the story about the shelling of refugee columns (shelled by the "Ukrainian side" or "personally" by "Azov"): Ria Novosti, news publications mainly in the central region of the Russian Federation, "power" sites (riot police, airborne troops), political technologists close to the authorities. After a wave of accusations (in March), in April this is supported by "humanitarian" reports (coordinated evacuation work, etc.) on popular patriotic-military public sites. In March, the patriotic pages in Telegram refute the alleged fakes of the Ukrainian media about the shooting of Ukrainians at border checkpoints

(number of reports, in percentage)



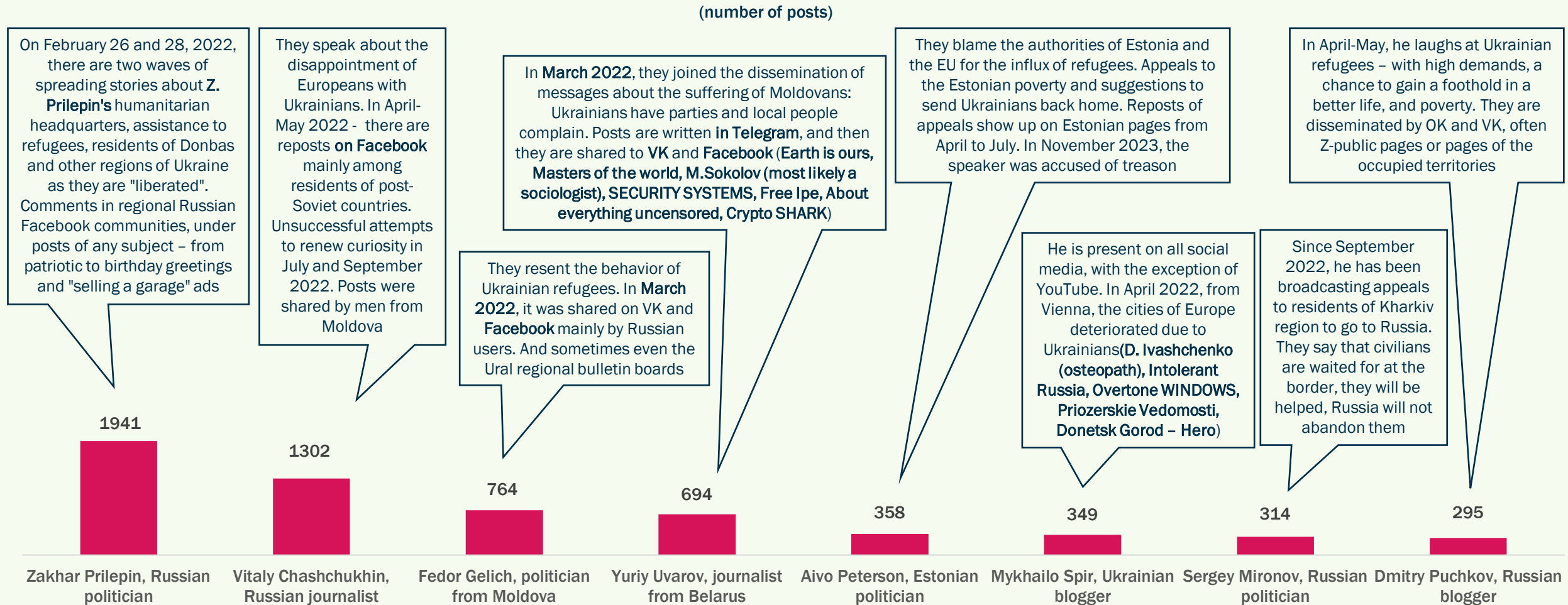
DYNAMICS OF POST SHARING

The peak of sharing posts about refugees (in particular, about the Armed Forces of Ukraine preventing Ukrainians from leaving for the country that will take care of them, i.e. the Russian Federation) begins in March 2022 on popular patriotic public pages. A wave of viral spread on OK is conducted on culinary public pages (however, since February, all of them have quickly become mostly patriotic)



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

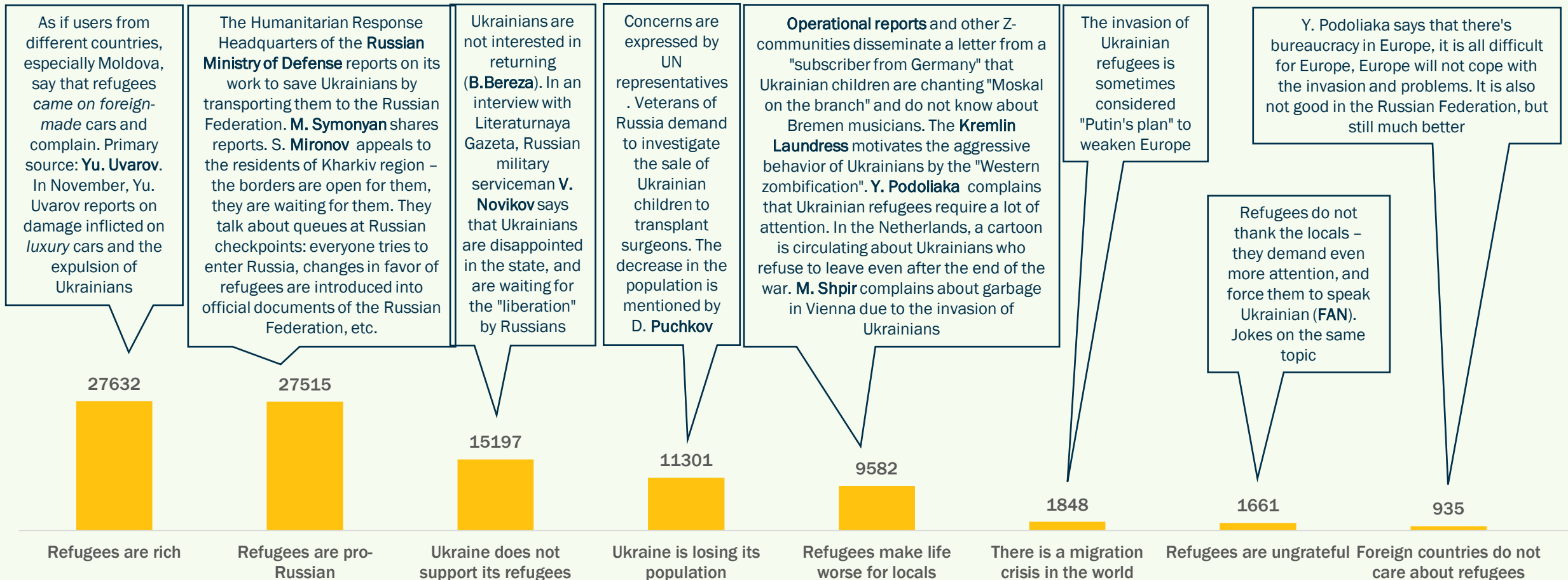
Among the "author's" messages, the difficult situation in Moldova receives the greatest and most frequent sharing – both from local and Belarusian journalists. The political elite is represented by non-mainstream figures who call for going to Russia: unlike other countries, it will help



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION

Unlike opinion leaders, official Russian messages from international platforms are much less common here, and messages created specifically for specific groups (such as Moldovans) are more noticeable

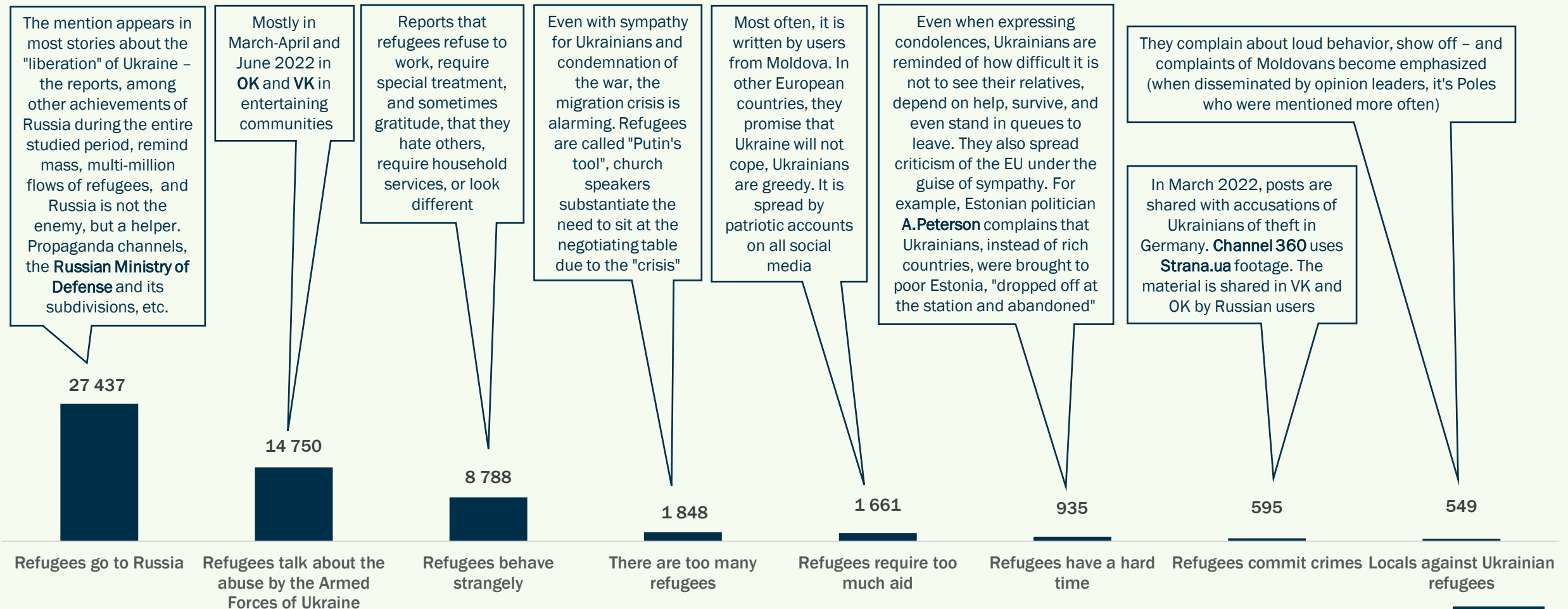
(number of posts)



KEY ARGUMENTS

Even with the active desire to highlight the cruelty of the "Azov fighters" and the Armed Forces in general, the idea of moving to Russia is becoming more widespread

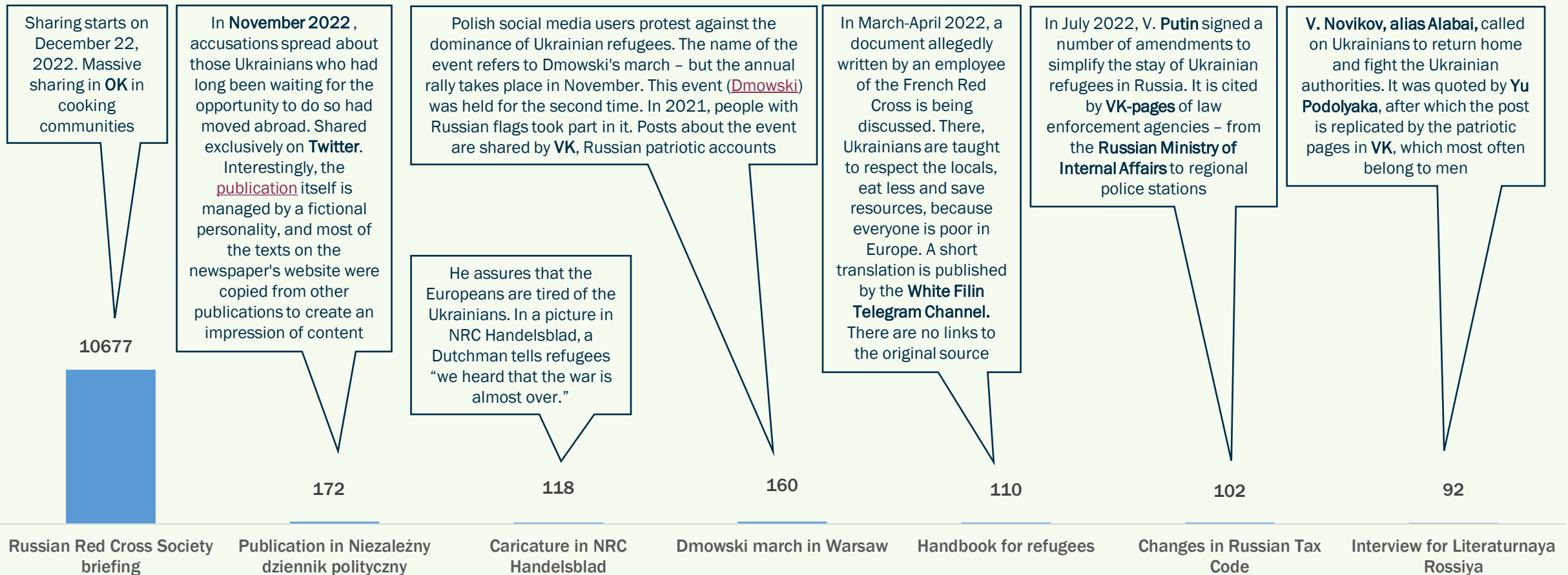
(number of posts)



KEY NEWS STORIES LAUNCHED BY THE RUSSIAN SIDE

Bots almost never promoted information on news hooks in this topic. The most notable efforts are the messages from the briefing of the Russian branch of the Red Cross: the sharing by the same type of pages indicates that this is a bot farm developed in advance. In another case, the message is promoted through non-existent media and by "raiding" the names of real events

(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY EMOTIONS BROADCAST BY THE AUTHORS

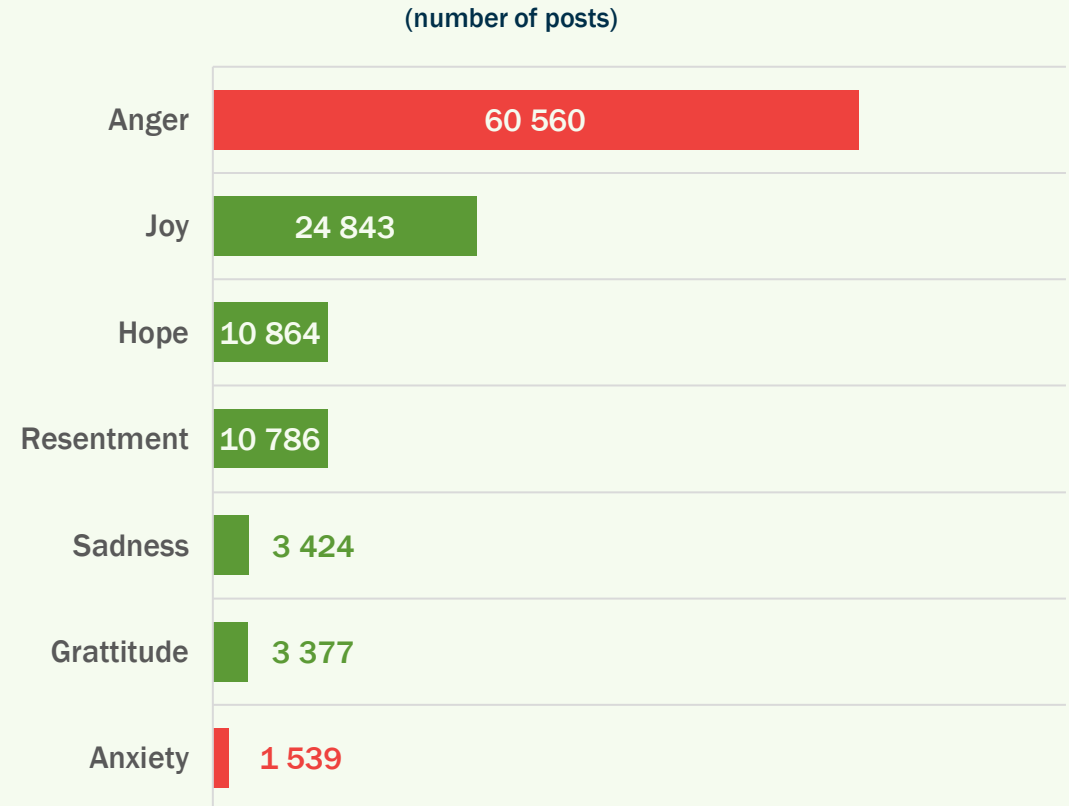
Anger: Residents of **Moldova** are shocked and angry at the behavior of Ukrainian refugees who show off with wealth, are uncultured and ungrateful (Yu. Uvarov, Russia 1 , Russkie Online, Chamber No.6, Anti PE). Ukrainians in **Switzerland** are shocked by refugees from Ukraine in Switzerland (Tv KG, regional pages in all social networks: Kursk BOMOND, Yakutia NEWS, Z-PolitWera, Yakutia and Yakutsk News, Whole View, Svetlova in touch, Milana.Malinovna)

Joy: T. Moskalkova reports in the State Duma on successful work with refugees (channels related to **Bashkortostan** and the **United Russia** party in the region are cited); G. Shurkina's poems are joy for the "good" Russia that liberates Ukrainians (Orthodox and "wise" VK publics, the author herself distributes poems in comments to patriotic posts of public opinion leaders. **United Russia** reports on its initiatives for Mariupol residents in VK

Hope: that Ukraine will release refugees and will not shell them (the humanitarian headquarters of the **Russian Ministry of Defense**, shared by political Telegram pages. Hope that the *relevant authorities* will deal with the crimes of Ukraine, forced vaccination of refugees and the liberation of the territories of Ukraine (**Veterans of Russia**, spread through anti-vaccination public pages).

Resentment: Ukrainians always ask for help (often Donetsk and Crimean public pages), Ukrainians behave unacceptably (about Germany, but spread by Russian **Telegram channels**)

Anger becomes the "loudest" emotion attributed to the inhabitants of long-suffering Moldova and Switzerland (where the main source of indignation is a Kyrgyz channel). A cheerful background is provided by the reports of Russian politicians on the evacuees to the Russian Federation



DISSEMINATION OF MISINFORMATION ABOUT REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE

Strategy for building an information campaign

The issue of Ukrainian refugees and IDPs in Russian propaganda is not holistic: it is used to promote other narratives for different audiences. We can identify several areas: for Russia - to show that their state cares about refugees; for Ukraine - to campaign to go to Russia, not to Europe, to prepare them for a poor life in the EU; for Western countries - to pit local residents against Ukrainians, as well as to convince them that a humanitarian crisis has arisen. Thus, the ambiguity of contradictory messages here is explained not by the desire to create chaos, but by addressing different audiences.

Similarly, speakers and emotions are used in different ways for different audiences, as well as social media platforms (for example, for Ukrainians in Poland - it's Facebook, and for Ukrainians who can go to the Russian Federation - it's media banned in Ukraine: OK and VK). The latter can be explained by the fact that Russian politicians and bloggers often distance themselves from "enemy" channels of information dissemination or are banned there. On the other hand, it can be assumed that Ukrainians who use the latter two social media despite the ban since 2017 are more immersed in the Russian agenda, identify the speakers and are a "ready" audience for propaganda.

The use of official Russian and Belarusian media on SM platforms is very noticeable in this issue: they popularized the messages spoken on international platforms. Only in some countries with strong pro-Russian parties, such as Poland, mainstream channels were also used. They tried to influence the rest of the audience (for example, in Moldova) through botnets.

The fact that the message about the ingratitude of the Ukrainian refugees is launched almost simultaneously in Moldova and Germany may indicate that there is a structure that plans campaigns simultaneously in different countries, selecting specific arguments for each.

3

DISINFORMATION ON THE SALE
OF UKRAINIAN CHILDREN TO
TRANSPLANT SURGEONS OR
PEDOPHILES

DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE SALE OF UKRAINIAN CHILDREN TO TRANSPLANT SURGEONS OR PEDOPHILES

General Topic Description

The time interval of the analyzed period: February 26, 2022 – August 31, 2023.

As part of a full-scale invasion, the Russian Federation is deporting Ukrainian children from the occupied territories of Ukraine on a massive scale. They are taken to occupied Crimea, Russia or Belarus, ostensibly for rehabilitation or to rest in camps. In March, the International Criminal Court [issued](#) an arrest warrant for Russian dictator Vladimir Putin and Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova over the illegal deportation of Ukrainian children.

Instead, in order to cover up the news of the crimes committed, Russian propaganda launches fake news about Ukrainians selling underage children to foreign authorities and the involvement of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in taking children out of the occupied territories for sale. In addition, it places undue emphasis on any report found in Western countries about valid suspicious cases, usually those in which human trafficking has been exposed or distorted. Often the same propaganda publications accuse the trafficking of children for another purpose: for the entertainment of pedophiles.

These themes can hardly be considered as a separate information campaign: rather, they are thematic pre-designed themes that can be activated from time to time: with or without need, as well as responding to the natural occurrence of such information by spreading it.

In addition to children, false reports of Russian propaganda state that the Ukrainian military, among others, also become victims of the so-called "black transplant surgery" in Ukraine. Another message on this topic are stories about Ukrainian refugees being "dismembered for organs" in European countries. One of the vivid examples in this case is the news of the Russian publication "Izvestia" about how a Ukrainian immigrant in Poland was allegedly "sold" to four recipients.

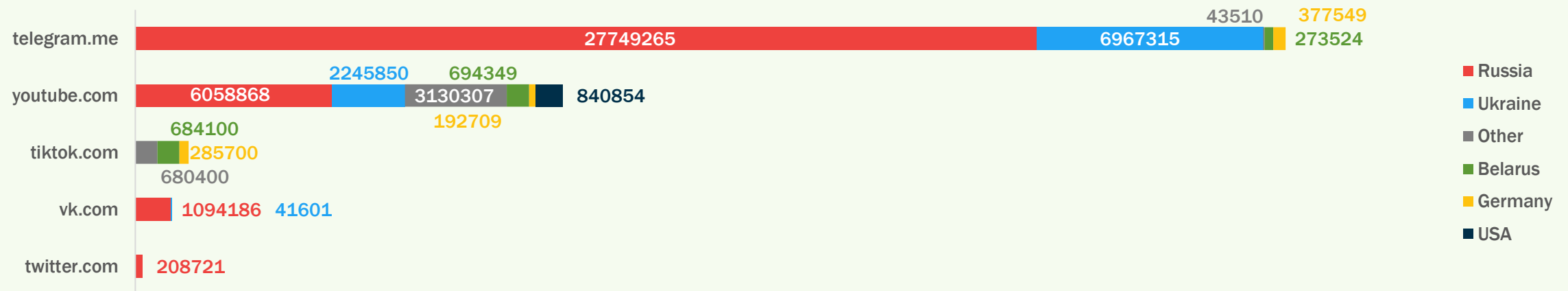
3.1.

MOST POPULAR POSTS
(MOSTLY OPINION LEADERS AND
WELL-KNOWN MEDIA)

DISTRIBUTION OF ATTENTION BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION CHANNEL AND POST GEOGRAPHY

News about pedophilia and related information do not differ much depending on the social media. Massive news of the same content about the exposure of a number of cases (British pedophiles in Poland, a 52-year-old Ukrainian refugee in Poznan, etc.) became popular on Telegram, from time to time with reference to Western media and law enforcement agencies

(number of contacts with the audience in the Cyrillic segment of social media)



Telegram: in **Russia**, propaganda resources (**Ukraina.ru**, **SOLOVYOV**, **Ostashko! Important** and others). Less often, this is done by officials (**V. Volodin**, **M. Zakharova**). The former and the latter pick up the same news items, such as an article about British pedophiles in Poland who "hunt Ukrainian children", and statements by a certain circle of speakers (**D. McGregor**, **OSCE**, etc.). In **the Ukrainian** Telegram segment, there is a circle of news hooks and speakers identical to the Russian one. The most notable channels are **Country Politics**, **Gossip Girl**, etc. **Belarus:** Guardian article on Ukrainian surrogacy in the context of the problem of child trafficking (BelVPO). **Germany:** translations into German of posts of some Russian TG channels (for example, retransmission of testimony of the "SBU ex-agent" V. Prozorov).

YouTube: among users from the **Russian Federation**, the problem of pedophilia and trafficking in children from Ukraine is shared by some top pro-government video bloggers or pages of propaganda media (**N. Mikhalkov** and his **Besogon TV**, **Tsargrad TV** channel). The key relay of

messages for **Ukraine** was daily streams on the YouTube channel Mriya (now blocked and deleted).

TikTok: users from **Belarus**, **Germany** and other countries spread the same messages about the detention of a refugee in Poland, stories describing the schemes of selling children abroad by surrogate mothers. Sometimes – there are reports about the involvement of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the theft of children.

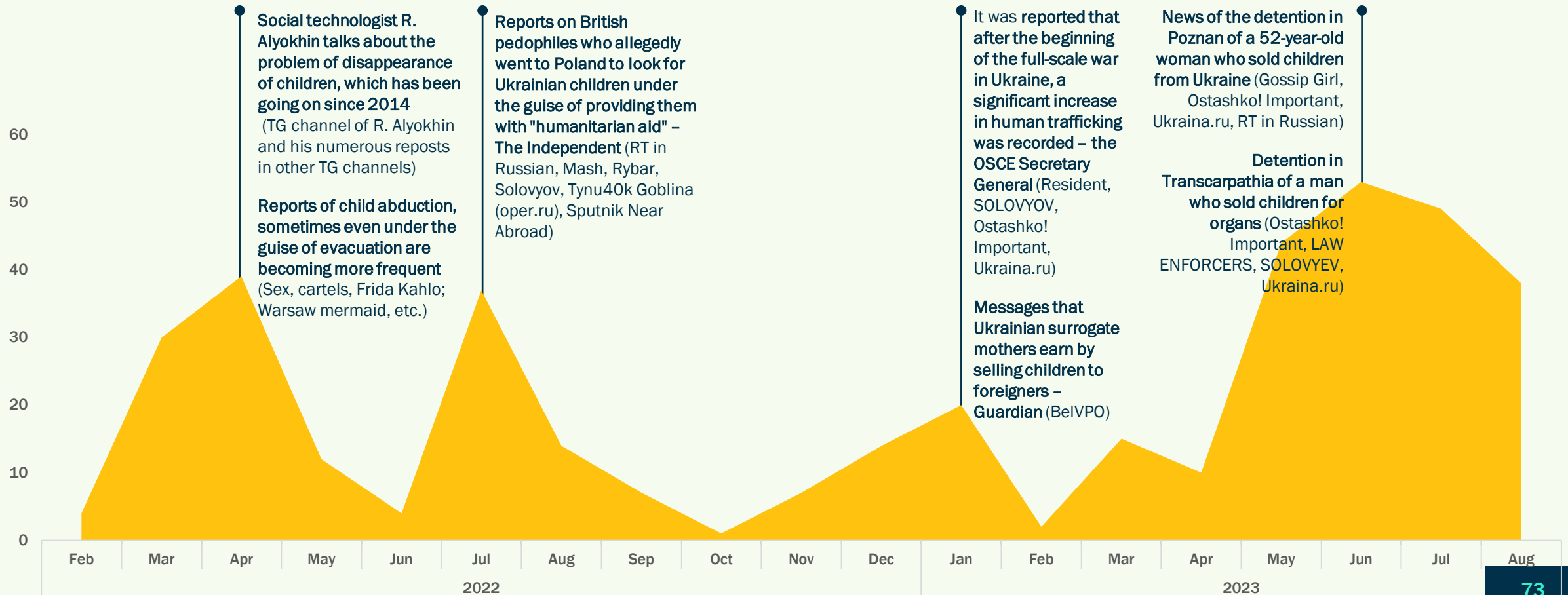
VK: **Russians** duplicate the agenda of Telegram channels, but with much less coverage (about British pedophiles, a mother with many children from the Dnipropetrovsk region in Poland).

Twitter: A single tweet by **Russian** opposition media outlet The Insider about the detention of a woman in Poznan who was selling foster children to pedophiles.

DYNAMICS OF POST SHARING

The first waves of attention to the issue of pedophilia were associated with expert opinions or reports that were not based on specific facts. Subsequently, there were several waves based on a more or less substantiated fact: a number of identified cases of child trafficking in Europe (the peak occurred in the summer - due to the multiplicity of news hooks). There is a noticeable activation of propagandists in the topic after Putin's arrest warrant

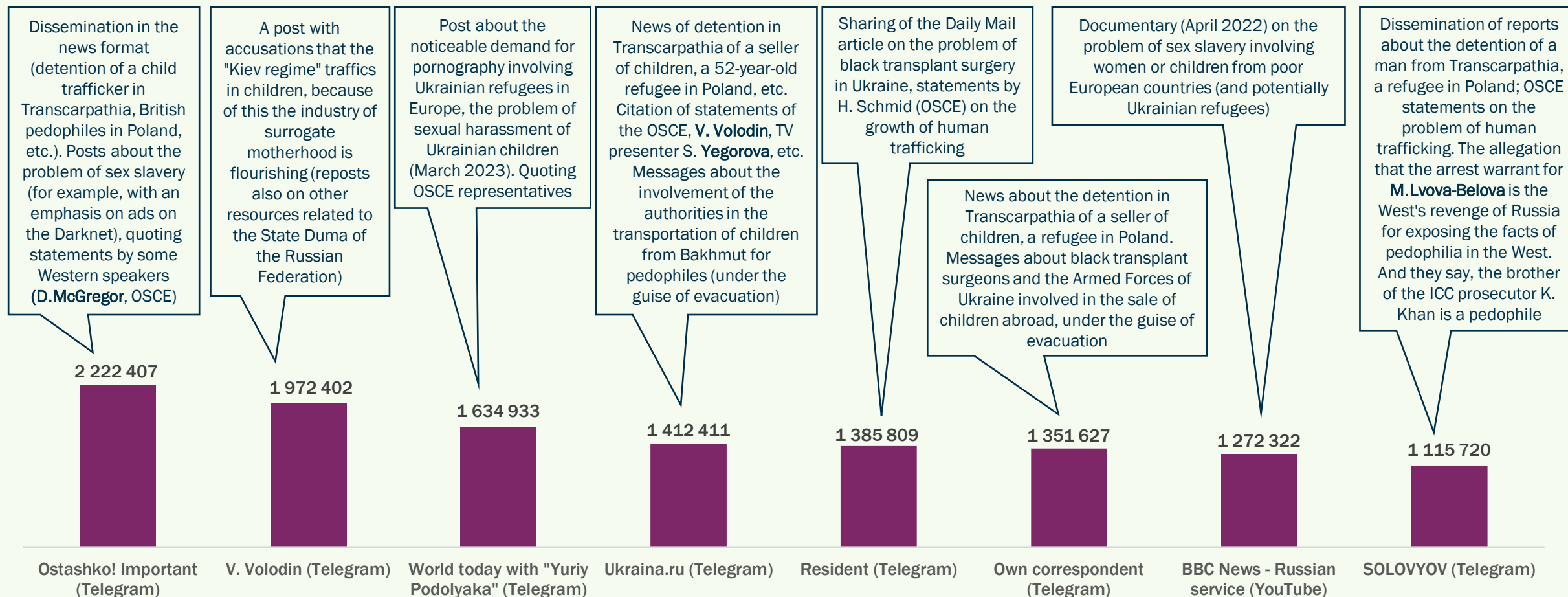
(post count)



KEY CONTENT CREATORS

For the most part, the authors of the content are key political propagandists and their resources (Ostashko! Important, Ukraina.ru, SOLOVYEV, etc.). From time to time, the speaker of the State Duma of the Russian Federation, then the military propagandist Yu.Podolyaka get highly shared, but they are not systemic broadcasters of accusations

(number of contacts with the audience; authors' communication channels in SM are in brackets)



MAIN GROUPS OF POST SPEAKERS

Western law enforcement officers: messages about suspicious activity of the British in Poland against Ukrainian children are based on the detection of information in databases about the convictions of pedophiles. Sources: Publications in **NCA** and **The Independent**. Most often they were shared by Telegram channels and VK communities: **RT in Russian**, **VESTI**, **LIFE.ru**, etc.

Western military: American **D. McGregor** assured that 50,000 to 60,000 people, in his opinion, were victims of human trafficking. His position was spread by Russian telegram channels: **Uncle Slava**, **Ostashko! Important**, and some Ukrainian pro-Russian authors in Telegram: **Mriya**, **TarikNezalejko**.

Western Journalists: American **K. Morris** and his statement on how trafficking in children is flourishing in Ukraine. "Investigation" of the French **K. Nean** from **Donbass Insider** about the involvement of the White Angels police detachment in the transportation of children from frontline cities for sale abroad.

Western human rights activist: statements by OSCE Secretary General **H. Schmid** about the growth of human trafficking in Europe, Polish human rights activist **I. Pachwicz** about an entire Mariupol orphanage sold to Spain together with the children.

Ukrainian special services: "testimony" of the ex-SBU **V. Prozorov** about the involvement of his special service in the forced transfer of children to the UK to sell to pedophiles, **V. Mishchenko** – about the work of "black transplant surgeons" in Bakhmut with the suggestion of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

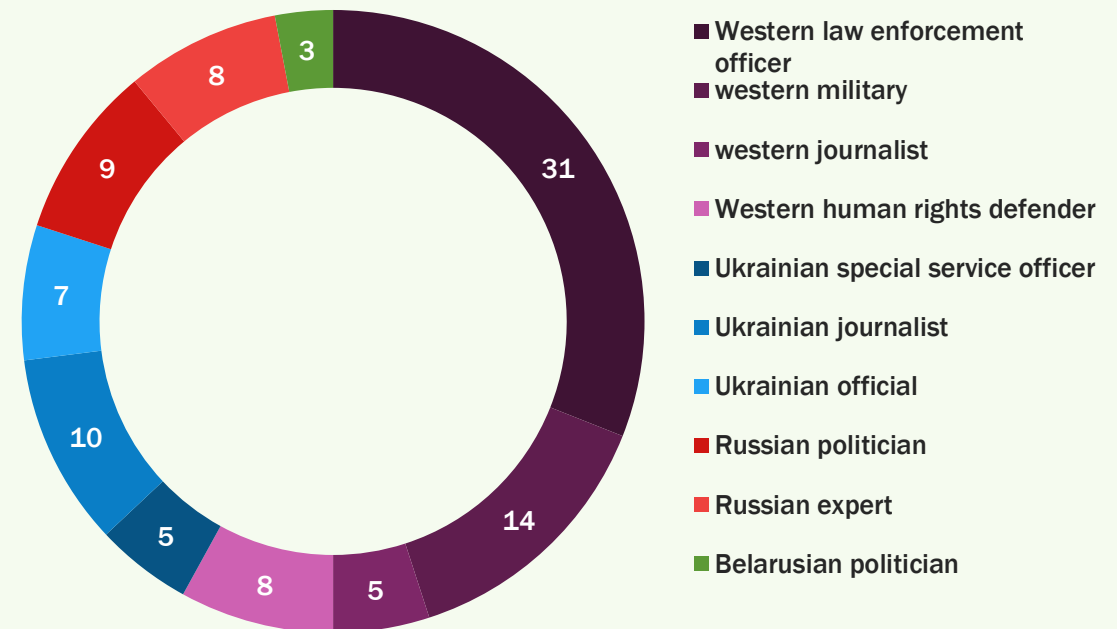
Ukrainian journalists: **V. Hlahola** became a source of news about the detention of a man in Transcarpathia who took children to Europe for sale. The news with reference to Hlahola was shared by: **Notepad Russia**, **Ukraina.ru**, **Ponomar Live**. **Ukraina.ru** also quoted statements by **S. Yegorova** about the problem of disappearance of children from the combat zone, as they say, they become victims of pedophiles.

Ukrainian officials: adding a subtext about the sale of people for organs to the quotes of **I. Vereshchuk** and **O. Syniehubov** about the forced evacuation of children from areas close to hostilities. Criticism of **I. Souslova** in publications about cases of removal of children from refugee families in the EU for the fact that the speaker allegedly hushes up the problem of pedophiles.

Russian politicians: **V. Volodin** accuses the "Kiev regime" of trafficking in children. He is quoted by: **TASS**, **Ukraina.ru** and others. **V. Nebenzia** at the UN denies the involvement of the Russian Federation in the abduction of children, but claims the problem of trafficking in Ukrainian children in Europe.

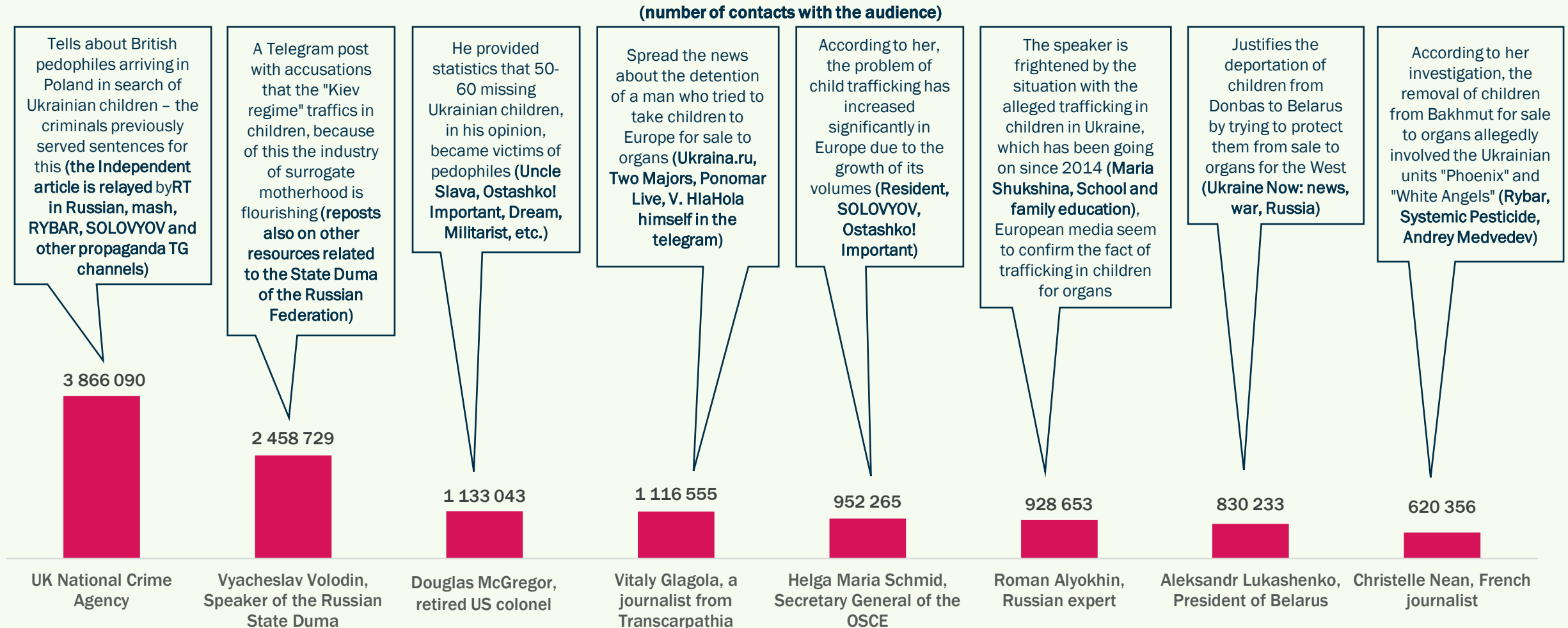
Most often, groups of Western speakers comment on the topic of pedophilia in Ukraine: law enforcement agencies that detect cases of child trafficking, human rights defenders, etc. Sometimes there are speakers loyal to the Russian Federation (D. McGregor, K. Morris, K. Nean). Russians are in the minority, even compared to Ukrainian speakers; and they are more reactive in their statements

(number of contacts with the audience)



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

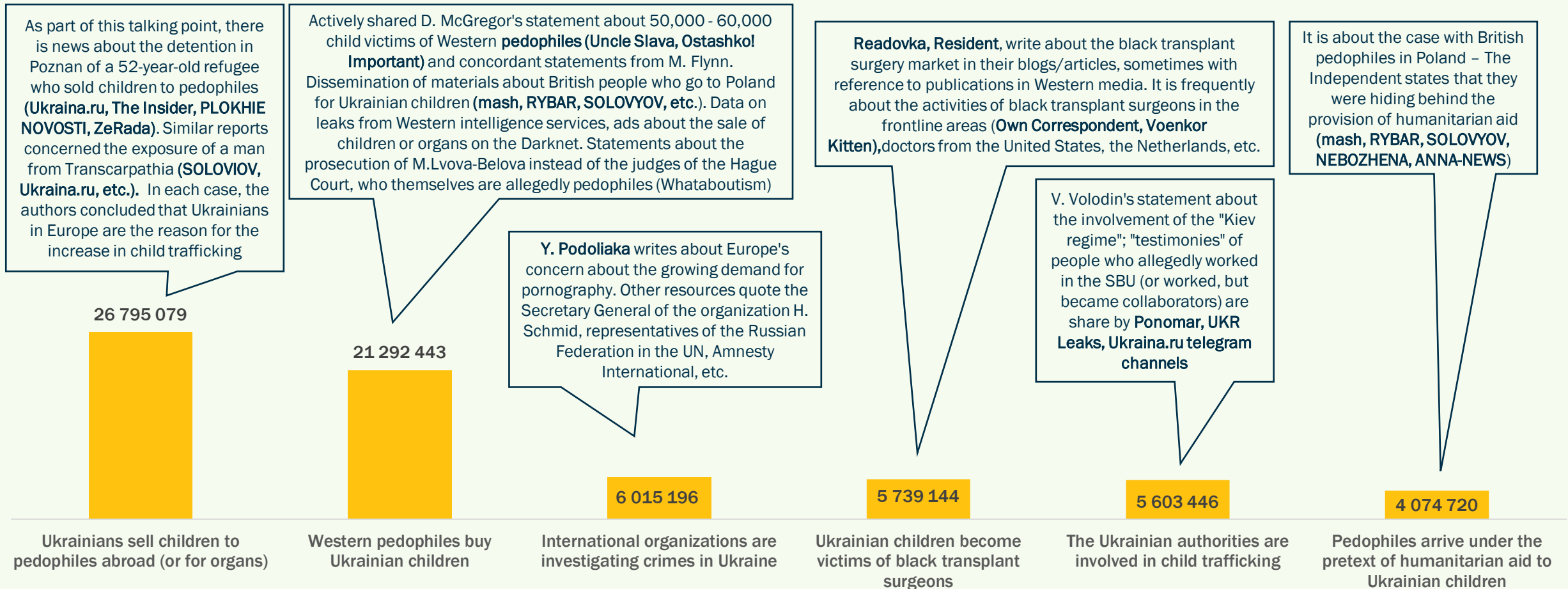
The main speakers of the campaign are primarily representatives of the "collective West", although there are also carriers of pro-Russian views (US Army General D. McGregor) or representatives of organizations with a powerful Russian lobby (H.M. Schmid from the OSCE), who convey narratives favorable to Russia - on problems of child trafficking



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION

The issue is mixed with statements of Western personalities about real biased or suspicious cases (only in the issue of pedophilia, not in transplant surgery), with interpretations of these issues that fit into the Russian strategic narrative: about the involvement of Ukrainian authorities, etc

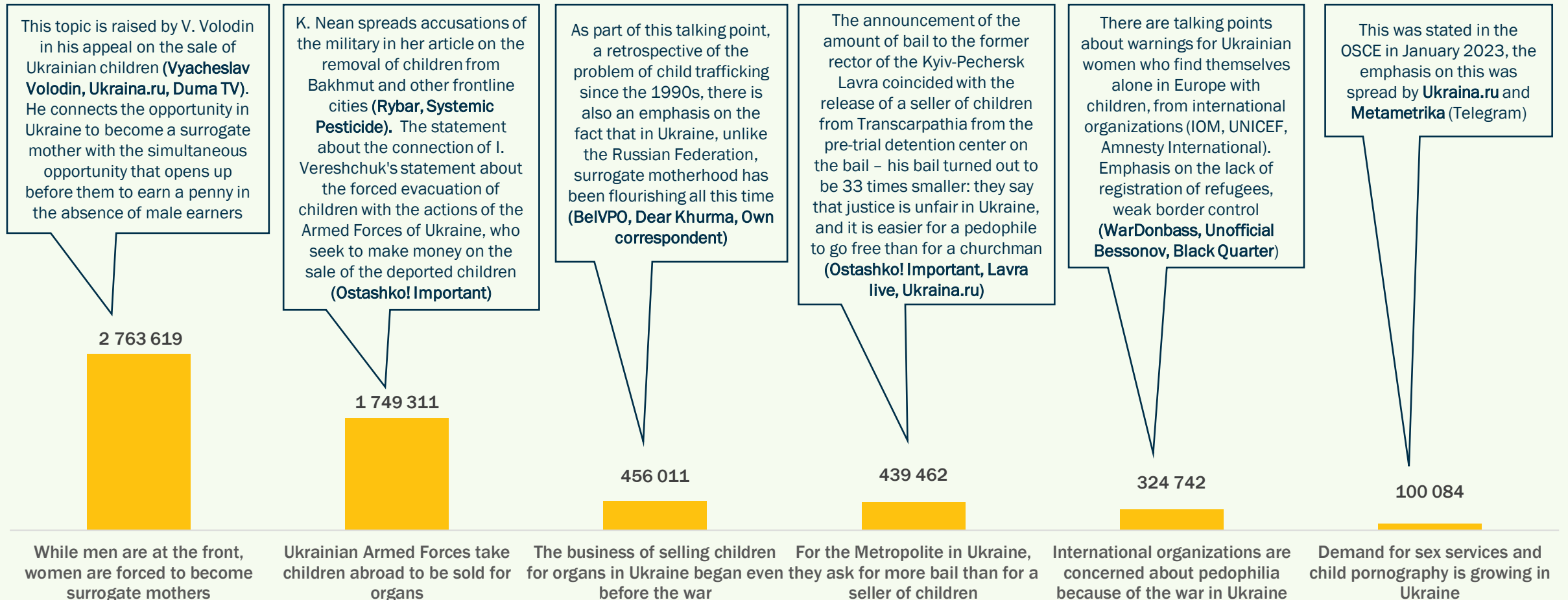
(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

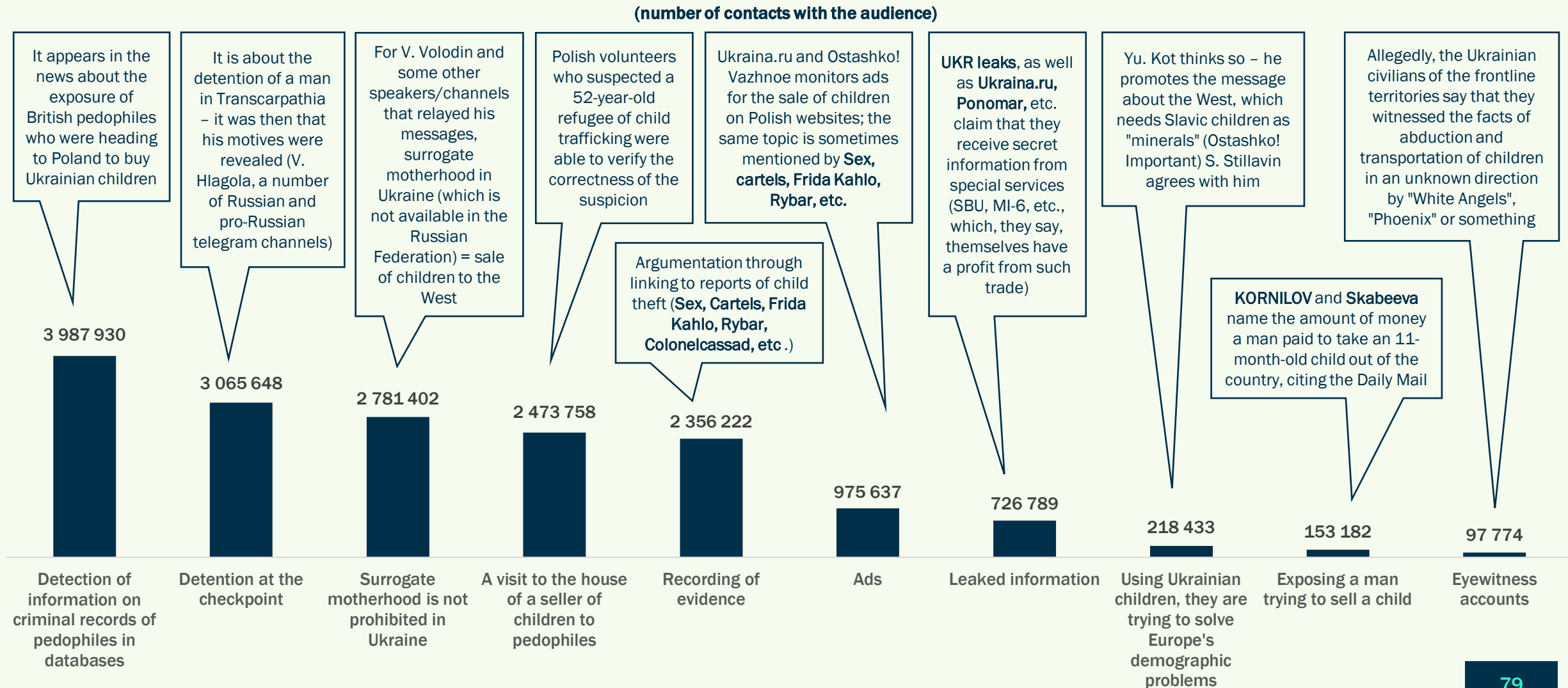
Sometimes they use this high-profile issue to try to solve current communication problems, such as encouraging Bakhmut residents to wait for Russia and not to evacuate to the West

(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY ARGUMENTS

Arguments popular among opinion leaders are most often linked to certain high-profile news events discussed by various authors
(exposure of the activities of British pedophiles in Poland, detention in Poznan of a 52-year-old refugee from Ukraine)



KEY EMOTIONS BROADCAST BY THE AUTHORS

Anger: at British pedophiles in Poland who hunt Ukrainian children; at a man from Transcarpathia who tried to sell children abroad; at a Ukrainian woman in Poland who wanted to sell her own adopted children and abused them before; at pedophiles in general, in whose hands children from Ukraine become "prey" (D.McGregor).

Contempt: to the Ukrainian authorities (Ukraina.ru, Vyacheslav Volodyn, Turned to Z war), which, they say, are engaged in the sale of children; to Ukrainian refugees, who have become a "plague" for Europe.

Anxiety: from international organizations – UNICEF, Amnesty International, OSCE, etc.; shock of some Western states (Ukraine.ru, WarDonbass, Resident, Rybar).

Sadness: for Ukrainian children (in particular, orphans from orphanages) who become "goods" in the hands of the Ukrainian authorities (under the guise of evacuation) and allies of Ukraine (Colonelcassad, Readovka, Rybar, Sex, cartels, Frida Kahlo).

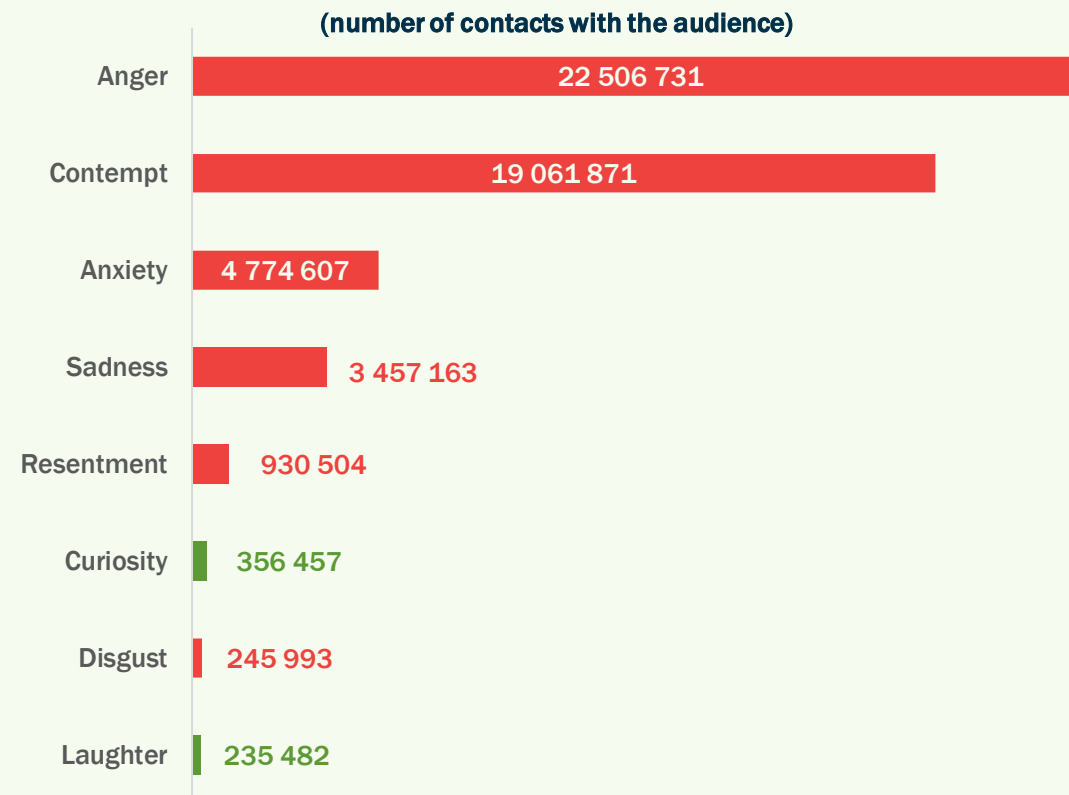
Resentment: accompanies news about a man from Transcarpathia who sold children abroad, but he was released on bail (UAH 1 million), while for Metropolit Pavlo, who was governor of the Lavra, the bail is 33 times higher (Ostashko! Important, Lavra live, Ukraina.ru)

Curiosity: it is broadcast by the TG channels Summary of the Novorossiia Militia Z.O.V., ROKOT, Beregin. It is told about how Ukraine warns its citizens about the risk of becoming a victim of human traffickers abroad.

Disgust: towards Ukrainian man-eaters (Countess as ☢ a changed face runs to the pond); foster mother in Poland due to inhumane conditions of children's stay (Notepad Russia, Evil Genius).

Laughter: about the "betrayal" by the Poles regarding the sale of children by a refugee from Ukraine, while Zelensky talks about the babies rescued from the Russians (Cartel, Kostyan the Cat).

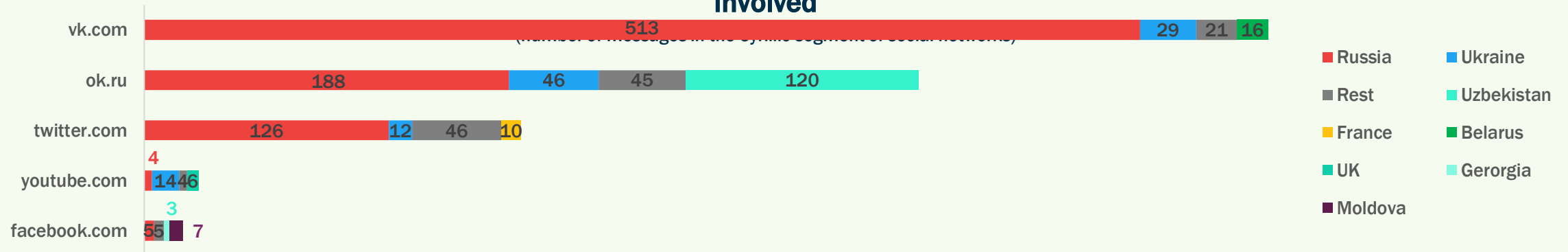
In reports about pedophilia in Ukraine (or about Ukrainian children abroad) there are basically negative emotions towards the alleged organizers (both in Ukraine and in the West). Only sometimes there is sympathy for the victims of child trafficking



3.2. VIRAL POSTS AND BOT ATTACKS

DISTRIBUTION OF ATTENTION BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION CHANNEL AND POST GEOGRAPHY

The number of shares indicates that the bot attacks were not massive. The most intense sharing of identical posts is on Russian social media in Russia. OK also has a noticeable replication of the topic in the CIS countries (Uzbekistan, to a lesser extent Belarus, Kazakhstan). In Ukraine, the issue is promoted by separate pseudo-patriotic bots. Among Western social media, only X was significantly involved



VK: in Russia, city public pages for news and announcements spread the news about the detention of a man in Transcarpathia who sold children for organs; ordinary users (from **Moscow, St. Petersburg**, to a lesser extent other regions – but mainly before the Ural Mountains) broadcast news about British pedophiles in Poland, articles about child trafficking with shocking details, statements by **H. Schmid** (OSCE), **V. Volodin** (Speaker of the State Duma of the Russian Federation), foreign law enforcement officers, etc. **Ukraine**: the same posts from residents of the occupied territories (Crimea, Donbas), sometimes from Kyiv and Kharkiv residents. **Belarus**: users from Minsk spread the news about an orphanage from Mariupol sold to Spain, while in Vitebsk they spread accusations against M.Saakashvili's wife (S.Rulofs) and the Red Cross regarding the sale of children for organs.

OK: in the **Russian Federation**, they spread articles about pedophilia and the sale of children to organs and deliberately inflate the scale of the problem; as well as news about British pedophiles (in this case, users/bots from **Kaliningrad** were involved), S. Roelofs, etc. Carried out by individual users and Z-communities. Some bots are disguised as patriotic Ukrainians (**Ukrainian songs, HEROES OF THE NATION**). **Ukraine**: pro-Russian politically charged bots or groups with Kyiv "registration" shared, in particular, the text of the IA "Antifascist" about how the West buys Ukrainian children for organs, and Russia/"LPR"/"DPR" save them from this fate. **Uzbekistan**: bot attack with a post about how Russian special forces allegedly saved 1,600 children near Kyiv from pedophiles at the beginning of the SMO.

Other: the activity of users and bots mainly from the rest of the CIS countries (Belarus, Kazakhstan, etc.).

Twitter: Russian Federation – retweets by users from Moscow and other regions (including beyond the Urals) of news about the detention of a man in Transcarpathia, a Ukrainian refugee in Poznan (who abused children and planned to sell them to pedophiles), the involvement of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in child trafficking. **Other**: bot attack with French-language posts about British pedophiles who hunted Ukrainian children (France).

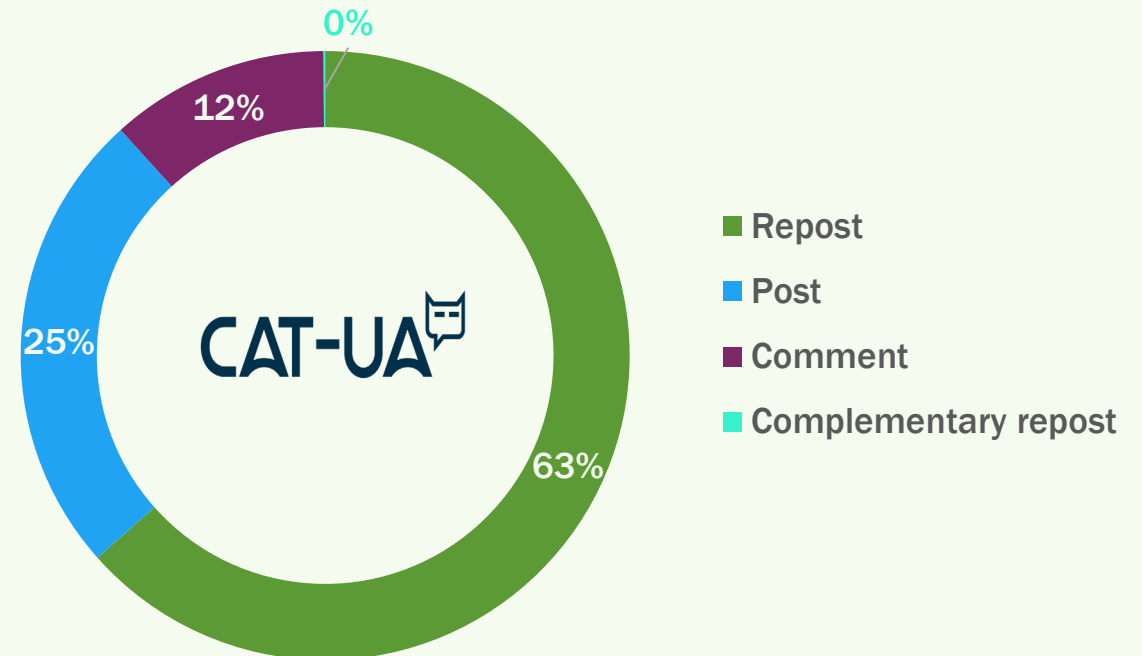
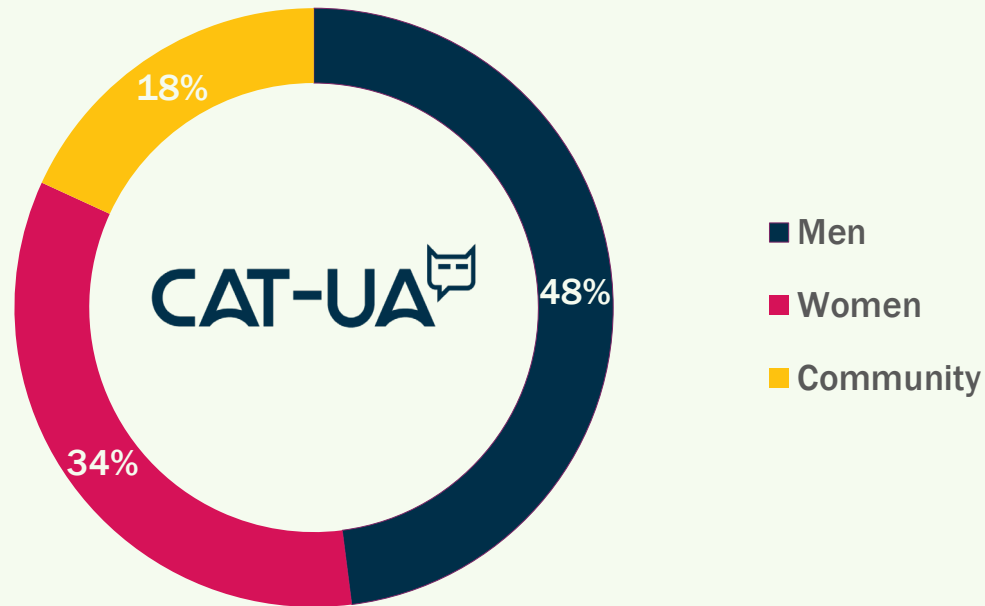
YouTube: Ukraine – comments under the videos of patriotic information channels (**there are questions, UNIAN, Channel 24, Military Television of Ukraine**) with the same text about British pedophiles. **Other**: the same comments under the video of YouTube channels, which formally have a different geolocation, but work mostly for Ukraine.

Facebook: Russian Federation – individual users shared news about British pedophiles detained in Poland. **The other** is the activity of Moldovan accounts (mainly in autonomous and pro-Russian Gagauzia), which dispersed the talking point about the detention of a man on the Ukrainian-Slovak border (allegedly he planned to sell children abroad).

DEMOGRAPHICS AND TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

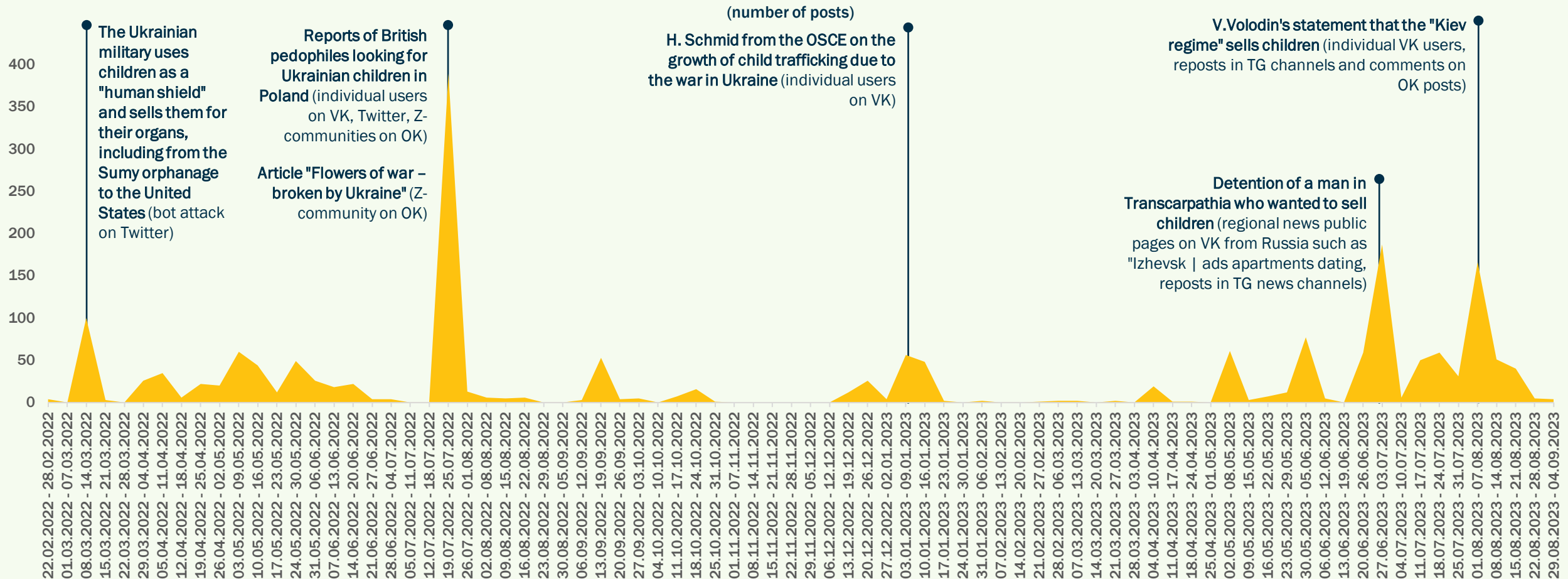
Male bots are more active on OK than "females", spreading news about British pedophiles, the "rescue" of children by Russian special forces near Kyiv, as well as articles with heterogeneous messages about the problem of child trafficking from Ukraine. The geography of male bots in OK is more unnatural: the activity of profiles from Kyiv, Kaliningrad, Tashkent (but not Moscow or St. Petersburg) is recorded. At the same time, in VK, St. Petersburg is sometimes more expressive in geography among female users, which cannot be said about men, who are mostly from Moscow (however, this is largely ensured by Z-bots with names, as in thematic public pages). Necessary news and articles are inserted mainly through reposts on social media VK, OK and Twitter (this does not depend on gender or geolocation); instead, the basic way to spread info attacks for YouTube are comments

(number of messages, in percent)



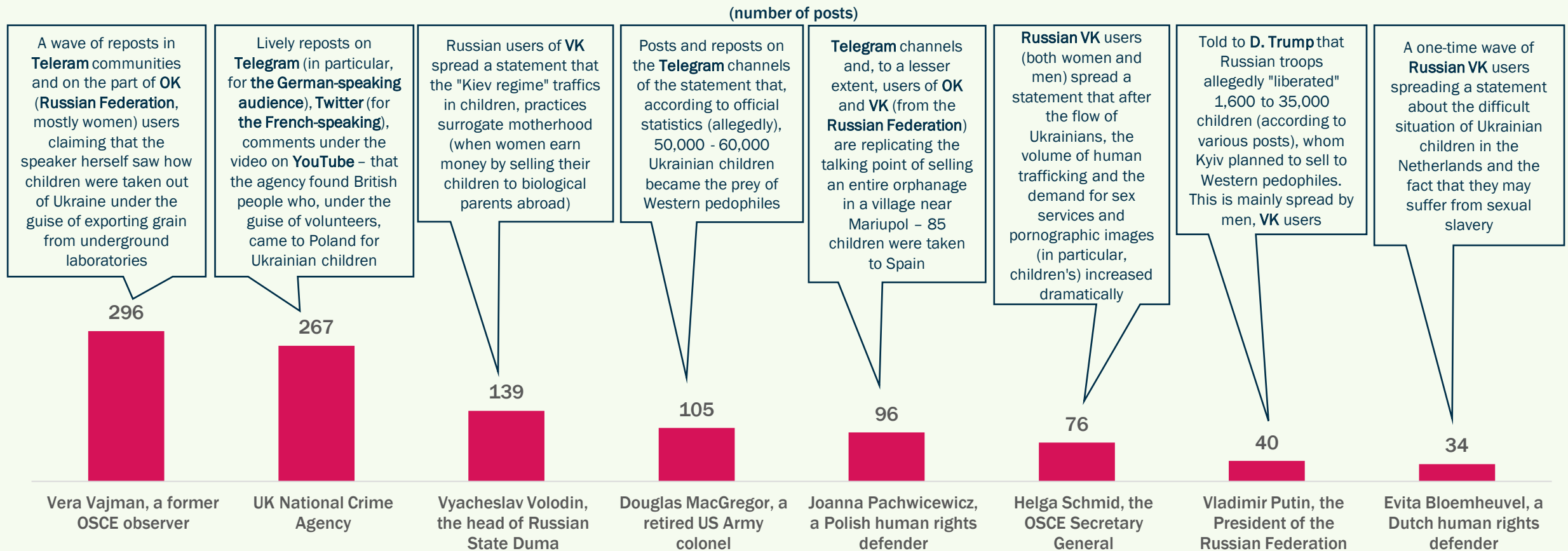
DYNAMICS OF POST SHARING

The picture is one of episodic bursts of attention rather than powerful campaigns. The most massive was a bot attack related to the news about the exposure of British pedophiles in Poland (July 2022), but in general, attention to the issue turned out to be unstable and with long interruptions. The next surge of attention took place in the summer of 2023 - against the background of the news from Transcarpathia and the statements of V. Volodin



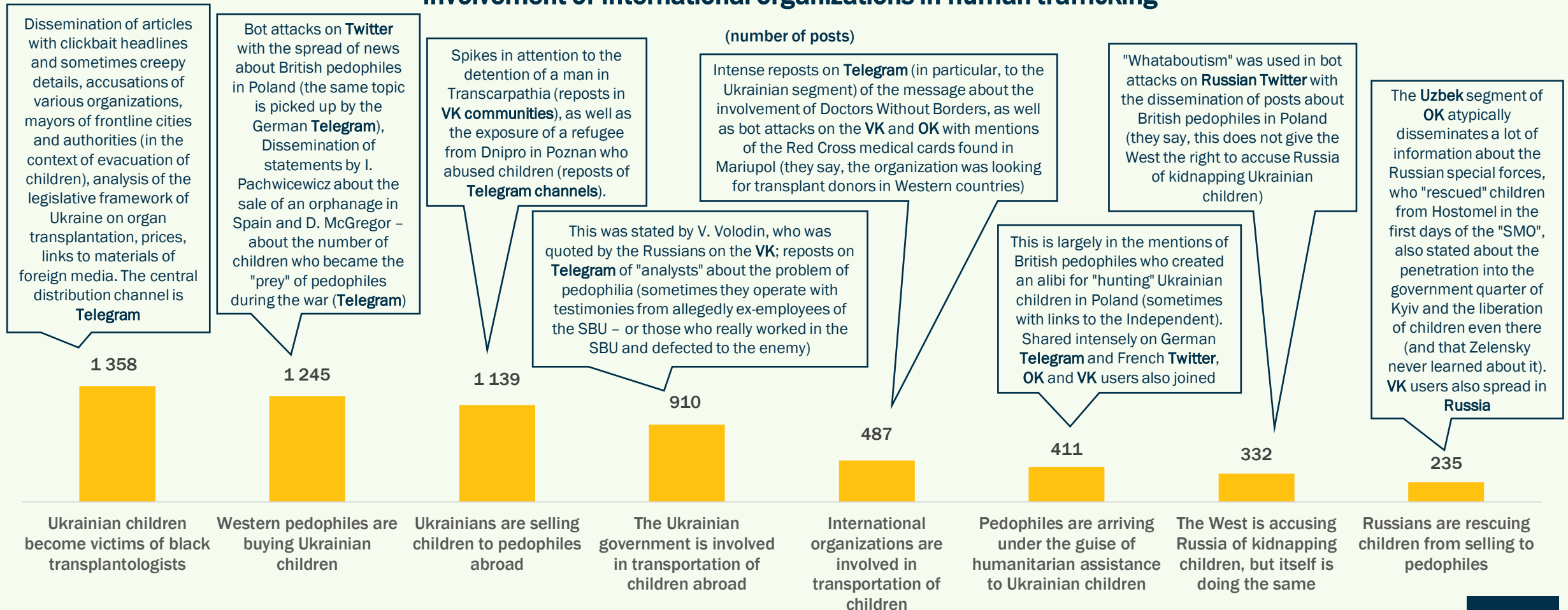
KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

It is mainly the statements of foreign speakers (although they are often representatives of organizations with a strong Russian lobby, such as the OSCE, or simply experts "on the payroll" of the Kremlin, such as D. McGregor) that are broadcast and presented as authoritative evidence of the existence of a significant problem of abduction and sale of Ukrainian children. In some cases, there is a replication of statements to foreign audiences (such as about British pedophiles in Poland), but the main consumers of the speakers' messages are Russians



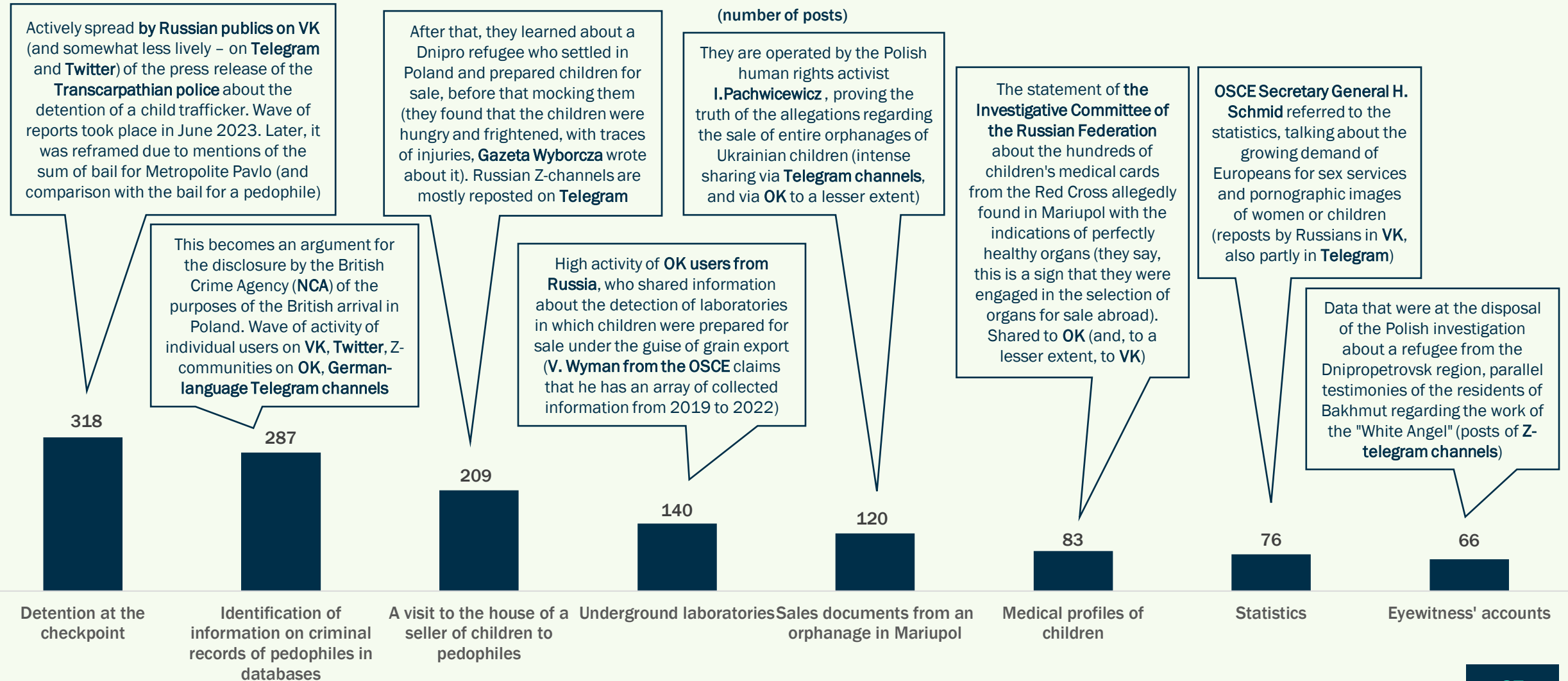
KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION

The focus on the problem of black transplant surgery is mainly in a block of analytical articles, which express general considerations and give various examples, criticizing everyone - the Ukrainian authorities, the West and international organizations. In connection with pedophilia, there are more viral spread of certain high-profile cases (British pedophiles in Poland, there is also a refugee from Dnipro). It is noticeable that bot messages are much less reasoned stories than "respectable" propagandists - for example, about the involvement of international organizations in human trafficking



KEY ARGUMENTS

Argumentation is used in much the same way as in the case of opinion leaders, except that sometimes it is necessary to argue more exotic versions of stories



KEY EMOTIONS BROADCAST BY THE AUTHORS

Anger: at British pedophiles who go to Poland for Ukrainian children (**Russian bot** attacks on **Twitter**, **German-speaking Telegram**); at a Transcarpathian who sold children in the EU for organs (**Russian VK** public pages for local ads); at a refugee in Poland (**Russians on Twitter**, **Telegram**), at Ukrainians and their authorities in general.

Anxiety: on the part of international organizations, human rights defenders (**I. Pachvicewicz**, **V. Vayman**, **H. Schmid**), Western media (**The Guardian**), the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation – in the latter case, because of the possible involvement of the Red Cross in the abduction of children from Mariupol (reposts of Russians in the **OK** and **VK**).

Contempt: for the "Kiev regime" due to the prosperity of pedophilia and surrogate motherhood (**V. Volodin**, **VK** users from the **Russian Federation**), for black transplant surgeons from the organization "Doctors Without Borders" (viral sharing in **Telegram** channels), for Ukrainian "Nazis" (**Russians on Twitter** with reference to the Belarusian state TV channel **ONT**).

Hope: for the Russian military, who "liberated" (or could "liberate") children from pedophiles from Kyiv in the first days of the so-called "SMO", "rescued" from pedophiles (reposts of **Uzbek OK** users, **Russian VK** users, mostly **men**).

Disgust: on the part of **Telegram** channels – to a refugee in Poland who wanted to sell foster children; to a Transcarpathian who sold children for organs in the EU (compared to Metropolit Pavlo).

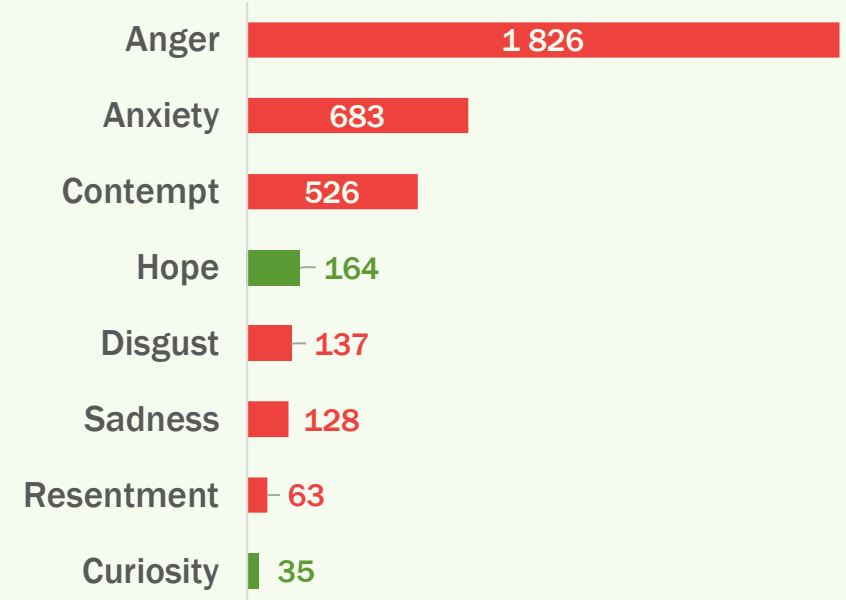
Sadness: for children suffering from "modern slave traders" from Western countries, religious organizations, "Soros structures", etc. (reposts in **Russian TG** channels of information about the "investigation" of **UKR Leaks**).

Resentment: on part of the Western media, which are dissatisfied with their ignoring the problems of Ukrainian pedophilia and black transplant surgery (reposts of **VK** users from **Russia**); also due to the involvement of (allegedly) international organizations.

Curiosity: to the channels and organizers of the transportation of children from Ukraine to the West (such framing is in the dissemination of statements **by Russian women** on **OK** or by **telegram** channels of **I. Pachwicewicz**).

The key emotion is hatred of pedophiles, organizers of child trafficking schemes, black transplant surgeons. Sometimes it turns into contempt - especially for the Ukrainian authorities, who allow or encourage criminals. Only sometimes there was hope - when they wrote about Russian special forces, who in the first weeks of "SMO" allegedly "rescued" children from Kyiv who were being prepared for sale. Compassion is not all that common either

(number of posts)



DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE SALE OF UKRAINIAN CHILDREN TO TRANSPLANT SURGEONS OR PEDOPHILES

Strategy for building an information campaign

The theme is typical of Russian propaganda: highly emotional, with an emphasis on the inhuman cruelty and cynicism of the enemy side. It was used sporadically throughout the period and did not develop into a single information campaign. The reasons for the outbreak of such reports were various: reports from Western law enforcement officials (which were immediately actively promoted with accents and exaggerations favorable to the Russian authorities), the battle for Bakhmut (as they tried to convince the population to wait for the arrival of the Russian military and not to go to the West), attempts of the Chairman of the State Duma V. Volodin to attract attention, etc. Particularly noticeable is the intensification of propagandists in the issue after the announcement of Putin's arrest by the court in The Hague in the case of child abduction - probably in order to distract attention from it and to make the opponents worse.

In accordance with the rules of classical propaganda, truth and falsehood were mixed here. Genuine reports by Western personalities about suspicious cases were supplemented by favorable news about the involvement of Ukrainian authorities in human trafficking, some cases were raised to the level of a large-scale, generally recognized problem.

It is clear that the issue was developed by mainstream Russian propaganda channels, and the environment of "patriotic bloggers" or large expensive botnets was much less involved. As for the bots, only local attacks are noticeable, using much more exotic messages than "respectable" propagandists: for example, they accuse Doctors Without Borders of human trafficking. Some botnets are "handcrafted", for example, all of the same gender and from St. Petersburg. Some pseudo-patriotic Ukrainian bots on OK were also involved.

4

DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE
DESTRUCTION OF WEAPONS
PROVIDED TO UKRAINE BY
PARTNERS

DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE DESTRUCTION OF WEAPONS PROVIDED TO UKRAINE BY PARTNERS

General Topic Description

The time interval of the analyzed period: March 1, 2022 – August 31, 2023.

The first large-scale attempt of Russian propaganda to discredit Western weapons transferred to Ukraine lasted from July to October 2022. Only in July, the Russian Ministry of Defense reported four affected HIMARS facilities and one transport loading vehicle (in the Malotaranivka, Pokrovsk and Kostiantynivka regions). The latter case is the only one in which the agency published video evidence of some damage to this equipment, and a Western expert (J. Buckby) was involved in the discussion. The campaign first involved a network of pro-war TG channels, then influential propagandists. In the future, the tactics have changed somewhat. Even before official statements, propagandists reported on the possible destruction of systems and sometimes published videos. Local TOT public pages were used to spread the message in Ukraine, and liberal Russian media were also involved. Subsequently, the Russian Defense Ministry began to regularly report on the elimination of installations in different parts of the front, and the influential Russian media began to massively broadcast the downing of HIMARS shells..

To discredit the Patriot systems, Russia engaged in a propaganda campaign to destroy the credibility and reduce the fear of Western weapons. This campaign was accompanied by the promotion of the "strongest army in the world" and "advanced Russian weapons" narratives. The campaign continued until May 2023. Then there were two attack attempts: on May 16, the Russians used "Kinzhal" against "Patriot", and on May 29 - probably "Iskander-M". This time, unlike the HIMARS case, all possible channels of communication were involved. It was based on the statements of the Russian military. It is significant that S. Shoigu and V. Putin were the first to comment on the success of this scale. The campaign itself was based on the principle of "arousing interest": at first, information was spread by authoritative propagandists or public pages in Telegram, and later it was officially confirmed. This theme was repeated by the Western media, which is skillfully used by propaganda. Subsequently, on June 16, 2023, the Russian Ministry of Defense issued an official statement about financial rewards for destroyed or captured Western equipment. But there was no reward for the defeat of the Patriot in this list.

We also included less frequent references to the destruction of other equipment, for example, Challenger, when they had not yet been delivered.

4.1.

MOST POPULAR POSTS
(MOSTLY OPINION LEADERS AND
WELL-KNOWN MEDIA)

DISTRIBUTION OF ATTENTION BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION CHANNEL AND POST GEOGRAPHY

Telegram, and to a lesser extent VK, remain the most popular platform for propaganda campaigns in Russia, and in Ukraine they operate through a network of pro-Russian public pages. For the West, they usually use TikTok and Twitter.

(number of contacts with the audience in the Cyrillic segment of social media)



Telegram: the news on this subject in **Russia** were shared by a network of pro-war public sites (**Rybar, Colonelcassad**), as well as channels of Russian propagandists (**SOLOVYOV, Skabeeva, Ostashko! Important**) and war correspondents (**Ponomar Live**). These and traditional media regularly duplicate the statements of the Russian military about the course of "SMO" and the destruction of Western equipment (**TASS, Ria Novosti, RTVI**). At the height of the propaganda campaign, it was the network of pro-war channels that published video and photographic evidence of hits. They were among the first, even before the official statements of the Russian Ministry of Defense, to point to strikes on the right targets. In **Latvia**, reports from the Russian Defense Ministry on the course of special operations were disseminated by opposition resources (**Meduza**). **Ukraine:** local public pages on TOT, as well as the pro-Russian part of popular channels (**Politics of the Country, ZeRada**), mostly broadcast statements of the Russian Ministry of Defense and S. Shoigu.

VK: in Russia: actually duplicates Telegram. Here, the source of many messages is the official website of the **Russian Ministry of Defense**. It is connected with **Ukraine** only by local public pages of the Donetsk region, which broadcast the summary of the Russian Ministry of Defense.

YouTube: Pro-war propaganda channels discuss the topic of advanced Russian weapons, praising "Kinzhal" during the attack on Kyiv on May 16 (**LenTV24, Human**). As well as **DW in Russian**, in the plot of which the probability of damage to the Patriot system is mentioned.

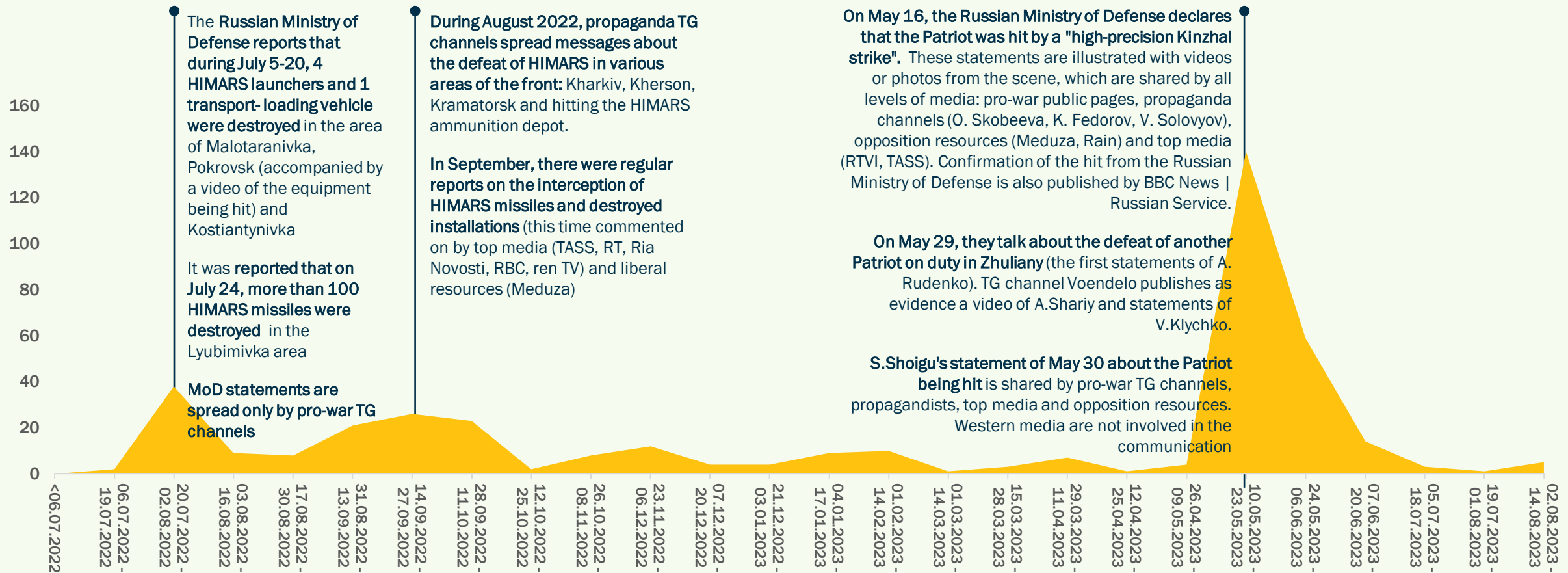
TikTok: short cuts from the Russian **NTV** channel from users in **Turkey**.

Twitter: posts about the defeat of Patriot during the attack on Kyiv on May 29, 2023 from the liberal media (**Meduza, BBC Russian**).

DYNAMICS OF POST SHARING

The fight against NATO's HIMARS was the main theme of 2022, but its activity was far from as high as the stories about the destruction of a new enemy – the Patriot air defense system

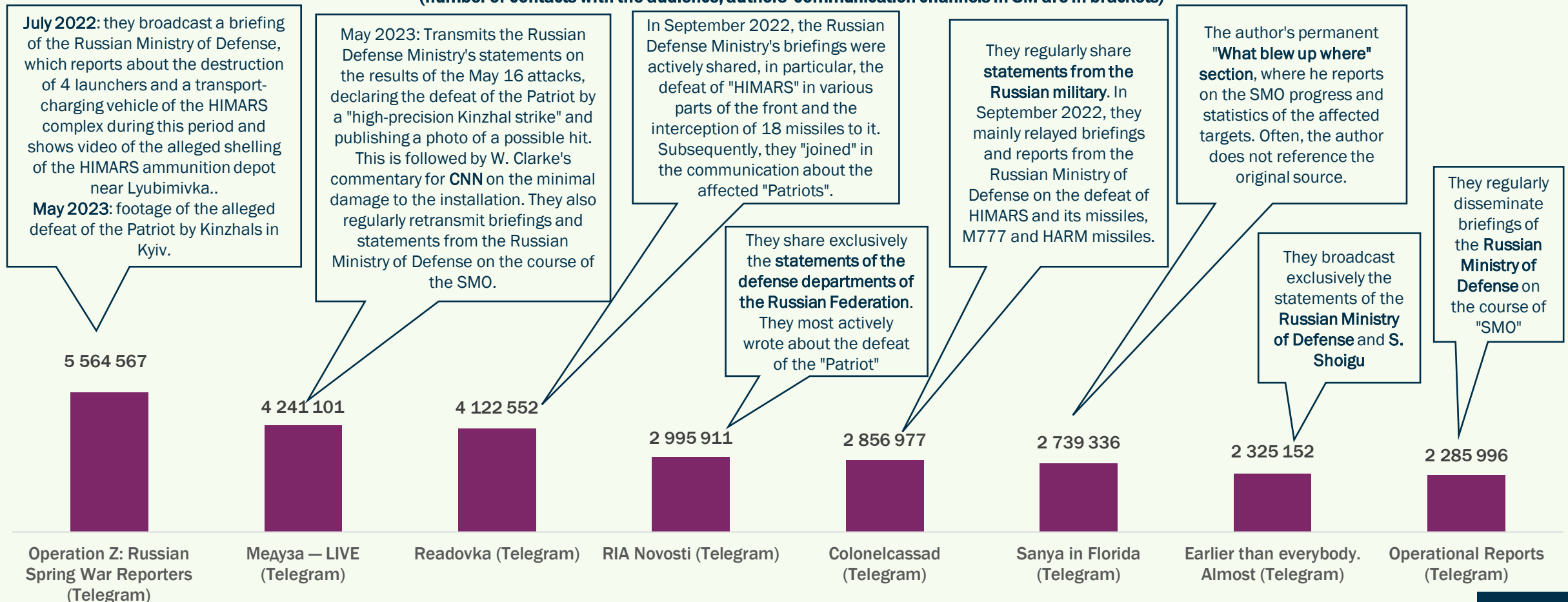
(Post count)



KEY CONTENT CREATORS

The propaganda TG channel "Operation Z: Russian Spring War Reporters" was the first to publish video evidence of certain damage to the "Patriot" in Kyiv. The rest of the pro-war TG-channels mostly reported only official statements of the defense agencies. Liberal resources (Meduza) tried to balance their opinions, but regularly and in greater volume they published the statements of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation on the course of the SMO

(number of contacts with the audience; authors' communication channels in SM are in brackets)



MAIN GROUPS OF POST SPEAKERS

Russian military: most often – officials of the Russian Ministry of Defense: **Minister S. Shoigu**, spokesman **I. Konashenkov**, spokesman of the Center group **A. Savchuk**. Most often, they personally reported the defeat of significant Western equipment, but the elimination of less popular weapons was mentioned in routine briefings of the MoD. Also **I. Girkin**, who suggested a hit on the Patriot systems in Kyiv.

Western journalists: **Reuters** and **DW**, which themselves refer to official sources in the United States, about the serious damage to the Patriot and the need to repair it. As well as an interview for **CNN** with Wesley Clark, former Commander of the US and NATO Allied Forces in Europe, in which he confirmed the damage to the Patriot air defense system. This CNN material is cited by both pro-war and opposition Russian resources.

Military correspondents: mostly pro-war TV channels that regularly cover the events of the Russian-Ukrainian war with references to their own sources (**Yu. Kotenok**, **A. Rudenko**, **A. Ponomar**, **Filatov**). They publish alleged photo and video evidence of a hit on the Patriot air defense system during the attacks on Kyiv (video from street cameras) and the attack on Kharkiv, where there was an alleged hit on the HIMARS ammunition plant (video by **Trukha**).

Western experts: comments of American expert J. Buckby, former adviser to Pentagon chief **D. McGregor** and former Israeli politician **Yakov Kedmi**, acknowledge the power of the Russian Armed Forces.

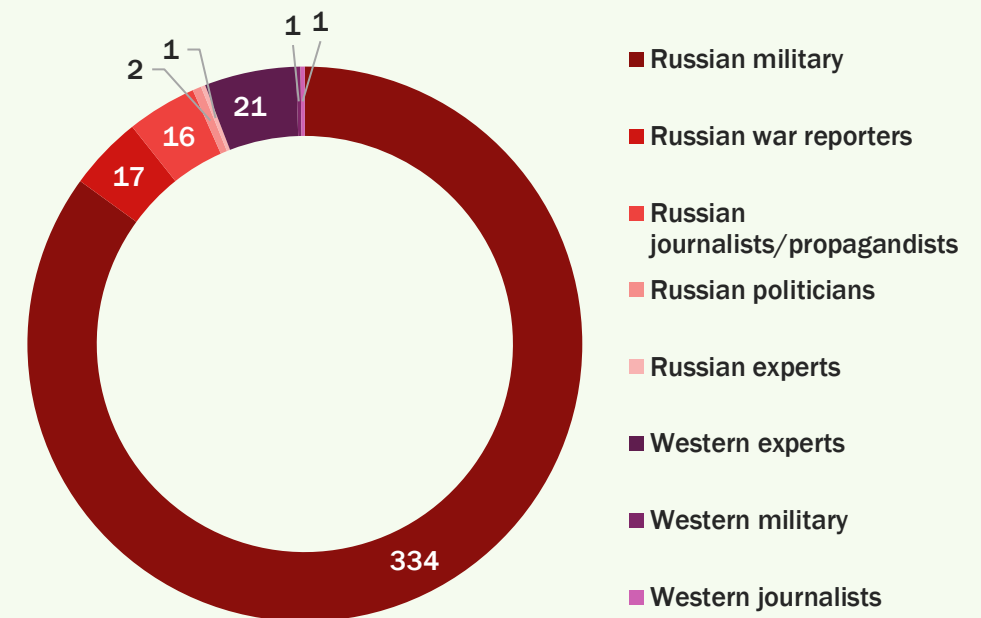
Russian journalists/propagandists: numerous pro-war TG channels which either repost the statements of the military departments or refer to the publications of the military correspondents (**R. Ostashko**, **A. Gasparyan**, **A. Tolmachev**).

Russian politician: Vladimir **Putin** 's statement at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum: he said about the destruction of five Patriot complexes near Kyiv. He is quoted by top TG channels.

Russian experts: **Yu. Knutov** during the talk show **Own Truth on NTV**, where he described in detail the defeat of the Patriot by the Russian "Kinzhal".

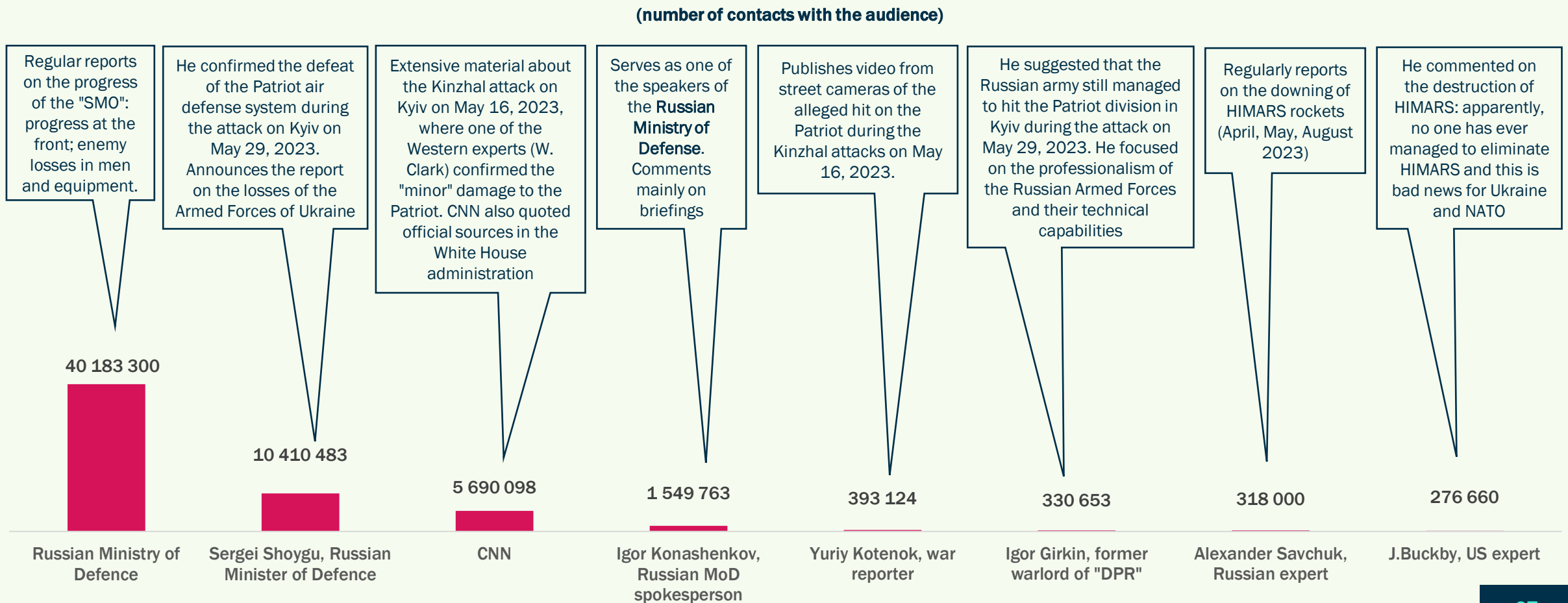
Ukrainian collaborator: **O. Tsarev** for **Tsargrad TV**, where he comments on the defeat of Patriot in Kyiv and losses for the United States. The studio shows the footage of the defeat and focuses on the harassment of bloggers who posted the video online.

It was the statements of Russian officials that became the "evidence" of the destruction of Western equipment in Ukraine. The other speakers only supplemented the military's testimony and demonstrated related evidence (photo and video recordings)
(number of contacts with the audience)



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

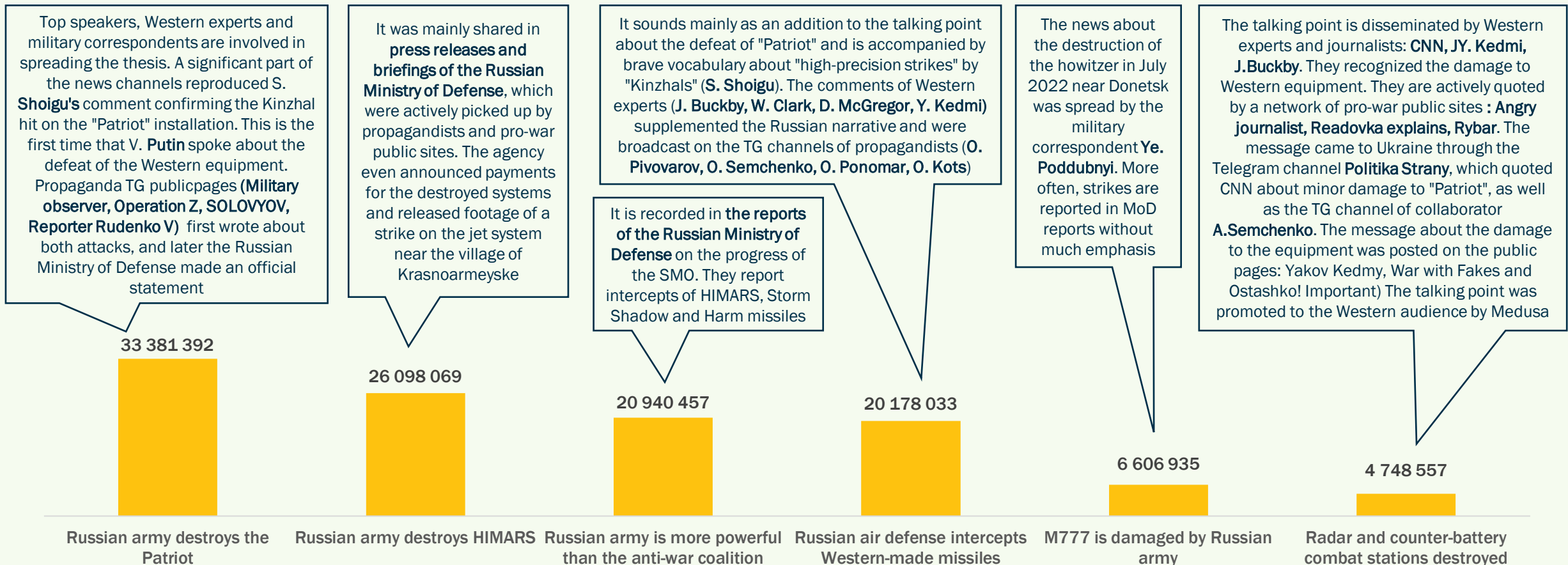
The main speakers of the campaign were the Russian military (Russian Ministry of Defense, S. Shoigu, I. Konashenkov, O. Savchuk). Their statements were taken as undeniable facts. The comments of Western experts (CNN, J. Buckby) were used as evidence of the brilliant work of the Russian Armed Forces and the weakness of the defensive capabilities of the NATO forces. And "real" evidence of hits on the equipment reached the Internet through the channels of Russian war reporters (Yu. Kotenok), who publish information even before official statements



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION

The destruction of Western equipment is one of the key communication messages of the Russian Ministry of Defense, which is systematically picked up by propagandists and pro-war channels. It is used to reinforce the professionalism of the Russian army. However, in the case of high-profile hits, it comes first from pro-war TG channels, and then the top management is involved

(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

Propaganda did not try to prove the defeat of less popular examples of Western technology, but simply presented it as a fact. For the most part, the Russian Defense Ministry's briefing, rapidly disseminated through a network of propaganda TG channels, was sufficient for this purpose

(number of contacts with the audience)

During a briefing of the Russian Ministry of Defense on July 27, 2022, an attack on the HIMARS ammunition depot near the village of Lyubimivka was reported (**Operation Z, RT in Russian, Lentach, Rybar**). This was followed by reports of Kalibr strikes on the settlement of Mayorske, where they also hit the HIMARS missile depot. Other large hits on warehouses were commented on by the Russian Defense Ministry without specifying the exact location and without such resonance. The probable hit on the Kommunar plant in the Kharkiv region, where shells for the MLRS may have been produced, was reported by Readovka, accompanied by video explosions from the **Trukha** Telegram channel.

3 599 038

Russian Armed Forces destroy warehouses of munitions for Western weapons

The defeat of the American AN/TPQ-37 anti-aircraft battery near Donetsk was reported for the first time (**REN TV** with reference to the briefing of the Russian Defense Ministry). The peak of the spread of talking points is the **fall of 2022**. Several other cases of damage in the DPR were announced during a briefing of the Russian Defense Ministry.

3 091 733

Stations of electronic and counterbattery warfare are destroyed

The Kalibr attack on Lviv on July 6, 2023 was first picked up by **Ria Novosti**. According to them, an anonymous source in the Russian Ministry of Defense did not confirm the presence of Challenger tanks there, but assured that "with a high degree of probability they were there." Later, both liberal media (**Meduza**) and expert channels (**Y. Kedmi**) referred to **Ria Novosti**.

502 319

Russian Armed Forces destroy warehouses with Challenger tanks

The talking point is noticeable in **October-December 2022**. Then the Russian Ministry of Defense reported the destruction of the MLRS-2 in the Mykolaiv region, emphasizing its German origin. Subsequently, the Ministry of Defense announced the defeat of 5 more installations in the Zaporizhzhya region. The news is cited by less popular TG channels

181 489

The Russian army hits MLRS and MARS II

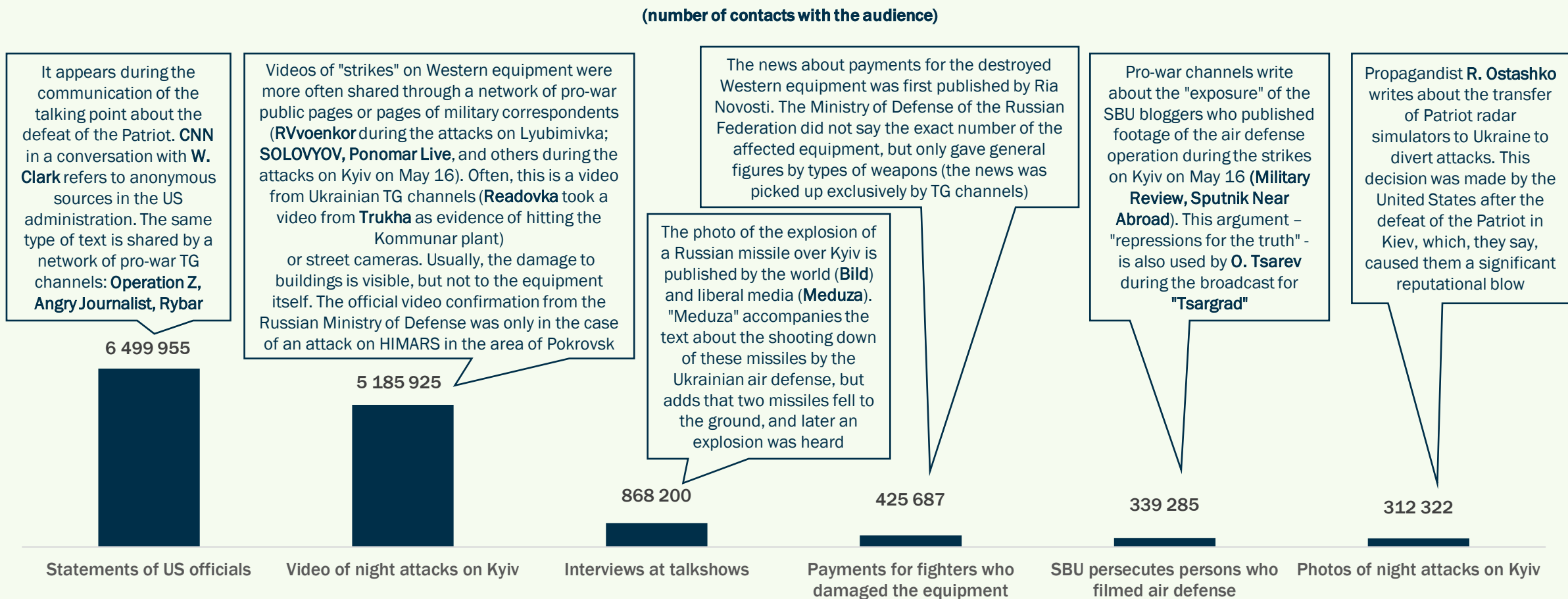
The fact of the hit was voiced at a briefing of the Russian Ministry of Defense on May 17, 2023, emphasizing the British production (it was cited by pro-war TG channels, in particular, **Only on the point**)

82 197

The L119 mortar is destroyed

KEY ARGUMENTS

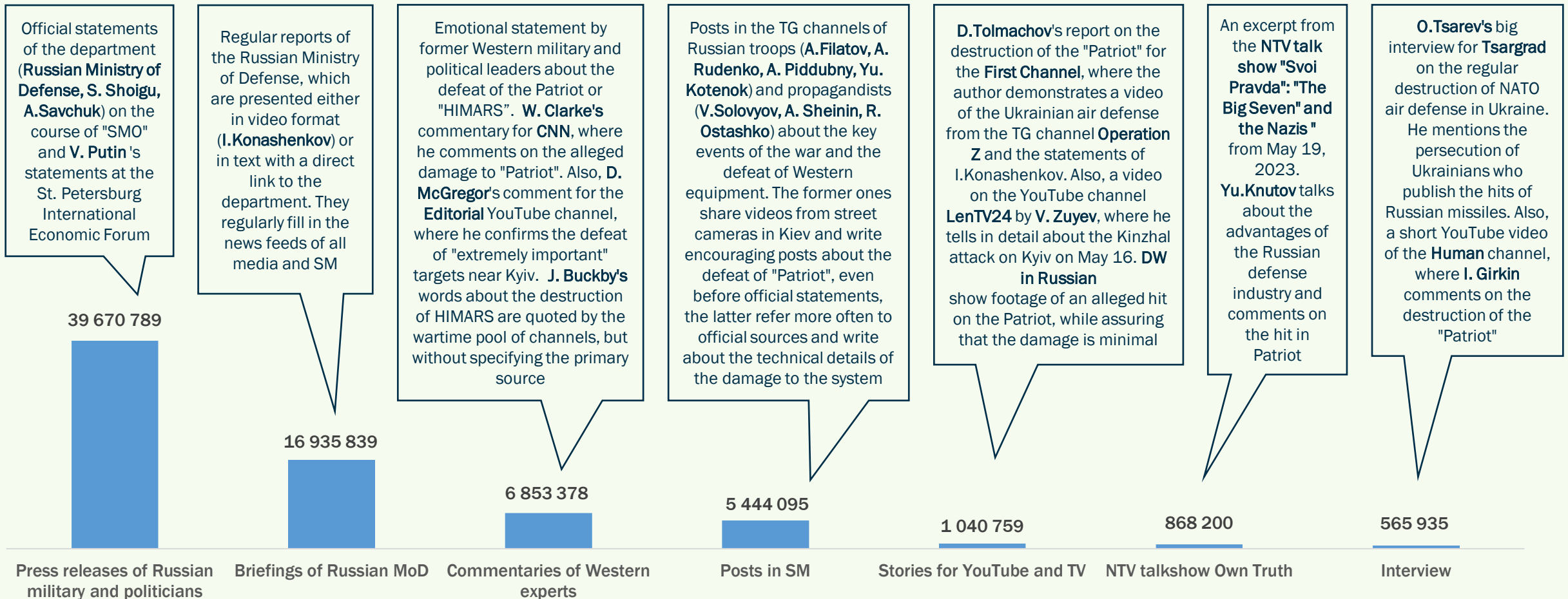
Propagandists argue that NATO equipment is still damaged, helped by the curiosity of Western audiences about the issue. Therefore, CNN's statements during an interview with W. Clark, citing anonymous sources in the White House administration, are taken by the propaganda machine. Videos from street cameras and subsequent "repressions" for published videos of the work of the Ukrainian air defense complete the general picture, although often these videos do not show the equipment itself, only the buildings



KEY NEWS STORIES LAUNCHED BY THE RUSSIAN SIDE

The propaganda campaign about the destruction of Western equipment was mostly directed from above. The primary source was almost always the official statements of the Russian military, which were somehow confirmed by other "independent" speakers

(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY EMOTIONS BROADCAST BY THE AUTHORS

Joy: accompanies most of the statements of key speakers about the defeat of Western equipment. It serves as a basic emotion for describing the strikes of the Russian army on the enemy's rear.

Hope: is broadcast in TG channels that publish unverified information. These are posts about possible damage to equipment, explosions in places of probable duty of the "Patriot".

Laughter: in pro-war TG channels (**Operation Z, Mirror | News**). It is recorded in the case of the destruction of the Patriot: they mock the excuses of V. Zelensky and the US statements about the indestructible ADMs.

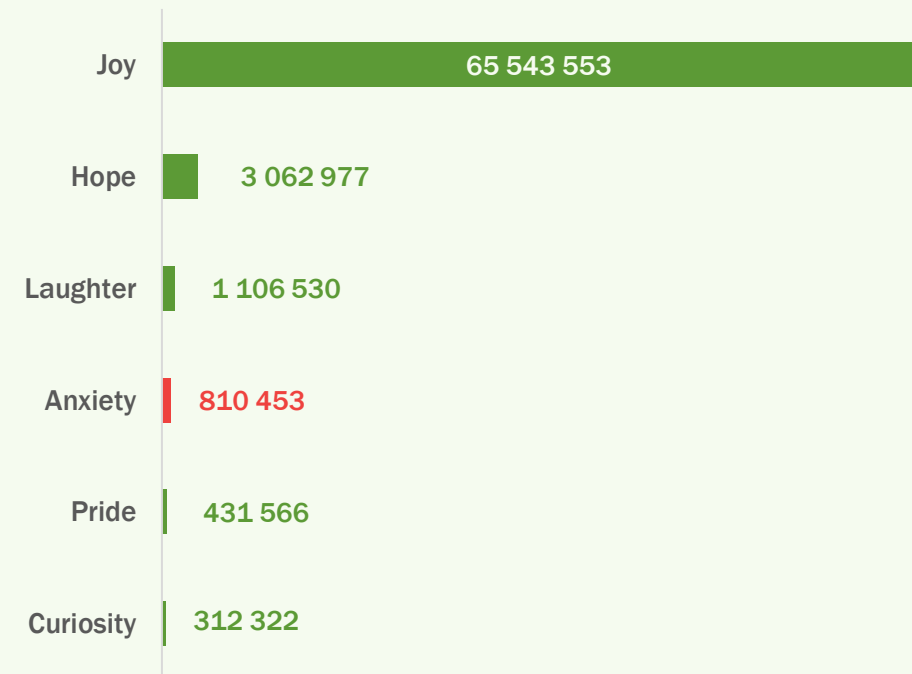
Anxiety: recorded in the statements of Western experts (**J.Buckby, D. McGregor**). The authors say that the defeat of the equipment is completely unexpected and causes significant damage to the reputation of NATO countries.

Pride: broadcast by the **Russian Ministry of Defense** in the statistics of payments for the personal destruction or capture of enemy military equipment in the SMO zone (including HIMARS systems and missiles, Leopard tanks).

Curiosity: noticeable on pro-Russian public pages (**ZeRada**), which develop the defeat of "Patriot". They are interested in the vocabulary of "defeated" and "destroyed". It is said that it is difficult to destroy an air defense system consisting of 10 combat vehicles. Therefore, several launchers were probably hit.

One of the key was the emotions is joy – it accompanied most of the statements of the official speakers. The rest of the palette of emotions is spread by propagandists, experts and pro-war public pages that often share unverified information or ridicule the enemy

(number of contacts with the audience)

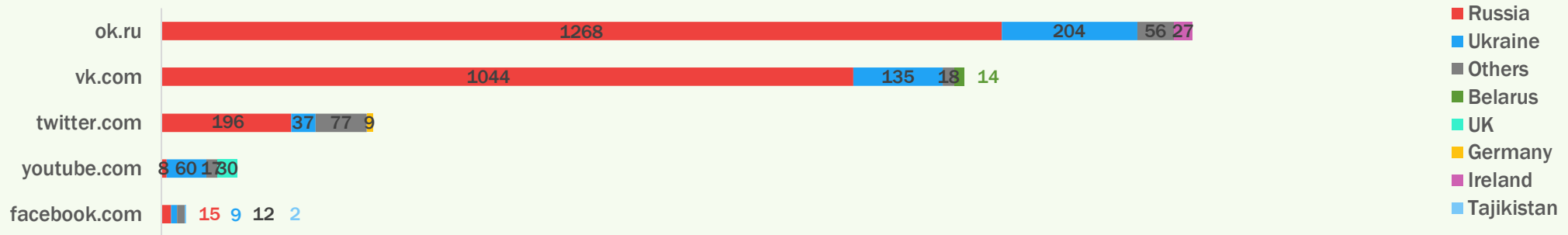


4.2. VIRAL POSTS AND BOT ATTACKS

DISTRIBUTION OF ATTENTION BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION CHANNEL AND POST GEOGRAPHY

For viral campaigns in the Russian segment, SM used the traditional OK.ru and VK, where a developed network of pro-war public pages operates. At the same time, they also worked through these channels in the countries of the former socialist camp. In the West, on the other hand, key messages were posted on Twitter, including V. Putin's statement on the attack on the five Patriots

(number of messages with the audience in the Cyrillic segment of social networks)



OK: in Russia, the most numerous campaign is the discrediting of Patriot, reports of the defeat of the system during the Kinzhalt attack on Kyiv on May 16, 2023, which are published on the network of pro-war public pages (accompanied by videos and official statements of the defense department). The authors emphasize the vulnerability of American installations and the effectiveness of "Kinzhals". The second attempt is the viral replication of Shoigu's statements. In the **Ukrainian** segment, the largest number of statements about the destruction of HIMARS installations and warehouses for storing shells to it. Especially installations in the area of Kharkiv, Mykolaiv regions and Zaporizhzhia (briefing of the Russian Ministry of Defense dated September 22, September 25 and October 30, 2022, respectively) and warehouses in Lyubimivka and Kushuhum. The campaigns launched against the Russian SM sector were duplicated in hostility to the country's regime: **Belarus, Greece, and Uzbekistan**. In **Ireland**: comments by military expert V. Dandykin about the numerous destruction of HIMARS in Ukraine are spreading, saying that the Russians have found the vulnerability of the system. V. Dandykin said this for the news agency of the movement "Revival. The Golden Age".

VK: in the Russian section, J. Buckby's reposts of the defeat of HIMARS in the Pokrovsk area are particularly noteworthy. In a commentary for the Military Review, he called this bad news for Ukraine and NATO, because no one has yet managed to eliminate HIMARS in a clash. Briefings of the Russian Ministry of Defense with reports of destroyed systems in various areas of the front are also broadcast live.

In **Ukraine**: CNN statements citing an independent representative of the US administration about the defeat of the Patriot battery by Kinzhals in Kyiv and a video of a possible hit from street cameras. The campaigns to discredit HIMARS aimed at the Russian Federation were duplicated in **Belarus, Israel, Kazakhstan, and Moldova**.

Twitter: in the **Russian** segment, there are statements by the Russian Ministry of Defense on the elimination of the HIMARS platoon in the area of Drobyshevoy in the Donetsk region in October 2022. The next largest campaign is an attack on the military academy in Lviv, where Challenger was probably located (Ria Novosti is quoted with reference to sources in the Ministry of Defense). The same campaigns were broadcast to the countries of the anti-war coalition: the **United States, Spain, Canada and Finland**. Putin's statements about the destruction of the Patriot are also noticeable. In **Ukraine**, there are statements of the Russian Ministry of Defense about the attacks on Lyubimivka and the defeat of the Patriot. In **Germany**, most of the statements of the Russian Ministry of Defense and V. Putin about the neutralization of "Patriot".

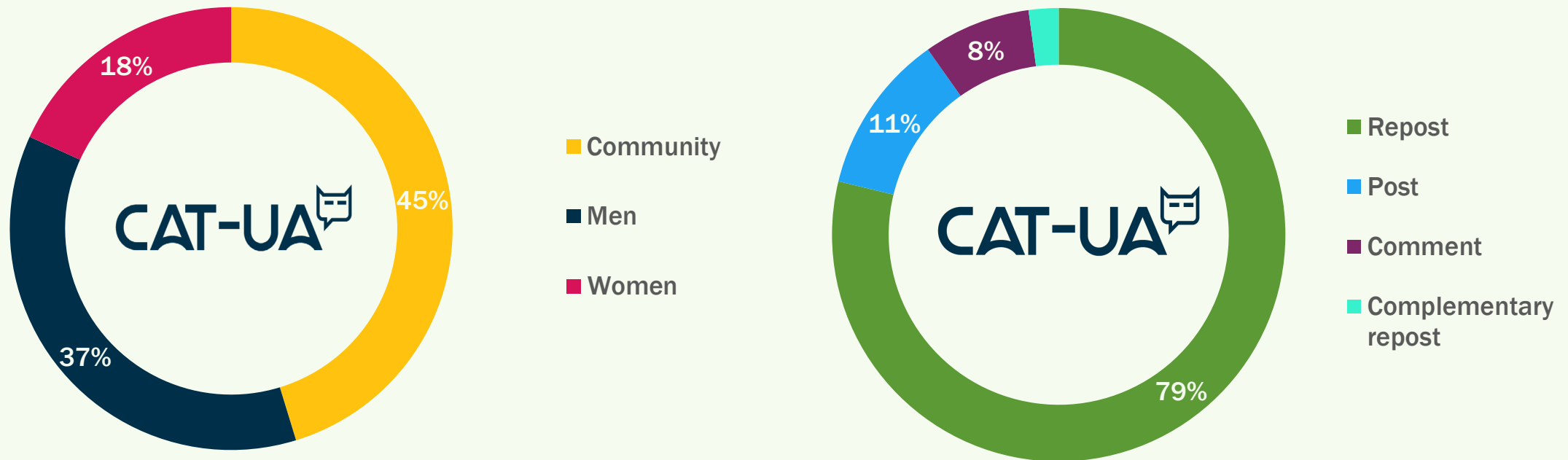
YouTube: in Ukraine, Russia and the United Kingdom: comments under the stories "ICTV", "TSN" and "RTVI", where users publish the latest reports of the Russian Ministry of Defense.

Facebook: in Russia: viral posts of the Russian Ministry of Defense about the defeat of Patriot and 22 Jul 2022 reports, where several affected HIMARS were reported.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

Significant campaigns were launched through well-known pro-war public pages on TG (Readovka, Colonelcassad, Newsach/Dvach), channels of propagandists and military correspondents (Yu.Podolyak, V.Solovyov, T.Bozhenko, A.Kots), as well as public pages of influential media (Ria Novosti, TASS, Vesti). In VK, a large part of the communities on TOT were involved, and OK.ru is characterized by the reposting of messages on "lifestyle" public pages. At the same time, the use of official channels of the Russian Ministry of Defense is noticeable. Women were equally active in all social media. On VK and Twitter, men mostly posted messages about the neutralization of "HIMARS", and on TG they laughed at the statements about the downing of "Kinzhals"

(number of posts)



DYNAMICS OF POST SHARING

Large-scale viral campaigns began with official statements from the Russian military about the defeat of equipment on the battlefield. However, they did not last long, briefly sharing the messages of influential speakers

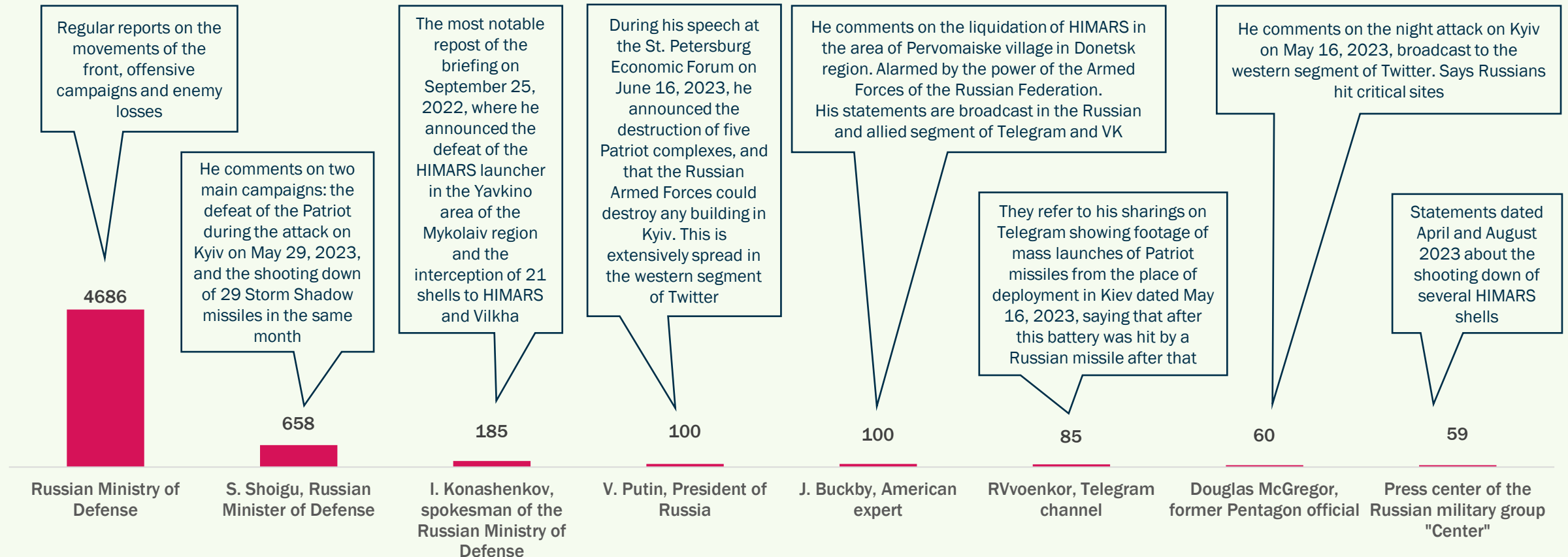
(number of messages)



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

For routine news about the course of "SMO" and the defeat of minor targets, the propaganda uses the summary of the Russian Ministry of Defense. Particularly important events, such as the defeat of Patriot or HIMARS, are personally confirmed by authoritative spokesmen (S. Shoigu, I. Konashenkov). For Western audiences, the campaign's messages are broadcast by speakers whose statements are difficult to deny (D. McGregor, V. Putin). However, rumors on social media are spread through a network of pro-war channels, mainly on Telegram (RVvoenkor)

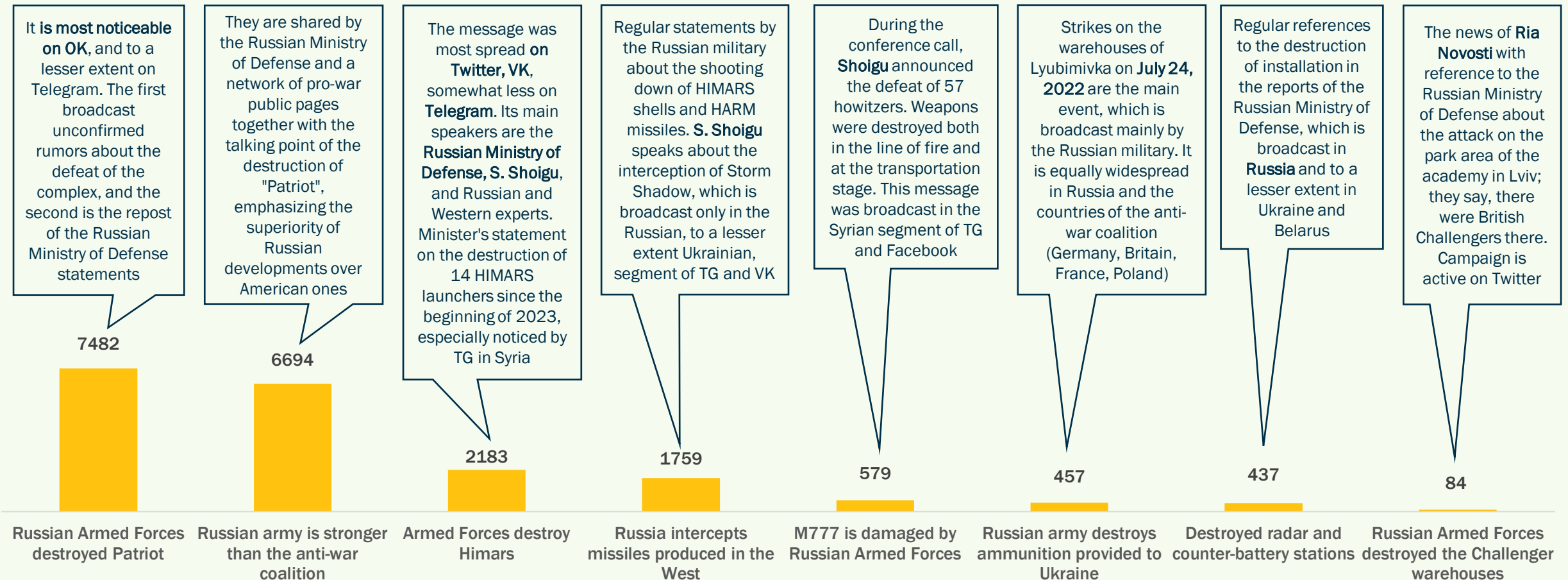
(number of messages)



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION

The main propaganda target was the "reputational" destruction of Patriot and HIMARS. It was these units that proved to be the most frightening for the Russians, and therefore the most effort was spent on the campaign to discredit them (the range of channels and speakers). At the same time, the promotion of these messages was accompanied by dithyrambs for the Russian military industry

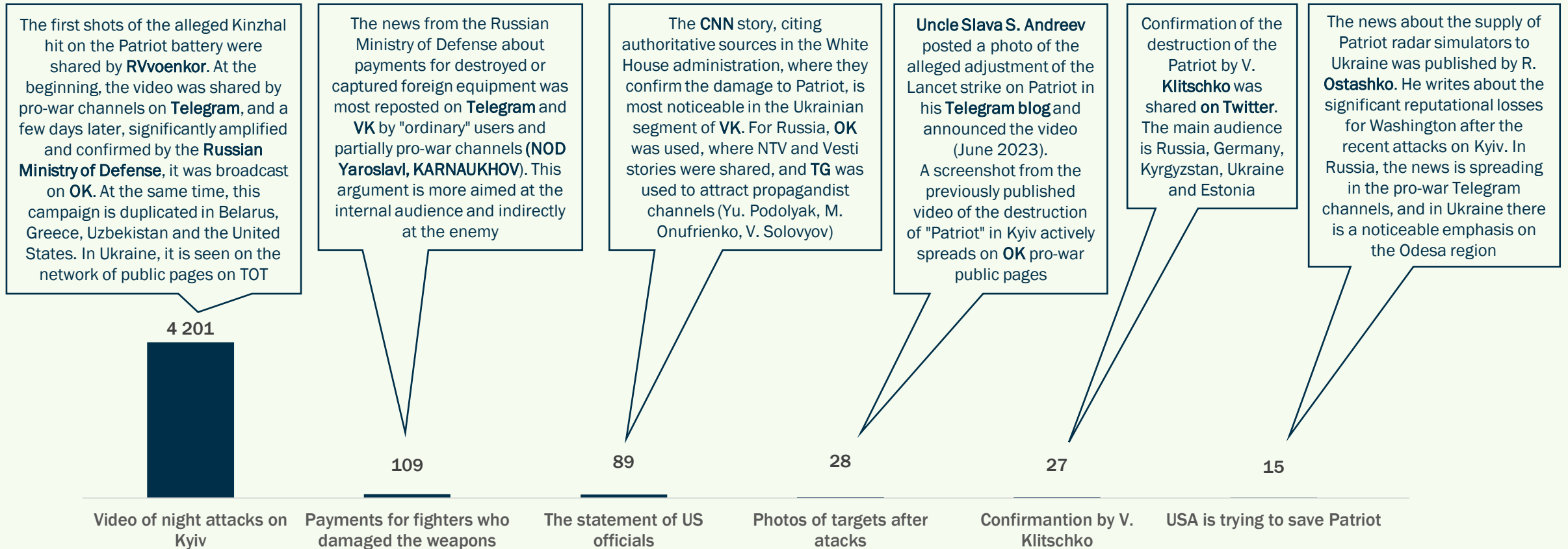
(number of messages)



KEY ARGUMENTS

The key argument of the propaganda is a video from street surveillance cameras in Kyiv, which allegedly recorded the hit of a Russian missile at Patriot. The arguments were combined depending on the audience for which they worked: for the internal audience it was the video and payments for fighters as proof that the Russian armed forces achieved the desired goal; statements of American officials were for the Ukrainian audience; for the West, they reproduced statements of V. Klitschko and a video of the defeat of equipment

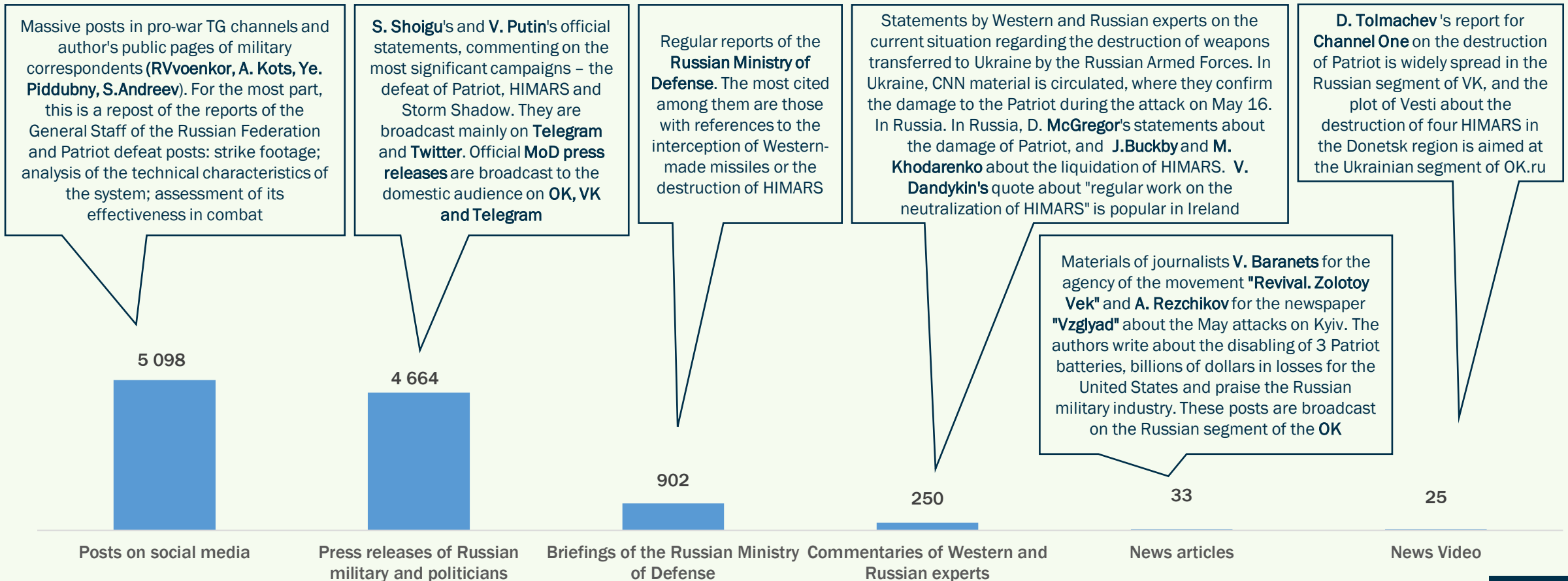
(number of messages)



KEY NEWS STORIES LAUNCHED BY THE RUSSIAN SIDE

Propagandists mostly repost routine statements of the Russian military. However, if the campaign is aimed at discrediting a special significant piece of equipment, authoritative speakers (S. Shoigu, V. Putin) are involved, and their statements are disseminated on social media

(number of messages)



KEY EMOTIONS BROADCAST BY THE AUTHORS

Joy: the basic emotion of pro-Russian social media for any mention of the facts of destruction or damage to Western-made equipment

Pride: recorded in the Russian SM segment during the campaign to discredit Patriot. These are numerous posts on the Internet, as well as statements by **S. Shoigu** and **V. Putin** about the destruction of the Patriot by a "high-precision strike of the Kinzhal hypersonic complex " and other attempts to glorify the Russian military industry

Laughter: The largest posts in terms of coverage are visible in the **Ukrainian segment** of Telegram and relate to statements about the shooting down of Russian Kinzhals. They said that the Kinzhals were really shot down but at the expense of the Patriots.

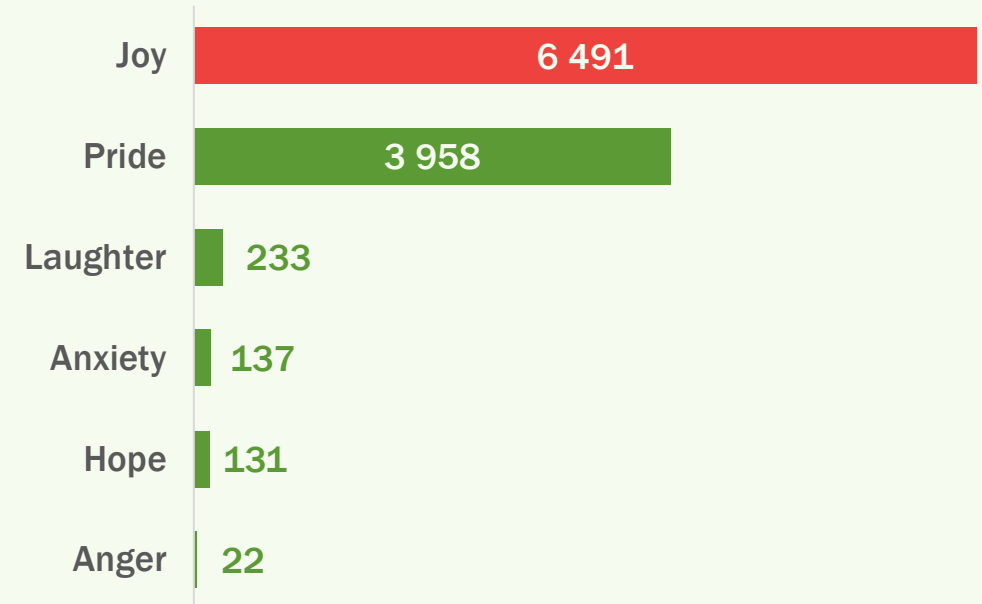
Anxiety: recorded in the Russian sector of **Telegram** and **VK** in the statements of **J.Buckby**. The authors say that the defeat of the equipment is completely unexpected and causes significant reputational damage to NATO countries.

Hope: noticeable in the posts of Russian troops on the unconfirmed facts of the defeat of "Patriot".

Anger: noticeable during the "retaliation strikes" on Odesa on May 18, 2023. At that time, propaganda reported a hit at the "Tsentrolit" plant, which housed the supplied Western equipment.

The basic mobilizing emotion of all campaigns is joy, complemented by pride in the achievements and victories of the Russian Armed Forces. Other, more specific emotions inherent in individual statements and sharing channels

(number of posts)



DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE DESTRUCTION OF WEAPONS PROVIDED TO UKRAINE BY PARTNERS

Strategy for building an information campaign

The campaign to discredit the American weapons was primarily the task of the Ministry of Defense, but sometimes "higher forces", including President Vladimir Putin, joined its communication vertical, and their statements were already replicated through more familiar channels.

The typical campaign looked like this: the first reports about the destroyed unit of equipment appeared in the network of Russian pro-war telegram channels: unconfirmed information was first "leaked" to such unofficial resources. This communication channel aroused interest in the next briefing of the Russian Defense Ministry, where such information was usually confirmed. And the results of these briefings were further popularized by the media close to the Ministry of Defense, as well as by a network of bot farms. It is worth noting the role of the so-called liberal Russian media, which tried to maintain a balance of opinions, but even more often broadcast the Russian position.

If it was a particularly image-building achievement, it was additionally commented by S. Shoigu, and in an exceptional case - by V. Putin. In addition, if possible, Western speakers were involved, whose opinions were disseminated to both domestic and foreign audiences, for whom the statements of "friends" should appear more authoritative - their statements were disseminated via Twitter. In fact, the attention paid to various names of devices is proportional to their promotion.

Evidence of such campaigns was very rare: it was mostly limited to unsubstantiated statements by MoD officials. However, when something could be presented as evidence, it was cited, such as the video of the destruction of buildings that presumably housed the equipment. Top speakers tended to give amplified messages.

5

DISINFORMATION ON THE
RESALE OF WEAPONS
PROVIDED TO UKRAINE BY
PARTNERS

DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE RESALE OF WEAPONS PROVIDED TO UKRAINE BY PARTNERS

General Topic Description

The time interval of the analyzed period: March 1, 2022 – August 31, 2023.

The first attempts of Russian propaganda to spread the narrative about the active resale of weapons from Ukraine did not have any noticeable success before April 2022. The authors referred to anonymous sources or did not cite them at all - for example, in the report on the company "Techimpex", which allegedly resold weapons in the form of "surplus" to Africa on behalf of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine. In April, this message appeared in the video blog of the opposition Russian Y. Shvets, who joined the broadcast of accusations in the wake of active attention to this issue thanks to the statements of EU officials and law enforcement officers from Ukraine's neighbors: the creation of an anti-smuggling center in Moldova, statements about arms smuggling, and then their refutation in July 2022. Similar rhetoric was spread by the American congresswoman V. Spartz, whose quotes were noticed in the Russian opposition and pro-Ukrainian segment.

After a wave of mentions related to the statements of the EU, Europol and other institutions, mentions of arms smuggling were rare and contained practically no unique messages. External circumstances changed from time to time, and the accusations that had been made earlier were periodically recalled. They were repeated from time to time by Russian diplomats at UN Security Council meetings convened on the initiative of the Russian side in September and December 2022 and April 2023. Depending on the situation, other foreign official speakers joined in: for example, Wang Wenbin reacted to the US statements about China's involvement in the supply of lethal weapons to Russia by saying that the US was provoking global instability through smuggling by supplying weapons to Ukraine. They tried to see the weapons received from Ukraine in the Mexican cartels, when they supposedly boasted about the "Javelins", although they were AT4 anti-tank grenade launchers, as well as in darknet ads.

In general, the topic had a strong international political context. In fact, Russian speakers were mostly reactive in their statements, while key messages were broadcast with reference to non-Russians. There is another communicative technique, i.e. "reference to authorities" from the collective West. Although the artificial amplification of Russian speakers is noticeable in bot attacks: R. Kadyrov, V. Nebenzia.

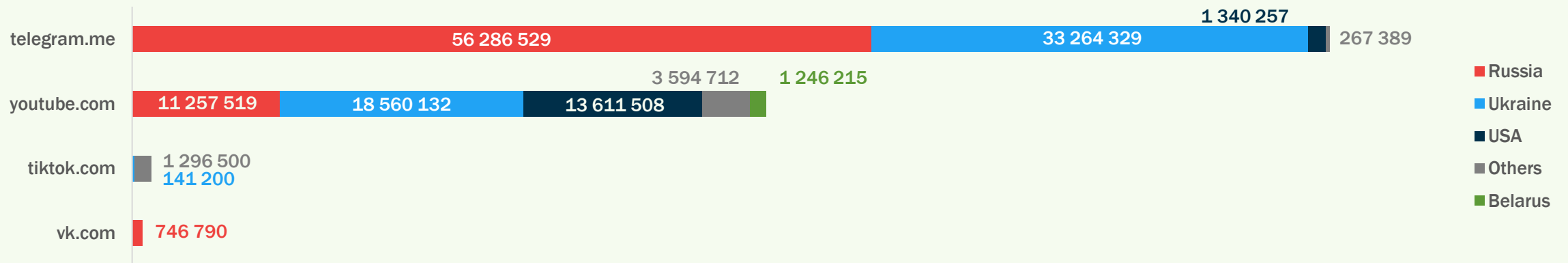
5.1.

MOST POPULAR POSTS
(MOSTLY OPINION LEADERS
AND WELL-KNOWN MEDIA)

DISTRIBUTION OF ATTENTION BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION CHANNEL AND POST GEOGRAPHY

The Russian audience is indoctrinated with messages on this topic via Telegram, and there is also a strong coverage of pro-Russian TG channels working for the unoccupied part of Ukraine. But "opinion leaders" from abroad are more inclined to use Western platforms (such as the formally pro-Ukrainian Y. Shvets on YouTube)

(number of contacts with the audience in the Cyrillic segment of social media)



Telegram: in Russia, it is used by propagandists, mainly military bloggers (**B. Rozhin, V. Solovyov, O. Kotz, Yu. Kotenok, R. Ostashko**), for the coordinated dissemination of basic statements about arms smuggling from Ukraine, getting it into the hands of terrorists in different countries: Mexico and Syria in particular. They often rely on the statements of Western speakers or institutions (**Europol**), using this as a reason for trust, and purely Russian speakers (**M. Zakharova, V. Nebenzia**) relay them. In Ukraine, this agenda is promoted by anonymous telegram channels (**Resident, Legitimny, Gossip Girl**, etc.), which have a large audience and number of subscribers. **USA** – their blogger expat "**Sanya in Florida**" joins the broadcast of narratives inspired by the Russians.

YouTube: Russian news aggregators create digests on anonymous channels (sometimes this is the retransmission of news from Russian TV channels whose accounts are blocked on YT).

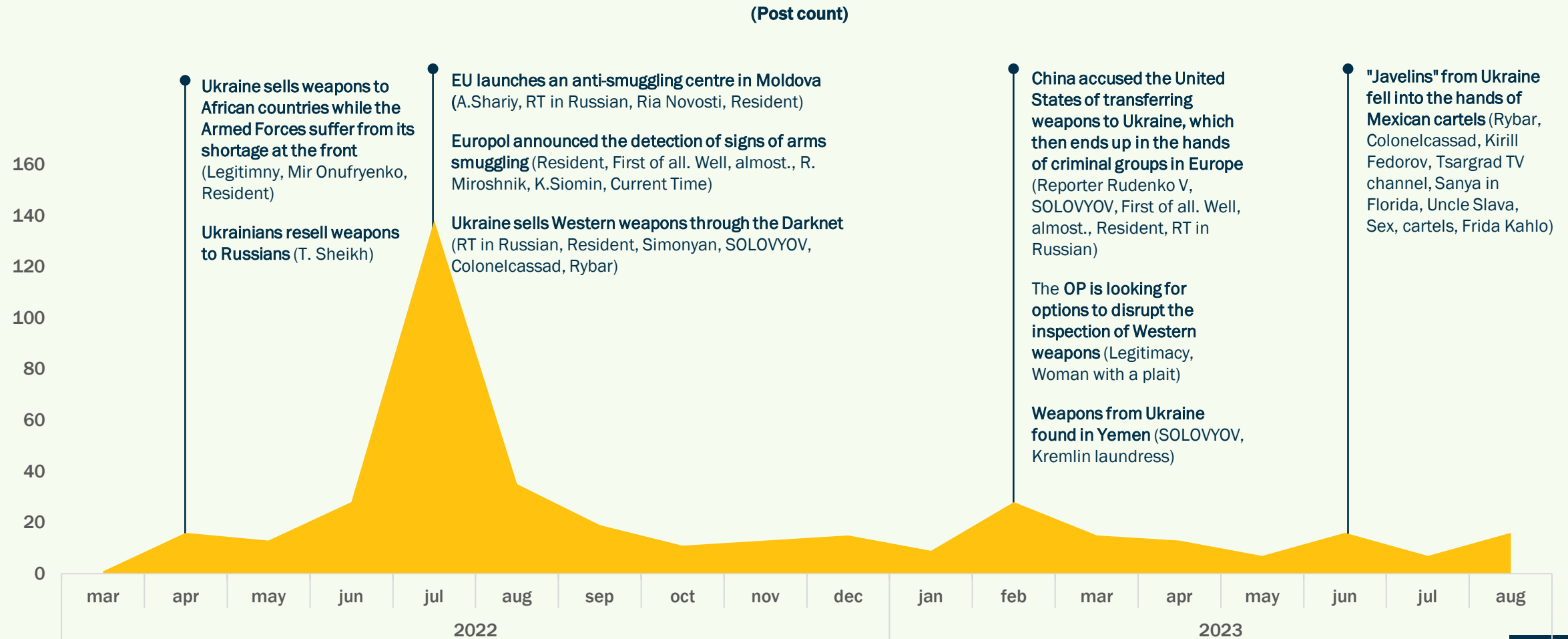
Separately, some "eminent" video bloggers join (**N. Mikhalkov** and his video blog "**Besogon TV**", on which conspiracy theories are regularly shared). **Ukraine:** most of the coverage is formed by several pro-Russian bloggers (**M. Dulskiy, Ye. Myslyvets**, etc.). **USA:** **Yu. Shvets** spreads criticism of the Ukrainian authorities for the resale of weapons, and complements it with his considerations. **Belarusian** resources include YouTube channels of the state TV of BELARUS (**ATN: news of Belarus and the world, ONT TV channel**), inviting Russian experts.

TikTok: short cuts from Russian TV (**Channel One, REN TV**) from users from **Germany, Turkey** and **Ukraine**.

VK: posts about the resale of weapons (for example, to Mexico) only on public pages from **Russia** (like **Tsargrad TV channel**, owned by the "Orthodox" oligarch **K. Malofeev**).

DYNAMICS OF POST SHARING

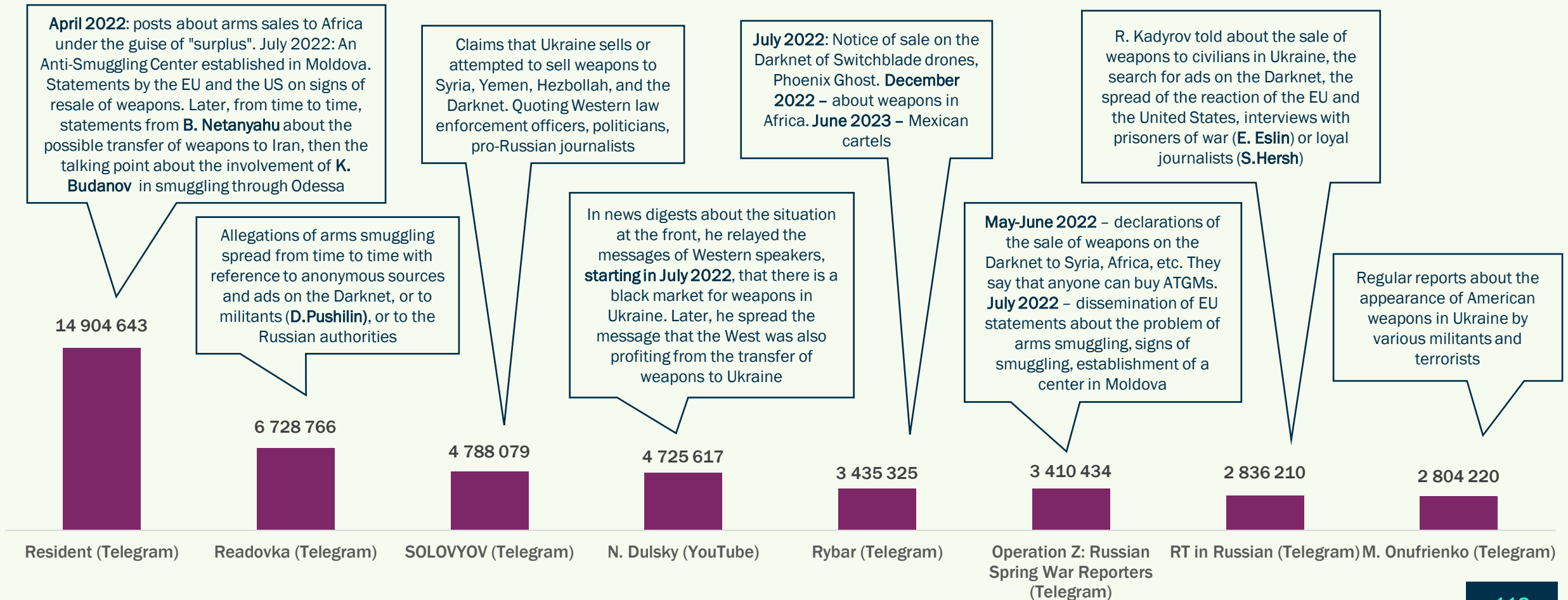
The strongest reinforcement on the issue of arms smuggling took place in July 2022. The Russians referred to the statements of EU law-enforcement officials (however, after the EU's refutation, the issue was dropped). The following peaks of attention were not too noticeable - except for a slight revival, which chronologically coincided with the corruption scandal in the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (January-February 2023)



KEY CONTENT CREATORS

One group of authors (Resident, V. Solovyov, M. Dulsky, RT in Russian) relies more on the statements of Western speakers to justify the narrative of arms smuggling, while the other (Readovka, Rybar, etc.) relies on anonymous sources and Russians

(number of contacts with the audience; authors' communication channels in SM are in brackets)



MAIN GROUPS OF POST SPEAKERS

Western law enforcement officers: officials and spokespersons of Europol, other international or national institutions of Poland, Britain, Finland, etc.

Western politician/diplomat: most often – congresswoman **V. Spartz** with statements about Syria and Mexico. It is quoted even by liberal/opposition Russian resources (**Present time, M. Solonin**).

Western military: retired officers/generals loyal to the Russian Federation (**S. Ritter, D. McGregor**) or military who defected to the Russian side or surrendered (**J. McIntyre, E. Eslin**).

Foreign expert/journalist: mostly American journalist **S. Hersh**, who promoted the talking point not only about weapons on the black market, but also, for example, about the US involvement in the explosions at the Nord Streams.

Politician of the Global South: Chinese diplomat **W. Wenbin** with statements about the risks of weapons falling into the hands of bandits in different countries; **B. Netanyahu** with statements about the risk of weapons falling into the hands of HAMAS.

Representative of the international organization: **A. Guterres** in the context of the agreements on the "grain agreement" promised not to use the ports of Ukraine for arms smuggling.

Russian politicians/diplomats: the focus of attention is on **V. Nebenzia**, who at the UN Security Council meetings convened by Russia stated the threat of proliferation of weapons around the world. Also **R. Kadyrov**, who stated that Ukrainians sell weapons to their enemy right on the battlefield.

Most often, accusations against Ukraine are attributed to Western law enforcement officers, politicians, diplomats, and retired military personnel. Russian speakers mostly take up the topic

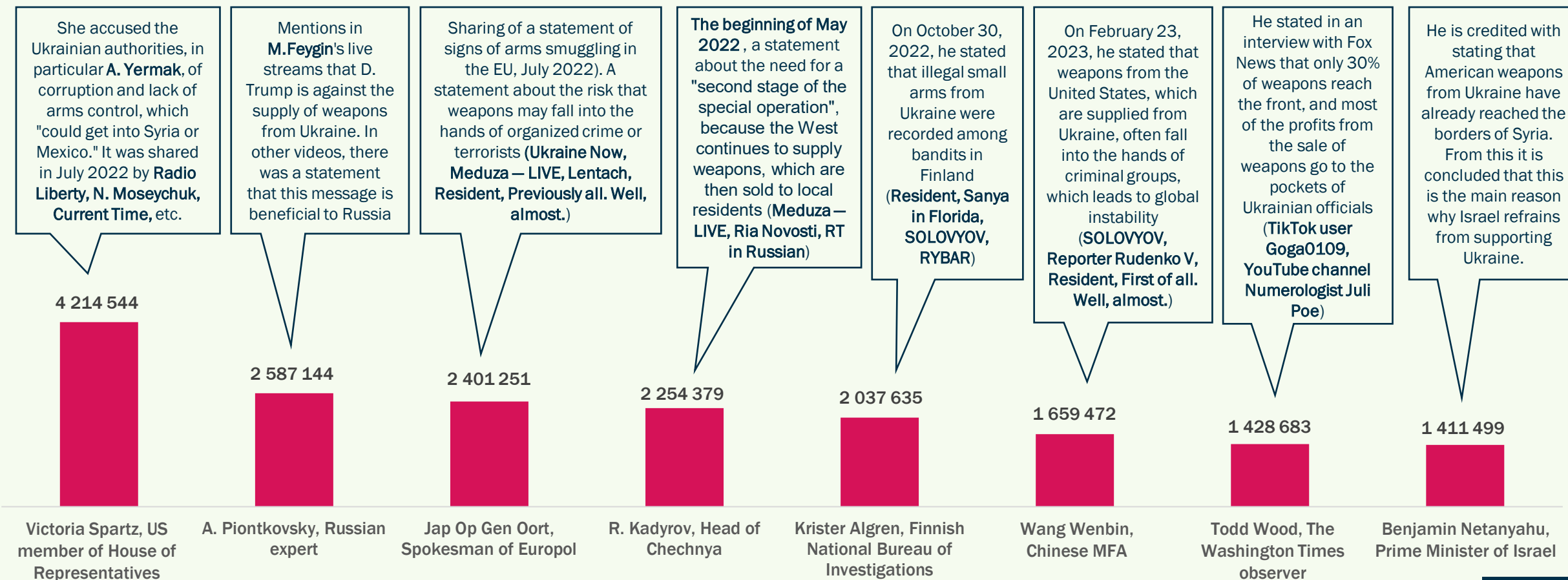
(number of contacts with the audience)



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

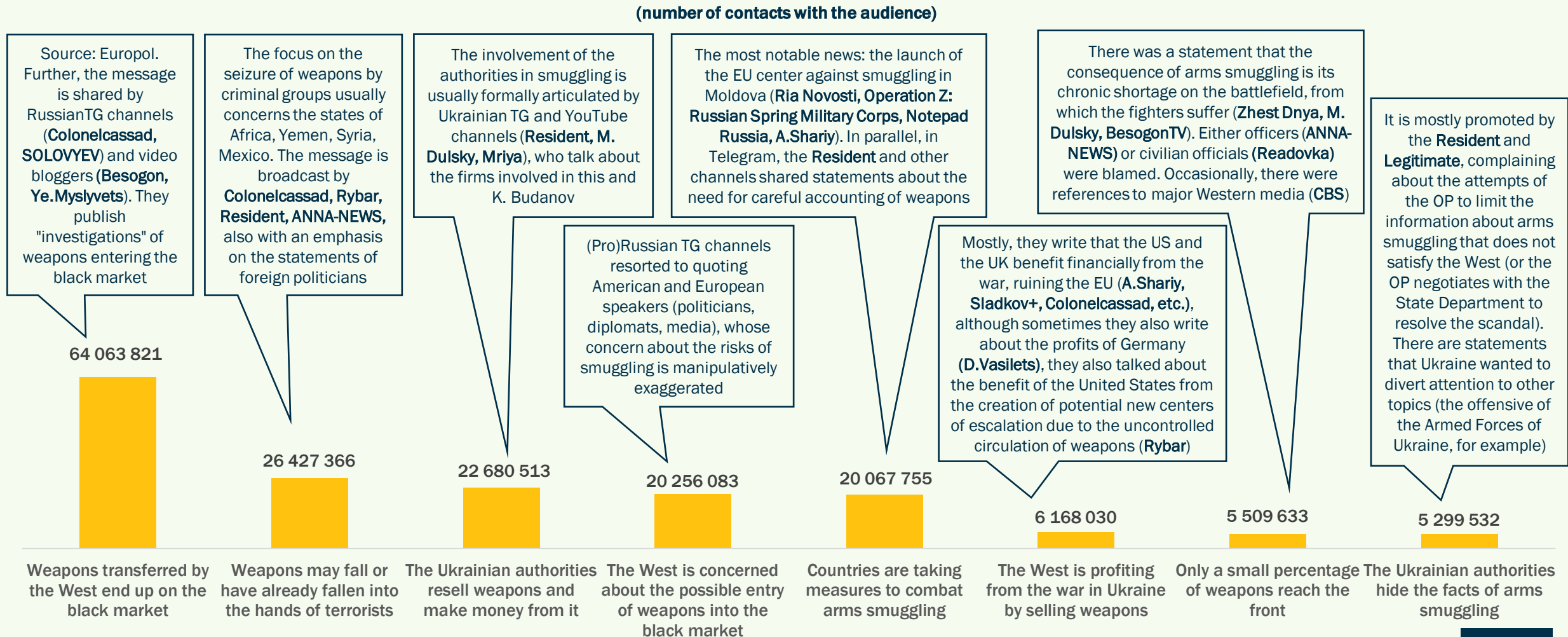
The narrative about arms smuggling successfully penetrated the Ukrainian patriotic information space thanks to the statements of V. Spartz, A. Piontkovsky and other similar speakers. Other speakers did not go beyond the Russian and pro-Russian information space

(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION

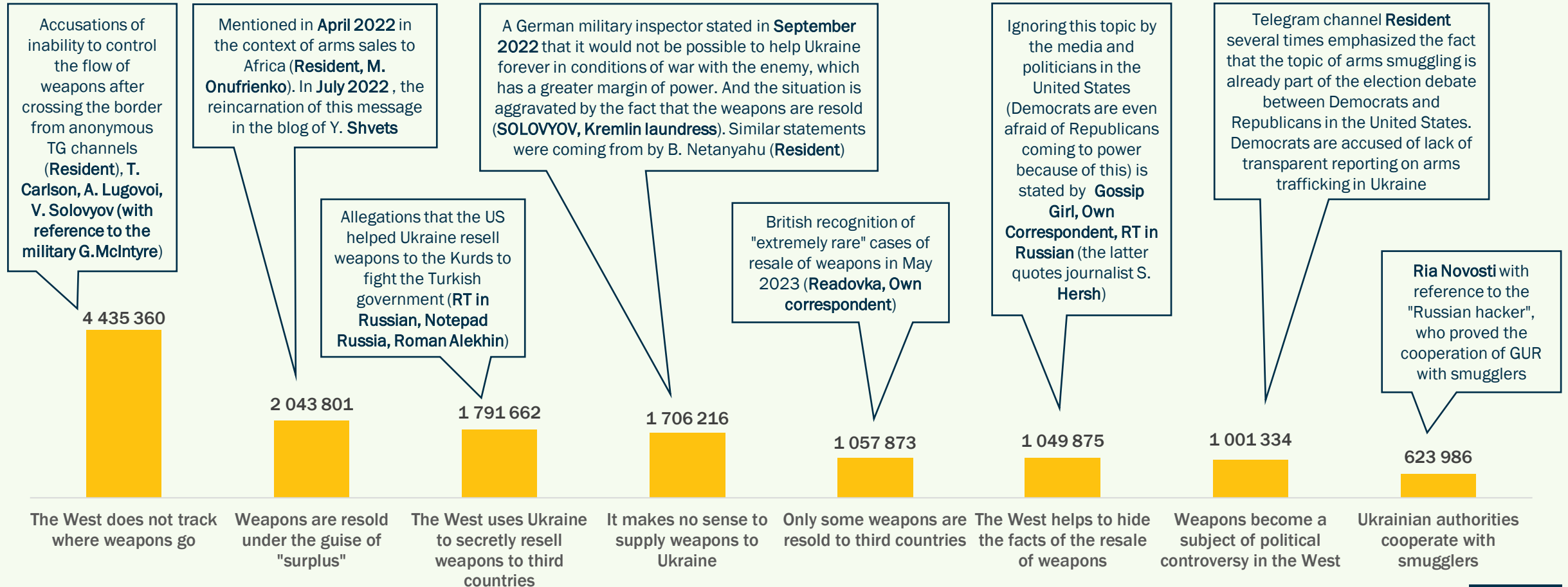
Separate messages for Ukrainian, Western, and Russian audiences are highly visible. The resale as an alleged fait accompli coexisted in the information space with the concern that the weapons could end up on the black market (but not necessarily yet). Formally, Ukrainian authors always emphasize that the Ukrainian authorities are involved in all these problems



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

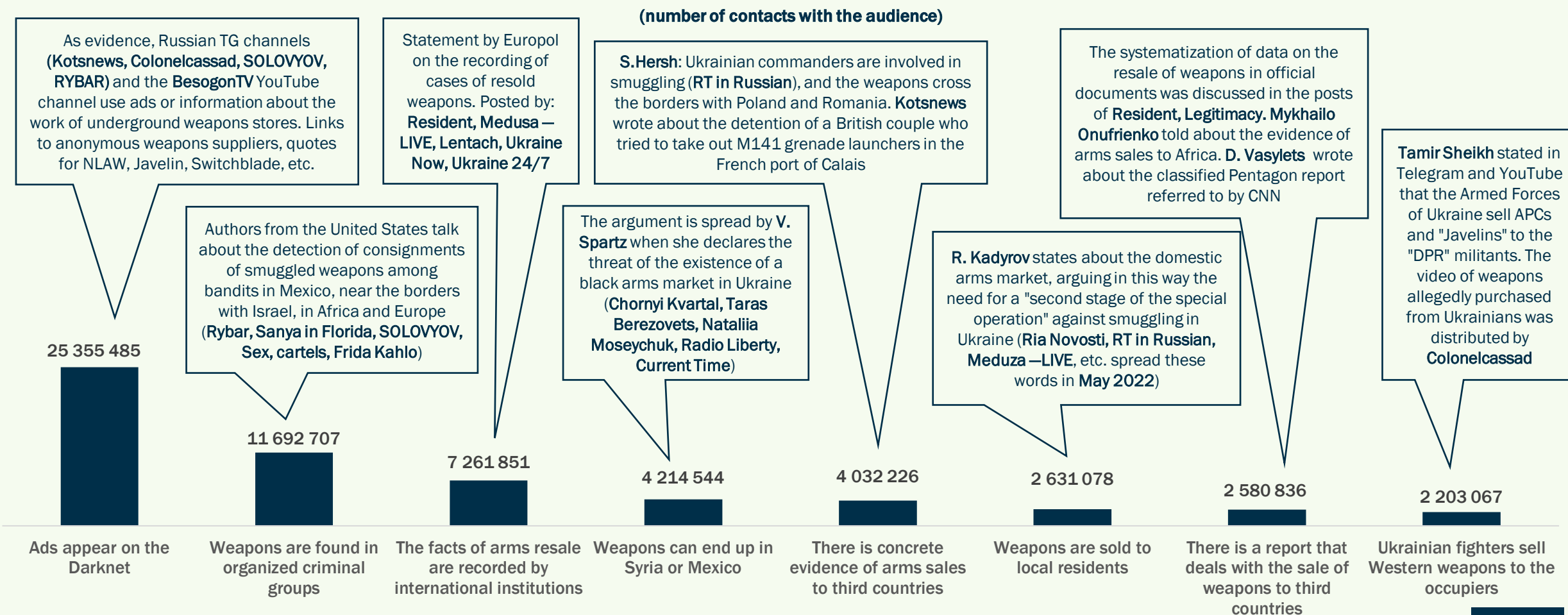
Background messages are mainly about silencing the problem of arms smuggling. If the Ukrainian authorities become the subject of hiding the truth in formally Ukrainian Telegram channels such as "Resident", then the West appears more often in Russian channels, and Ukraine does not even have agency

(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY ARGUMENTS

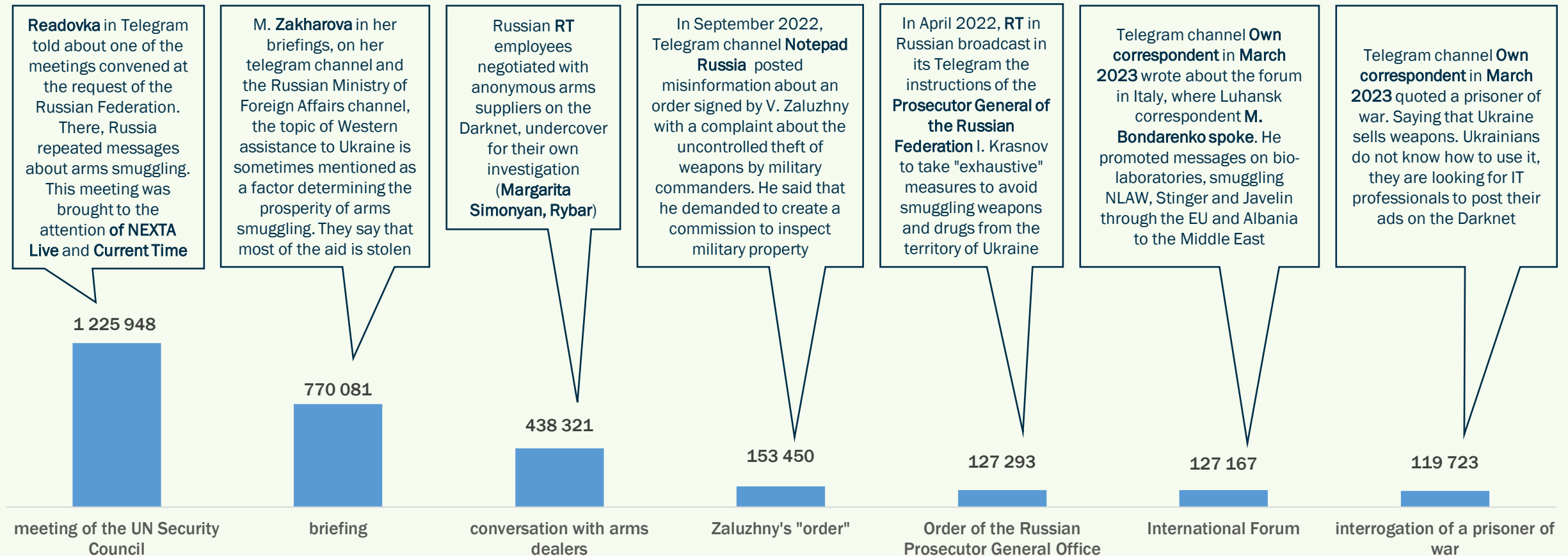
The most popular argument to confirm the facts of arms smuggling is the placement of ads in the "dark" segment of the Internet, which is not indexed. Instead, documentary evidence of resale is not as often used by the propaganda. Often, the arguments to confirm the main messages are speculative. There are also accusations that Ukraine secretly sells Western weapons even to Russians (despite the West's sensitivity to the problem of declassification of its technologies)



KEY NEWS STORIES LAUNCHED BY THE RUSSIAN SIDE

Because the talking points about arms smuggling were more likely to be spread by reference to Darknet ads or statements by foreign politicians, the news stories organized directly by Russia were not very prominent. The most notable news - the UN Security Council convened by the Russians - was reactive, not proactive

(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY EMOTIONS BROADCAST BY THE AUTHORS

Anger: the Ukrainian authorities resell weapons to other countries whilst they are lacking them at the front in Ukraine (**Resident, Legitimate, Mykhail Onufrienko's World**); **R.Kadyrov's** calls to stop "world chaos and disorder" due to smuggling (RT in Russian, **Zhest Belgorod, Ria Novosti**); the West pumps the "Kiev regime" with weapons that are uncontrollably stolen (**Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova**); corruption flourishes in the Ukrainian Armed Forces (**SOLOVIEV, Andrey LUGOVOY**). State Duma – dissemination of statements by **J. McIntyre**).

Anxiety: the OP is concerned about publicity of arms smuggling (**Resident**), as well as the West (USA, EU) is concerned about the risks of getting the arms by bandits, terrorists (**Resident, Inotv, MediaKiller, RT in Russian**), Mexican cartels (**Ostashko! Important**)

Outrage: officials, despite the fact that the front needs weapons, sell them abroad (**Readovka**), V. Zaluzhny demands checks against this background (Notepad Russia), dissatisfaction with the reaction of the authorities – O. Reznikov, A. Yermak – about accusations of smuggling (**Yu.Shvets**).

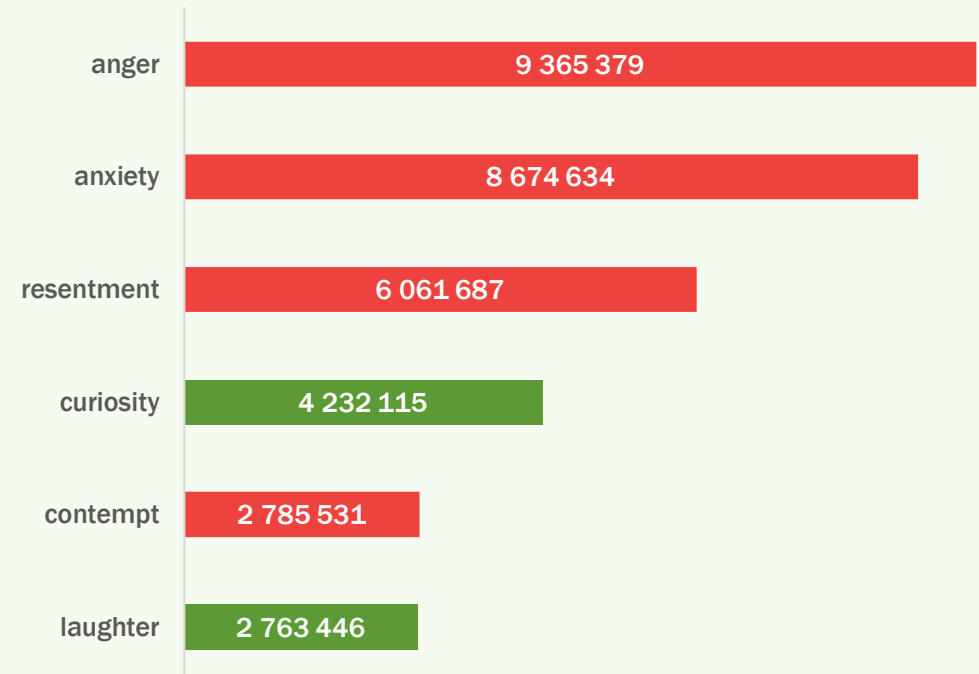
Curiosity: disclosure of secret schemes for the resale of weapons on the Darknet (**Gossip Girl, Rybar, Resident, MargaritaSimonyan**), the OP develops various scenarios for distracting the West from scandals (**Legitimate, Woman with plait**).

Disrespect: to the head of the "clown's office" for selling weapons on the black market (**OperationZ: RussianSpring War Reporters**); to the "defenders", who are engaged in commerce instead of protecting the country (ibid.) and who will not be helped endlessly (**SOLOVYOV, Kremlin laundress**).

Laughter: about sellers of weapons for Mexicans – they say, a gift is also offered ("coke from Zelia") (**Uncle Slava, Sanya in Florida**); about the military, who complain about a difficult situation: they say that all the weapons have already been sold on the Darknet (**Zhest Dnya**); "blasphemous" trade in "holy" Javelins (**Kotsnews**).

One of the key emotions (along with basic anger) was fear - due to quite noticeable rhetoric about the concern of various parties about the problem of lack of arms control, the risks of them falling into the hands of terrorists and organized crime. However, the majority of messages are unemotional (reporting on the recorded resale of weapons)

(number of contacts with the audience)



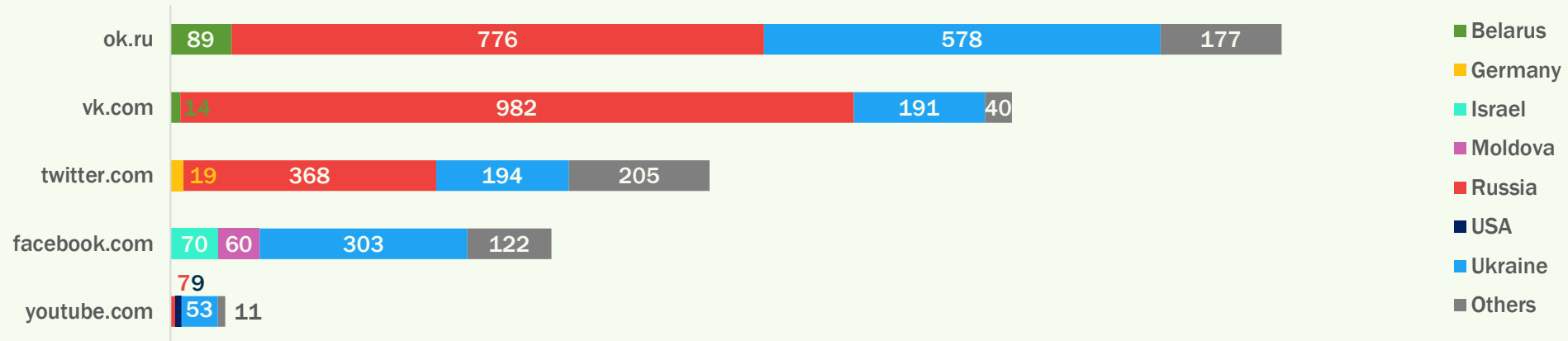
5.2.

VIRAL POSTS AND BOT ATTACKS

DISTRIBUTION OF ATTENTION BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION CHANNEL AND POST GEOGRAPHY

The main area of bot attacks and virus sharing by Russian users is Russian social media (VK, OK). Twitter is popular for bot attacks in two Russian capitals (Moscow and St. Petersburg). However, Western social media in general are more often used for influence abroad (Russian enclaves such as PMR or diaspora environments)

(number of messages in the Cyrillic segment of social networks)



OK: in the Russian Federation, messages about the resale of weapons are spread by various thematic groups and are not related to politics (fitness, football, gardening, design, fashion, manicure, knitting, etc.). In the group "Beautiful Hostess: Home, Comfort, Love", for example, there was a message, "whether the help of the West will turn against them". Another type of repeaters is the accounts of pro-government Russian media (Ria Novosti, LIFE.ru, Kommersant, RT in Russian), and urban communities. Users from **Ukraine** amplify the statements of pro-Russian expats (Prime Minister **M.Azarov**, journalist **V.Skachko**) along with the messages of European officials and "insiders" of the military. The main places of publication are pro-Russian communities (**Novorossiia and World News, Political Matryoshka, Slavyane ... Against fascism !!!**). In **Belarus**, anti-Polish accusations are noticeable, user posts from this country often appear in groups of like-minded people from Germany and the Baltic countries.

VK: in the Russian Federation, there are two types of message broadcasters: ordinary users from Moscow, Voronezh, Kemerovo, etc., and hurray-patriotic **Z-communities (Russian Front / Anti-Maidan)**. However, individual users dominate. They repost news from Telegram channels or public pages in the

VK. Ukraine: the activity of communities of collaborators prevails. Single individual users are registered in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

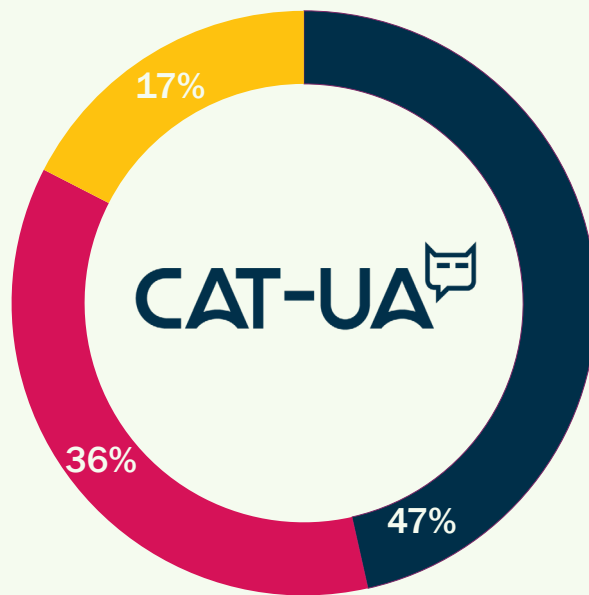
Twitter: Russian Federation – retweets of news about ads on the Darknet, Europol's statements about signs of smuggling. Dominated by users from Moscow and St. Petersburg. **Ukraine** – users from Kyiv, Odesa region, Donetsk, Sevastopol, Kharkiv disseminate V. Nebenzia's statements on arms smuggling and corruption in the Ukrainian government.

Facebook: Ukraine – sharing of Europol statements under the heading "Skotynyaky...". It is often recorded in groups supporting P. **Poroshenko**, and not only on the pages of individuals. Clickbait: "If this is confirmed, we will immediately stop any help to you!". **Moldova:** Transnistrian groups (mostly Tiraspol as geolocation) spread the statement of Moldovan Prime Minister N. **Gavrilita** about smuggling as a fait accompli. **Israel:** the activity of the bot "**Zhenya Star**" from Ashdod, which disseminated an article about weapons sales schemes on the Darknet.

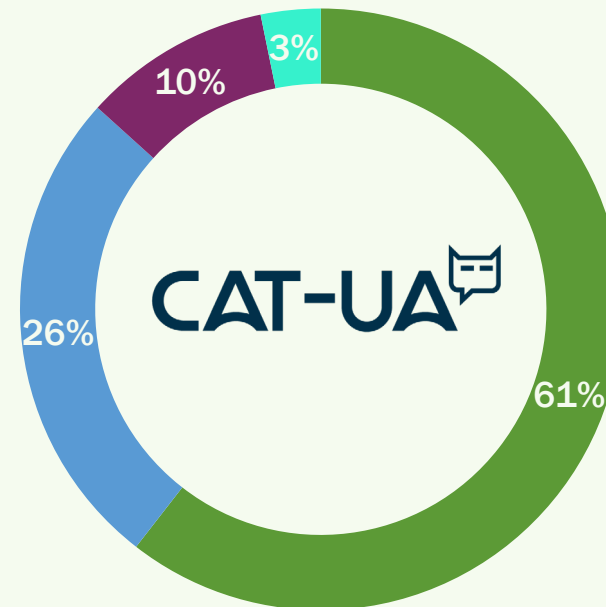
DEMOGRAPHICS AND TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

Authors of viral or bot shares occurred mainly on OK, and these were resources without political orientation (My Dacha Corner, Nogotochki, School of Repair, etc.). Women repost emotional "betrayals" ("what did we do, why did we sell weapons?") in the Ukrainian segment of Facebook, they resort to spreading messages in chats to look for escort girls (Telegram), repost news headlines in VK posts. Men are three times more active in posting - this content format is inherent to authors interested in politics in OK, individual bots (Israeli Zhenya Star on Facebook), and individual VK users are also involved. At the same level as women, they repost news on different social media (in about the same proportions) and leave comments with about the same content on VK

(number of messages, in percent)



■ Men
■ Women
■ Community

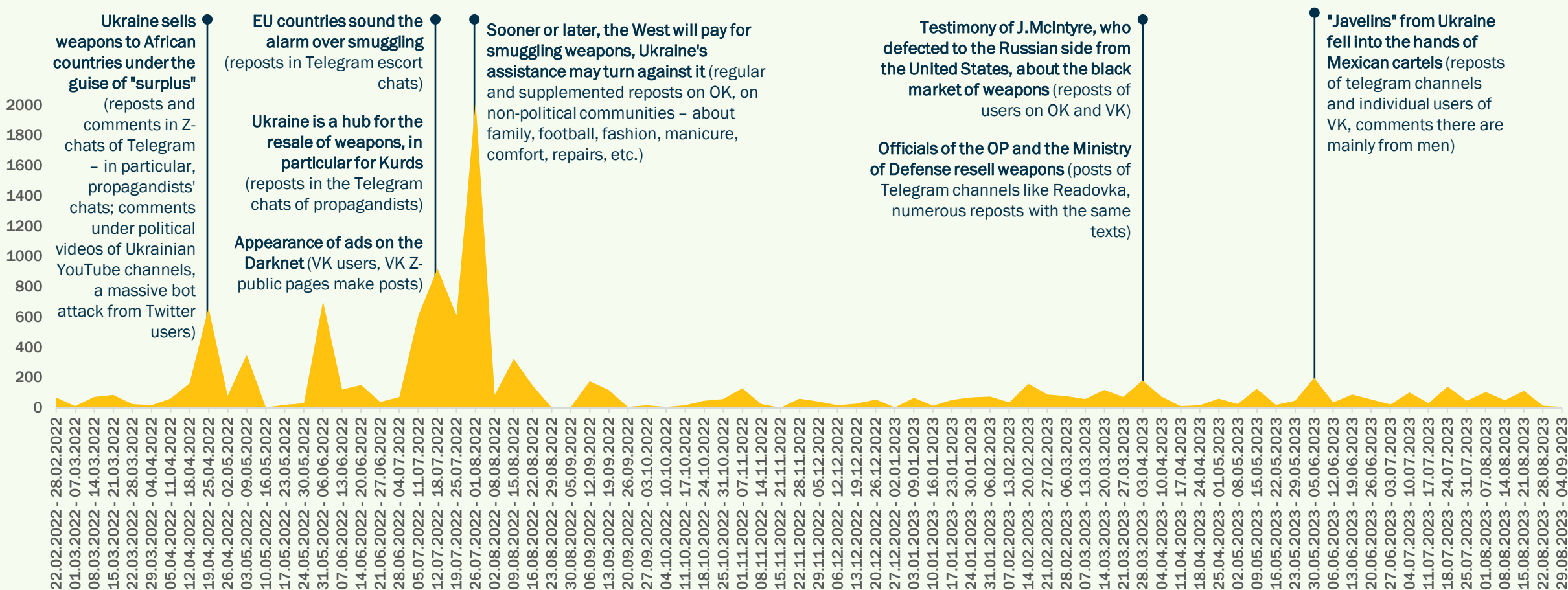


■ Repost
■ Post
■ Comment
■ Complementary repost

DYNAMICS OF POST SHARING

The peak of sharing occurred in late July - early August 2022 on OK, when numerous groups (mostly non-political content) were filled with the same type of reposts about arms smuggling. After that, bot activity began to decline, with occasional spikes in attention due to individual news hooks, but much less than in the spring of 2022

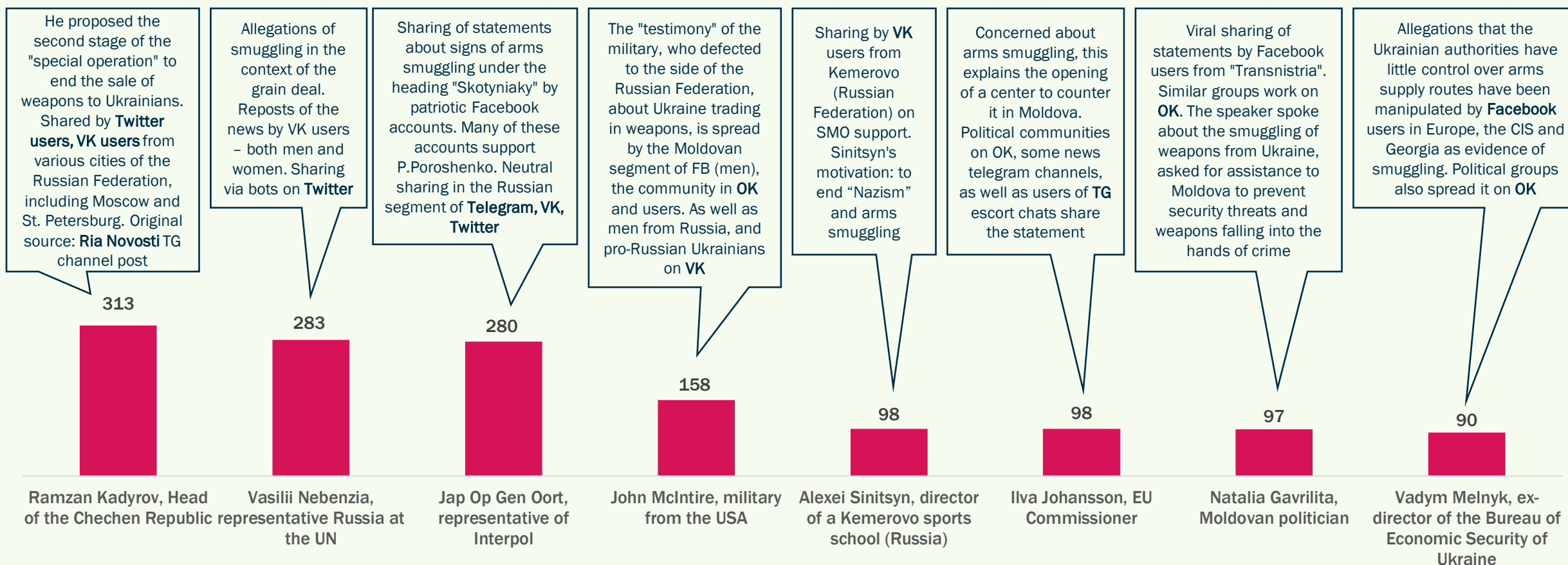
(number of posts)



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Disinformation channels prefer very different spokespersons, and often do not use them at all. Sometimes it is geographically linked: for example, users from Transnistria spread statements about smuggling from Moldovan politician N.Gavrilita, and users from Russian Kemerovo post similar messages from their compatriot, an ordinary director of a sports school

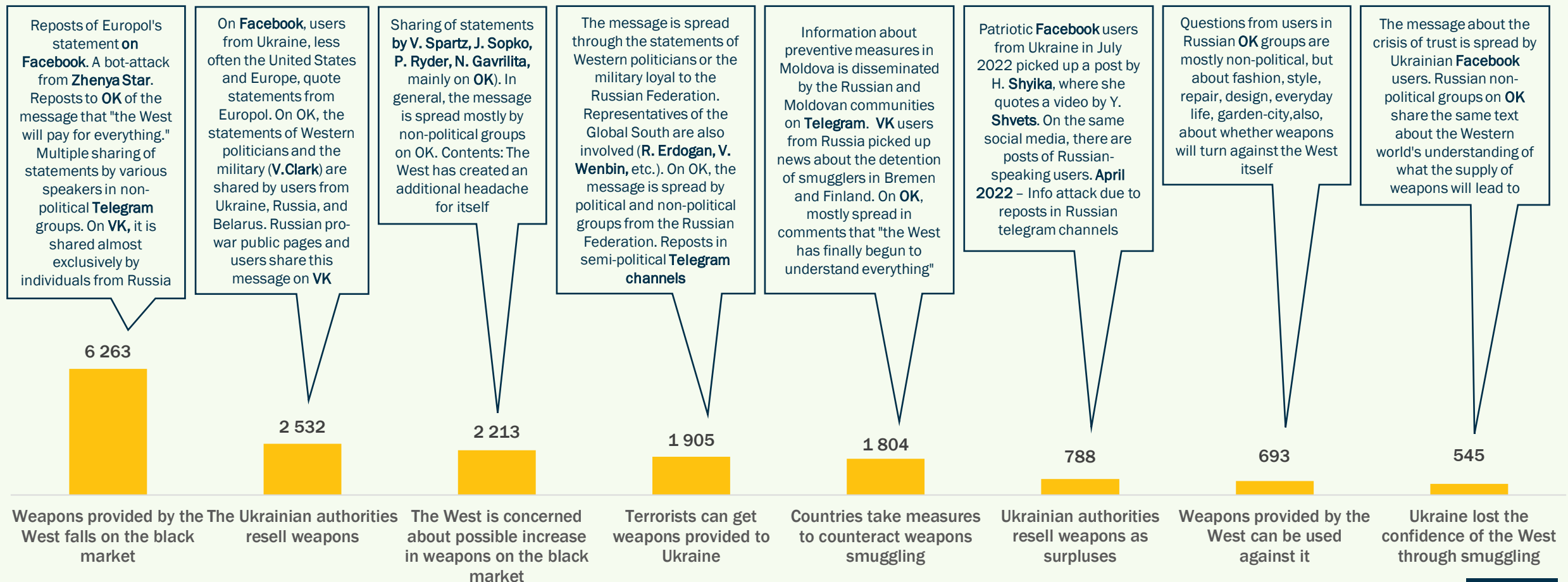
(number of posts)



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION

The vast majority of authors and participants in bot attacks agree on the "statement" of weapons going from Ukraine to the black market. There is also a widespread belief that the Ukrainian authorities directly benefit from the resale of weapons. At the same time, the West appears to be both a naive victim of Ukrainian smuggling and a party concerned about the scale of the problem

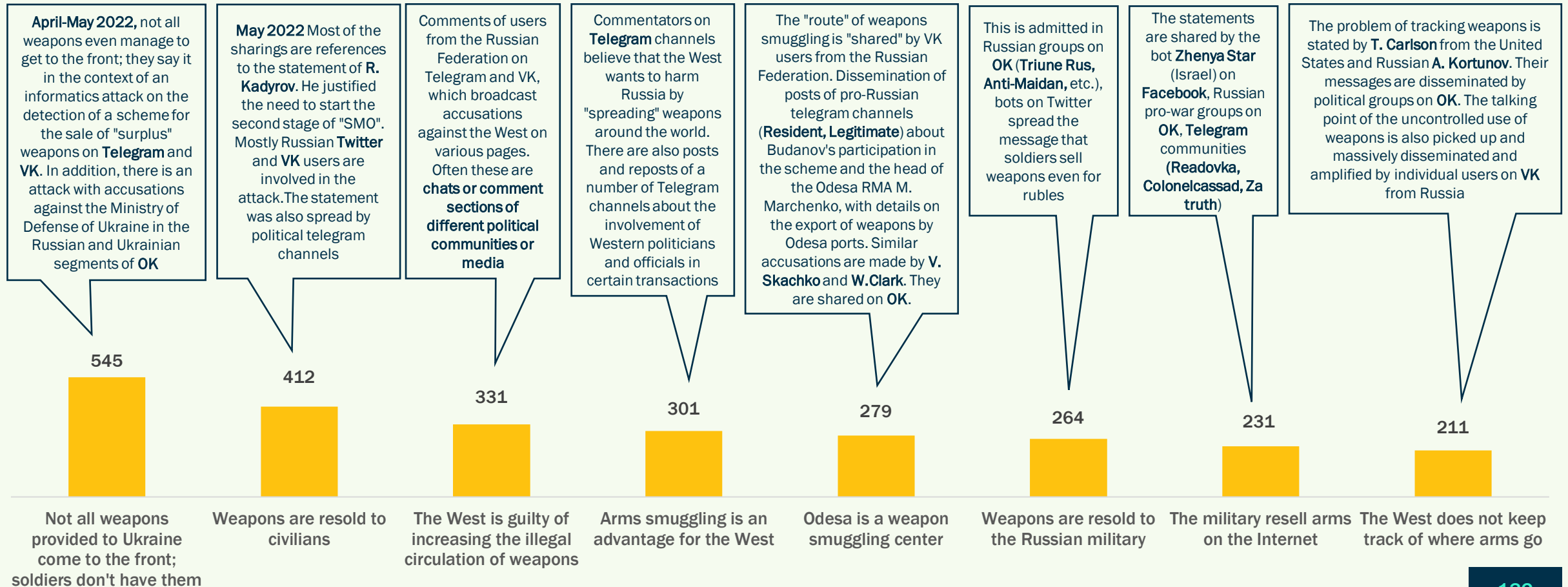
(number of posts)



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

Secondary messages are more clearly linked to specific cyberattacks and statements. Accusations at this level often concern specific individuals or institutions - even K. Budanov (a native of the Odessa region) was accused of participating in the scheme of reselling weapons through Odessa, not to mention the Ministry of Defense, to which the Military Intelligence Service is subordinate

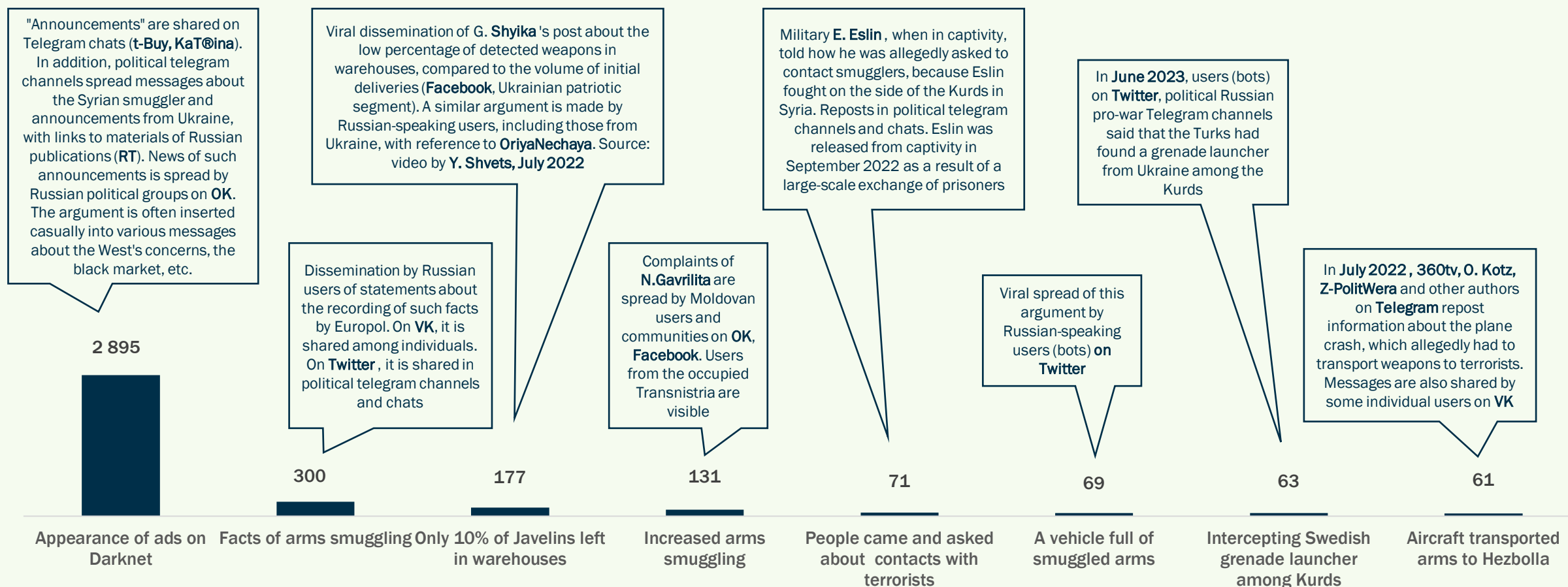
(number of posts)



KEY ARGUMENTS

The absolute leader in frequency of sharing is evidence of Ukraine's involvement in weapons resale through a link to ads on the darknet. More specific and event-related arguments follow

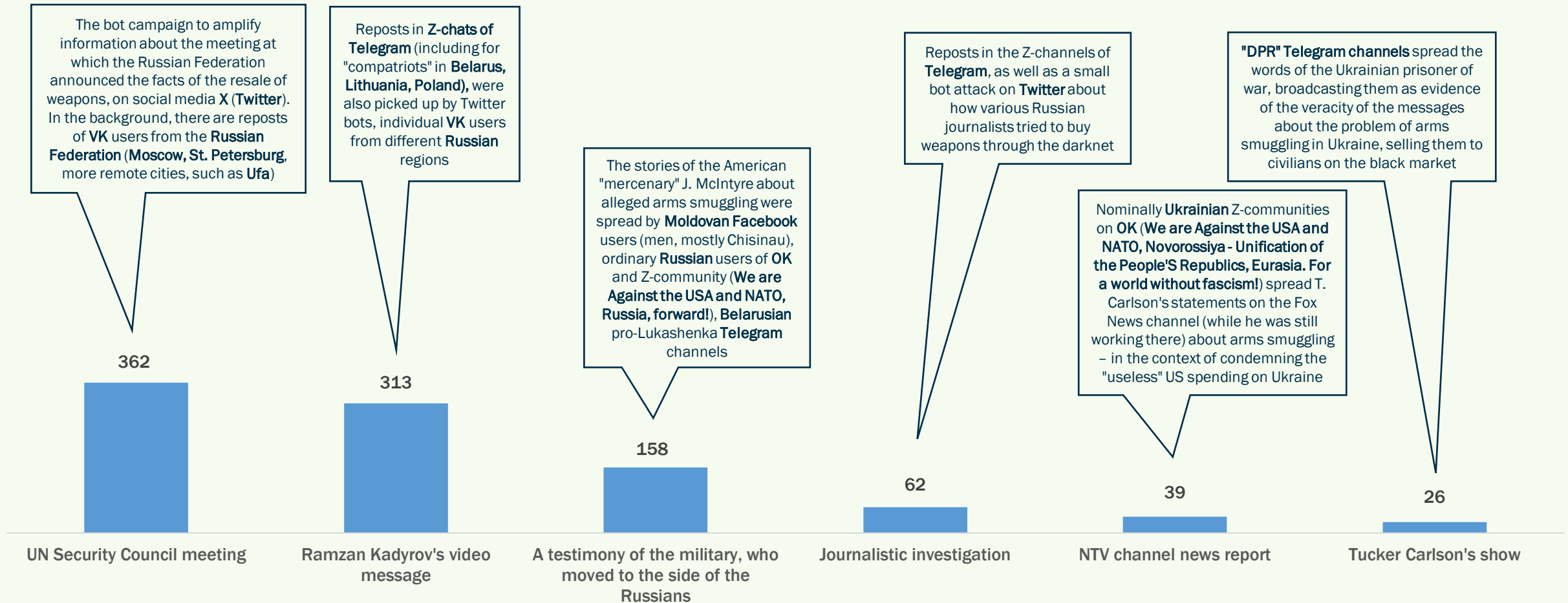
(number of posts)



KEY NEWS STORIES LAUNCHED BY THE RUSSIAN SIDE

Purely Russian news hooks are rarely used and do not go viral (except for the emotional appeal of R. Kadyrov at the beginning of "SMO"), in some cases international platforms (UN Security Council) or foreign speakers are involved (the American military who defected to the side of Russia, or MAGA propagandist)

(number of posts)



KEY EMOTIONS BROADCAST BY THE AUTHORS

Anxiety: concern on the part of the EU due to the risks of weapons entering the black market (TG escort chats; **groups on OK**), American journalist S. Hersh (**Twitter, OK**), ordinary resident of Kemerovo (VK users from Kuzbass), the United States due to weapons entering Mexico (**Telegram channels**); concern due to the lack of guarantees against the resale of weapons and international instability (comments in Telegram chats and VK).

Anger: at the "Skotyniaky" who sell weapons (Ukrainian-language **Facebook**); at the Nazis who terrorize people and sell weapons (**J.McIntyre**, who is quoted by **Telegram channels** and **VK / OK** users); at the United States and the EU, who arm terrorists (individual **VK** users) and want to hurt Russia (commentators in Telegram chats and **VK** public pages); at the Ministry of Defense (who resells weapons under the guise of "surplus", while soldiers lack it at the front – users on **Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, VK**, etc.).

Curiosity: to the schemes of getting weapons on the black market (**ANNA-NEWS** about the alleged existence of a scheme with the participation of K. Budanov), to a wide range of weapons on the darknet, to the method of obtaining weapons by Mexican cartels (**VK, Telegram**). There is also a massive spread on OK of the rhetorical question "what will happen next" in posts about the fact that the West missed smuggling.

Disdain: for "Kuleba, Zelensky, Danilov", who beg for weapons, and then sell them and at the same time plunder the country; for **Ukrainians as a "nation of thieves"** in general.

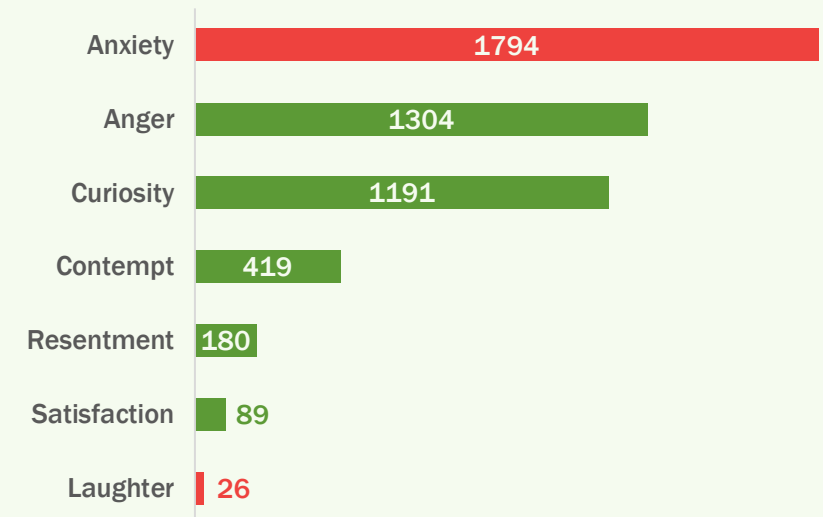
Outrage: due to the lack of sharing in the Western media of information about the center for combating arms smuggling in Moldova (telegram chats and channels, **Twitter** users); **Tamir Sheikh** about NATO's reaction to arms smuggling from Ukraine (users on **VK** and **OK**).

Satisfaction: Ukraine's sale of Western weapons to Russians (political groups on OK, **Twitter** accounts).

Laughter: at the Miami police, which transfers the weapons seized from the Mexican cartels to the Ukrainian troops, and they transfer them back to the gangsters in the cartels (**Telegram channels**).

The basic emotion in bot attacks is the fear/anxiety that various authors of original posts and their repeaters try to provoke: they say that international stability is disappearing because of arms smuggling (not because of Russian aggression), and the influence of terrorists is growing. The anger is mostly directed at the Ukrainian authorities and the West, which "enabled" the resale of weapons by supplying them to Ukraine. At the same time, there is a demonstrative interest in the schemes of such resale or further development of events

(number of posts)



DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE RESALE OF WEAPONS PROVIDED TO UKRAINE BY PARTNERS

Strategy for building an information campaign

This is another topic that is regularly used by Russian propaganda to discredit Ukrainians and undermine Ukraine's military cooperation with the West. The core of this campaign are Russian military bloggers on Telegram, who usually do not quote respected speakers, but use specific channels to disseminate information to different audiences. First, there are mass mailings through non-political OK communities, mainly to the Russian audience and the audience of the long-occupied territories. They help to reach a politically indifferent part of the population that does not read military bloggers. Second, it is the use of pseudo-patriotic Ukrainian or pseudo-pro-Ukrainian users (from Y. Shvets to bloggers committed to European solidarity, or those who try to appear as them) and the amplification of their messages with the help of pseudo-patriotic bot farms on Facebook. This tool focused on messages about distrust of the Ukrainian authorities, which "quarrel with the West" because of this smuggling, and besides, the weapons are not enough for Ukrainian soldiers. Third, pro-Russian top channels in Ukraine such as the Resident, which also use the same message and tend to refer to Western sources (the same rhetoric is used by non-military Russian propagandists such as Solovyov). And fourth, the use of local politicians in other states (N. Gavrilita in Moldova, etc.).

The most noticeable increase was after an ambiguous quote from Europol, the incorrect interpretation of which was later refuted by the organization itself. The MP V. Spartz also "helped" the propagandists and caused one of the outbreaks of such mentions. Russia itself hardly created any news hooks, but often communicated without pretexts.

The argumentation of the campaign is usually very weak: most often it is advertisements on the darknet, which are easily falsified and difficult to verify.

6

DISINFORMATION ABOUT
VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY'S
ILLNESS OR DEATH

DISINFORMATION ABOUT VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY'S ILLNESS OR DEATH

General Topic Description

The time interval of the analyzed period: March 1, 2022 – August 31, 2023.

The first notable attempts to spread the narrative about V. Zelensky's illness date back to March 11, 2022, as a response to his video message debunking Russian propaganda about bio-laboratories in Ukraine. It can be seen that at first propagandists preferred to argue precisely because of the change in the president's appearance, and when the media began to talk more and more about the counteroffensive, they changed the key argument: that the West wants to get rid of Zelensky because he does not meet their expectations.

The issue practically did not concern patriotic Ukrainians, but was discussed mainly in Russian and pro-Russian circles. Western speakers were actively quoted, such as Laszlo Kever (Speaker of the Hungarian Parliament), Charles Roizman (columnist for the French newspaper Causeur) and Peter Szijjarto (Foreign Minister of Hungary) - they spread the message of mental illness; Mike Tyson (American boxer) called Zelensky a drug addict and recommended him to go to rehabilitation; Stu Peters (American blogger) characterized him as a sociopath. The only pro-Russian Ukrainian channel whose rumors about V. Zelensky's liquidation plans were actively picked up by the Russians was the Legitimate Telegram channel (July 20, 2023).

The analyzed sample contained a few unique publications, a larger proportion of authors who reposted or copied the same news and conclusions about V. Zelensky's health to their public pages. This can also be explained by the fact that the spread of news about the president's stay in intensive care (the Russian hacker attack on the Ukrainian radio stations "Bayraktar" and "Melodia" on July 21, 2022), about the infection with US biological weapons (July 20-28, 2022), about the appearance of a medical report on the diagnosis of prostate cancer (July 2, 2022), and quoting Western "thought leaders" took place mostly without adding any author's views. It is also noteworthy that the Russian side chose the tactic of manipulating borrowed news hooks, instead of building the agenda exclusively with their own.

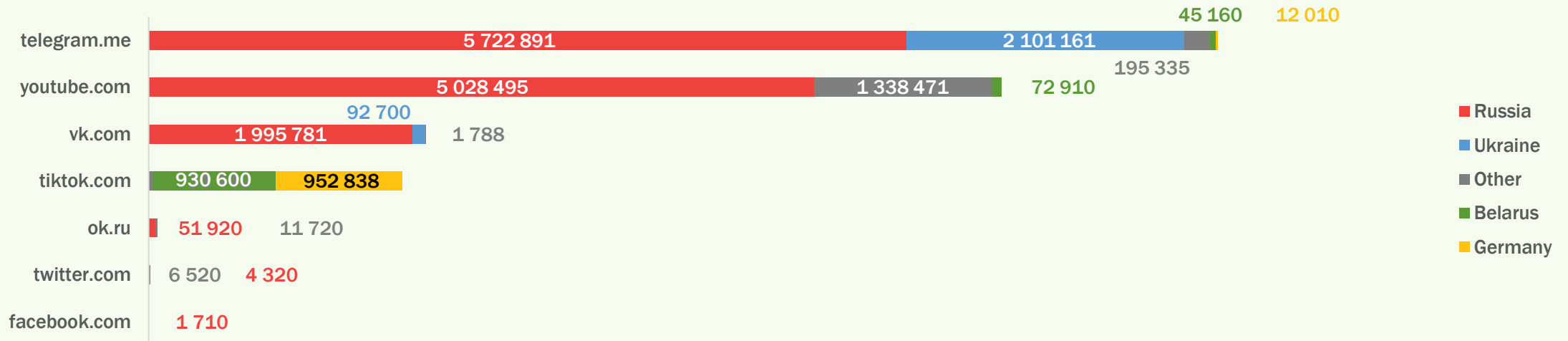
6.1.

MOST POPULAR POSTS
(MOSTLY OPINION LEADERS AND
WELL-KNOWN MEDIA)

DISTRIBUTION OF ATTENTION BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION CHANNEL AND POST GEOGRAPHY

Russians discussed Zelensky's health on Telegram and YouTube (slightly less than on VK), while authors from Belarus and Germany preferred TikTok. In Ukraine, the topic was discussed only by well-known pro-Russian accounts, mainly on Telegram

(number of contacts with the audience in the Cyrillic segment of social media)



Telegram in the **Russian Federation** was used both by anonymous channels and by well-known propaganda channels (**Ponomar Live**, **Kremlin_Russian**, **Vladimir Rogov**, **PMC Media**, **SOLOVYOV**). For the most part, they reposted publications from other channels (**Legitimate**). On the part of **Ukraine**, the topic is promoted only by pro-Russian telegram channels (**Reporter Rudenko V**, **In fact in Luhansk**, etc.), which have a fairly large audience. In **Belarus**, the channels of local bloggers (**Azarenok**, **STV**, **Ilya Begun**), and in **Germany** anonymous channels spread the news about Zelensky being on intensive care.

YouTube: the following types of speakers were noticeable in the **Russian** information field: Russian bloggers (**Andrey Tyunyaev**, **Ilya Anishchenko**, **Tamir Sheikh**) and fortune-tellers/Tarot readers (**Svetlana Veda**).

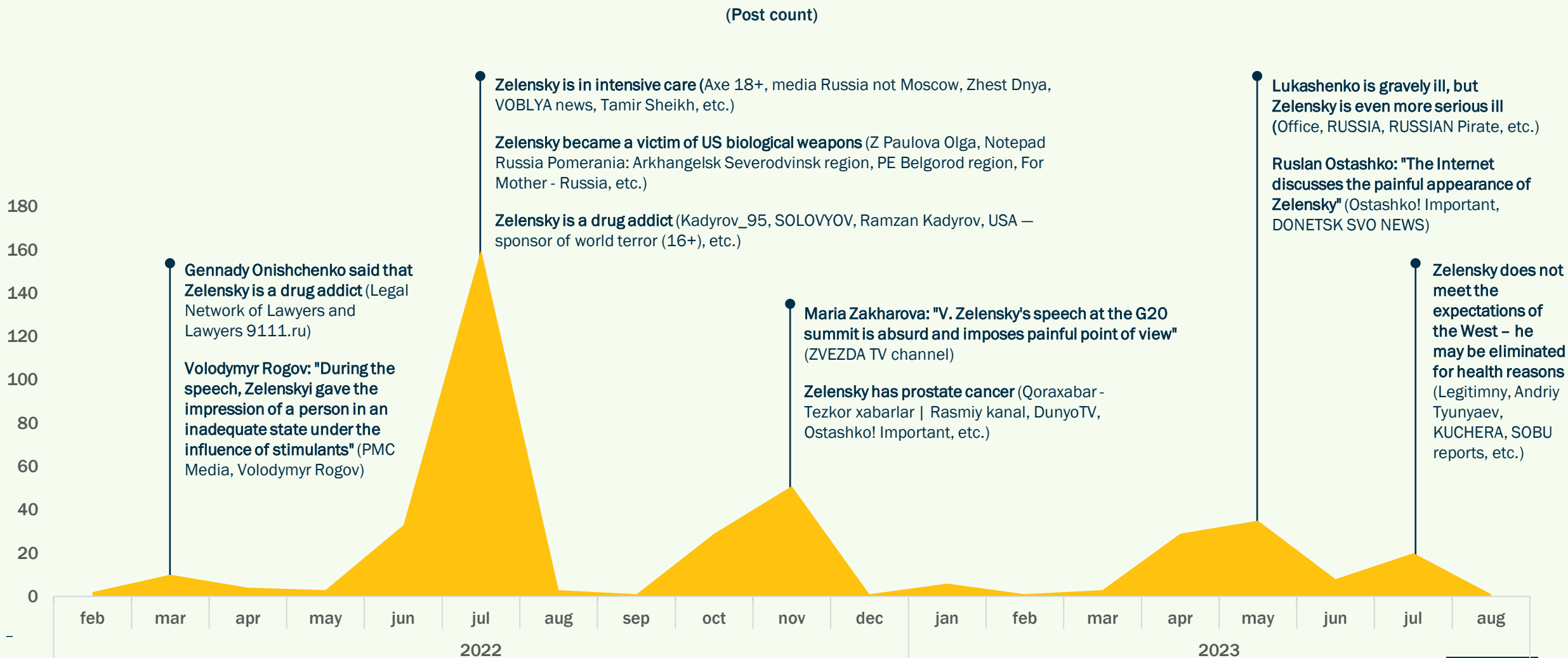
TikTok: content from Belarusian blogger **Alexei Kapustin** with an analysis of V. Zelensky's face and a video with part of the news from Russian TV where **Stu Peters** is quoted, from the German user **AndrejK**.

OK: it was the most used by the Russians, who spread the opinions of the Russian politician **V. Rogov** and the Ukrainian parliamentarian **Geo Leros**.

Twitter (X): posts citing Western politicians (**Laszlo Kever**) and experts (**Charles Roizman**) about V. Zelensky's disease were reposted, adding their comments to the community and users from Tajikistan, Armenia and Russia. There are many citations of the thematic publication in the Russian **Gazeta.ru**.

DYNAMICS OF POST SHARING

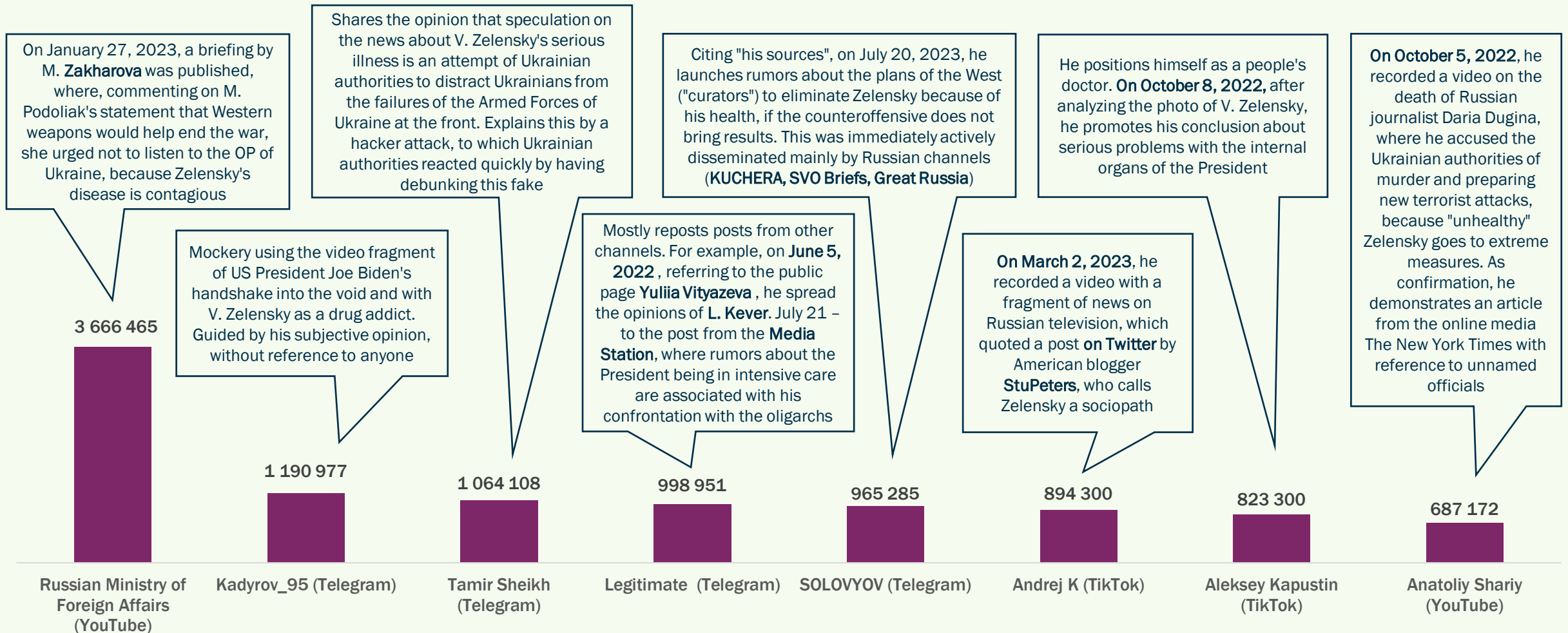
The most notable attempt to spread the story about V. Zelensky's illness was recorded in July 2022: at that time a Russian hacker attack on Ukrainian radio took place. However, even then, the propagandists' versions contradicted each other



KEY CONTENT CREATORS

V. Zelensky's painful condition has become a commonplace that various accounts use sometimes as an excuse to promote themselves, sometimes as an argument to prove other messages

(number of contacts with the audience; authors' communication channels in SM are in brackets)



MAIN GROUPS OF POST SPEAKERS

Russian blogger/expert/journalist: Tamir Sheikh, V. Soloviov, O. Lysenko (a doctor who "noticed" the symptoms of a drug addict in Zelensky). Andriy Tyuniaiev and Roman Alekhin promoted the idea that Zelensky does not meet the expectations of the West, and he will soon be liquidated.

Russian politician: the leaders in terms of coverage are R. Kadyrov and M. Zakharova. V. Rogov also appears, who, commenting on the appearance and behavior of the President, defined him as "a person in an inadequate state under the influence of stimulating substances." This message was repeatedly spread by the Russians.

Russian fortune teller/Tarot reader/astrologer: for the most part, they predicted a very bad state of health and a quick death.

Belarusian blogger/expert/journalist: H. Azarenok, who, according to the time of the President's appeals, determined that he was a drug addict, I. Begun and O. Kapustin commented mainly on the appearance and habits of a drug addict.

Western politician: Speaker of the Parliament of Hungary L. Kever and Hungarian Foreign Minister P. Szijarto called V. Zelensky mentally ill and accused of threats to citizens of Western countries.

Western blogger/expert/journalist: the most prominent person is a columnist of the French newspaper Causeur Ch. Roizman, who, like the previous ones, promoted the message of mental instability and insanity of V. Zelensky.

Ukrainian politician: G. Leros spread the message about drug addiction, and the content authors use his 2021 interview with Zelensky's former business partner H. Lazutkin.

Ukrainian blogger/expert/journalist: Only pro-Russian speakers commented on the topic. A. Shariy is the leader in terms of coverage, T. Nezalezhko stated that the President looks as a drug addict, and the producer Yu. Bardash also inadvertently drew attention to the peculiarities of the language and accused him of dependence on psychotropic substances.

The most prominent group of speakers are Russian "opinion leaders", followed by Western politicians, bloggers and experts by a wide margin

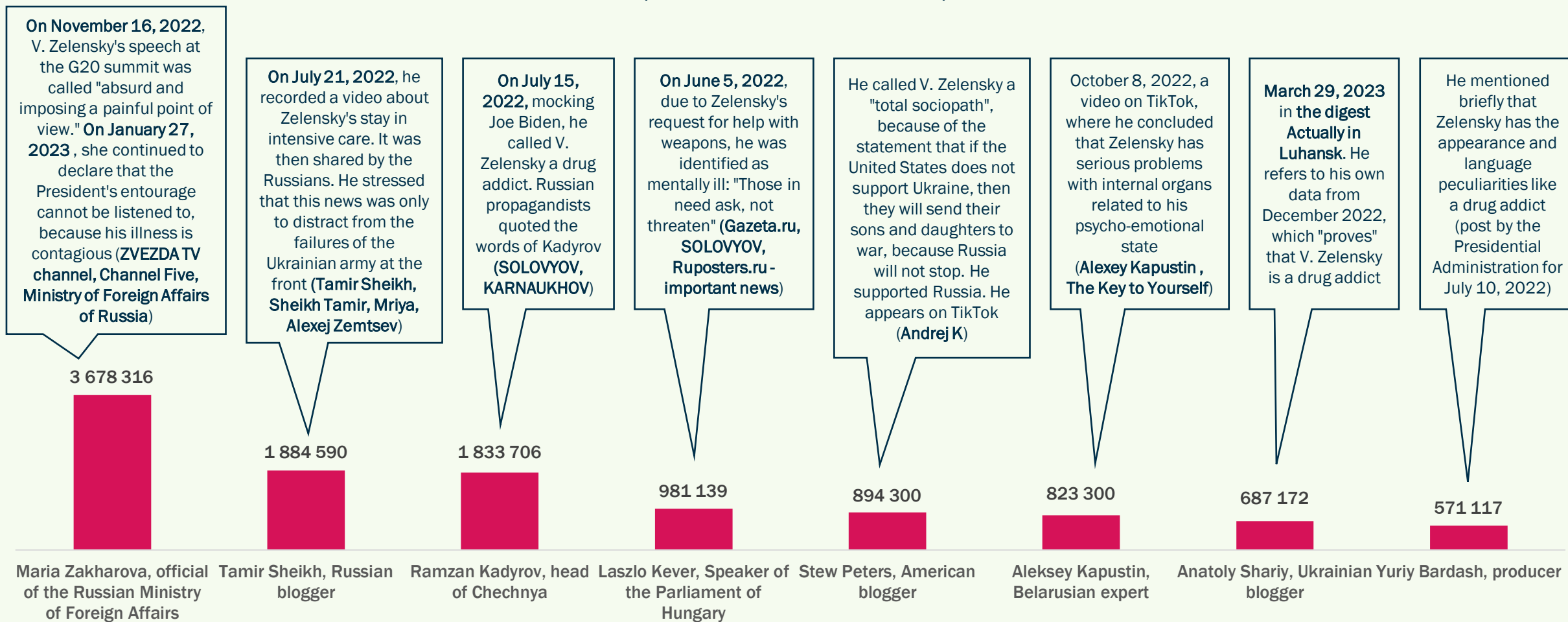
(number of contacts with the audience)



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

M. Zakharova, the only one of the top speakers, used the news about Zelensky's illness rather indirectly. The others - bloggers and R. Kadyrov - discussed it quite seriously. This message practically did not fall into the Ukrainian patriotic oriented space

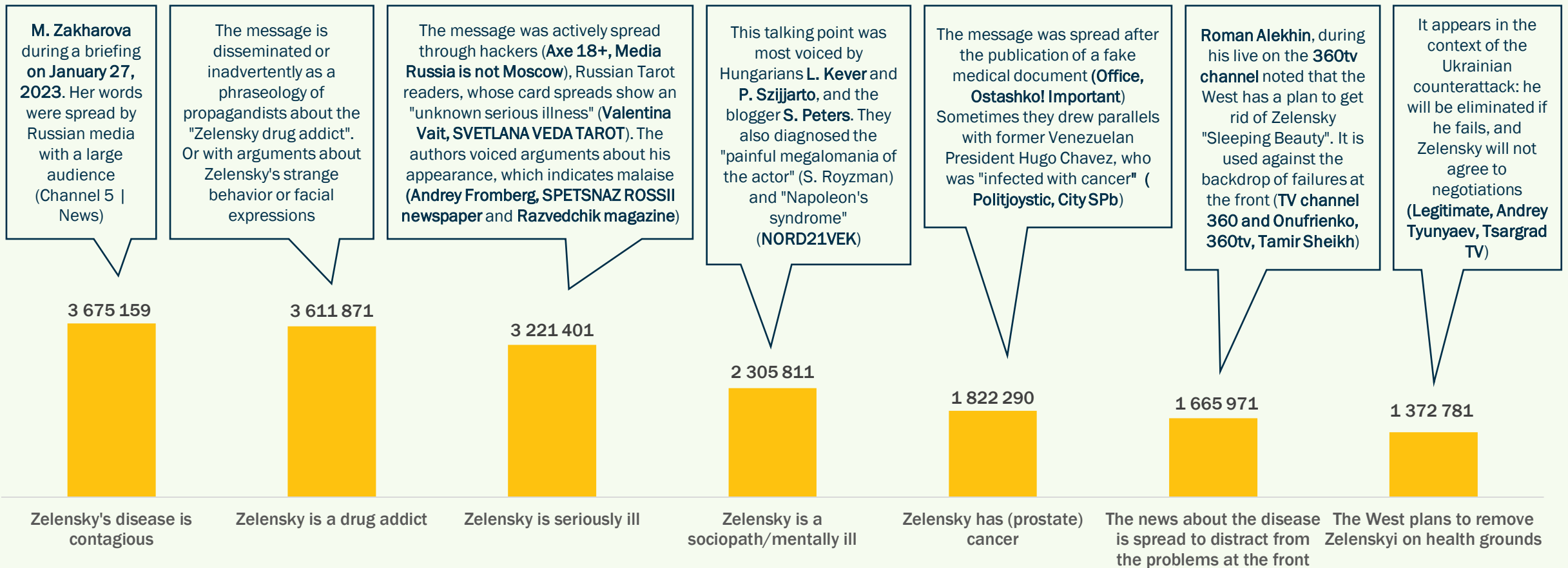
(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION

Russian propaganda, describing the president as sick, inadequate and addicted to narcotics, focuses on the conclusion that he is no longer able to decide anything, is crazy with hopelessness, and the West no longer needs him - either they will get rid of him by giving him cancer, or simply for health reasons

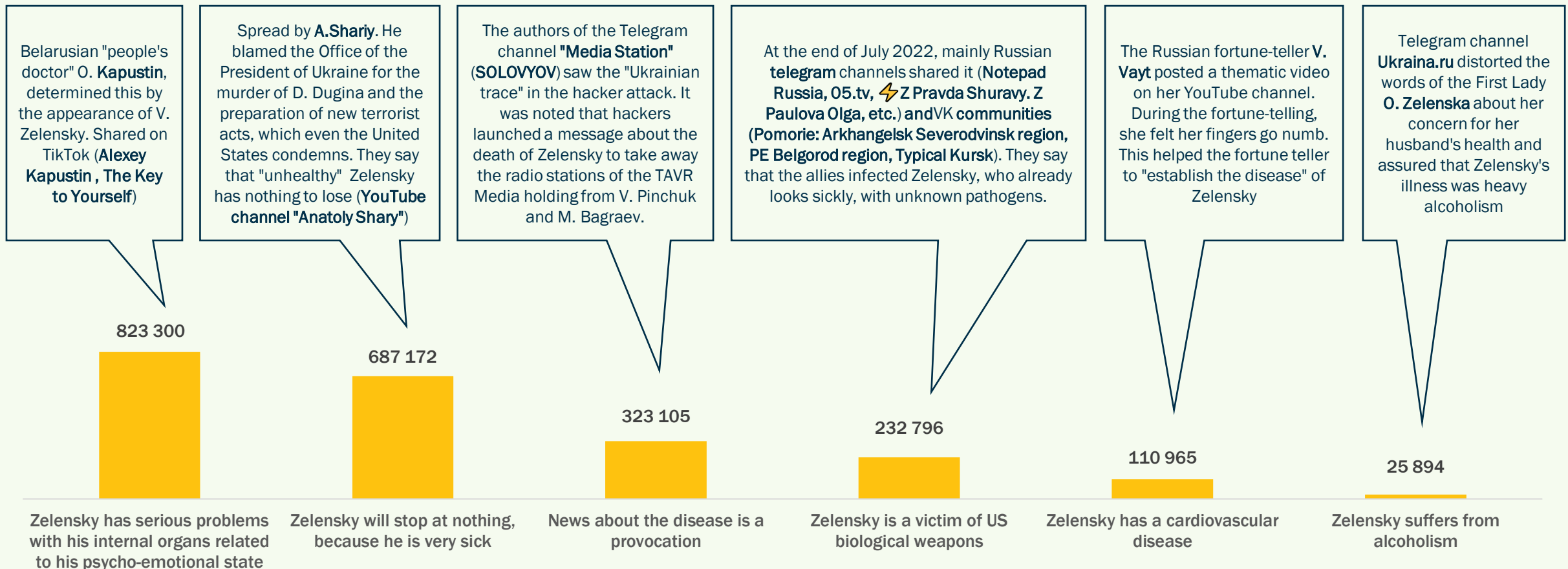
(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

Less popular messages, traditionally rich in conspiracy theories and fortune-telling data

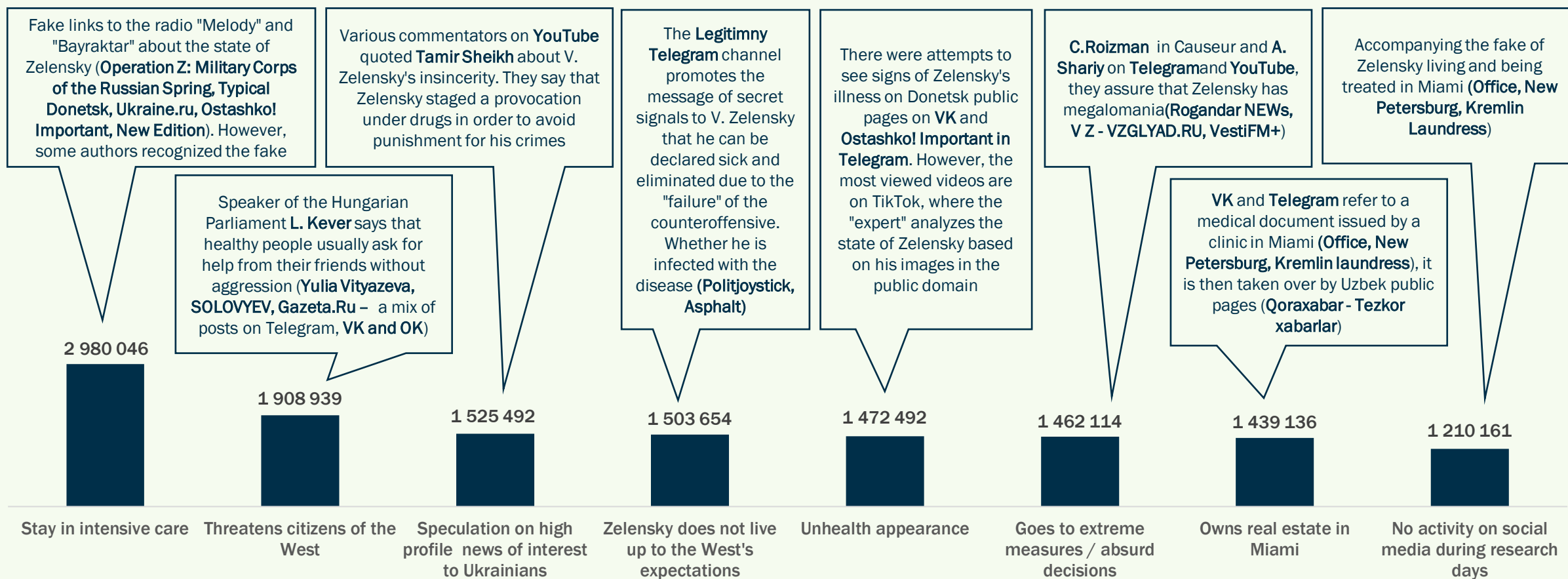
(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY ARGUMENTS

The most conspicuous evidence – the evidence that V. Zelensky is in intensive care – was spread by pro-Russian resources of the first conditional level (such as *Ukraina.ru*). However, there are also remarkable arguments that it is his powerful activity or audacity that are signs of mental illness or drug addiction: apparently, it is designed to reduce this activity

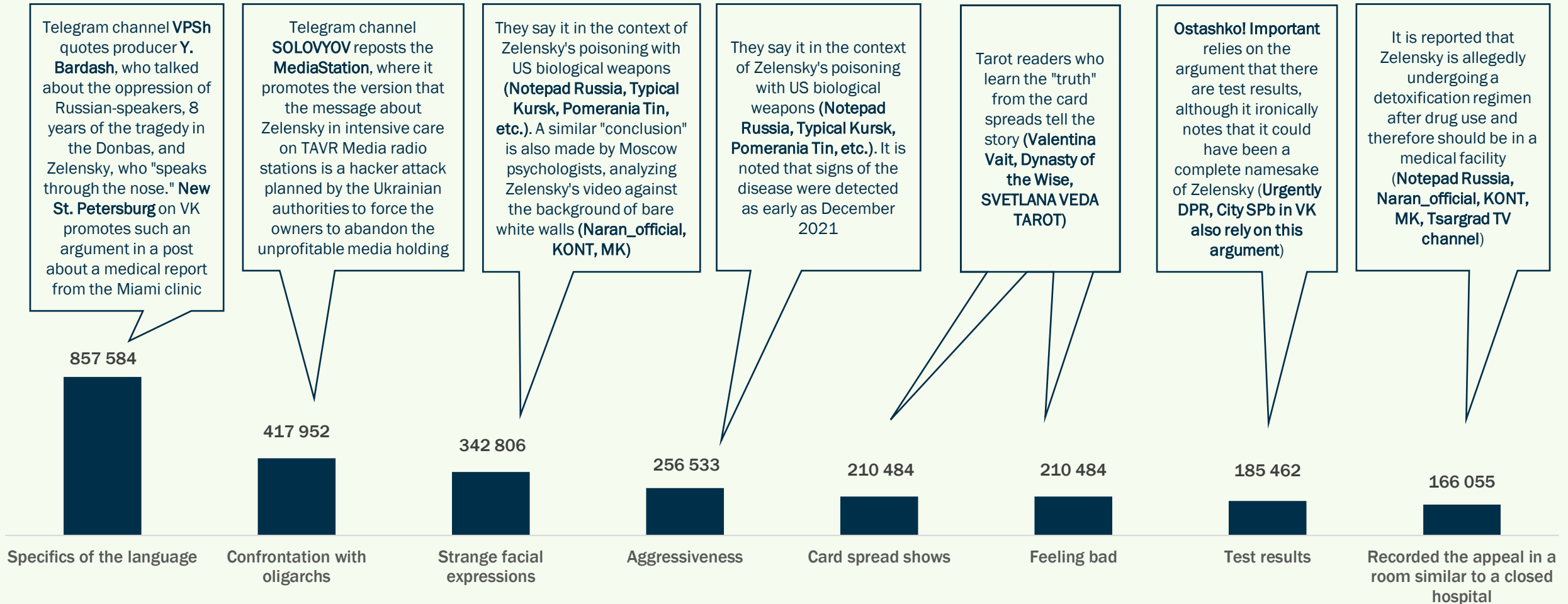
(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY ARGUMENTS (CONTINUED)

Background arguments are partly specific and relate to the description of individual facial features of V. Zelensky, and partly focus on what "the card spread shows"

(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY NEWS STORIES LAUNCHED BY THE RUSSIAN SIDE

The Russians preferred manipulative interpretation of other people's news hooks rather than creating and launching their own, or even dispensing with news hooks altogether, simply making "injections" of unsubstantiated rumors

(number of contacts with the audience)

Publications about this Russian hacking attack appeared on July 21, 2022. This news hook stimulated internal discussions among Russians (**Axe 18+**, **Media Russia is not Moscow, Zhest Dnya**) and pro-Russian Ukrainians (**KD 18+ [Politika] Kherson, Novoye Izdanie, PE Donetsk Z**). Some authors doubted the truth of the news, but did not stop spreading fake news about Zelensky

3 477 048

Hacker attack by Russians on Ukrainian radio "Bayraktar" and "Melodia"

On November 2, 2022, a medical report from a private clinic in Miami appeared on the Internet, where a man named "Vladimir Zelensky" was allegedly diagnosed with prostate cancer. The VK community **Vedomstvo** was the first to share this news hook. The description of its profile states that the channel is maintained by representatives of law enforcement agencies

1 822 290

The appearance of a medical opinion

A.Shariy's video of December 2021 is mentioned. There, the pro-Russian blogger told about the "analysis results" of Zelensky's biological sample taken after visiting the Ryba restaurant in Odesa in July 2020. Supposedly, an examination in a German laboratory confirmed his drug addiction. It was spread by the **OKuser** from Moscow **Tatiana Khoroshko** and pro-Russian community **Actually in Luhansk**

2 707

Addictologist's opinion

KEY EMOTIONS BROADCAST BY THE AUTHORS

Contempt: for the appearance of V. Zelensky and when they produce a message about drug addiction (Tsargrad TV channel, Ostashko! Important, Naran_Official).

Outrage: about Zelensky's speech at the G20 (M. Zakharov on Sputnik radio), in relation to his statements about Russia, which, according to C. Roizman, indicate his mental illness (Slavyane, Karaulny Z, Rogandar NEWS: News, facts, events!).

Laughter: at J.Biden with a mention of Zelensky as a drug addict from R.Kadyrov (Kadyrov_95, SOLOVYOV, VOBLYA news, etc.).

Anger: Zelensky threatens the West, he is mentally ill (L. Kever on Gazeta.Ru, SOLOVYOV, Ruposters.ru - important news) and a sociopath according to Peters (Andrej K on TikTok).

Joy: due to the infection of Zelensky with unknown pathogens from the United States (Notepad Russia, Pomerania: Arkhangelsk Severodvinskregion).

Curiosity: regarding the further development of events after rumors about the West's plans to eliminate Zelensky for health reasons (Legitimate) and whether the medical report from Miami really refers to the president of Ukraine, and not a coincidence (Teledno, Vedomstvo, Our People are a patriot!).

Hope: that “Western curators” (360tv, 360 Channel and Onufrienko) will do something to the President, and that he actually has serious health problems, as the card spreads predict (Valentina Vayt).

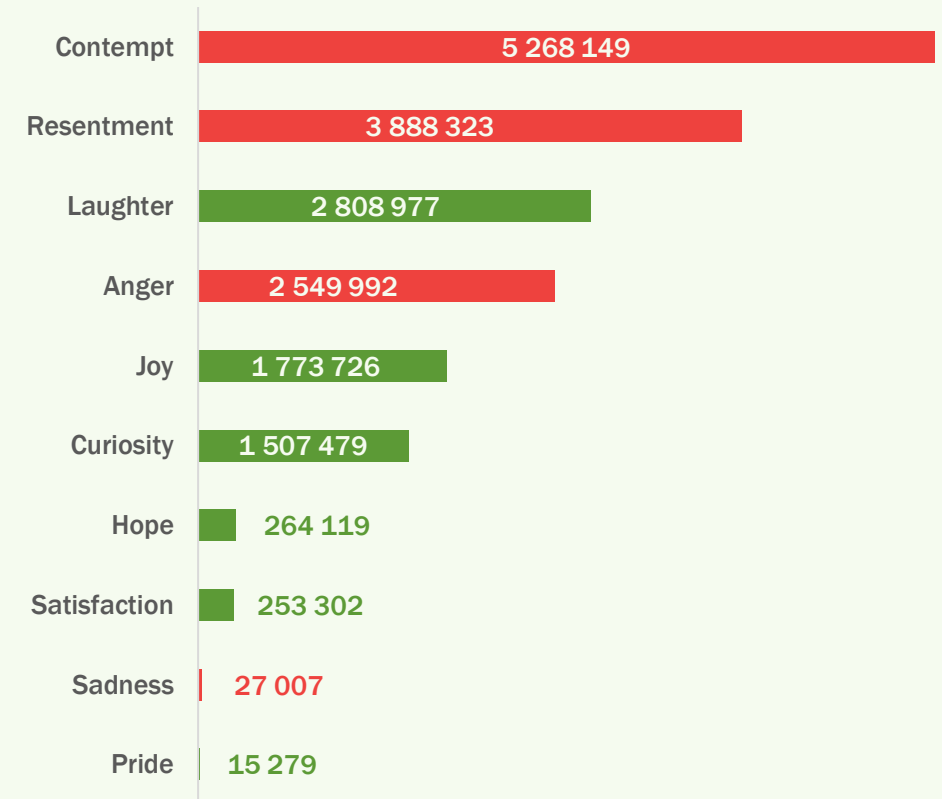
Satisfaction: from the information that the news about V. Zelensky's stay in intensive care was launched on Ukrainian radio stations.

Sadness: due to the fact that the news about resuscitation turned out to be fake (Tatiana Zadniprianska) and V. Zelensky's drug addiction (Legal Network of Lawyers and Lawyers9111.ru).

Pride: for Russian hackers who hacked the radio and spread panic among Ukrainians.

The authors wrote about V. Zelensky mostly with contempt and ridicule, but they were angry and indignant - after his concrete statements

(number of contacts with the audience)

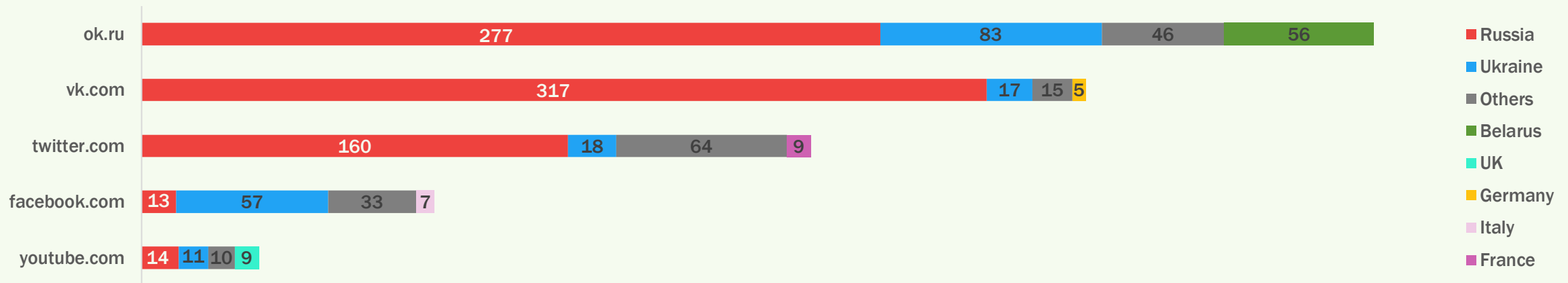


6.2. VIRAL POSTS AND BOT ATTACKS

DISTRIBUTION OF ATTENTION BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION CHANNEL AND POST GEOGRAPHY

VK and OK were used for viral spread and bot attacks in Russia (Twitter (X) to a lesser extent); Facebook was used more actively than other social media in Ukraine

(number of messages in the Cyrillic segment of social networks)



OK: in Russia was used mainly by pro-war public pages (**Oleg Semakov Russia - victory Z, I am proud of you, Russia Z!**, **RUSSIA is MY HOMELAND!**). In addition, the spread through personalized accounts of Russians was noticeable. In Ukraine, this topic was mostly written by ordinary users who do not hide their support for Russia. In Belarus, accounts of well-known media were involved in the dissemination of such views (**Belnovosti. News of Belarus, ONT TV channel, BeITA**).

VK: in the Russian information field, both well-known propaganda channels (**KARNAUKHOV, Argumenty i Fakty/aif.ru, Channel Five | Novosti, Sladkov+**) and ordinary Russians joined the sharing, often through comments and reposts.

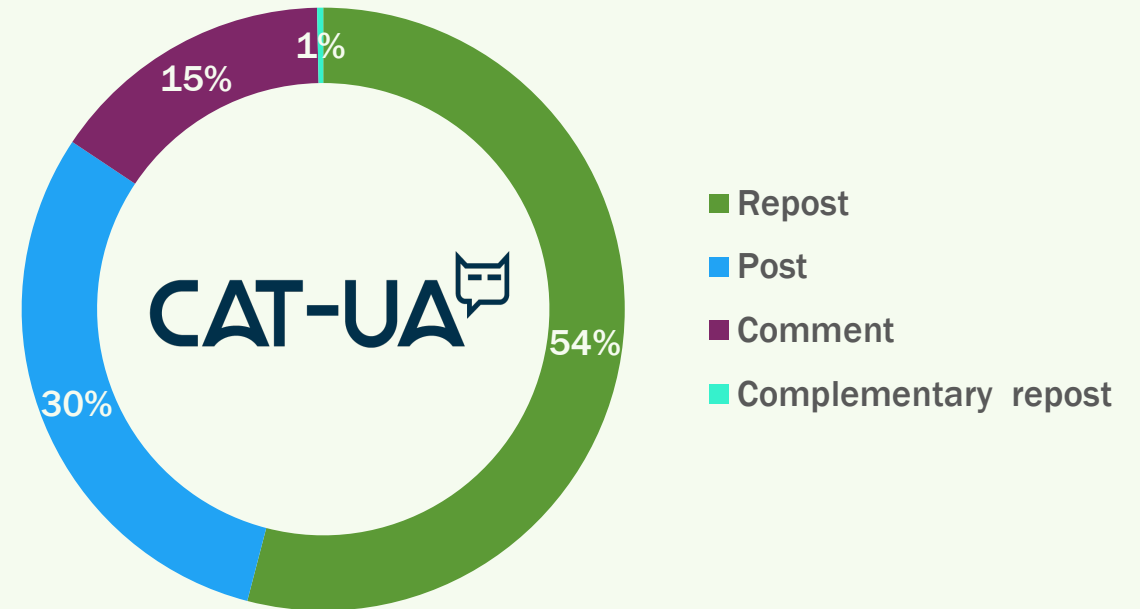
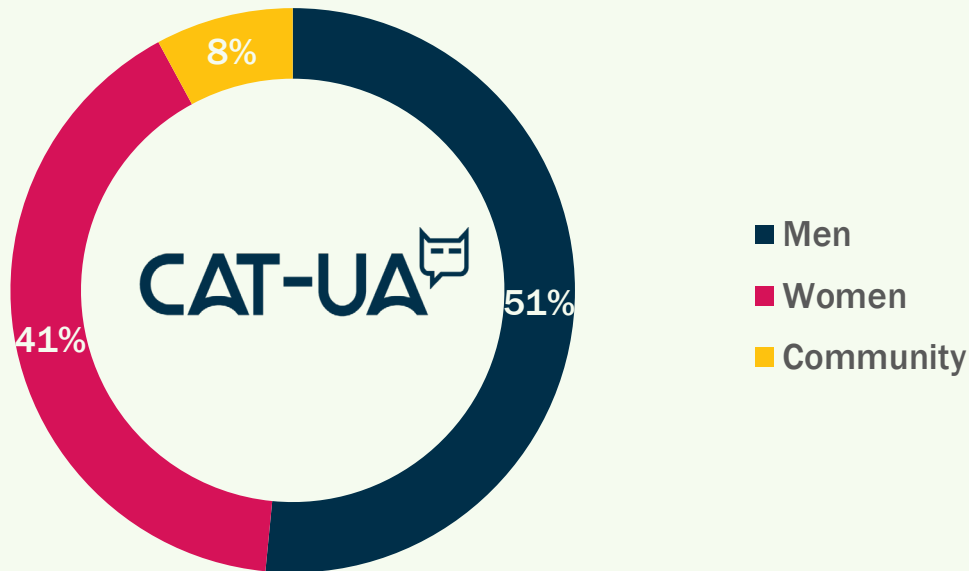
Twitter (X): Russians (mainly from Moscow and the region, St. Petersburg, the Stavropol Territory, and the Krasnodar Territory, etc.) were chosen to actively disseminate the views of **Charles Roizman**, a columnist for the French newspaper Causeur, and news about the hacker attack on Ukrainian radio.

Facebook: the only social media where Ukrainian accounts are the leaders in the number of shares. V. Zelensky was accused of narcissism due to the publication of a collection of his speeches. Currently, this content is unavailable due to the deletion or blocking of the "zero" publication, but it has been recorded in the array.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

Most pro-war Telegram communities were involved in the viral spread of the Zelensky disease narrative (Preemptive Z, Fronts marks, etc.). There were twice as many male accounts from Ukraine as female accounts. Also in the analyzed array, it is male accounts that leave comments under the posts of well-known Russian media (InoSMI, Ukraina.ru, Komsomolskaya Pravda, etc.), angrily accusing Zelensky with his whole list of ailments of genocide of Ukrainians and demanding a tribunal over him. In addition, a noticeable proportion of men commented on a number of videos on YouTube (for example, under the video of Sheikh Tamir), while women wrote a little more on Twitter

(number of messages, in percent)



DYNAMICS OF POST SHARING

Three powerful information attacks between July 19, 2022, and July 25, 2022, caused the largest spike in shared posts by probable bots, with all three versions being thematically distant from each other and more of a background. Sharing in 2023 was not an end in itself, but a means to convey the message that Zelensky would soon be eliminated

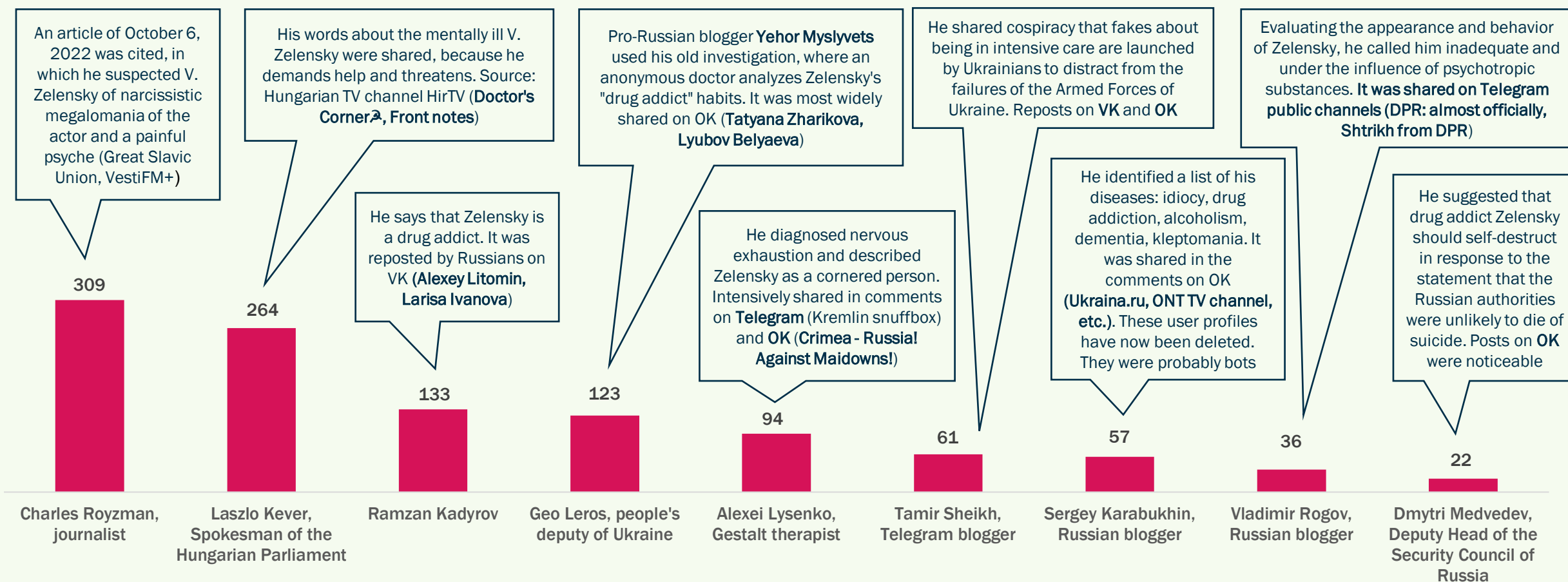
(number of posts)



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

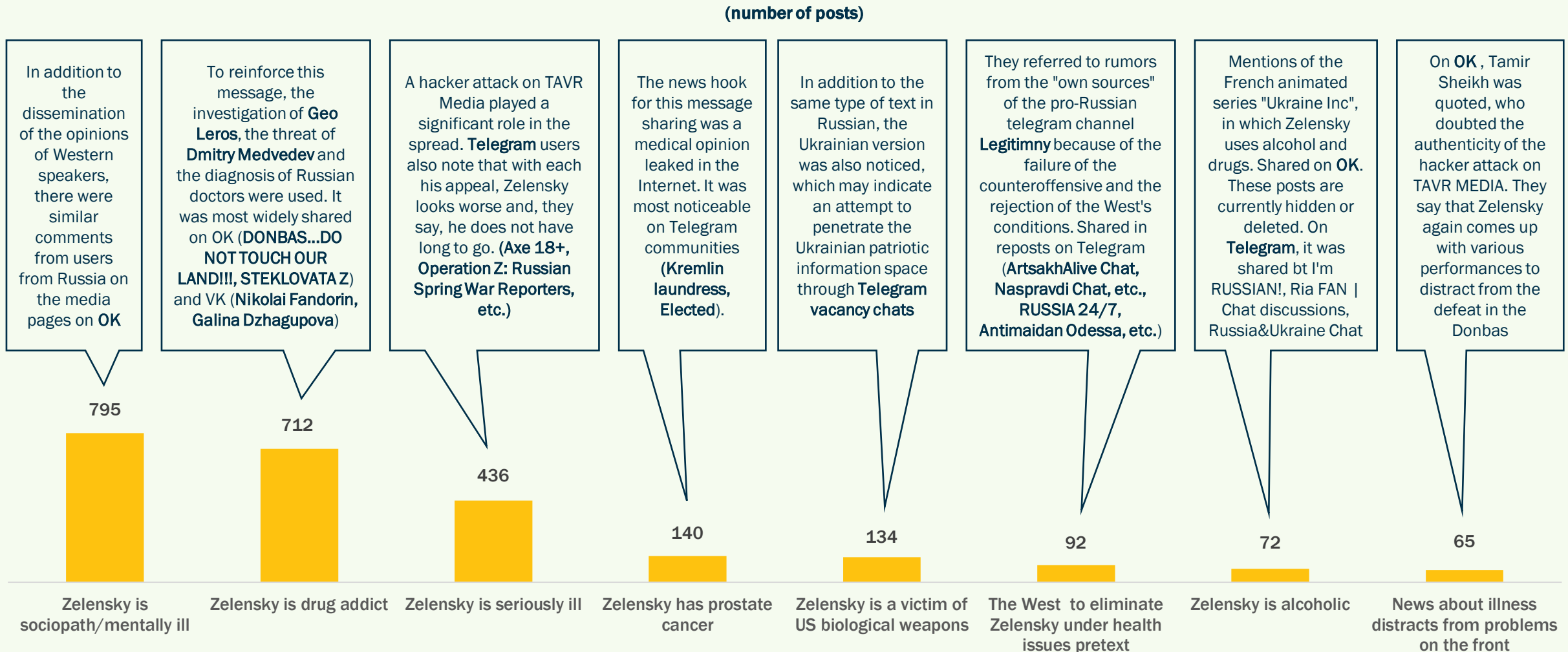
It is noticeable that almost all top speakers are not specialists in psychiatry or addiction. Statements by Western speakers have become the most active viral sharing, while the views of Russian politicians have received a significantly lower number of shares

(number of posts)



KEY MESSAGES OF THE DISCUSSION

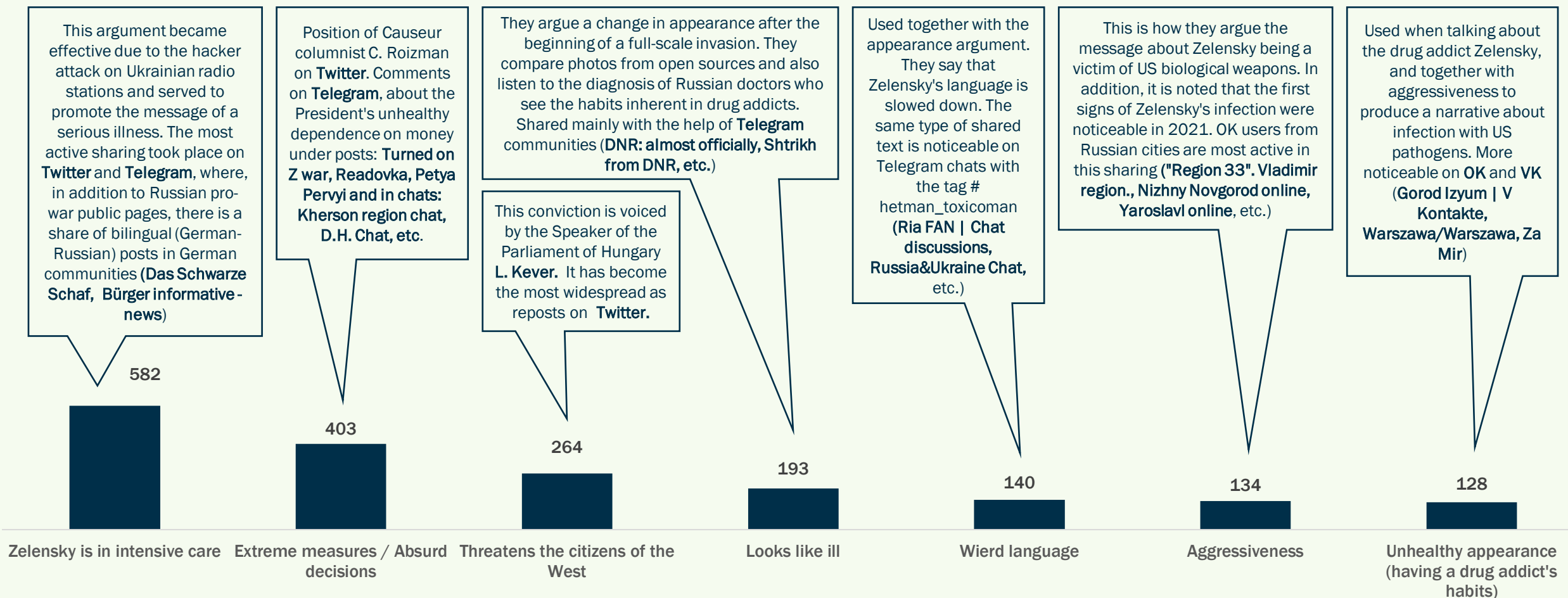
What is unique about these disinformation attacks is that the bots often comment on the posts of well-known media outlets, giving the appearance of support for the messages they are spreading



KEY ARGUMENTS

Those speakers or publications that do not take the argument lightly, focus mainly on the appearance of the president, available from open sources, but pay attention to other things

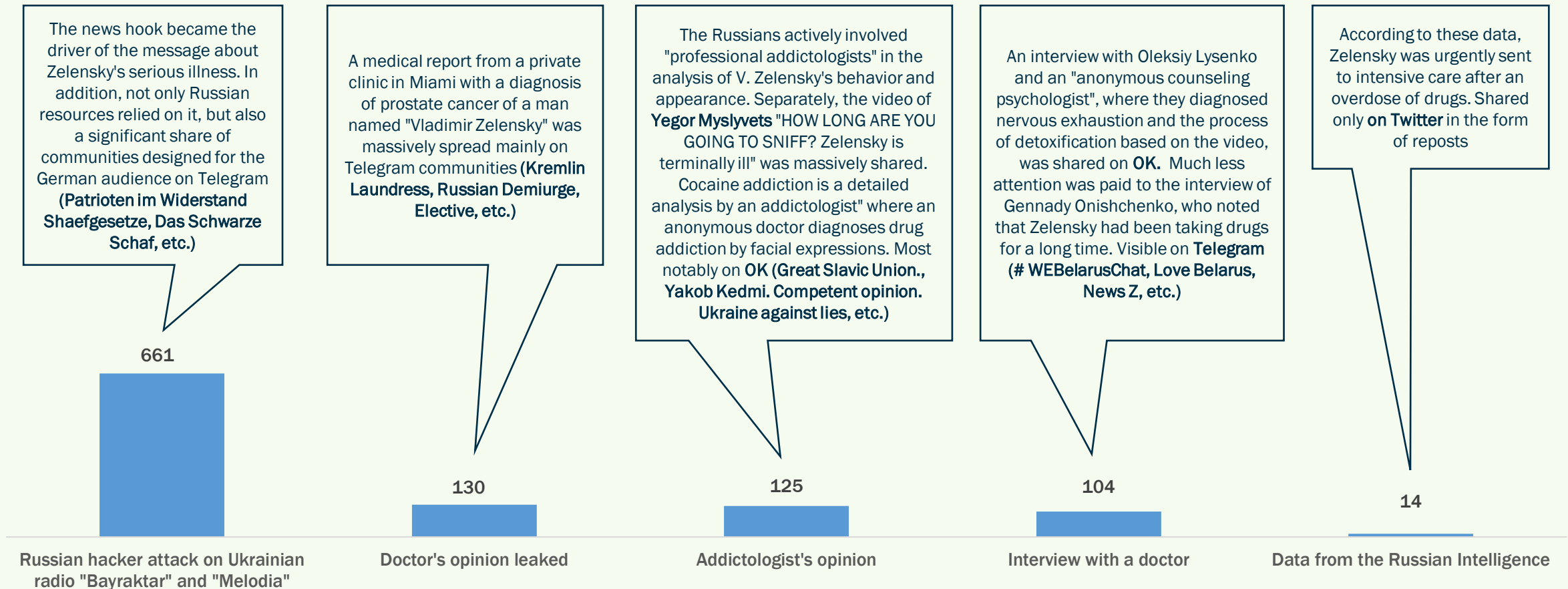
(number of contacts with the audience)



KEY NEWS STORIES LAUNCHED BY THE RUSSIAN SIDE

Fewer publications used news hooks other than the desire to comment on Zelensky's appearance. These news stories were either fake or comments from doctors and experts, some of whom preferred to remain anonymous - with disguised faces and altered voices. The hacking attack remained the leader in the number of shares

(number of posts)



KEY EMOTIONS BROADCAST BY THE AUTHORS

Contempt: Zelenskyi has a drug overdose, he looks like a drug addict ("Kolkhoz named after Sverdlov", Yakov Kedmi. Competent opinion, Novorossiia, etc.).

Joy: Russian hackers hacked the radio; the West wants to get rid of Zelensky, infected with some pathogens; Western experts/politicians began to realize that he was inadequate (Taman newspaper, CBD Rating, World Herald Z, Znakhar, 05.tv, etc.).

Resentment: Zelensky's statements about Russia show the exceptional sickness of his psyche (FOR THE STATE OF RUSSIA (formerly Ukraine), We are Against the USA and NATO, etc.) his narcissism knows no bounds (ZE blazen, Fuck_ZE, ANTIQUARTAL, etc.).

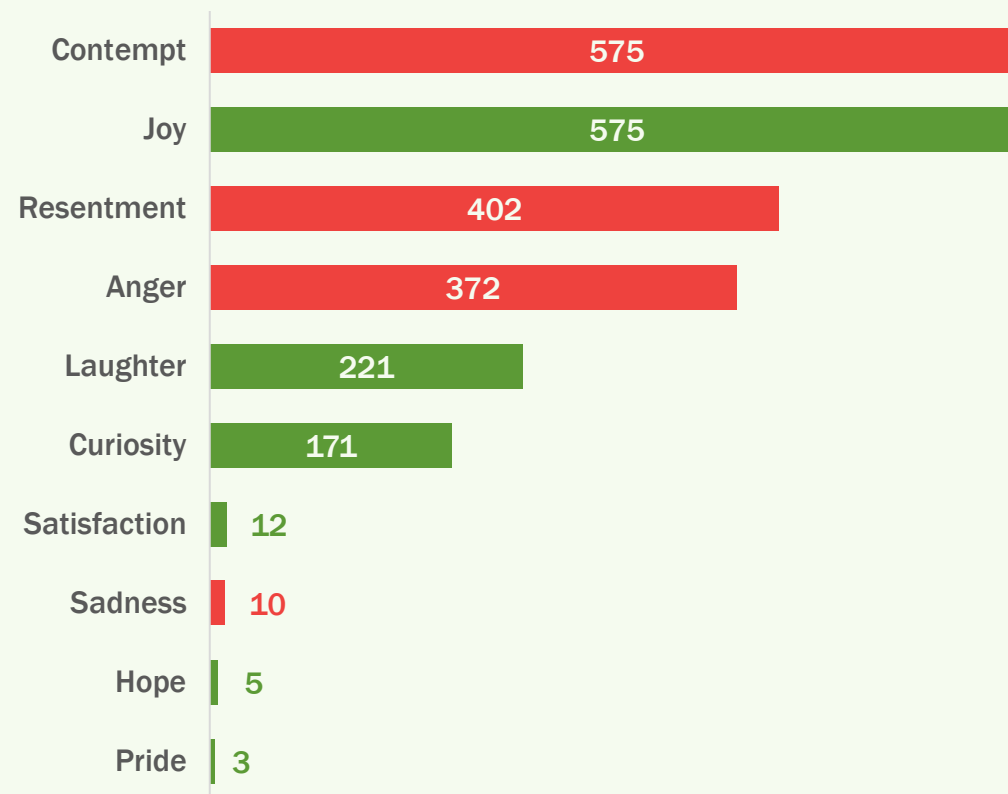
Anger: The President threatens Western citizens; he is mentally ill; there must be a tribunal over him, he is guilty of genocide of Ukrainians (Doctor's Corner², Front notes, etc.).

Laughter: At all the rumors about the state of health, Zelensky said that there was no intensive care, and he had long been accustomed to mild overdoses; Kadyrov's jokes about Biden and Zelenskyy the drug addict; "Zelenskyy's morning does not begin with coffee"; (SteklovataZ, We LIVED AND WORKED in the USSR., Tsargrad TV channel, etc.).

Curiosity: whether Zelensky will be eliminated for health reasons; and what happened to him, because they write that he is in intensive care; whether he has an overdose; whether the medical report on prostate cancer is really of "that" Zelensky (RUSSIA24/7, Legitimny, Antimaidan ☒ Z, Against Bandera for life, etc.)

The topic of Zelensky's illness mostly elicited ridicule, joy, and jokes among users, but the resentment and anger grew when he was accused of genocide and narcissism

(number of contacts with the audience)



DISINFORMATION ABOUT VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY'S ILLNESS OR DEATH

Strategy for building an information campaign

The topic of V. Zelensky's alleged illness or drug addiction was not a single holistic message, but a whole set of very different, often mutually exclusive versions, which, however, together formed a holistic narrative about the incapacity of the Ukrainian president: they say, whatever the real reason, the result is still the same. This is the way rumors often work in traditional society, growing out of a single source that the distributors embellish too much. At the beginning of the war, this message was an end in itself: the audience was taught to think about incompetence. Later, it was used instrumentally: since the audience believed in this or that illness of Zelensky, referring to this argument, it was not difficult to convince the audience that the West was dissatisfied with the Ukrainian counteroffensive and was preparing to remove the president. Also, this issue was used as a potential clickbait by various figures (R. Kadyrov, Belarusian healers) for self-promotion.

Despite numerous attempts, this message almost did not get into the Ukrainian patriotic information space: only supporters of the Russian narrative believed in it. Especially because it was instrumentally very poor: almost no noticeable news hooks were created, experts were not involved (or were involved with a blurred face), Russian bloggers or politicians mostly expressed their opinions, or attracted sources such as fortune tellers and Tarot readers.

The peculiarity of this attack is the use of bot accounts to write comments not on other people's pages, but under publications about Zelensky's disease, in order to demonstrate support for this version.

CONCLUSIONS

THE REACH OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA HAS SUFFERED FROM THE RESTRICTIONS IMPOSED BY WESTERN PLATFORMS. At the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, the largest coverage indicators were topics shared by YouTube accounts of top Russian propagandists, in particular RT, Russia 1, etc. However, after the summer of 2022, the reach of their messages on Western platforms decreased, and propagandists largely focused on Russian-born resources, including Telegram.

THERE IS A GRADATION OF PROPAGANDA SHARING NETWORKS: FROM GREATER REACH TO MORE OUTRIGHT LIES. Typically, one campaign is carried out by one of the groups of propaganda accounts, while others pick it up to a lesser extent. In addition to the channels of top propagandists connected to state media, such groups include the community of Russian "patriotic military bloggers" with a wide reach. Pro-Russian telegram channels in Ukraine have significant reach, mainly due to the constant repetition of messages. Finally, propagandists who

spread outright fake news have the smallest reach; such networks voice more exotic messages than "respectable" propagandists: for example, Doctors Without Borders is accused of human trafficking. The choice of sharing network often correlates with the topic: in particular, the issue of "trafficking in Ukrainian children" was handled by mainstream Russian propaganda channels, and the "destruction of Patriots" was handled by military bloggers..

PROPAGANDA THEMES CHANGE WITH THE RUSSIAN STRATEGIC NARRATIVE. The first months of the full-scale war were accompanied by increased attention to humanitarian issues (migration flows, misinformation about civilian casualties in Bucha); later, the agenda of Russian propaganda focused more on military-political issues (the state of health of V. Zelensky, arms smuggling by Ukraine); after all, 2023 was the year of the "renaissance" of the theme of destroyed Western weapons after the first deliveries of Patriots.

IN THE CYRILLIC SEGMENT, ANY RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN HAS THE GREATEST REACH INSIDE RUSSIA. Russian accounts have the largest share in all topics, and a significant share of Ukrainian accounts is in those topics where propagandists hope to play on the dominant narratives of Ukrainians. Some formally Western accounts also target these two audiences (such as Yu. Shvets from the US). Another part is diaspora publications, including opposition ones, which do not completely refuse to quote propaganda.

WESTERN SPEAKERS IN THE CYRILLIC SEGMENT ARE ONLY AN AUXILIARY METHOD. Russian propaganda often allows itself to build a campaign solely on the statements of Russian politicians and bloggers. Western or Ukrainian speakers are involved in two cases: when the topic has statements by non-Russian politicians, that can be taken out of context or used in full, or if they want to influence the Western audience, in which case pro-Russian, but formally Western experts are involved.

CONCLUSIONS (CONTINUED)

PROPAGANDA IS MOSTLY BASED ON NEGATIVE EMOTIONS. Positive emotions are rather an exception to the rule for Russian propaganda (to raise morale with reports of destroyed Western equipment). The most common emotion is anger, which is supposed to mobilize Russians to fight. The second most common are demobilizing negative emotions: contempt and disgust (typical in relation to the "younger brother") and fear and anxiety (often directed at Western audiences to scare them about the consequences of war)..

MIXING TRUTH AND LIES: THE TECHNIQUE DOES NOT LOSE ITS IMPORTANCE. In accordance with the rules of classical propaganda, Russians continue to mix truth and lies, especially in cases involving Western audiences. Real reports of Western personalities about suspicious cases, for example, in the field of human trafficking stories with refugees, are often supplemented by propaganda messages: about the involvement of Ukrainian

authorities in human trafficking, about crazy conflicts with refugees instead of individual cases, etc.

PRESUMABLY, THERE IS AN ORGANIZATION THAT SIMULTANEOUSLY PLANS RUSSIAN CAMPAIGNS IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES, SELECTING SPECIFIC ARGUMENTS FOR EACH. Its existence can be proved by the presence of such messages as the ingratitude of Ukrainian refugees, which was launched almost simultaneously in Moldova and Germany.

REPOSTING IS A KEY WAY OF MASS DISSEMINATING THE SAME INFORMATION, AND THE ROLE OF COMMENTS HAS BEEN DIMINISHED BY THE POLICIES OF WESTERN PLATFORMS. In some cases (such as in the refugee campaign), there are even posts that are mechanical reprints of texts from other accounts. Propaganda comments were actively used at the beginning of the invasion under the posts of independent media or well-known patriots to try to influence people with a non-Russian

position, especially on the issue of Bucha. Later, however, this format fell out of use, presumably due to the efforts of platforms to block botnets.

A feature of this attack is the use of bot accounts to post comments not on other people's pages, but under publications about Zelensky's disease, in order to demonstrate support for this version.

THE GENDER OF THE BOTS IS USUALLY CHOSEN BY RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA ACCORDING TO GENDER STEREOTYPES.

Female accounts are used for emotional posts on humanitarian issues, and male accounts are used for geopolitical and military reasons in the format of "armchair expertise. The highest share of non-personal accounts is found on Telegram channels in the dissemination of "state" reports, such as on destroyed Western equipment in Ukraine, or "household" communities on OK, whose names are far from politics or war, as it was in the denial of crimes in Bucha.

CONCLUSIONS (CONTINUED)

BOTS ARE OFTEN USED IN THE SAME COUNTRIES WHERE OPINION LEADERS ARE INVOLVED. BUT SOME CAMPAIGNS HARDLY USE BOTS AT ALL.

In "international" issues (for example, regarding refugees), the share of people sharing the same texts who identify themselves as Russian in their profile is less significant. Many accounts are registered in the countries affected by the issue. In general, the pattern of bot sharing is the same as in the opinion leader segment. However, some topics do not involve bots at all. Most of the time, these are topics launched by mainstream Russian propaganda channels, for example, the sale of Ukrainian children.

RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA HAS SEVERAL CHANNELS OF INFLUENCE ON UKRAINE, BUT THEIR EFFECTIVENESS IS LIMITED.

These channels include, first, propaganda channels operating in the occupied territories, which are hardly read in the government-controlled territory of Ukraine. Secondly, they are pseudo-patriotic Ukrainian or pseudo-pro-Ukrainian users (from Y. Shvets, whom

YouTube does not restrict as a propagandist, to bloggers who position themselves as committed to *European Solidarity*): pseudo-patriotic bot farms on Facebook are involved in spreading their messages. This tool focused on messages about distrust of Ukrainian authorities, as in the case of arms smuggling, which allegedly "will make us quarrel with the West", and besides, there are not enough of these weapons for Ukrainian soldiers. Third, pro-Russian top channels in Ukraine, such as the Resident, which use similar messages and tend to refer to Western sources.

But this communication is not always effective. Thus, in the case of Zelensky's illness, despite numerous attempts, the communication almost did not get into the Ukrainian patriotic information space: only the carriers of the Russian narrative could believe in it. In particular, because it was instrumentally very poor: almost never were noticeable news hooks created, experts were not involved; Russian bloggers or politicians mostly expressed their opinions, or involved

sources such as fortune tellers and Taro readers.

SOMETIMES, AN ALREADY PROMOTED NEWS BECOMES SELF-SUFFICIENT, AND IS USED FOR OTHER NEEDS.

The topic of V. Zelensky's alleged illness or drug addiction at the beginning of the war was an end in itself: the audience was taught to think about his incapacity. Later, this "knowledge" was used instrumentally: since the audience believed in Zelensky's illness, referring to this argument, it was not difficult to convince the audience that the West was dissatisfied with the Ukrainian counteroffensive, and was preparing to remove the president. Also, this issue was used as a potential clickbait by various figures (R. Kadyrov, Belarusian healers) for self-promotion.

TYPICAL STRATEGIES: AN EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO A CRISIS IS TO CREATE CHAOS.

The first part of the campaign on the crimes in Bucha had to respond quickly to the strong Ukrainian and Western criticism, and used the most accessible and cheapest

CONCLUSIONS (CONTINUED)

online tools, such as opinion leaders on Telegram, as well as bot attacks through accounts that attract an audience on non-political topics. The messages used for this phase were as diverse as possible, including those that denied each other. Presumably, the goal was to make it difficult to support any version, including the real one. Talking points were chaotically argued with rather unsubstantiated arguments and edited video frames. The same strategy is applied to the least probable and therefore "cheap" issues, such as V. Zelensky's illness or drug addiction. The story about this was a series of very different, often mutually exclusive versions, which together formed a holistic narrative about the incapacity of the Ukrainian president: they say, whatever the real reason, the result is still the same. This is the way rumors often work in traditional society, growing out of a single source that the spreaders embellish too much..

TYPICAL STRATEGIES: IF THERE IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO PREPARE EVERYTHING

WELL, CONSERVATIVE CAMPAIGNS ARE USED. The second part of the attack in connection with Bucha was much more conservative. It was seen that it was carefully prepared and the well-known propagandist V. Solovyov was responsible for it. It was based on the speech of the French journalist A. Bocquet, who testified about the staging of the tragedy in Bucha. The speech in the French media was very actively taken up by the Russian resources of V. Solovyov; it was much less spread by top bloggers or botnets. The message of A. Bocquet was also new: it was not used during the first wave. The argumentation in this case was much more holistic and did not use contradictions.

TYPICAL STRATEGIES: SOME OF THE "FAVORITE" TOPICS OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA PROVIDE NEWS HOOKS FOR NUMEROUS SEPARATE, VERY DIFFERENT CAMPAIGNS. There are issues, such as Ukrainian refugees and IDPs, or the trafficking of Ukrainian children, that are not treated holistically in Russian propaganda,

but rather are used to promote other narratives to different audiences. For example, on the first of these issues, for Russia, they showed that their state cares about refugees; for Ukraine, they encouraged Ukrainians to go to Russia, not to Europe, and they talked about poor life in the EU; for Western countries, they set local residents against Ukrainians and also convinced that a humanitarian crisis had arisen. Thus, the ambiguity of contradictory messages here is explained not by the desire to create chaos, but by addressing different audiences. Speakers and emotions, as well as social media platforms, were also involved in different ways (e.g. for Ukrainians in Poland, it was Facebook, and for Ukrainians who can go to Russia – it was banned social media in Ukraine i.e.: OK and VK).

The issue of trafficking in Ukrainian children developed in a similar way: sometimes propagandists were simply responding to messages from Western law enforcement officials (which were immediately amplified

CONCLUSIONS (CONTINUED)

with emphasis and exaggeration to the advantage of the Russian authorities). During the battle for Bakhmut, however, they used messages about pedophiles and transplant surgeons buying Ukrainian children to convince the local population to wait for the arrival of the Russian military and not to go to the West. This issue was also often used for self-promotion: so did the head of the State Duma V. Volodin. Propagandists intensified their efforts on this issue after the announcement of Putin's arrest by the court in The Hague - probably to distract attention and to make opponents worse.

TYPICAL STRATEGIES: TOP SPEAKERS ARE INVOLVED ONLY IN THE MOST IMPORTANT CAMPAIGNS, AND USUALLY WITH SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE. During the campaign about the alleged destruction of the Patriot system, all possible channels of communication were involved. It was based on the statements of the Russian military,

which referred to the video that partially confirmed this event. Such issues are used in a highly technological way, based on the principle of "arousing interest". The typical campaign looked like this: the first reports about the destroyed unit of equipment appeared in the network of Russian pro-war Telegram channels: unconfirmed information was first "leaked" to such unofficial resources. This communication channel aroused interest in the next briefing of the Russian Defense Ministry, where such information was usually confirmed. And the results of these briefings were further popularized by the media close to the Ministry of Defense, as well as by a network of bot farms.

It is noteworthy that the vertical of the Ministry of Defense was primarily involved, but given the high profile, S. Shoigu and V. Putin commented on the success of such a scale. Their statements were later repeated through more familiar channels. In addition, if possible, Western speakers were involved,

whose opinions were disseminated both to their own and foreign audiences, for whom the statements of "friends" should appear more authoritative - their statements were disseminated through Twitter..

TYPICAL STRATEGIES: INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGNS ARE MORE LIKELY TO SUCCEED WHEN THERE ARE STATEMENTS FROM RESPECTED INSTITUTIONS AND SPEAKERS, EVEN IF THEY ARE FAKE. The first attempts of Russian propaganda to spread in the West the narrative about the active resale of Western weapons from Ukraine did not have a noticeable success before April 2022. The authors referred to anonymous sources or did not quote them at all. However, the really significant reach was achieved later, thanks to the promotion and exaggeration of the statements of European institutions on this issue, which were later refuted. Similar rhetoric was spread by deputy V. Spartz, whose quotes were noticed in the Russian opposition and pro-Ukrainian segment.