



## **Diving into Pro-Russia Propaganda Targeting Chinese Audiences in Malaysia**

*By Kuek Ser Kuang Keng, Dr. Chan Wei See, Wong Kai Hui*

### **Introduction**

Since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, we have observed a flurry of pro-Russia disinformation presented in Chinese language circulating among the online communities of Chinese-speaking Malaysians. This disinformation aims to shape the audience's views towards the war and its various stakeholders.

Most of this disinformation was carefully crafted to fit the established cognitive frameworks of "US vs. China" prevalent among Chinese-speaking Malaysians. It often tapped into the popular pro-Beijing sentiment among the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. Consequently, the messages and narratives were unique and different from the pro-Russia disinformation spreading in Europe and other languages. This phenomenon warrants a more detailed and systematic investigation to better understand the nature and structure of such influence operations.

To investigate this influence operation, we went beyond disinformation. In our dataset, we included propaganda that might be factual but was presented in a biased and misleading way to promote a particular point of view. We are aware that pro-Ukraine/US/West narratives in the Chinese language were also promoted and spread simultaneously, but it was less pervasive compared to the opposite, hence we did not include them in this investigation.

This investigation aims to identify:

1. The main narratives of pro-Russia propaganda in the Chinese language that were distributed on major social media platforms targeting Chinese-speaking audiences in Malaysia during the Russia-Ukraine war; and
2. The networks that promoted and disseminated such propaganda, and their actors and distribution patterns.

*Note: Initially, the investigation included Chinese-speaking communities in Singapore, but the dataset for that audience was too small for analysis. Read more details in the **Limitations of this investigation** section of this report.*



## Methodology

The investigation employed a multi-phase forensic approach to compile and analyze a dataset of pro-Russia propaganda across Facebook and other social media platforms.

### Phase 1:

We compiled a list of known Facebook accounts - public accounts, pages, and groups - that have been spreading pro-Russia content in the Chinese language. Their public posts which contain keywords related to the war were scraped.

Natural Language Processing (NLP) technology was utilized to cluster these posts based on narratives discernible to the NLP algorithm. This was followed by manual reviews and refinement by the researchers to produce a set of Boolean searches consisting of keywords combined by specific Boolean operators.

### Phase 2:

All publicly available posts on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube) posted between 1 Feb 2022 and 28 Feb 2023 were scraped based on the lexicon built from phase 1. However, only Facebook posts (10,465) were further analyzed due to data limitations (see **Limitations of this investigation** for more details).

An NLP algorithm was performed to cluster the posts based on content narratives, followed by manual reviews to remove irrelevant posts. Then, a subset of 1,636 highly engaging posts (with 15 or more interactions including reactions, shares, and comments) was selected. This dataset was further shrunk to 1,151 pro-Russia propaganda posts after a second round of manual review. Then, they were categorized into 12 primary narratives through manual reading and clustering.

Network analysis was done on the 1,151 posts to identify the actors and visualize distribution patterns. Comparison with previous investigation results found new actors.



We then tracked the provenance of selected narratives and posts to identify the actors behind them and the entities that helped amplify them.

*Note: The data scraping, NLP clustering, and network analysis were supported by our project partner, [The Nerve](#), a data insights company based in the Philippines.*

### **Background & Context**

There were 33.03 million internet users in Malaysia in 2023, when internet penetration stood at 96.8 percent of the total population (33.4 million), according to the report titled “Digital 2023: Malaysia” by DataReportal.

From the data compiled from Meta, ByteDance, Twitter, and Google’s advertising resources, the number of users on the top social media platforms is as follows:

Social media platform	No. of users in Malaysia (million)	Proportion to population
Facebook	20.25	60.63%
TikTok	19.30	57.78%
Instagram	13.90	41.62%
Twitter	4.40	13.17%
Little Red Book (Xiaohongshu)	2.53*	7.57%

Table 1: Number of users of different social media platforms in Malaysia.

*Source: DIGITAL 2023: MALAYSIA (<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-malaysia>)*



\* No official data for Little Red Book: (1) <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/l5FgS-1RsLWOJ7ouiq6LnA> ; (2) <https://www.silvermouse.com.my/blog/how-popular-are-xiaohongshu-lemon8-in-malaysia/#:~:text=A%20more%20recent%20report%20indicates,highest%20among%20countries%20outside%20China>

While the new social platform TikTok is rapidly gaining popularity among young communities, Facebook is still the most popular social platform among users.

## Overview of the findings

This research aims to study how pro-Russia propaganda information in the Chinese language was framed and distributed on Facebook, targeting the Chinese-speaking community in Southeast Asia, especially Malaysia, during the first year of the Ukraine-Russia war from 01 Feb 2022 to 28 Feb 2023.

In general, the Chinese-speaking community in Southeast Asia does not have direct cultural affinity and emotional ties to either Ukraine or Russia. The research found that pro-Russia propaganda messages were mainly conveyed and amplified through the established cognitive framework of “US versus China” or “West versus Russia” rivalries, often immensely loaded with sensationalized adverbs and adjectives to reinforce the existing anti-US or pro-China sentiments, without focusing on specific factual progress of the Ukrainian-Russian war.

A significant part of the propaganda war was rooted in the long-standing US-China rivalry. For example, the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) were often depicted as hegemonic, self-interested, manipulative, hypocritical, and guilty, while China was portrayed as principled, peace-loving, and capable of counterbalancing Western hegemony.

The propagandists depicted US intervention in the Ukraine-Russia conflict as driven solely by its geopolitical interests. They claimed that the US aimed to prolong the conflict through its “puppet”, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky, to cause economic turmoil for both the EU and Russia — a strategy that purportedly “kills two birds with one stone”. The narrative suggested that by destabilizing Russia and the EU, the US aimed to reinforce its global hegemony. The propaganda argued that the instability in Europe could prompt capital flight from the continent to the US and bolster American fuel sales, strengthening its



position as a leading global oil and gas producer. The argument also claimed that the US profited significantly from supplying weapons to Ukraine.

The *"US/EU sanctions have failed"* narrative was the most prevalent among the 12 narratives, accounting for 20.16% of the reviewed posts. It also garnered the highest number of shares and interactions on public pages and groups on Facebook. The narrative that the *"US is behind the war and benefiting from it"* has the third-highest prevalence (18.33%) while the narrative that "Ukraine has been duped by the US/NATO/West" appears in 7.12% of the posts.

The pro-Russian propaganda also included narratives that heroized Vladimir Putin and glorified Russia or its military (19.46%) while discrediting Zelensky or Ukraine (5.30%). The propagandists praised how Putin and the Kremlin successfully "resisted" US and Western hegemony, stressing that sanctions against Russia not only failed to harm it but also backfired against the US and EU, undermining their global position. The trend of de-dollarization was enthusiastically cited as evidence, aligning with the narrative that "US/EU sanctions have failed".

Furthermore, among the propaganda posts, the narrative of "China as a global power and Russia's ally" is also highly prevalent (15.64% of all reviewed posts). The posts can be divided into two strands: one explicitly celebrating China's role as a loyal and reliable ally of Russia, and the other highlighting China's objective, neutral, and peace-loving stance during the war, with an undertone of condemning the US and NATO expansion for disrupting world peace.

Although this research focused on pro-Russia propaganda, we found that a significant portion of the posts (close to 20%) aimed to enhance China's image and inflate its importance in the war. A small cluster of posts (3.82%) argued that "Taiwan could be the next Ukraine" as the Russian invasion motivated China to annex the island.

Interestingly, the "Biochemical Lab conspiracy theory" narrative, despite having the lowest prevalence (3.48%) among the 12 main narratives, garnered the highest average number of shares on Facebook.

Our analysis of the distribution network and patterns revealed that more than half (60%) of the posts contained visual elements, with 33% featuring videos and 27% photos. This aligns with social media trends where visual content, particularly video, garners more engagement than text.



Half of the pro-Russia posts (51%) were shared by pro-Beijing Facebook pages/groups that were part of several interconnected networks. At least a dozen of these entities were known for spreading pro-Beijing disinformation, some since the 2019 Hong Kong pro-democracy protests.

Interestingly, some of the pages/groups that spread pro-Russia propaganda were supporters of Pakatan Harapan, the largest ruling political coalition in Malaysia, even though the current administration officially condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

### The main pro-Russian narratives

#### The top narratives

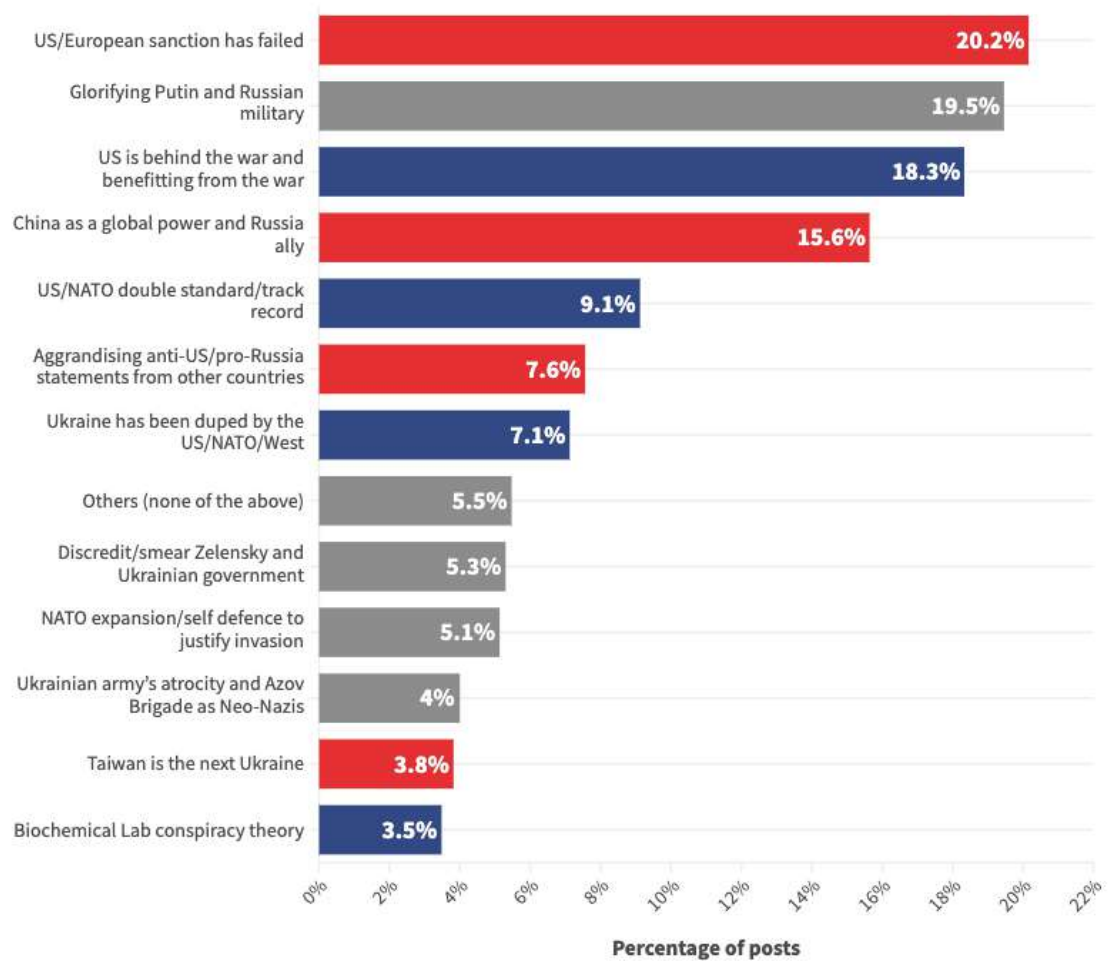




Chart 1: The main pro-Russia narratives ranked by percentage of posts.

Red: Narratives amplifying China’s role and anti-US voices.

Blue: Narratives discrediting the US, NATO, and the West.

Note: Total number of posts is 1,151 but one post can contain more than one narrative.

Narrative clusters	No. of posts	Percentage	Interactions	Average interactions per post	Shares	Average shares per post
US/EU sanctions have failed	232	20.16%	39,409	169.9	2,666	11.5
Glorifying Putin and the Russian military	224	19.46%	14,783	66.0	1,288	5.8
US is behind the war and benefiting from it	211	18.33%	14,572	69.1	1,112	5.3
China as a global power and Russia's ally	180	15.64%	16,431	91.3	1,099	6.1
US/NATO’s double standard/ track record	105	9.12%	11,250	107.1	878	8.4
Aggrandising anti-US/pro-Russia statements from other countries	87	7.56%	6,461	74.3	524	6.0
Ukraine has been duped by the US/ NATO/West	82	7.12%	6,902	84.2	599	7.3



Discredit/smear Zelensky and the Ukrainian government	61	5.30%	3,265	53.5	344	5.6
NATO expansion/self-defense to justify Russia's invasion	59	5.13%	4,901	83.1	411	7.0
Ukrainian army's atrocity and Azov Brigade as Neo-Nazis	46	4.00%	2,804	61.0	319	6.9
Taiwan is the next Ukraine	44	3.82%	4,284	97.4	263	6.0
Biochemical Lab conspiracy theory	40	3.48%	3,111	77.8	462	11.6
Others (none of the above)	63	5.47%	3,709	58.9	325	5.2

Table 2: Analytics of the 12 pro-Russia narratives ranked by percentage of posts.

Note: Total number of posts is 1,151 but one post can contain more than one narrative.

### **(1) US/EU sanctions have failed**

*(Percentage: 20.14%; Interactions: 39,406)*

In general, the posts under this cluster asserted that sanctions on Russia not only failed to punish Russia but also harmed the West even more. Some posts praised Putin's demand for the gas payment to be made in Rubles as an effective counter-sanction measure. This, combined with the increasing popularity of the Chinese RMB, was said to have triggered a trend of de-dollarization that weakened the dominance of the US dollar.





It was claimed that Europe regretted launching the sanctions amidst gas shortages, inflation, food shortages, and other economic challenges. Supporting arguments included: (1) Italy warned the EU to halt the sanctions on Russia, saying “We are all deceived by the US”; (2) Germany began paying for Russian gas in Rubles, and the United Kingdom decided to do the same; and (3) Switzerland halted its move to freeze Russian assets and reinstated its neutral stance immediately after a significant withdrawal of capital from the country.

Some propagandists ridiculed the EU for finding loopholes to circumvent its sanctions regime. For example, European fuel giant Shell was allegedly producing blended oil containing less than 50 percent of Russian oil so it could be classified as a “non-Russian product”.

## ***(2) Glorifying Putin and the Russian military***

*(Percentage: 19.44%; Interactions: 14,783)*

A significant number of posts glorified Vladimir Putin, Russia, and the Russian military, justifying their actions against Ukraine. These posts celebrated the technological advancement of Russia’s jet fighters and weapons, cheered for Putin or Russia’s successes in the war, or exaggerated their achievements to the extent that some of them claimed that Russia had won the war.

These posts framed the Russian invasion as an act of self-defense against US and Western hegemony, claiming that Putin launched the war to deter future NATO expansion. Some argued that Putin intended to unify Ukraine and Russia and liberate the population in Luhansk and Donetsk, where the Ukrainian military had bombarded for eight years. Others claimed that Putin showed mercy towards Ukraine by slowing down Russia’s advancement to avoid more fatalities.

Some of these posts told heartwarming stories about Putin, praising his humility and amiable interactions with the Russian people. This type of propaganda was also applied to Russian soldiers, depicting them as compassionate individuals who fed civilians in the “liberated” cities.



### ***(3) US is behind the war and is benefitting from it***

*(Percentage: 18.32%; Interactions: 14,572)*

The US was accused of instigating the war, causing the suffering of the Ukrainian people, the global food crisis, and the inflation of consumer goods. Many posts blamed the US for initiating and prolonging the war for its benefit. They claimed that the superpower sought to weaken Russia and the EU to maintain its dominant position in the world. Some posts viewed the race between the US and the EU as a competition between unilateralism and multilateralism, with Washington struggling to maintain its dictating role while the EU attempted to rise as a competing power.

It was also claimed that the US prolonged the war for economic gains, as capital would flow to the US from Europe due to the conflict. The US also profited significantly from the fuel price hike following the war, increased gas exports to Europe, and arms supplies to Ukraine.

Many posts accused the US of “threatening” China to join the sanctions against Russia for US interests. A post by a Chinese news anchor – “Can you help me fight your friend so that I can focus on fighting you later?” – was widely lauded and shared. This post implied that Washington intended to use China in its fight against Russia so it could later focus on tackling China after Russia’s fall.

The remaining posts accused the US of (1) spreading disinformation to smear and demonize Russia when it warned that Russia intended to invade Ukraine before the war; (2) bombing the Nord Stream pipeline together with Ukraine to sabotage the gas trade between Europe and Russia; (3) bullying Russia and violating its principles on property rights by imposing sanctions and freezing Russian assets.

### ***(4) China as a global power and Russia's ally***

*(Percentage: 15.63%; Interactions: 16,431)*

The posts in this cluster can be divided into two main tones: one explicitly celebrating China's partnership with Russia, and the other subtly condemning the US while emphasizing China's love for peace without directly stating that China and Russia are allies.



In the first tone, a large proportion of posts emphasized that China's economic interactions and cooperation with Russia had strengthened under Western trade sanctions. For instance, some boasted about Huawei's skyrocketing sales in Russia after US sanctions, some glorified how China managed to send goods to Russia by railway, and some highlighted the close cooperation between China and Russia in moon exploration and airspace programs.

In the second tone, the posts emphasized China's geographic proximity to Russia and celebrated their long-term harmonious and mutually beneficial relationship. In contrast, the US and NATO countries were portrayed as selfish and divisive. Some posts alleged that the US was threatening China to join the sanctions on Russia, but China chose peace and remained neutral. Other posts suggested that China would be targeted by NATO and the US if Russia were defeated, thus the two should forge a strategic partnership.

### ***(5) US/NATO double standard/track record***

*(Percentage: 9.11%; Interactions: 11,250)*

While Russia was accused of violating international laws during the war, pro-Russia propagandists revisited US and NATO's past military interventions, arguing that they had also violated international laws but were treated with different standards.

Posts in this cluster exaggerated US military participation in several wars, including those in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Some posts criticized the US for benefiting from continuous warfare through military equipment exports and argued that the US is not qualified to "disguise itself as a guardian of democracy and human rights". Some posts revisited the NATO aerial bombing campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War in 1999 and the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia which killed Chinese journalists. Some articles accused the US and its allies of interfering in China's internal affairs, including issues surrounding Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

Some posts alleged that Russia had captured personnel from the US, Canada, and other NATO countries from the Azovstal Iron and Steel Works factory, indicating these countries' direct participation in the war, as well as NATO's involvement in the "biochemical weapon development project" in Ukraine.



***(6) Aggrandizing anti-US / pro-Russia statements from other countries***

*(Percentage: 7.55%; Interactions: 6,461)*

This collection of posts highlighted and amplified certain critical comments against the US and NATO, especially from countries other than China and Russia. For instance, remarks by Irish Member of the EU Parliament Clare Daly, Indian Republic TV news anchor Arnab Goswami, and foreign ministers of India and Argentina were translated and exaggerated without providing clear context.

Conversely, pro-Russia remarks from politicians in countries such as Serbia, Turkey, and Germany were also magnified. For example, when French President Emmanuel Macron expressed opposition to a strong confrontation with Russia, his remarks were twisted to appear “supportive” of Putin, implying division or incoherence between the US and EU.

***(7) Ukraine has been duped by the US/NATO/West***

*(Percentage: 7.12%; Interactions: 6,902)*

Framing the war as a proxy conflict between the US/West and Russia, posts in this cluster alleged that Ukraine or Volodymyr Zelensky was duped by the US/West/NATO. They claimed that Ukraine was manipulated and controlled by the US, with no authority over its own country. Some posts alleged that Western countries have been sending outdated or flawed weapons to Ukraine to create the impression that the West was not genuine in assisting Ukraine. Some posts emphasized how Ukrainian citizens have become refugees and beggars as their country was used by the West as a tool to suppress Russia.

***(8) Discredit/smear Zelensky and the Ukrainian government***

*(Percentage: 5.3%; Interactions: 3,265)*

Many posts in this cluster belittled Volodymyr Zelensky, calling him a traitor to Ukraine and a puppet to the US and NATO, acting only on their wills. In contrast, some posts blamed Zelensky for refusing to end the war only to fulfill



his selfish desire to be a war hero. He was often described as a “comedian” or “actor” in a degrading tone.

Some propagandists discredited Zelensky as an incompetent and corrupt leader. One post cited ‘an unverified source’ and accused Zelensky of having US\$1.8 billion in his bank account in the US. It was also said that the Ukrainian government selectively allowed the rich to leave the country before the war broke out.

### ***(9) NATO expansion/self-defense to justify invasion***

*(Percentage: 5.12%; Interactions: 4,901)*

Framing Russia’s “special military operation” as a self-defense move instead of an invasion, this cluster of posts portrayed Russia as a victim of NATO’s eastward expansion, leaving it no choice but to defend itself. The US was depicted as the instigator of war behind Ukraine and NATO, and Russia’s military operation was glorified as resistance against US/West hegemony. NATO was portrayed as not keeping its promises and being responsible for the war.

### ***(10) Ukrainian army’s atrocity and Azov Brigade as Neo-Nazis***

*(Percentage: 3.99%; Interactions: 2804)*

The propagandists claimed that the Ukrainian army had been committing atrocities towards civilians. For example, Scott Ritter, a former US intelligence officer who contributed to Russian state media outlets RT and Sputnik, was quoted as saying that it was the Ukrainian, not Russian army, that killed hundreds of Ukrainian civilians in Bucha. One post alleged Ukraine, in a bid to blame Russia, fired two missiles at one of its hydropower dams, but they were fortunately shot down by the Russian army.

A significant number of posts accused the Azov Brigade, a volunteer paramilitary organization in Ukraine, of killing Russian-speaking civilians. An Italian correspondent in Ukraine cited in a few posts claimed that the Azov Brigade was a Nazi terrorist group responsible for killing civilians over the past eight years, but Ukraine blames Russia for the killing.



### ***(11) Taiwan is the next Ukraine***

*(Percentage: 3.82%; Interactions: 4,284)*

Taiwan was also frequently mentioned in pro-Russian posts as an analog to Ukraine. The main narratives include: (1) Taiwan should learn from the Ukraine-Russia war and realize it will not receive genuine assistance or protection from the US if China invades Taiwan; (2) Ukraine is an ‘internal affair’ of Russia, hence the US should not intervene in the sovereignty of another nation, and the same goes to Taiwan, which is ‘part of China’; (3) The US is using Taiwan as its tool to suppress China, and those who advocate for Taiwan's independence will lead Taiwan down the same destructive path as Ukraine.

### ***(12) Biochemical Lab conspiracy theory***

*(Percentage: 3.47%; Interactions: 3111)*

The posts in this cluster accused the US of setting up and leading biological or biochemical laboratories in Ukraine. However, their content varied in detail.

Regarding the number of labs, some posts claimed that Russia found evidence of 336 bio-labs in the US and worldwide, including Ukraine. Quoting a Russian source, one post claimed the US Department of Defence had conceded that the US had funded 46 bio-labs in Ukraine. Another post claimed that the US spent about US\$200 million to set up more than 30 bio-labs in Ukraine, some of which specialize in developing bio-weapons.

Regarding the source, most posts in this cluster asserted that Russia had found documents as evidence. A few posts explained that the evidence was discovered when the Russian army captured NATO commanding officer Roger L. Cloutier, who “possessed top secrets about the US research on lethal viruses at its biochemical laboratories in Ukraine”. Others cited an independent reporter who ‘revealed the bio-lab agreement between the US and Ukraine’ as the source.

There was also propaganda claiming (1) a NATO lab specializing in developing biochemical weapons was found inside the Azovstal Iron and Steel Work



factory; and (2) the COVID-19 virus came from US biological labs in Ukraine as a result of experiments conducted on bats.

### **(13) Others (none of above)**

*(Percentage: 5.47%; Interactions: 3709)*

This narrative cluster consists of posts that do not fall under the above 12 clusters, and there is no common theme across the cluster. Noteworthy posts include:

1. One post quoted a China CCTV report and claimed that Hunter Biden was involved in the US biological lab projects in Ukraine, funded by an investment firm led by him. The report claimed that “the UK's Daily Mail revealed earlier that Biden's son was truly involved in the biological lab project in Ukraine”. However, a check showed that the Daily Mail only reported the allegation as a ‘wild propaganda campaign’ by Russia.
2. One post highlighted internal conflicts within the US, especially the division between Republicans and Democrats regarding the Russia-Ukraine war.
3. Several posts accused Western media of spreading disinformation and smearing Russia.
4. Another post claimed the super-rich were frightened and alarmed by the West’s violation of property rights following the sanctions on Russia, prompting Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-Shing to urgently sell his core assets in the UK.

### **Distribution networks, entities, and patterns**

Out of the 1,151 Facebook posts compiled, more than half (60%) contain visual elements - 33% with videos and 27% with photos. The videos include Facebook native videos and YouTube videos. The remaining 40% are posts with links. Only one post is a live-stream video. This observation aligns with most social media trends, where visual content, especially video, tends to get more engagement than text.

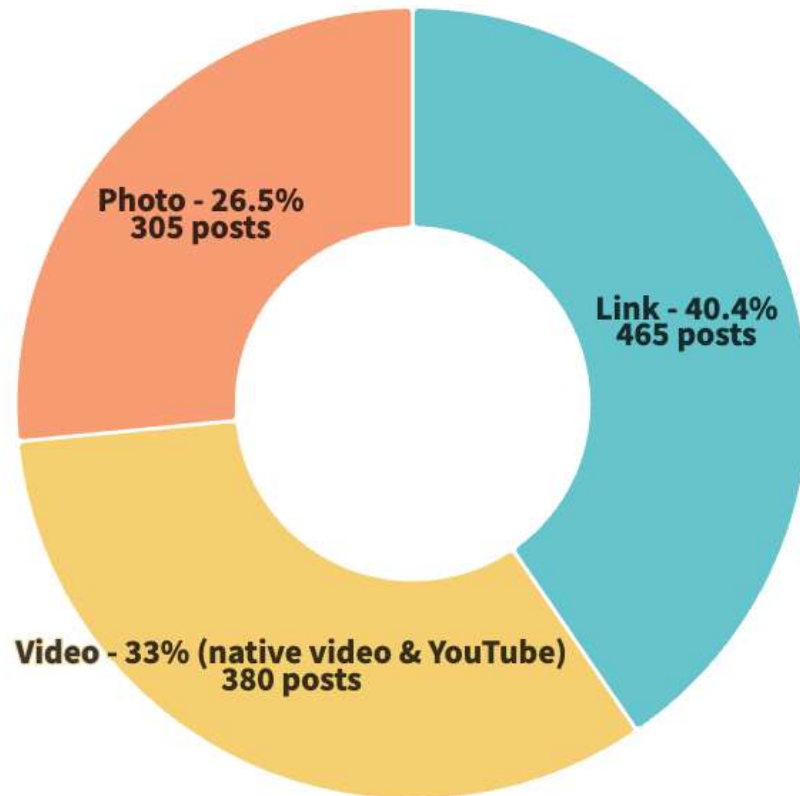


Chart 2: Formats of the 1,151 posts.

The posts were made by 89 Facebook entities, with 80% being groups and the rest pages. The entities can be largely divided into three categories: (1) Pro-Beijing groups/pages that distributed content favorable to China; (2) Pro-Pakatan Harapan groups/pages that shared posts supporting the ruling coalition, and (3) Community chat groups that catered to Malaysians from specific regions or cities like Sabah or Johor Bahru.





**Categories of entities**

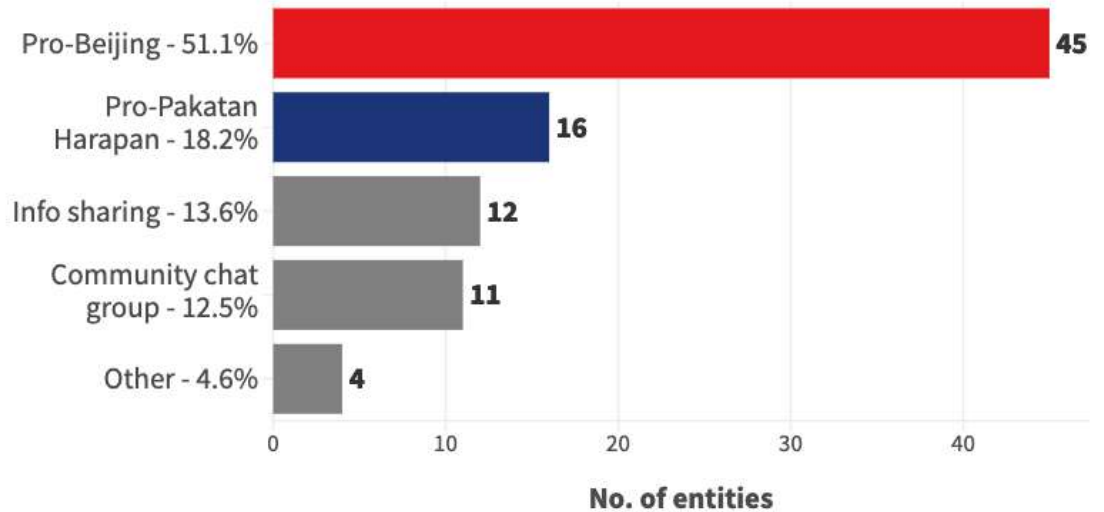


Chart 3: Categorization of the 88 pages/groups.

Posts from pro-Beijing entities make up half (51%) of the total. The top 10 pages/groups with the highest number of pro-Russia posts are considered pro-Beijing entities.

Name	Page or group	Category	No. of interactions	No. of posts	No. of shares
鼎力支持习近平主席 ★专页★	group	Pro-Beijing	18,381	176	1,194
News World	page	Pro-Beijing	7,427	95	782
全球华人支持习近平主席	group	Pro-Beijing	9,252	93	797
地球人軍事風雲	page	Pro-Beijing	4,347	87	229
中國正能量	group	Pro-Beijing	8,528	78	760
心系祖国 同心筑梦	group	Pro-Beijing	2,626	52	263
全球華人自由談	group	Pro-Beijing	3,369	48	270



全球華人軍事聯盟	group	Pro-Beijing	2,047	45	275
統一中國自由談	group	Pro-Beijing	2,721	44	278
國際軍情觀察點	page	Pro-Beijing	15,301	44	891

We also performed network analysis based on the sources of their posts, which could be websites, YouTube channels, or other Facebook pages. Through this analysis, we can identify communities of pages/groups (those that are more connected based on the sources of their posts) and determine which pages/groups played a more central role.

Nodes are Facebook pages and public groups who have shared content found in the scan. They are sized according to how central they are in this network. A connection is established between two nodes if they have shared from the same sources (sources can either be external websites, YouTube channels, or other Facebook pages). A community detection algorithm "clusters" nodes together based on how connected they are through the established links.

**comm\_louvain** ● Community 0 ● Community 3 ● Community 1 ● Community 2 ● Community 4  
● Community 5



Chart 4: Results of network analysis of the posts. Explore the different Facebook pages and groups identified by accessing the [interactive version of the chart](#).

We cross-checked the pages/groups with [Doublethink Lab](#) (DTL), a Taiwan-based organization that tracks disinformation campaigns from China, and found



that at least 12 of them have been identified by DTL as entities spreading pro-Beijing disinformation. Some of them have been distributing such content as early as 2019 during the pro-democracy protest in Hong Kong.

### **Provenance tracking**

Although many of the Facebook posts in our dataset have been removed from the platform for undisclosed reasons, our scraping process managed to collect the text and links contained in the removed posts. By searching the internet for this text and links, we were able to track the provenance of their content.

Two provenance tracking cases are detailed in this report:

#### **1. The US plots to weaken Europe**

Various Chinese state media outlets were found to be proactively promoting the narrative that the US plotted to weaken Europe or the EU by perpetuating the Russia-Ukraine war.

This narrative claimed that the US was using the Ukraine crisis to jeopardize the investment environment in Europe, prompting a capital flight from Europe to the US to support its domestic economy. Repackaged from the pre-existing narrative that “the US wants to see a weaker Europe,” it accused the US of intentionally prolonging the war by, among other things, supplying weapons to Ukraine.

The prime mover of this narrative in the Chinese language sphere was the Chinese state media. Our investigation traced the narrative to a professor at the National Defence University and Air Force Major General, Qiao Liang, who co-authored the book “Unrestricted Warfare”. He was interviewed by Chinese state-owned media [China News](#) on 26 February 2022, two days after Russia invaded Ukraine. He opined that the US was leveraging the Ukraine crisis to damage the European market so it could benefit from the influx of European capital and the surge in arms sales, thereby consolidating the dominant position of the US dollar. This report was reposted by other Chinese state media, including [Youth.cn](#), [Huaxia](#), [Sina](#) and [Wangyi \(163\)](#).

In the following one and a half years, high-ranking Russian officials and Chinese state media consistently pursued this narrative in different forms and presentations, as seen in the excerpts of selected media reports listed below.



Leading Chinese state media, such as Chinese News Agency Xinhua, People's Daily, CCTV, and Huanqiu have all spread the narrative in their reports, analyses, or opinion pieces. The narrative then found its supporters and amplifiers in scholars, commentators, reporters, influencers, and social media users who often suggested that Europe had been betrayed or "stabbed in the back" by the US.

### 26 Feb 2022 | China News



首页 — 国际新闻

字号：大 中 小

## 专家解读俄乌局势：普京为何要走这一步棋？

2022年02月26日 22:36 来源：中国新闻网 [参与互动](#)

**中新网**北京2月26日电(记者 张尼)自24日俄罗斯宣布在顿巴斯地区开展军事行动以来，俄乌局势引发全球关注。面对美国、欧盟、英国制裁压力，为何俄罗斯总统普京仍选择走出这一步棋？未来局势又会朝什么方向发展？**中新网**电话专访了军事专家乔良。



Source: <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gj/2022/02-26/9687038.shtml>



On 24 March 2022, Xinhua News Agency published a report titled “Russia-Ukraine Conflict: The US Stirs up Trouble, and the World Suffers Deeply,” in which its reporters wrote, “Russia has been conducting special military operations in Ukraine for a month now. However, the US, instead of taking practical steps to ease the situation, continues to ‘add fuel to the fire’ through means such as providing weapons and imposing sanctions.”

“...leveraging the crisis in Ukraine, the US has strengthened its control over Europe in security matters, making it even more challenging for Europe to pursue a path of strategic autonomy...”

## 24 March 2022 | Xinhuanet

www.news.cn  
新华网  
NEWS  
www.xinhuanet.com

新华社通讯社主办  
公司官网  
股票代码: 603888

学习进行时 高层 时政 人事 国际 财经 网评 港澳 台湾 思客智库 全球连线 教育 科技 科普 体育 文化 健康 军事 访谈 视频 | 金融 汽车 食品 房产 信息化 乡村振兴 溯源中国 城市 旅游 能源 会展 彩票 娱乐 时尚 悦读 公益 书画 一带一路 亚太网 上市

新华网 > 国际 > 正文

— 2022 —  
03/24  
18:32:33  
来源: 新华网

字体: 小 中 大 分享到: [WeChat] [Weibo] [Facebook] [Twitter]

新华社北京3月24日电 (国际观察) 俄乌冲突：美国兴风作浪 世界深受其害

新华社记者黄河 邓仙来 李骥志

俄罗斯在乌克兰开展特别军事行动已经一个月。如今美国不仅没有采取实际举措推动局势缓和，反而通过武器援助、制裁等方式不断“煽风点火”。

分析人士指出，以美国为首的北约持续东扩是俄乌冲突爆发的根源。美国为维护自身霸权，不惜牺牲包括欧洲盟友在内的他国利益，这种做法早已引发各方不满。解决乌克兰危机，当务之急是推动当事方对话谈判，长远之道是摒弃冷战思维，真正构建平衡、有效、可持续的安全架构，使欧洲免于战火，使其他地区和国家不被牵连。

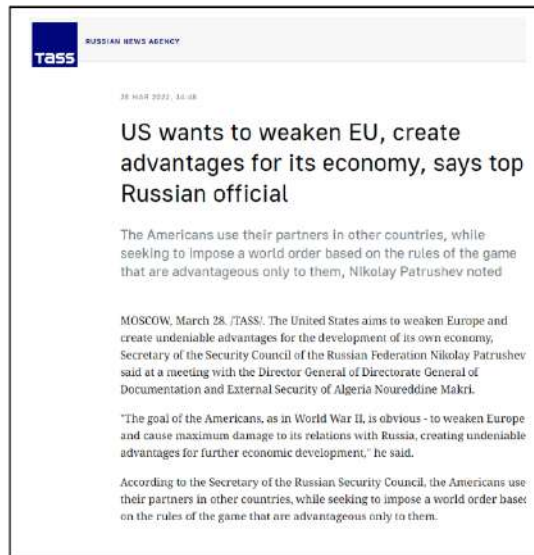
霸权思维兴风作浪

Source: [http://www.news.cn/world/2022-03/24/c\\_1128500752.htm](http://www.news.cn/world/2022-03/24/c_1128500752.htm)

On 28 March 2022, Russian state media TASS and Sputnik cited Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Nikolay Patrushev, as saying, ‘the goal of the Americans, as in World War II, is obvious – to weaken Europe and cause maximum damage to its relations with Russia, creating undeniable advantages for further economic development.’



28 Mar 2022 | TASS



28 Mar 2022 | Sputnik



Sources:

1. <https://tass.com/world/1428367>
2. <https://sputnikglobe.com/20220328/us-seeks-to-weaken-europe--derail-russia-eu-ties-russian-security-council-head-says-1094262999.html>

A day after the Russian Secretary of Security Council made the above statements, China Central Television (CCTV) published a commentary titled “Europe needs to be vigilant about being stabbed in the back by the US once again.” It argued that US President Joe Biden's “slip of the tongue” that Putin “cannot continue to hold power” has “further exposed Washington's true intentions, which are to curb Russia through the Ukrainian crisis, tie up and weaken the EU, and maintain its dominance.”

It also quoted a journalist, 库萨 (Kusa), working in Kyiv as saying that the US is taking advantage of the sanctions against Russia to enter the European energy market. “This not only allows the US to maximize its interests but also further entangles Europe.”

This was followed by a strong-worded comment: “Forcing Europe to stab itself with a knife and then profiting from it – a country that can be so ruthless to its



allies is none other than the US! However, for the US, which is accustomed to betraying and selling out Europe, this is already a common occurrence.”

## 29 March 2022 | CCTV

新闻频道 > 国际新闻

### 国际锐评 | 欧洲需警惕再次被美国背后捅刀

来源：中央广播电视总台央视新闻 | 2022年03月29日 16:32:08

当地时间27日，美国总统拜登结束对欧洲为期三天的访问返回华盛顿。“除了加码制裁、加大武器供给，拜登对如何结束乌克兰危机，没有给出任何具体的答案。”美国《政客》网站做出这样的评价。

事实正是如此。拜登访欧三天，没有说一句敦促和平、调解局面的话，反而在煽风点火，唯恐俄乌双方打不下去。在参加北约、七国集团和欧盟三场峰会中，美方提出关于能源和军事安全等领域的一系列主张，以拉拢欧洲盟友一致对俄。但细究这些主张，主要是为了维护美国自身利益，无法解决欧洲的当务之急，对乌克兰危机只会火上浇油。

值得注意的是，美国领导人在波兰首都华沙发表演讲时，脱口而出称普京“不能继续掌权”，令国际社会哗然。随后白宫一位官员出面解释称，这一言论并不代表华盛顿对俄政策的转变，也不是支持俄罗斯的政权更迭。

尽管有官方出面“纠偏”，但拜登的“失言”进一步暴露出华盛顿的真正图谋，那就是借乌克兰危机遏制俄罗斯、捆绑与弱化欧盟、维持霸权。而对俄罗斯领导人的公然挑衅，不由令人想起美国此前在世界其他地区搞“颜色革命”的套路。

欧洲对此表现出相当的警觉。比如，法国总统马克龙强调，法国的目标是通过外交手段实现停火和撤军，“我们不应该让事情升级，无论是言语还是行动”。

Source: <https://news.cctv.com/2022/03/29/ARTIECIEV48BlhO54DwpkG8a220329.shtml?spm=C94212.PBi4fu284IjM.EqrnPf7WdfbU.16>

On 22 April 2022, a YouTube channel named 域外编撰者 (Extraterritorial Editors), which has posted more than 300 videos, uploaded a video that outlining five goals that the US has achieved with the Russian-Ukraine war, one of which was its intention to weaken the European economy. This argument was essentially repackaged from that of Qiao Liang (see above) without quoting him. While its influence on YouTube was limited (having only 1.55K subscribers), this channel was popular on Chinese social media, where it has been posting similar original videos. By the time of writing, it had gathered 1.66 million followers and 5.112 million accumulated likes on [Lixigua](#), a popular Chinese video-sharing platform.



This particular video was reposted on Facebook on the same day by a page called 南方前沿 South Daily, a name identical to the verified official page of Guangdong state-owned newspaper Southern Daily on the Chinese video-sharing platform Ixigua.

22 April 2022 | Youtube



22 April 2022 | South Daily



Sources:

1. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCrC\\_ajy1RA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCrC_ajy1RA)
2. <https://www.facebook.com/profile/100068271968799/search/?q=%E6%8B%9C%E7%99%BB%E6%8C%91%E8%B5%B7%E4%BF%84%E4%B9%8C%E5%86%B2%E7%AA%81%E5%AE%8C%E6%88%90%E5%88%A9%E7%9B%8A%E9%9B%86%E5%9B%A2%E6%84%BF%E6%9C%9B%E6%B8%85%E5%8D%95>

A month later, the narrative reemerged in Chinese mainstream media. Chinese state media Huanqiu.net (环球网) posted an article titled "The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has lasted for over two months. How many times has Europe been stabbed by the US?", written by a commentator using the pseudonym 朝阳少侠 (Chaoyang Young Hero). The article listed five issues Europe has faced since the beginning of the war, including an energy crisis, food crisis, refugee crisis, increased defense budget, and the loss of its "strategic autonomy".





The writer argued, “At this point, some Europeans are just waking up from their dreams... By exerting extreme pressure and triggering the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the US has bound the EU to the forefront of geopolitical conflicts in the heart of the Eurasian continent. This is done solely to fulfill its strategic goals of controlling Europe, containing Russia, and shifting its focus to the Indo-Pacific region.”

The Communist Youth League of China (CYLC), the youth wing of the Chinese Communist Party, reposted the report on another state-owned Chinese media 澎湃 (The Paper), on the same day.

22 May 2022 | Huanqiu.net



22 May 2022 | Pengpai



Sources:

1. <https://m.huanqiu.com/article/47uNORWwMk4>
2. [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_17973732](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_17973732)

The narrative resurfaced in Chinese mainstream media again on 1 November 2022, when the state-owned Hong Kong Central News Agency carried a report titled “Russian Foreign Minister: The US’ objective is to weaken the European



Union.” Citing CCTV, the report quoted Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov as saying, “The US’ goal is to thoroughly ‘bleed’ the EU economically, leading to its deindustrialization.”

1 Nov 2022 | Hong Kong Central News Agency

📍 首頁 -> 國際

## 俄外長：美國的目的是削弱歐盟

分享到:

2022-11-01 18:23 | 稿件來源: 香港中通社

【字號: 大 中 小】

香港中通社11月1日電 俄烏戰事發生以來，歐洲與美國一道對俄羅斯施加多輪制裁，但制裁的反噬效應令不少高度依賴俄能源的歐洲國家深陷危機。俄外長拉夫羅夫近日在訪問中表示，美國的目的是在軍事和經濟上削弱歐盟。



俄羅斯外長拉夫羅夫。圖源：新華社

Source: <http://www.hkcna.hk/docDetail.jsp?id=100203935&channel=2810>



The narrative continued to make occasional appearances on Chinese state media throughout the war. China's persistence in pursuing the narrative is perhaps most revealing when People's Daily, the most authoritative mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, also amplified the narrative.

In an in-depth analysis titled "The US has Disrupted European Stability by Exploiting the Crisis in Ukraine" published on 30 May 2023, the daily said, "Since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, the US has been actively fanning the flames and implementing extreme sanctions, leading to the crisis expanding and persisting, resulting in the largest geopolitical disaster in post-Cold War Europe. The US is using the crisis to further bind Europe's dependence on the US in energy and security, and restrain European strategic autonomy. The deteriorating security situation prompted European countries to increase military spending, allowing the US to reap benefits. The economic losses and refugee crisis caused by the war are disproportionately borne by European countries."



30 May 2023 | People's Daily

人民网 >> 国际

## “美国利用乌克兰危机破坏了欧洲稳定”（深度观察）

——美国如何从乌克兰危机中攫取战略利益①

本报记者 周卓斌 邢雪 刘仲华

2023年05月30日06:22 | 来源：人民网 - 人民日报

Tf 小字号

乌克兰危机爆发以来，美国大搞拱火助战、极限制裁，导致危机扩大化、持久化，造成冷战后欧洲最大的地缘政治灾难。美国借危机进一步绑架欧洲在能源和安全上对美国的依赖，遏制欧洲战略自主。安全形势恶化刺激欧洲各国提高军费，美国坐收渔翁之利。战争带来的经济损失和难民危机又不成比例地由欧洲国家承担。

Source: <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0530/c1002-40001706.html>

The reports and social media posts presented above are non-exhaustive. However, they are sufficient for us to conclude that the Chinese state media have been consistently pursuing this narrative since the beginning of the war, at least until the first half of 2023.

### 2. Russian oil giant sponsored “anti-war protest”

Our tracking and analysis found that a Chinese-language video featuring an “anti-war protest” by Serbian football fans at the UEFA Europa League was distributed and amplified by propagandists with selective information and context to criticize the US.

The earliest instance of the video in Chinese we were able to track was posted by Chinese media outlet **Guancha** (观察者网) on 18 March 2022. The [post](#) was



then shared by a Facebook account named [Ben Hui](#) in a public Facebook group [Global Chinese Free Talk \(全球华人自由谈\)](#).

The video showed Serbian football fans holding banners listing US military interventions in over 20 countries at a UEFA Europa League game in Serbia.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/realGuancha/videos/2052618834940713/>

The caption of Guancha's post reads:

【壮观！塞尔维亚球迷看台上高举横幅讽刺美国，反击所谓的“反战西方”】3月17日，在塞尔维亚首都贝尔格莱德举行的欧联杯比赛上，贝尔格莱德红星队的球迷们举起多道横幅，上面写着阿富汗、叙利亚等20多个曾被美国入侵的国家以及相应年份，最下方是反战横幅，写着约翰·列侬歌词“我们要说的是，给和平一个机会”。俄罗斯卫星社记者里德说：“这是对所谓的‘反战西方’的尖锐回应。”

Translation: [Spectacular! Serbian fans in the stands held up banners satirizing the US and fighting back against the so-called 'anti-war West'] On 17 March 2022, during a UEFA Europa League match in Belgrade, fans of Red Star Belgrade held up banners listing the names and years of countries invaded by the US. At the bottom was an anti-war banner with the lyrics of John Lennon's song "All we are saying is give peace a chance." Russian news agency



Sputnik's reporter Wyatt Reed said this is a sharp response to the so-called 'anti-war West'.

The main source cited in the video was another [video post](#) about the protest by Reed on his account on X (formerly Twitter).



Source: <https://twitter.com/wyattreed13/status/1504648994085122068>

On the same day, Guancha published a text-based [news article](#) about the protest. However, it described Reed as a “foreign media personnel” instead of identifying him as a correspondent for Russian state-owned media Sputnik.



有国外媒体人在社交媒体上表示，“今晚，塞尔维亚最受欢迎的足球队贝尔格莱德红星的数万名球迷举着20多个国家的标语，对所谓的反战西方做出了尖锐的回应。”



与塞尔维亚球迷的“高调”形成鲜明对比的是西方主流媒体针对横幅事件的集体沉默，此前的“反战”积极性无影无踪。

Source: [https://www.guancha.cn/internation/2022\\_03\\_18\\_630896.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/internation/2022_03_18_630896.shtml)

Reed's [LinkedIn page](#) says he served as a Sputnik correspondent in Washington, DC, from Oct 2019 until June 2023 but his [X profile](#) does not mention his association with Sputnik. Instead, he claims to be the “managing editor of The Grayzone” and “covering the end of empire”.

A check on the Sputnik website revealed that he has [written more than 400 articles for Sputnik](#). He also has an [author page](#) on [The Grayzone](#), a US news website that was accused of spreading conspiracy theories and pro-Russia disinformation.

Although the banner-holding incident in the Rajko Mitic Stadium on 17 March 2022 did happen, what was presented was not the complete picture.

Reed's posting and Guancha's reporting (both the video post and news article) omitted the fact that Serbian Red Star Belgrade Football Club, or “Crvena Zvezda”, that organized the banner-holding episode was sponsored by Russia's



largest oil and gas company, Gazprom, according to reports by both [The Atlantic](#) and [Russian state-owned media RT](#).

The disinformation was further amplified the next day (19 March 2022) by the China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying (华春莹) through her X account @SpokespersonCHN which had 2.3 million followers. She [posted](#) the same video shared by Reed but with a shorter length and different zoom level.



Source: <https://twitter.com/SpokespersonCHN/status/1505183619253682177>





## Limitations of this investigation

- The initial plan is to replicate the same investigation methodology for Facebook posts catering to users in Singapore, but the number of such posts scraped for the same period (1 Feb 2022 to 28 Feb 2023) is too low for any meaningful analysis. The scraped dataset contained 1,159 posts in total, with only 412 of them having 5 interactions or more.
- The same limitation occurred in the X (formerly Twitter) datasets for both Malaysia and Singapore, with only 208 posts for Malaysia and 342 for Singapore.
- The number of YouTube videos collected, after filtering for those identified as catering to Malaysian and Singaporean audiences, was only around 20. Therefore, YouTube was not included either.
- Little Red Book and TikTok, two popular social media platforms among Chinese-speaking users in Malaysia and Singapore, were not included in the investigation as it was beyond our project partner's capacity. The two platforms did not share their user and content data, unlike Facebook, which did so through an analytics tool called Crowdtangle.
- The NLP algorithm did not work as expected for Chinese-language content, as it is built based on the English language. Multiple rounds of time-consuming manual finetuning and review had to be done to the posts to produce more accurate results.
- Facebook posts with long video content could not be examined completely, as we did not have access to tools that could batch-convert the video content into text-based content. Many of them are news digests that include other content not related to the war, making the analysis even more time-consuming.



### **About the investigators/authors**

*Kuek Ser Kuang Keng* is a data journalist, media consultant and trainer based in Malaysia who specializes in digital and investigative journalism.

*Dr. Chan Wei See* holds a PhD in Politics and International Relations, specializing in political sociology and environmental politics.

*Wong Kai Hui* is a Malaysian journalist with a Master's in Inter-Asia Cultural Studies.

END