Eyes on Russia Project

Report 3

22nd February 2022

Eyes on Russia: Report 3

Background

The Centre for Information Resilience's "Eyes on Russia" Project will monitor and verify developments related to Russian aggression toward Ukraine. Each week, CIR investigators will collate, geolocate, and, as possible, verify photos and video footage appearing on social media and claims made by parties to the conflict. Our latest findings can always be found on this Twitter thread.

CIR will also contextualize these details amid the discourse and developments of the week. The footage will be added to an open source map, which policymakers, journalists, and other OSINT researchers can use to track the conflict. Finally, CIR will release weekly written summaries of its research, detailing verified troop and equipment movements, influence operation narratives, and broader updates. This is the third of such weekly reports. The first report can be read here.

The Centre for Information Resilience (CIR) is an independent, non-profit social enterprise dedicated to exposing human rights abuses, countering disinformation, and combating online behaviour.

We believe, at a time of heightened tension, that journalists and policymakers should have easy access to verified information. The Eyes on Russia Project will aim to empower its audiences with analysis and facts on which they can rely.

If you require further information, please do get in touch at hello@info-res.org.

1. Executive Summary

- Despite public claims that Russian forces would return to their bases[1], instead the military build-up has increased. Military equipment has been observed leaving larger bases and spreading out to newly set up, smaller bases in fields along the border in Kursk and Belgorod Oblasts. The geolocated military hardware is all fully loaded and painted with new camouflage.

- The Russian-Belarussian military exercise has been extended indefinitely[2]. Russian forces are still arriving in Southern Belarus and are now moving closer to the border with Ukraine.

- Overall, footage indicates that Russian forces in Belarus, Russia, and annexed Crimea are moving closer to the Ukrainian border and into battle positions.

- Over the past week, as Russian proxies in the DNR and LNR have evacuated some women and children due to an alleged threat of a Ukrainian offensive into the territory, several incidents have been reported that suggest the Russian Federation and its proxies are attempting to create the pretext for military action in Ukraine based on the narrative of "Ukrainian aggression."

- In Russian language media, CIR observed an increase in discussion of alleged "Ukrainian aggression" as the Russian Federation and its proxies in the DNR and LNR attempt to create a pretext for Russian military action on Ukrainian territory and the formal recognition of the "separatist" governments in these regions.

- On the 21st February, President Putin ordered troops into the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics", after recognising them as independent states. Over the coming days, CIR will continue to monitor the deployment of Russian military assets into Ukraine.

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[1] https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-returns-some-troops-bases-areas-near-ukraine-report-2022-02-15/
[2] https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-belaris-military-exercises-ukraine/31712447.html

2. Noted Narratives

From 14-21 February, CIR continued to observe the amplification of narratives noted over previous weeks' reporting, including allegations that: NATO is responsible for the conflict; Ukraine is a fascist state; and the U.S. military and energy lobbies are pushing for war.

Alongside this, CIR has tracked an increase in the volume of posts alleging Ukrainian aggression, reflecting the shift in Kremlin rhetoric from a security impasse with NATO to lurid claims of genocide in the Donbass.

The number of mentions of these narratives across Twitter since the beginning of February 2022 are indicated in the graph (Figure 1) below:
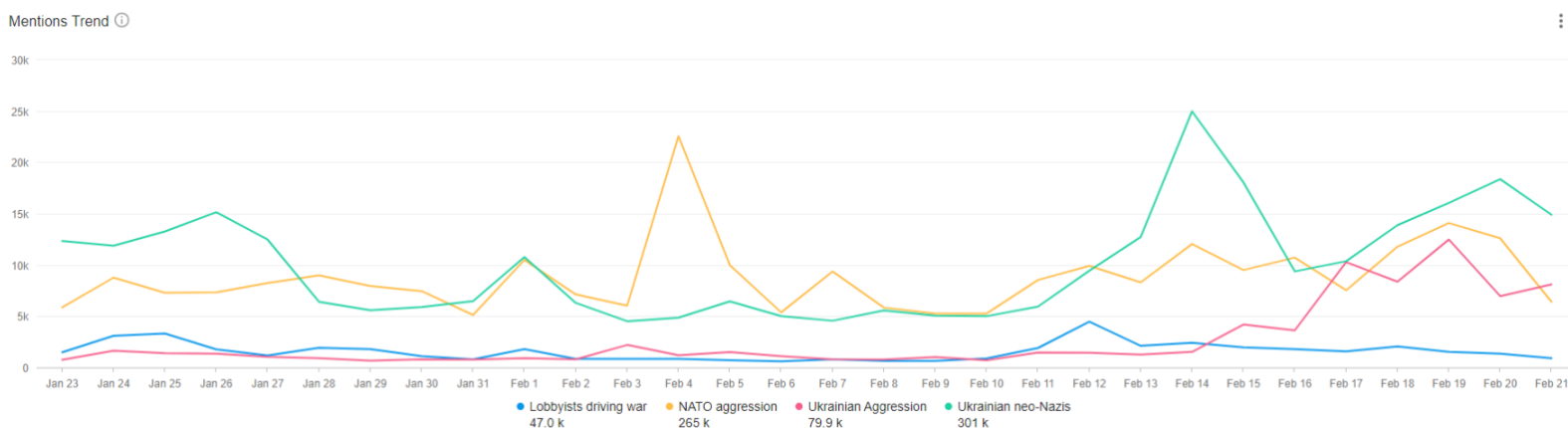

Figure 1: Mentions of Russian influence narratives on Twitter from January 23 to 21 Feb 2022.

This week, CIR also observed an increase in discussion of alleged "Ukrainian aggression" as the Russian Federation and its proxies in the DNR and LNR attempt to create a pretext for Russian military action on Ukrainian territory and the formal recognition of the "separatist" governments in these regions.
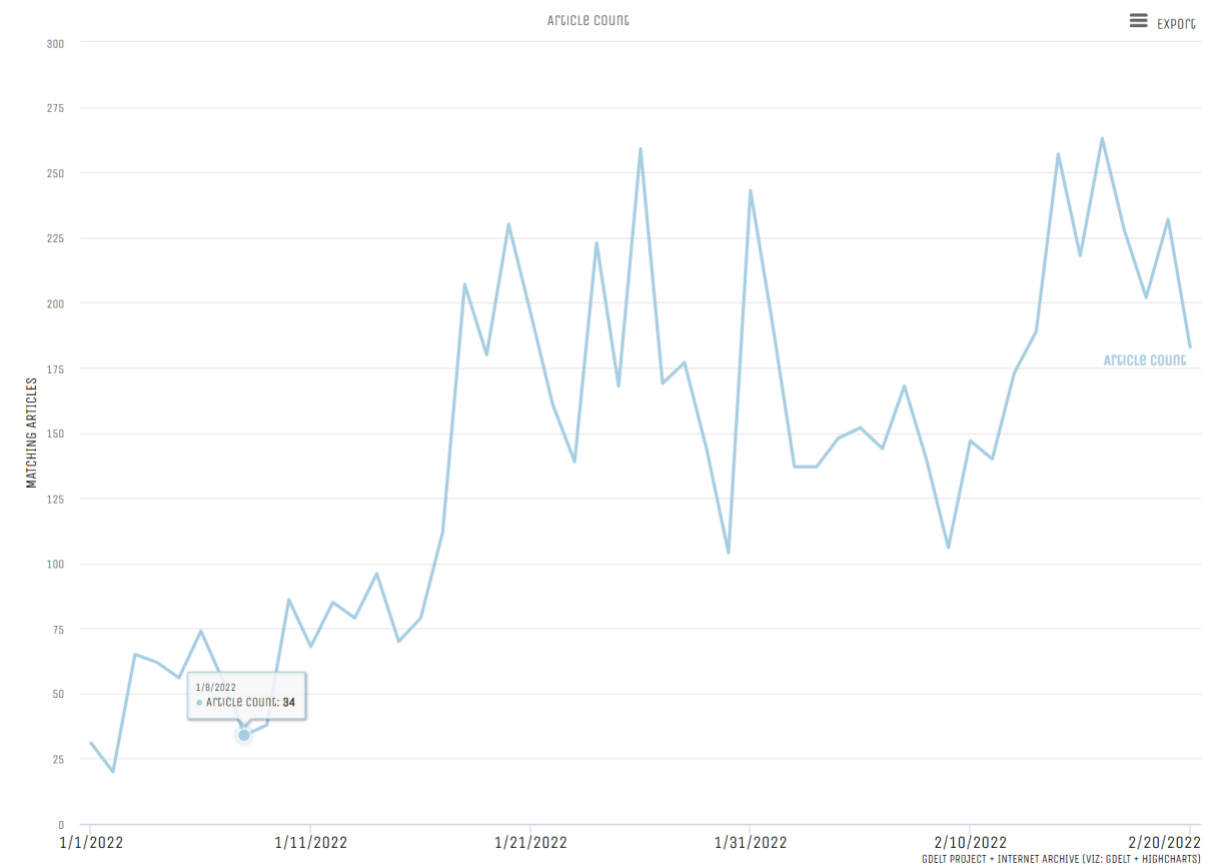
Figure 2: Mentions of "Ukrainian aggression" in Russian language press since the beginning of 2022, showing a nearly 200% increase in mentions over the past 10 days.

The mentions of this narrative correspond with activities on the ground contributing to "reporting" about it. Over the past week, the Russian government and its proxies in Donbas have engaged in the following activities:

- **The shelling of a kindergarten in Stantsiya Luhanksa**: On 17 February, shelling hit a kindergarten in active use in the Ukrainian-controlled town of Stantsiya Luhanska. Three staff members suffered concussions as a result of the blast. Russia and its proxies initially attempted to claim Ukraine had shelled a kindergarten inside proxy territory; when it became clear the attack was inside Ukrainian-controlled territory, they asserted it was a

Ukrainian attack on its own people.[3] Geolocation of the school and images of the impact crater allowed Bellingcat investigators to underline the shelling likely came from the south, where Russian proxies are located.[4] Once the location of the kindergarten became clear, with video from the scene published by the Ukrainian authorities, a number of separatist accounts, and even Russian state TV host Vladimir Solovyov, shared a claim[5] that the incident had, in fact, never occurred and was a fake created by "Western media at the suggestion of their Ukrainian psy-ops colleagues".

- **Pre-recorded evacuation videos released by DNR and LNR leaders:** On Friday, 18 February, the leaders of the so-called DNR and LNR posted video clips announcing an evacuation of citizens from the region due to an imminent attack from Ukrainian forces. The metadata on both videos, however, shows the videos were recorded two days earlier, on 16 February, laying bare the pre-planned nature of the allegations of the supposedly "imminent" attack.[6]

- **False video alleging a sabotage operation targeting chlorine tanks**: On February 18th, a Telegram account of the press service for the People's Militia of the Donetsk's People's republic published a video that alleged a sabotage attack on chlorine tanks by Polish saboteurs near the city of Gorlovka. However, following an investigation by OSINT analysts, the metadata of the video indicated that the video was created on February 8th and a folder creation date of 4th of February. Analysts were also able to determine that additional audio files were layered onto the video. The conclusion of the OSINT analysis

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[3] Donetskoe Agenstvo Novosti, Войска Киева утром ударили по районам девяти населенных пунктов Донбасса," 17 February 2022, https://archive.ph/FiDEx ; Lenta.Ru, "Военные ДНР открыли ответный огонь по позициям украинских силовиков," 17 February 2022 https://lenta.ru/news/2022/02/17/dnr/

[4] Elliot Higgins, "Thanks to @Taras_Syniuk who pointed out this image of the crater. It gives a clear view of the spray pattern, which is consistent with the incoming fire coming from the south. This would be in the direction of Russian backed separatist frontlines," Twitter, 17 February 2022, https://twitter.com/EliotHiggins/status/1494287486373306370

[5] Vladimir Orlov, Telegram post, 17 February, 2022, https://t.me/SolovievLive/86945

[6] Aric Toler, "Head of the LNR posted a video about evacuation on the state news outlet, but the metadata shows that the file was created two days ago (Telegram retains metadata). Testing some other videos on the channel to see other creation dates, will post below," Twitter, 18 February 2022, https://twitter.com/AricToler/status/1494738571483353092?s=20&t=CnTfRC_dxt4x44axxfCmkw

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indicated that the video was created to propagate a false flag operation.[7]

- **Allegations of car bomb set by Ukraine in Luhansk**: On the 19th of February narratives were emerging on Twitter about an alleged car bomb planted by Ukraine in Luhansk.[8] However, an investigation by OSINT analysts indicated that the event was a false flag operation and corresponds with warnings by Western allies of imminent provocations by the Russian military and backed separatists in Luhansk and Donetsk in an attempt to provoke an invasion.[9]

- **Alleged Ukrainian attacks on Russian soil**: The 21st of February has seen two startlingly dramatic claims from Russian media and officials - that the Ukrainian military launched two attacks on the territory of the Russian Federation itself. The first of the incidents allegedly took place at around 6:00 Moscow time[10] not far to the east of the kindergarten shelled on the 17th, near Mityankinskaya[11], in Russia's Rostov Oblast. The Russian Ministry of Defence claimed that two Ukrainian infantry fighting vehicles were destroyed in combat and five Ukrainian soldiers killed. In the evening, the Russian Ministry of Defence released video[12] showing two burning BMP-2s in a wooded area.

  In the south, near the Azov Sea, the FSB claimed that Ukrainian forces had shelled and

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[7] Eliot Higgins, "Anatomy of a Russian Separatist False Flag - On February 18th the Telegram channel of the press service of the People's Militia of the Donetsk People's Republic published the following video, claiming to show a sabotage operation targeting chlorine tanks," Twitter, 20 February 2022, https://twitter.com/eliothiggins/status/1495355366141534208?s=21.

[8] Military Agent, "Video of the explosion of a car mined by Ukrainian saboteurs in Lugansk. MGB officers took her to a safe place and blew her up," Twitter, 19 February 2022, https://twitter.com/MilitaryAgentt/status/1495139292489912324.

[9] Davey Alba, "Russia has been laying groundwork online for a 'false flag' operation, misinformation researchers say," *The New York Times,* 19 February, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/19/business/russia-has-been-laying-groundwork-online-for-a-false-flag-operation-misinformation-researchers-say.html.

[10] Federal Security Service of Russia, "*On the violation of the Russo-Ukrainian border",* 21st February, 2022, http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/press/message/single.htm%21id%3D10439436%40fsbMessage.html

[11] Grigory Naberezhnov & Vladislav Gordeyev, "*Ministry of Defence reports on destruction of Ukrainian BMPs crossing into Russia",* RBC, 21st February, 2022, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/21/02/2022/621389849a794724e81ee873

[12] NTV, "Video of the destroyed Ukrainian BMPs that entered Russian territory", Twitter, 21st February, 2022, https://twitter.com/ntvru/status/1495807185061830660

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destroyed a border observation post[13] on Russian territory just east of the Ukrainian village of Kuznetsi at around 9:50 Moscow time[14]. The Russian-backed separatist authorities claimed[15] that the Ukrainian troops involved in this attack had been engaged in combat and "liquidated" by separatist forces. Video released by both the FSB and pro-separatist accounts on Telegram has been geolocated[16] to the Kuznetsi area, which is approximately 40 kilometres inside separatist-controlled territory.

The video released on Telegram[17] shows BTR-80 armoured personnel carriers coming under fire, which would have necessitated crossing the river Kalmius and driving behind enemy lines for at least an hour or two without detection. No evidence of any artillery has been presented by Russia or the separatists.

All the above kinetic incidents have been geolocated by CIR investigators. Furthermore, *BuzzFeed News* correspondent Christopher Miller has tracked over 20 reports from Russian state media attempting to prop up the "Ukrainian aggression" narrative.[18] Finally, these narratives were echoed at a Russian Security Council meeting on 21 February, where ministers underlined allegations of "genocide" and referred to residents of the Donbas as "Russian citizens."

Potential future narratives

In looking toward potential future incidents about which Russia might attempt to amplify allegations of "Ukrainian aggression," CIR sees potential for the following narratives, which have been observed in various versions throughout the past eight years of Russian aggression in the Donbas, to resurface:

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[13] Ivan Lindemann, *"FSB show destruction of a border post by a Ukrainian shell in the Rostov Oblast",* TV Zvezda, 21st February, 2022, https://tvzvezda.ru/news/2022221133-2k6yZ.html

[14] Federal Security Service of Russia, "*On the shelling of Russian territory from the Ukrainian side",* 21st February, 2022, http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/press/message/single.htm%21id%3D10439434%40fsbMessage.html

[15] "*Ukrainian saboteur groups penetrating the south of the DNR have been liquidated - UNM",* Donetsk News Agency, 21st February, 2022, https://dan-news.info/defence/ukrainskie-diversionnye-gruppy-pronikshie-na-jug-dnr-likvidirovany--unm/

[16] Nick Waters, "So the video that's reported to be of Ukrainian armoured vehicles intruding into Russia was filmed at the same place as the video which reported to show a Russian border post which had been blown up by Ukrainian artillery", Twitter, 21st February, 2022, https://twitter.com/N_Waters89/status/1495782339137478660

[17] Joker DNR, Telegram post, 21st February, 2022, https://t.me/JokerDNR/1039

[18] Christopher Miller, "Russia Is Spreading Garbage Information, And Then It Might Use That Garbage Information To Justify Starting A War," *BuzzFeed News*, 20 February 2022.

- **Attack on evacuees**: The announcement of an evacuation of civilians this weekend from the Russian-backed separatist leaders in Donetsk and Luhansk raises the grim prospect that the bus convoys carrying children, women, the infirm and the elderly to Russia's Rostov region may be subject to a staged attack.

- **Attacks on humanitarian convoys**: In the past, Russia and its proxies have claimed[19] Ukrainian forces carried out attacks on humanitarian convoys. Given the rhetoric surrounding the situation in the Donbass, and previous Russian deployments of "humanitarian aid" beginning in August, 2014, it is plausible that such operations may both resume and serve as a controlled environment in which to stage a false-flag incident.

- **Atrocities by Ukrainian soldiers**: The height of the war, in 2014 and 2015, saw a number of lurid claims that Ukrainian soldiers and paramilitaries were subjecting civilians in the Donbass to barbaric torture and executions. These included the now-notorious faked RT report on a crucifixion in Sloviansk. Crude videos have been produced to accompany these claims in the past.

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[19] Interfax, "*Ukrainian soldiers shelled humanitarian convoy in the Donbass",* 25th April, 2015, https://www.interfax.ru/world/438490

3. Military Movements

Belarus

CIR investigators have geolocated Russian heavy weaponry and logistical equipment continuing to move in the Mazyr, Ryansk, and Gomel region of Southern Belarus. **Footage indicates that Russian forces are moving closer to the Ukrainian border.** Particularly, movement of logistics equipment has been identified in the towns of Naroulia and Kirov, roughly 50 and 10km from the border with Ukraine, respectively. Additionally, heavy weaponry has been geolocated to the town of Kalinkavichy, in the Gomel region.

The latest reports of military exercises with joint participation from Russia and Belarus indicate that military activity will continue in these regions at least for the duration of military exercises. This comes as the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenka, has announced that Russian troops will remain in Belarus for ongoing military exercises to prevent so-called 'Western aggression'.[20]

Finally, troops from the Russian National Guard from Chechnya have been identified in Yelsk district within the Gomel region, the column was reportedly moving towards Naroulya.

Western Russia

CIR also identified the continued amassing of Russian military equipment within the Kursk and Belgorod Oblasts. In Belgorod Oblast, convoys with military equipment were geolocated moving towards Ukraine and spreading out into fields as close as 10km from the border. These geolocated convoys have new winter style camouflage, are fully loaded with weapons and men, and all have an unknown 'z' insignia painted on the vehicles.

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[20] Robyn Dixon and Mary Ilyushina, "Putin may go to war to capture Ukraine. With Belarus, he did it without firing a shot," *The Washington Post*, 20 February, 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/20/russia-ukraine-belarus-military/.

Additionally, geolocated footage indicates that larger military bases have been emptying their forces, whilst smaller field bases have begun to appear on satellite imagery. This has been taking place along the border in Kursk and Belgorod Oblasts. In particular, the gathering of forces has been identified in the town of Tomarovka in Belgorod Oblast, where Russian military forces have been unloading and mobilizing to nearby fields and military stations.

Simultaneously, heavy weaponry has been identified moving through the city of Voronezh, and Veselaya Lopan', a town close to the border with Ukraine.
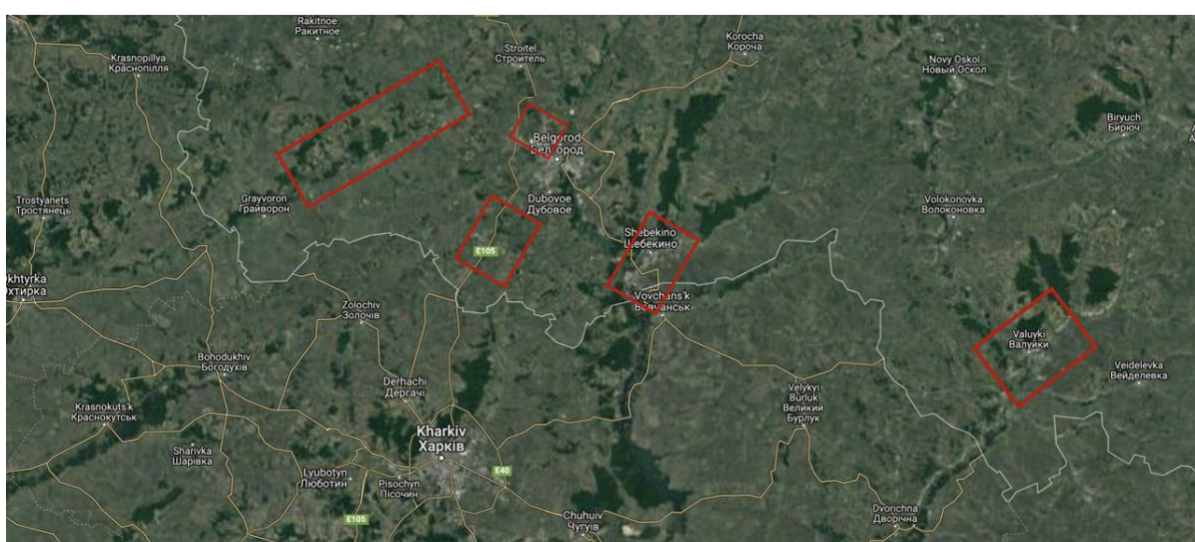

Figure 3: Areas marked in red show an increase in Russian military buildup and existing presence in Belgorod oblast.

Annexed Crimea

CIR has further identified the increased presence of Russian military personnel and equipment in annexed Crimea. Russian military convoys have been identified in movement 30km from the border with Ukraine, as well as tanks in fields close to the border.

Geolocated footage indicating the movement of disassembled bridges and boats by the Russian military has been identified in the Krasnodar Krai Oblast moving West towards annexed Crimea. This equipment underscores Russian preparation for a potential amphibious landing. It correlates with CIR's 14th of February report that cited analysis by the Conflict Intelligence Team, describing naval movement along the Bosphorus strait by elements from the 810th Russian Separate Naval

Infantry Brigade from the Black Sea Fleet and the 336th Separate Guards Naval Infantry Brigade of the Baltic Fleet.