

Caratterizzazioni dell'invasione dell'Ucraina nel discorso pubblico filo-governativo russo



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Note

Le pubblicazioni realizzate nel contesto del progetto sono disponibili on-line, in italiano e in inglese:

- <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/Progetti/Caratterizzazioni-dell-invasione-dell-Ucraina-nel-discorso-pubblico-filo-governativo-russo>
- <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Projects2/Framings-of-Russia-s-invasion-of-Ukraine-in-Russia-s-pro-Kremlin-public-discourse>

Le note tecniche sono disponibili sul sito:

- <https://tadadit.xyz/>

I dataset testuali, pubblicati in collaborazione con *Forschungsstelle Osteuropa Bremen* sono disponibili sul portale **Discuss Data**, in particolare:

- Giorgio Comai (2024): Russian state institutions full-text datasets – A collection of corpora based on contents extracted from the websites of Russian state institutions, v. 1.0, Discuss Data, <https://doi.org/10.48320/0578D7FE-35F7-4E9E-A29D-926618A5C6BD>
- Giorgio Comai (2025): zavtra.ru_ru - Full text corpus based on the website of Russian weekly newspaper 'Zavtra' (in Russian, 1996-2024) – Full text of all articles published on zavtra.ru with metadata, in tabular format., v. 1.1, Discuss Data, <https://doi.org/10.48320/EF3EBDDA-53CC-4078-88D9-BC9F3E7CF970>

Si segnala inoltre che Giorgio Comai è stato intervistato sui contenuti di questa ricerca:

- “Ucraina, cosa vuole veramente Putin - Le ‘cause profonde’ che minano i negoziati”, AGI, 18 agosto 2025, <https://www.agi.it/estero/news/2025-08-18/ucraina-cause-profonde-minano-negoziato-32783468/>

In breve

Gli obiettivi dell'invasione russa dell'Ucraina non sono definiti in termini territoriali. Né in discorsi ufficiali, né sui canali televisivi per il grande pubblico, né tra le voci più ideologizzate si trova alcun riferimento all'idea che raggiungere un determinato risultato territoriale – ad esempio, il pieno controllo delle regioni di Donetsk e Luhansk – porterebbe a una vittoriosa conclusione della guerra. Al contrario, si insiste su come gli obiettivi del conflitto siano ben più ambiziosi e riguardino questioni strutturali del sistema internazionale: non certo temi di cui si può negoziare con l'Ucraina.

I riferimenti alle “radici profonde” del conflitto, emersi in modo più evidente proprio mentre il presidente statunitense Trump cercava di trovare un accordo su basi territoriali, sono ulteriore segnale di come nella fase attuale della guerra nessuna plausibile concessione ucraina, tantomeno territoriale, possa porre fine al conflitto.

La Russia continua a perseguire obiettivi massimalisti: da un lato, rimodellare forzatamente l'architettura di sicurezza in Europa e costringere l'Occidente a “rispettare” il ruolo centrale della Russia sulla scena globale; dall'altro, ridurre l'Ucraina ad un vassallo docile e inoffensivo, da integrare nel “mondo russo” insieme alla Bielorussia.

Mentre il Cremlino mantiene un pluralismo ideologico altamente controllato, gli ideologi che hanno sviluppato e promosso narrative volte a legittimare la guerra in corso evidenziano come il vero obiettivo di questa fase sia una rinascita della Russia come grande potenza e civiltà non più subordinata politicamente e culturalmente all'Occidente. L'epurazione interna alla Russia e la marginalizzazione o eliminazione di elementi liberali sono quindi definiti come il principale risultato di questa guerra, ancor più importanti di conquiste territoriali o limiti all'estensione della Nato.

Alcuni attori internazionali sembrano cercare una via verso la pace sulla base di concessioni territoriali e politiche da parte ucraina. Da parte russa, tali conquiste sono intese solo come inevitabile conseguenza di un compromesso ben più importante, in conseguenza del quale l'Occidente riconoscerebbe alla Russia un ruolo prevalente nel suo vicinato e di primo piano a livello internazionale.

Questo è il contesto da cui emerge la difficoltà europea nell'affrontare questa crisi innescata dalla Russia. Comprensibilmente, UE e stati membri non riescono ad accettare le premesse negoziali che la Russia (e talvolta gli Stati Uniti) sembrano voler imporre, ovvero, semplificando al massimo, che alcuni stati più forti possano imporsi sugli altri. Altrettanto comprensibilmente, numerose e forti voci in gran parte d'Europa si rifiutano di accettare la premessa alternativa imposta dalla Russia, ovvero, che le controversie internazionali si possano risolvere facendo ricorso all'uso della forza. Risposte asimmetriche, tra cui le sanzioni, non hanno effettivamente cambiato i parametri del conflitto in corso, anche perché spesso introdotte in modo parziale. Per superare questa fase di impasse strutturalmente complessa è necessario abbandonare l'illusione che concessioni unilaterali ucraine possano porre fine al conflitto, identificare correttamente le priorità russe, e ragionare sulla base di corsi d'azione effettivamente compatibili con un'Unione europea non succube a logiche di grandi potenze.

Italiano

Perché Kyiv non può risolvere le “radici del conflitto”

25 May 2025 - **Giorgio Comai**

Nessun tipo di concessione unilaterale ucraina, men che meno territoriale, potrebbe risolvere quelle che Mosca considera le radici profonde del conflitto: ristabilire attraverso la guerra lo status della Russia sia a livello regionale che globale. Un'analisi.

Quando Vladimir Putin ha lanciato l'invasione russa dell'Ucraina nel febbraio 2022, ha affermato che lo scopo dell'“operazione militare speciale” era proteggere i residenti della regione ucraina del Donbas. “A tal fine”, ha aggiunto, “[la Russia] cercherà di smilitarizzare e denazificare l'Ucraina”.

Nella stessa occasione, ha chiarito che il conflitto non riguardava solo l'Ucraina, ma affondava le sue radici nelle “minacce fondamentali che irresponsabili politici occidentali hanno creato per la Russia” e in una vasta gamma di questioni riconducibili a come “gli Stati Uniti non ritengano necessario accordarsi con la Russia” su questioni importanti per Mosca.

Quando nel 2025 i funzionari del Cremlino e i media russi parlano delle “radici del conflitto” che devono essere affrontate per stabilire una pace duratura, si riferiscono alla percepita mancanza di rispetto nei confronti della Russia in un ordine internazionale guidato dagli Stati Uniti, non ai diritti e al benessere dei residenti del Donbas.

La disconnessione tra questi diversi livelli del conflitto (quelli più vicini alla realtà sul terreno in Ucraina e quelli legati allo status della Russia nell'ordine internazionale) rende difficile la creazione di un contesto negoziale funzionale e ostacola un dibattito pubblico sostanziale su questo tema. Se le radici del conflitto sono legate alle relazioni della Russia con l'Occidente, nessuna concessione unilaterale ucraina – men che meno concessioni territoriali – porterebbe ad un risultato soddisfacente per la Russia. L'esito auspicato da Putin semplicemente non può essere il risultato di una decisione presa a Kyiv.

L'Ucraina, ovviamente, rimane centrale per gli interessi russi. Ma se l'Occidente accetterà un quadro di sicurezza che accetti effettivamente la “necessità di concordare con la Russia”

tutte le questioni importanti e riconosca l'interesse preminente della Russia nel suo vicinato e in altre aree prioritarie, allora tutto il resto seguirà logicamente, comprese le questioni relative all'Ucraina. In questa visione, una volta rimosse le armi e le ambizioni geopolitiche occidentali dall'Ucraina, quest'ultima rientrerebbe inevitabilmente nello spazio politico e culturale russo, di cui inevitabilmente dovrebbe far parte.

La remissività occidentale alle richieste russe e il disegno neo-imperiale di Mosca di controllare l'Ucraina per includerla nello spazio culturale e politico russo assieme alla Bielorussia, sono inestricabilmente intrecciati, poiché un obiettivo non può essere raggiunto senza l'altro.

Cosa vuole il Cremlino

Da molto tempo, il Cremlino insiste sul fatto che la Russia debba essere “rispettata” dall'Occidente. Non ottenendo il livello di deferenza desiderato, Mosca ha deciso in più occasioni di ricorrere alla forza per palesare l'impotenza dell'Occidente e dimostrare di non poter essere ignorata: l'annessione della Crimea da parte della Russia e il suo successivo intervento militare in Siria avevano anche questo scopo. L'“operazione militare speciale” lanciata nel febbraio 2022 avrebbe dovuto (e dovrebbe tuttora) esprimere questo concetto in modo ancor più convincente.

I contatti in corso tra Russia e Stati Uniti, avviati dopo il ritorno di Donald Trump alla Casa Bianca, rappresentano un notevole successo per il Cremlino, poiché Washington e Mosca negoziano sull'Ucraina e sugli accordi di sicurezza a lungo termine in Europa alle condizioni di Mosca: in fondo, ciò che Putin aveva richiesto fin dall'inizio.

È diventato presto chiaro, tuttavia, che le parti non possono tenere dibattiti sostanziali sulle questioni di sicurezza a causa di una discrepanza di aspettative sul focus dei negoziati e su chi dovrebbe fare concessioni.

La leadership statunitense sembrava aspettarsi che costringere l'Ucraina ad accettare perdite territoriali, ottenendo al contempo alcuni guadagni materiali, fosse una ricetta sicura per porre fine alla guerra in modo da potersi dedicare ad altri affari.

Avendo constatato l'intrattabilità delle questioni di sicurezza sulla base di queste premesse, ha cercato comunque di dedicarsi ad altri affari, anche con Mosca, senza ottenere molto se non l'aver compromesso le relazioni con tutti i suoi alleati più consolidati. Riflettendo l'effettivo focus dei negoziati, sia gli Stati Uniti che la Russia hanno scelto di affidare i contatti tra le parti a uomini d'affari.

Nel complesso, emerge come il Cremlino stia ancora perseguendo gli stessi obiettivi che si era prefissato all'inizio dell'invasione su vasta scala nel 2022: da un lato, rimodellare forzatamente l'architettura di sicurezza in Europa e costringere l'Occidente a "rispettare" il ruolo centrale della Russia sulla scena globale; dall'altro, ridurre l'Ucraina ad un vassallo docile e inoffensivo, da integrare nel "mondo russo" insieme alla Bielorussia.

Allo stesso tempo, Mosca continua a perseguire attivamente i propri obiettivi immediati: un cambio di leadership a Kyiv (un primo passo verso la più radicale epurazione dell'élite politica e culturale nazionale ucraina presentata come "denazificazione") e notevoli limitazioni all'esercito ucraino (l'obiettivo di "smilitarizzazione").

E gli "abitanti del Donbas"?

C'è, tuttavia, un'eccezione a questa apparente coerenza: la componente umanitaria, tanto decantata nelle prime fasi della guerra, insieme alla necessità di salvare e liberare gli abitanti del Donbas, è praticamente scomparsa dalla retorica ufficiale russa.

Immagini di alcune città come Mariupol, scelte per mostrare gli sforzi di ricostruzione, vengono presentate dai media come utile sfondo alle visite dei funzionari federali, ma non sono affatto centrali nelle narrazioni che legittimano la guerra.

L'invasione russa ha distrutto la vita e i mezzi di sussistenza di milioni di persone che vivono in queste aree, al punto che persino le autorità e i media russi hanno smesso di insistere sul fatto che tutto ciò fosse stato fatto principalmente per il benessere delle persone che un tempo vivevano in città ora in rovina.

Al contrario, il tema degli "abitanti del Donbas" è lentamente svanito dall'attenzione pubblica in Russia dopo i primi mesi di guerra. Si parla ancora meno degli abitanti delle regioni di Kherson e Zaporizhia, che, in linea con la retorica originaria del Cremlino avrebbero dovuto essere in impaziente attesa di essere liberati dal giogo di Kyiv.

I territori sono a volte nominati nei resoconti sui combattimenti in corso, ma non effettivamente come una terra ambita da liberare e restituire alla madrepatria. Non vi è alcun accenno al fatto che l'obiettivo finale della guerra sia quello di stabilire il pieno controllo di quelle regioni e che il raggiungimento di quei confini amministrativi determinerebbe una conclusione vittoriosa della guerra per la Russia.

Questo è uno dei motivi per cui, mentre la leadership statunitense iniziava a spingere per raggiungere un accordo basato su concessioni territoriali, la parte russa ha parlato con sempre maggiore insistenza della necessità di affrontare le "cause profonde" del conflitto,

spostando gradualmente l'attenzione dei negoziati dalla guerra alle questioni economiche, in una manovra che indirettamente avvicina il Cremlino a tutti i suoi obiettivi molto più di quanto avrebbero mai potuto fare concessioni territoriali o politiche da parte di Kyiv.

Conclusioni

L'invasione russa dell'Ucraina è una *guerra performativa* neo-imperiale condotta per affermare lo status della Russia sia a livello regionale che globale.

Nell'attuale contesto internazionale, fortemente influenzato da una leadership statunitense instabile, in Europa sono in corso importanti dibattiti sulla strada migliore per stabilire una pace duratura nel continente, senza soluzioni facili in vista.

Accettare che nessuna concessione plausibile da parte di Kyiv può porre fine al conflitto è una premessa necessaria per dibattiti politici più sostanziali in Europa e altrove.

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“I falchi russi” e il Cremlino

19 settembre 2025 - **Giorgio Comai**

Intellettuali revanscisti, un tempo marginali, hanno prodotto elaborate teorizzazioni ideologiche oggi al centro delle narrazioni approvate dallo stato per legittimare l'invasione russa dell'Ucraina. Le loro idee hanno grande visibilità, ma questo non implica che “i falchi” possano effettivamente vincolare le scelte politiche del Cremlino.

Con l'invasione russa dell'Ucraina, una nuova serie di parole chiave è entrata a far parte del lessico del Cremlino. Espressioni come “Occidente collettivo” e “denazificazione” non sono mai state utilizzate – nemmeno una volta – nelle decine di migliaia di comunicati stampa e discorsi pubblicati sul sito web del Cremlino prima del 2021. Da allora però compaiono regolarmente.

Dopo aver analizzato con tecniche di text-mining i siti web di varie istituzioni statali e media mainstream, ho scoperto che le due espressioni di cui sopra erano pressoché assenti in ognuna di queste fonti prima che fossero utilizzate dal Cremlino, per poi diventare di uso comune.

Da dove derivano queste espressioni? Sono state davvero concepite originariamente dal Cremlino come espedienti retorici per accompagnare i piani militari per l'invasione dell'Ucraina? Oppure per anni si sono annidate in ambienti culturali in precedenza marginali, prima di imporsi all'attenzione pubblica?

Com'è emerso nel corso di una ricerca più approfondita, c'è una fonte in particolare in cui “Occidente collettivo” e “denazificazione” comparivano già da anni: *Zavtra*, un settimanale d'opinione, pubblicato sin dagli anni '90.

Ho letto *Zavtra* per la prima volta all'inizio degli anni 2000. Pubblicava articoli taglienti e ricchi di verve, molto diversi da tutte le altre pubblicazioni che trovavo in edicola nella provincia russa che frequentavo. I testi di *Zavtra* erano impregnati di revanscismo, contenevano critiche feroci rivolte a politici e personaggi pubblici, ed erano sfacciatamente in dissonanza sia con la retorica ufficiale che con il dibattito pubblico dell'epoca.

In parte a causa del suo logo rotondeggiante e dall'aspetto poco professionale, consideravo il giornale come una bizzarria della transizione destinata a scomparire, mentre il suo

fondatore – Aleksandr Prokhanov, sostenitore dichiarato del fallito golpe dell'agosto 1991 contro Gorbachev – sarebbe caduto nell'oblio con l'avanzare degli anni. Ero giovane e ingenuo e, col senno di poi, evidentemente sbagliavo.

Molti anni dopo, riflettendo sui risultati della mia recente analisi dei media, sono rimasto sorpreso nello scoprire che gli ambienti culturali e ideologici da cui emergevano articoli per una pubblicazione marginale come *Zavtra* potessero diventare una fonte diretta di ispirazione per gli autori dei discorsi del Cremlino. Anche ammettendo che non fosse *Zavtra*, di per sé, ad essere influente, nel contesto attuale ci sono buoni motivi per considerare le dinamiche che ho osservato come un invito a dedicare maggiore attenzione agli ambienti ideologici e culturali che si sono sviluppati attorno a quel giornale e al suo fondatore.

Come emerge da un eccellente libro di Juliette Faure recentemente pubblicato dalla Cambridge University Press – *The Rise of the Russian Hawks: Ideology and Politics from the Late Soviet Union to Putin's Russia* – si tratta di una storia sorprendentemente ricca e avvincente, che illustra come generazioni di scrittori e intellettuali con opinioni spesso contrastanti siano riusciti a coalizzarsi promuovendo una visione condivisa di “conservatorismo modernista” negli ambienti politici.

Juliette Faure analizza l'evoluzione di una rete di idee - quella dei “falchi russi”, come li definisce l'autrice - evidenziando la continuità dei dibattiti sul conservatorismo modernista russo dagli anni '60 fino ai giorni nostri, passando per la tarda epoca sovietica. Reagendo ad “un percorso di sviluppo condiviso con l'Occidente nella direzione di una convergenza finale dei due sistemi”, emersa già in epoca sovietica, questi pensatori “hanno collegato elementi di paradigmi precedentemente ritenuti incompatibili, tra cui la modernità tecnoscientifica sovietica, il conservatorismo religioso russofilo e il patriottismo di stato staliniano”.

Questa schiera di intellettuali si è ispirata a scritti precedenti associati al “cosmismo russo” e ad un approccio spirituale al progresso tecnologico. Tra i loro punti di riferimento culturali figurava Nikolai Fedorov (1829-1903), che aveva proposto un modello di “cristianesimo attivo” per cui “il progresso tecnologico avrebbe inaugurato una nuova era in cui l'umanità sarebbe stata capace di regolare il cosmo e realizzare le promesse della Bibbia, compresa la trasformazione della natura umana verso la sua deificazione”. Secondo questa corrente filosofica, concetti biblici come l'estensione della vita, la resurrezione e l'immortalità non dovevano essere intesi metaforicamente, ma potevano e dovevano essere raggiunti attraverso il progresso tecnologico oltre che spirituale.

Leggendo queste idee nel 2025, si possono facilmente tracciare vari collegamenti con i dibattiti contemporanei, dalle fantasie di onnivigenza legate all’“intelligenza artificiale” per passare a Vladimir Putin che discute con Xi Jinping di come la tecnologia e il trapianto di organi umani possano portare all’immortalità.

Oggi gli intellettuali russi associati a questo gruppo insistono sul progresso tecnologico e sul cristianesimo ortodosso come concetti centrali per la loro visione, superando la feticizzazione conservatrice stereotipata di un lontano passato rurale. Ed effettivamente, il conservatorismo modernista russo propone un mix assai eclettico di idee e personalità pubbliche che per molto tempo non sono riuscite a superare i loro disaccordi interni, poi però emergendo con “un linguaggio collettivo che collega vari gruppi e generazioni uniti nella comune opposizione alla convergenza della Russia con l’Occidente”.

Accomunati dalla stessa lotta contro i riformisti liberali e favorendo la costruzione di un’identità di gruppo rispetto alla coerenza teorica, si sono uniti ai più giovani sostenitori del “conservatorismo dinamico” per formare una rete organizzativa in grado di raggiungere effettivamente gli ambienti decisionali.

La fusione di questa rete di idee in un’organizzazione formale impegnata attivamente per influenzare la politica statale, *Izborskii Klub*, fondato nel 2012, ha visto come protagonista e primo presidente lo stesso Alexander Prokhanov, direttore di *Zavtra*. Prokhanov non solo non è caduto nell’oblio, come da giovane pensavo sarebbe accaduto, ma ormai superati gli ottant’anni, dopo l’invasione russa dell’Ucraina, ha ricevuto onorificenze statali e un riconoscimento pubblico da parte di Vladimir Putin, il quale ha dimostrato di avere familiarità con i suoi scritti.

Plasmare le politiche o legittimarle?

Considerando il ruolo preminente dell’ideologia nel discorso ufficiale in Russia e la misura in cui la concezione del mondo espressa dal Cremlino si allinea a quella dei “falchi russi”, si potrebbe essere tentati di concludere che il loro duro lavoro ideologico e organizzativo abbia dato i suoi frutti e che siano finalmente riusciti a influenzare la politica statale. La stessa *Zavtra*, sul suo sito web ufficiale, si vanta di come “nel corso degli anni, noi di *Zavtra* abbiamo creato diverse ideologie, diverse tendenze potenti che sono entrate e continuano a entrare a far parte della coscienza pubblica”.

In pratica, però, l’attaccamento della politica del Cremlino alle idee espresse da *Zavtra* e *Izborskii Klub* è stato tutt’altro che saldo. Le idee di *Zavtra* sono state infatti marginalizzate nei primi anni 2000, poi brevemente cooptate nel 2014 per legittimare l’annessione della Crimea e la potenziale espansione degli obiettivi politici verso la “Novorossiya”, ben presto però venendo nuovamente messe da parte quando il Cremlino si è mosso lentamente per trasformare il Donbas in un “conflitto congelato” più tradizionale, anziché in una linea del fronte altamente ideologizzata (già nel 2014 “i falchi russi” stavano spingendo per un

intervento militare più espansivo e per una posizione più assertiva nei confronti dell'Ucraina e dell'Occidente).

Come sostiene Faure, quello che il Cremlino cerca di fare è favorire un “pluralismo ideologico gestito”, promuovendo o declassando diverse reti di idee per garantire che “una gamma di linee e narrazioni sia disponibile per giustificare diverse scelte politiche”. Le idee espresse da Prokhanov e dai suoi compagni a volte si sono rivelate utili al Cremlino e sono state scelte, *à la carte*, tra le opzioni politiche disponibili; altre volte, sono state respinte senza troppe cerimonie.

Quanto conta davvero l'ideologia?

Le considerazioni proposte da Juliette Faure su come le coalizioni di pensiero radicale siano emerse e si siano evolute negli ultimi decenni, compiendo sforzi sempre più mirati per avvicinarsi agli ambienti decisionali politici, sono avvincenti e convincenti. Per Faure “l'ideologia gioca un ruolo fondamentale all'interno del sistema politico russo, plasmando il linguaggio collettivo costitutivo delle élite”; “la competizione tra questi gruppi, a sua volta, plasma l'insieme delle opzioni politiche disponibili”. Questa conclusione è in parte confermata dalla mia stessa ricerca che mostra come alcune delle parole chiave più importanti che hanno accompagnato l'invasione russa dell'Ucraina sono nate negli ambienti culturali e intellettuali descritti nel libro di Faure.

Eppure, pur riconoscendo che hanno ispirato il discorso ufficiale e pubblico, non è scontato che queste idee abbiano effettivamente influenzato le scelte politiche. Se accettiamo l'analisi di [Jeremy Morris](#) per cui “qualsiasi ideologia nazionale [in Russia] è superficiale, e certamente le élite politiche, per la maggior parte, sono del tutto ciniche se non addirittura incredule di fronte alle pretese di espansione del ‘mondo russo’”, dobbiamo anche chiederci quanto siano realmente rilevanti questi dibattiti ideologici per comprendere la politica russa contemporanea e, più nello specifico, i motivi che hanno spinto il Cremlino a invadere l'Ucraina.

Certo, il percorso di radicalizzazione di Putin non è avvenuto nel vuoto. Il suo pensiero potrebbe essere stato plasmato più dagli stereotipi sovietici e dalle [serie di spionaggio](#) che da elaborate costruzioni ideologiche, ma il ruolo di questi gruppi intellettuali nel costruire le basi ideologiche per trasformare una fantasia tardo-imperiale in una politica di stato non deve essere sottovalutato. Tuttavia, per quanto riguarda le soluzioni politiche relative alla conclusione della guerra e alle dinamiche dei negoziati concreti, è poco verosimile che possano realmente vincolare le scelte del Cremlino.

Gli stessi “falchi”, mentre cercano di stabilire la loro egemonia culturale, capiscono bene che la radicalizzazione del discorso pubblico nella Russia di oggi è un processo dall’alto verso il basso guidato dall’amministrazione presidenziale. Sono stati emarginati per convenienza politica dopo l’annessione della Crimea, e devono essere consapevoli che ciò potrebbe accadere di nuovo. Pur essendo entusiasti del crescente allineamento del Cremlino alle loro politiche, “i falchi” esprimono costante preoccupazione per la presenza di cospiratori e traditori, persino ai vertici del potere, pronti a invertire la rotta.

In effetti, ancor più dell’Ucraina e della NATO, sono i cambiamenti in atto all’interno della Russia stessa ad avere maggiore importanza per questi ideologi, che insistono sul risveglio della Russia, sulla riscoperta della sua identità imperiale come civiltà distinta e sulla pulizia interna come principali priorità.

Come ampiamente sostenuto sul sito dell’*Izbarskii Klub* da uno dei suoi esponenti di spicco, “tutte le ragioni che possiamo elencare, come la protezione del Donbas, la questione dell’espansione della NATO [...] e quant’altro, nessuna di esse è un fattore decisivo. [...] A dirla schietta, il punto non è riportare il popolo ucraino, la nostra nazione fraterna e i nostri cari fratelli, nel mondo russo. Questo è solo un aspetto esterno di quanto sta accadendo. Vi è una tendenza sottostante molto più complessa. Fino al 2022 la Russia è rimasta in una posizione di dipendenza quasi coloniale da un’altra civiltà. [...] Per noi, la cosa più importante è che l’epurazione della Russia sia iniziata. [...] L’Ucraina è solo un pretesto per un grande evento. [...] L’importante in tutta questa storia non è l’andamento dell’operazione militare speciale, seppur certamente cruciale, bensì la tenuta della rivoluzione dall’alto in atto all’interno della Russia stessa”.

Conclusioni

Una migliore comprensione dei dibattiti ideologici alimentati dai “falchi russi” fornisce un contesto importante ai decisori politici che cercano di comprendere i potenziali margini di una soluzione alla guerra in corso.

In primo luogo, emerge chiaramente che non c’è alcuna concessione plausibile che una legittima leadership ucraina possa offrire nel corso dei negoziati che possa placare i “falchi russi”, poiché le loro ambizioni si collocano su un piano totalmente diverso. Il rinnovato impero di civiltà a cui aspirano naturalmente sottometterebbe l’Ucraina e sconvolgerebbe gli accordi di sicurezza in Europa e oltre, ma specifici compromessi territoriali o amministrativi sono irrilevanti per questo scopo, se non come un inevitabile riconoscimento della forza di una Russia imperiale ringiovanita. Un’epurazione interna e un consolidamento ideologico del cuore della Russia sono più fondamentali.

Infine, vale la pena sottolineare che persino “i falchi” ancora considerano la radicalizzazione della società russa come una “rivoluzione dall’alto”. Nonostante le esternazioni intrise di narrazioni iper-patriottiche, è poco probabile che avvenga una spinta dal basso verso l’alto per istanze massimaliste, e non vi è alcun indizio che “i falchi russi” si stiano avvicinando all’egemonia culturale a cui aspirano, né tra le élite né tra l’opinione pubblica in generale.

È ancora l’amministrazione presidenziale a definire i contorni del discorso pubblico e dei dibattiti intellettuali accettabili attraverso meccanismi di pluralismo ideologico controllato, permettendo al Cremlino di scegliere narrazioni legittimanti, come da un buffet di formule ideologiche preconfezionate. È lecito chiedersi quanto sia effettivamente resiliente questa configurazione, però vi è una moltitudine di questioni concrete – tra cui il declino economico, le sfide provenienti dalle regioni e gli sviluppi sulla linea del fronte – che rappresentano vincoli più realistici alle azioni del Cremlino rispetto a subbugli motivati dall’ideologia dei “falchi”.

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In Russia non si parla della fine della guerra

26 settembre 2025 - **Giorgio Comai**

In Russia, non si parla di come finirà la guerra in corso e non si fanno piani per una realtà post-bellica. In Ucraina si combatte e si resiste. In Unione europea, non vi è una visione unica su come avvicinarsi alla pace. Accettare la natura composita dell'UE rimane importante per immaginare politiche comuni europee forse non ideali, ma realistiche.

Nei piani di governo e nell'organizzazione dell'economia russa non vi è nessuna traccia che vi siano preparazioni in corso per la fine dell'invasione iniziata nel 2022. Se ancora nel 2023 il programma di bilancio del governo immaginava un calo della spesa militare negli anni a venire, il piano approvato a fine 2024 si basa su una spesa in questo settore crescente per i prossimi tre anni. Ad oggi, circa il 40 per cento delle spese di bilancio sono legate ad esercito e sicurezza nazionale. Quasi quattro milioni di persone sono impiegate nel complesso militare-industriale, senza contare tutti gli impiegati nei settori civili legati a indotto o estrazione di materie prime.

In Russia, non si trova alcun cenno concreto alla fine della guerra, né sui media né nella retorica ufficiale. La guerra, si dice, terminerà solo quando gli obiettivi dell' "operazione militare speciale" saranno raggiunti e quando saranno affrontate le "radici profonde del conflitto".

I circoli ideologici che hanno costruito narrative utilizzate per legittimare l'invasione celebrano il risveglio della Russia e i processi di epurazione interna favoriti dalla guerra, preludio di una rinascita imperiale russa e di un nuovo ordine internazionale in cui la Russia avrebbe un ruolo da protagonista. Un'Ucraina assoggettata o effettivamente integrata nella Russia è parte strutturale del progetto.

Né in questi spazi più ideologizzati, né sui canali televisivi per il grande pubblico, né in discorsi ufficiali, vi è alcun riferimento all'idea che raggiungere un determinato obiettivo territoriale – ad esempio, il pieno controllo delle regioni di Donetsk e Luhansk – porterebbe a una vittoriosa conclusione della guerra. Al contrario, si insiste su come gli obiettivi

del conflitto siano ben più ambiziosi e riguardino questioni strutturali del sistema internazionale: non certo temi di cui si può negoziare con l'Ucraina.

È frequente che nel corso di un conflitto le parti coinvolte continuino ad esprimere posizioni massimaliste confidando nella vittoria sul campo di battaglia, o anche solo per mantenere maggiore flessibilità negoziale. Basandosi sia sul rapporto di forze che su dinamiche interne agli attori coinvolti, ad osservatori esterni è comunque spesso chiaro quanto queste posizioni massimaliste siano prevalentemente uno strumento retorico-negoziale, e quanto rappresentino invece espressione effettiva di un obiettivo politico che si intende perseguire per via militare.

Compromessi elusivi

Ogni segnale a nostra disposizione in questa fase conferma che la leadership russa continua effettivamente a perseguire obiettivi massimalisti, fiduciosa di poter uscire vittoriosa dal conflitto. Non cerca compromessi con l'Ucraina, che non ritiene effettivamente un interlocutore, ma potrebbe essere disposta a compromessi con gli Stati Uniti e con quell' "occidente collettivo", che come entità coesa esiste più nell'immaginario del Cremlino che nella realtà.

La leadership statunitense e tanti voci in Europa a più riprese hanno invece espresso la convinzione che sia l'Ucraina, e più nello specifico l'attuale presidente ucraino Zelensky, ad essere principale ostacolo alla pace: se Zelensky fosse aperto a compromessi – questo l'argomento proposto in passato ad esempio dal presidente statunitense Trump – si arriverebbe presto alla pace. Questa posizione si basa però su un fraintendimento delle posizioni e delle richieste russe, che ha basi diverse e rifiuta di accettare l'Ucraina come un attore pienamente indipendente. La Russia è plausibilmente davvero interessata ad un compromesso, ma che però dovrebbe essere raggiunto con l'Occidente: una rinuncia alla piena sovranità Ucraina dovrebbe essere parte di questo compromesso, ma certo non l'unica.

Nel contesto attuale, una leadership statunitense che favorisce un approccio mercantilista alle relazioni internazionali sembra talvolta aperta a negoziare direttamente con Mosca sovranità ucraina e parte di quella di alcuni paesi UE, oltre alla più ampia architettura di sicurezza in Europa a cui Washington sembra poco interessata.

Non solo da parte dell'Ucraina, ma anche parte dell'UE, c'è invece comprensibile reticenza ad essere più oggetto che soggetto di negoziato. Accettare alcune delle richieste espresse

dalla Russia implicherebbe comunque la messa in dubbio di tante delle premesse su cui l'Unione stessa si basa. E negoziare sui principi è notoriamente difficile.

Le complessità di un'Unione europea pluralista

Questo è il contesto da cui emerge la difficoltà europea nell'affrontare questa crisi innescata dalla Russia. Comprensibilmente, UE e stati membri non riescono ad accettare le premesse negoziali che la Russia (e talvolta gli Stati Uniti) sembrano voler imporre, ovvero, semplificando al massimo, che alcuni stati più forti possano imporsi sugli altri.

Altrettanto comprensibilmente, numerose e forti voci in gran parte d'Europa si rifiutano di accettare la premessa alternativa imposta dalla Russia, ovvero, che le controversie internazionali si possano risolvere facendo ricorso all'uso della forza; accettando questi termini del conflitto, diventerebbe imprescindibile per i paesi UE rafforzare la propria capacità militare.

Queste diverse premesse sono contrarie o ai principi fondanti dell'UE o alle convinzioni etiche di tanti cittadini che ripudiano le armi e temono una crescente militarizzazione delle nostre società.

A lungo l'UE ha cercato alternative e risposte asimmetriche, anche se come è caratteristico per un'Unione plurale con tante voci al proprio interno, nessuna di queste vie è stata percorsa con sufficiente convinzione per cambiare i parametri del conflitto.

Ad esempio, le sanzioni introdotte progressivamente e molto parzialmente hanno lasciato che, per anni di guerra, esportazioni di idrocarburi verso ovest continuassero ad essere una delle principali fonti di finanziamento per il governo di Mosca.

Non si è trovato lo spazio per negoziati inclusivi, né tantomeno per trattative più prettamente "geopolitiche": nonostante le palesi contraddizioni espresse da vari attori europei in relazione alle azioni genocidarie israeliane in Palestina, in UE non si è disposti ad abbandonare in toto il diritto internazionale a favore di un cinico realismo geopolitico sulla base del quale trovare nuovi accordi con la Russia; sarebbe comunque poco plausibile trovare consenso tra gli stati membri per una sorta di nuovi accordi di Jalta.

Gli stessi piani per il riarmo stanno prendendo forma solo nel quarto anno dell'invasione su ampia scala in Ucraina, più in reazione ad una politica estera statunitense erratica che alla guerra già in corso da tempo ai propri confini orientali. Si tratta comunque di investimenti che in gran parte hanno tempistiche di implementazione che li renderanno rilevanti per la guerra in corso solo se questa durerà ancora per anni.

Forse andrà proprio così. In effetti, continuano a non vedersi le circostanze per impostare una pace duratura.

Al di là delle responsabilità russe, il ruolo dell'Unione europea e degli stati membri nel corso della guerra è stato molto criticato perché avrebbe favorito il prolungamento del conflitto: perché non ha applicato sufficiente pressione per i negoziati, perché non ha applicato sanzioni sufficienti, o perché ha fornito troppo o troppo poco sostegno militare all'Ucraina.

Si tratta di critiche comprensibili, anche se in parte sembrano basarsi su un'immagine dell'Unione europea incompatibile con la realtà: pensando compiutamente al posizionamento dei singoli stati membri riguardo al conflitto è difficile immaginare un'UE effettivamente decisionista in questo frangente. Senza concentrarsi esclusivamente sui limiti dell'azione di Bruxelles, può essere più utile pensare all'UE come un attore non "meno geopolitico" di altri, ma "diversamente geopolitico", policentrico e strutturalmente più consapevole di dinamiche relazionali.

Per quanto le conseguenze di tentennamenti europei siano potenzialmente tragiche, dal cambiamento climatico alle guerre in corso, sono in parte conseguenza strutturale del pluralismo europeo che è certo tra le cose che rende l'Unione attrattiva per l'Ucraina e per tanti stati membri.

Ragionando su possibili politiche UE relative al conflitto in Ucraina, è importante considerare non solo quali di queste ci sembrino più valide, ma anche quali di queste abbiano maggiori chance di essere effettivamente adottate e implementate da un'Unione europea forte, ma, prima di tutto, plurale.

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English

Why Kyiv cannot possibly fix the ‘root causes’ of the conflict

25 May 2025 - **Giorgio Comai**

No amount of unilateral Ukrainian concessions would address what Russia considers the ‘root causes’ of the conflict.

Context

When Vladimir Putin launched Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, he claimed the purpose of the “special military operation” was to protect residents of Ukraine’s Donbas region. “To this end” - he added - “[Russia] will seek to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine.” On the same occasion, he made clear the conflict was not all about Ukraine, but really had its roots in “the fundamental threats which irresponsible Western politicians created for Russia” and a broad range of issues that all boil down to how “the United States does not believe it necessary to agree with Russia” on matters that are important to Moscow. When in 2025 Kremlin officials and Russian media refer to “the root causes of the conflict” that need to be resolved in order to establish long-term peace, they are really pointing to perceived lack of respect for Russia in a U.S.-led international order, not the rights and welfare of residents of the Donbas.

The disconnect between these different layers of the conflict – those closer to the reality on the ground in Ukraine, and those related to Russia’s status in the international order – complicate the establishment of a meaningful negotiating framework and hinder substantive public debate around these matters. If the “root causes” of the conflict lie in Russia’s relations with the West, no amount of unilateral Ukrainian concessions – least of all territorial concessions – would lead to a satisfactory outcome for Russia. Putin’s desired outcome cannot possibly stem from a decision taken in Kyiv.

Ukraine, of course, remains central to Russia’s interests. But once the West finally accepts Moscow’s vision for a security framework that fully acknowledges that it is “necessary to

agree with Russia” on all important issues and recognise Russia’s pre-eminent interest in its neighbourhood and beyond, then all the rest logically follows, including on matters related to Ukraine. In this vision, once Western geopolitical ambitions and weapons are removed from Ukraine, Ukraine would inevitably fall back within the Russian political and cultural space where it naturally belongs.

Western quiescence to Russia’s demands and Moscow’s neo-imperial design to control Ukraine, and indeed subsume it in the Russian cultural and political space along with Belarus, are inextricably intertwined, as one set of objectives cannot be achieved without the other.

What the Kremlin wants

For a long time, the Kremlin has been insisting that Russia must be “respected” by the West. Observing that the desired level of deference would not be forthcoming, on multiple occasions Moscow decided to use force to demonstrate that it cannot be ignored, as well as the West’s impotence: Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its later military intervention in Syria both served to advance this argument. The “special military operation” launched in February 2022 was (and still is) supposed to make this point more decisively.

The ongoing contacts initiated after Donald Trump’s return to the White House between Russia and the United States are a considerable success for the Kremlin, as Washington and Moscow negotiating over Ukraine and long-term security arrangements in Europe on Moscow’s terms is after all what Putin had been demanding from the outset. It soon became clear, however, that the sides cannot hold substantive debates on security matters due to a mismatch of expectations about what the negotiations would really be about and who should be making concessions.

The U.S. leadership seemed to expect that forcing Ukraine to accept territorial losses while achieving some material gains in the process was a sure recipe to end the war and move on to other business. Having observed the intractability of security issues based on these premises, the U.S. leadership has been trying to move on to other business – including with Moscow – regardless, without having achieved much besides having disparaged all of its most established allies in the process. Indeed, reflecting the renewed focus of the negotiations, both the United States and Russia have chosen business developers to lead contacts across sides.

The Kremlin is still pursuing the very same objectives it set at the beginning of the full scale invasion in 2022: on the one hand, forcibly reshape the security architecture in Europe and

force the West to “respect” Russia’s leading role on the global stage; on the other, reduce Ukraine to a pliant and inoffensive client, to be integrated in the “Russian world” along with Belarus. At the same time, Moscow is still actively pursuing its immediate goals: a change of leadership in Kyiv – a first step towards the more radical purge of the Ukrainian national political and cultural elite it understood as “denazification” – and considerable limitations to Ukraine’s army – its “demilitarization” objective.

What about “residents of the Donbas”?

There is, however, one exception to this apparent consistency: the humanitarian component, much touted in the early phases of the war along with the need to save and liberate residents of the Donbas has all but disappeared from Russia’s official rhetoric. Images from a few cities such as Mariupol chosen to showcase reconstruction efforts are presented in the media as useful background to visits by federal officials, but they are hardly central to war-legitimising narratives. Russia’s invasion has wrecked the life and livelihood of millions of people living in these areas to the extent that even Russian authorities and news media have mostly stopped insisting this was all done primarily for the welfare of the people that used to live in towns that are now in ruins.

Indeed, the topic of “residents of the Donbas” has slowly faded away from public attention in Russia after the first months of the war. There is even less talk about residents of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, who, in line with the Kremlin’s original rhetoric, should either be liberated or eagerly expecting to be freed from under Kyiv’s yoke. Even the territories themselves may feature in reporting in ongoing fighting, but not really as a much coveted land that needs to be liberated and returned to the motherland. There is no hint that the final war objective is to establish full control of those regions, and that reaching those administrative boundaries would determine a victorious end to the war for Russia.

This is part of the reason why, as the U.S. leadership started its push for settling a deal based on territorial concessions, the Russian side talked ever more insistently about the need to deal with the “root causes” of the conflict, while smoothly shifting the focus of negotiations away from the war and on to business matters, in a manoeuvre that indirectly gets the Kremlin closer to all of its goals much more than territorial or even political concessions from Kyiv ever could.

Conclusions

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a neo-imperial performative war waged for asserting Russia's status both at the regional and global level. In the current international environment heavily influenced by an erratic U.S. leadership, there are major debates in Europe on the best way forward for establishing long-lasting peace on the continent, with no easy solutions in sight. Accepting that no amount of plausible concessions from Kyiv would to put an end to the conflict is a necessary premise for more substantive policy debates in Europe and elsewhere.

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The “Russian Hawks” and the Kremlin

19 September 2025 - **Giorgio Comai**

Previously marginal revanchist intellectuals have been producing grandiose ideological theorisations, that are now at the core of state-sanctioned narratives legitimising Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. There is however little evidence that the “hawks” can effectively constrain the Kremlin’s policy choices.

With Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a new set of keywords entered the Kremlin’s vocabulary. Expressions such as “collective West” and “denazification” were never used – not a single time – in the tens of thousands of press releases and speeches published on the Kremlin’s website before 2021, but they featured routinely since then.

After text-mining the websites of different state institutions and mainstream media, I found that these expressions barely featured in any of these sources before they were picked up by the Kremlin, but became commonplace afterwards. Where did such expressions come from? Were they really originally conceived by the Kremlin as the rhetorical companions of the military plans for invading Ukraine? Or had they been brewing for years in previously marginal cultural environments before entering the public spotlight? As it turned out, there was one source where “collective West” and “denazification” had been featuring regularly in articles for years: *Zavtra*, a weekly broadsheet newspaper in print since the 1990s.

I first read *Zavtra* in the early 2000s; its articles were edgy and full of verve, very much unlike all other publications I could buy at newsstands in provincial Russia at the time. *Zavtra*’s articles were imbued with revanchism, featured scathing critique of politicians and public figures, and were obviously out of tune with both official rhetoric and mainstream public discourse. Partly because of its seemingly home-made bulging logo, I dismissed it as an oddity of the transition due to disappear as its founder – Alexander Prokhanov, a very public supporter of the failed 1991 August coup against Gorbachev – aged into oblivion. I was young and naive, and, with the benefit of hindsight, obviously wrong.

Looking at the results of my content analysis many years later, I was still surprised to find that the cultural and ideological circles authoring rabid articles for a fringe publication such as *Zavtra* could become direct source of inspiration for the Kremlin’s speech-writers.

Even accepting that *Zavtra* itself may not be so influential, in the present context there's good reason to take the adoption of these buzzwords as an invitation to dedicate more attention to the ideological and cultural spaces that have grown around *Zavtra* and its founder. As emerges from an excellent book by Juliette Faure recently published with Cambridge University Press – *The Rise of the Russian Hawks: Ideology and Politics from the Late Soviet Union to Putin's Russia* – this is a surprisingly rich and engrossing story, that illustrates how generations of writers and intellectuals with often conflicting views built a coalition promoting their shared vision of “modernist conservatism” among policy circles.

Juliette Faure analyses the development of the idea network she calls the “Russian hawks” highlighting the continuity of debates around Russian modernist conservatism from the 1960s through the late Soviet years to the present days. In reaction to “a developmental path shared with the West and leading to the two systems’ ultimate convergence” emerging already in Soviet times, “they connected elements of paradigms formerly held as incompatible, including Soviet technoscientific modernity, religious Russophile conservatism, and Stalinian state patriotism.”

This cohort of public intellectuals found inspiration in earlier writings associated with “Russian cosmism” and a spiritual approach to technological progress. Cultural points of reference included Nikolai Fedorov (1829–1903), who had proposed a model of “active Christianity”, whereby “technological progress would usher in a new age where humanity was able to regulate the cosmos and realize the promises of the Bible, including transforming human nature toward its deification.” According to this philosophical current, Biblical concepts such as life extension, resuscitation and immortality were not to be understood metaphorically, but could and should be achieved not only through spiritual, but also technological progress.

Reading about these ideas in 2025, one may easily find all sorts of connections with contemporary debates, from “AI” fantasies of all-intelligent humans to Vladimir Putin talking with Xi Jinping about how technology and transplantation of human organs could lead to immortality.

Contemporary Russian intellectuals associated with this group insist that technological progress and Orthodox Christianity are both central to their conservative vision, overcoming a stereotyped fetishisation of a distant rural past. Indeed, Russian modernist conservatism combines a rather eclectic mix of ideas and public figures that for a long time could not overcome their internal disagreements, yet eventually emerged as a “collective language coalescing various groups and generations united by their common opposition to Russia’s convergence with the West.” United by their common struggle against liberal reformists and favouring group identity-building over theoretical consistency, they united with younger proponents of “dynamic conservatism” in order to form an organisational network that

could effectively reach policy-making circles. The coalescing of this idea network into a formal organisation actively seeking to influence state policy, the *Izborskii Klub*, founded in 2012, had among its key figures and as its first president Alexander Prokhanov, director of *Zavtra*. Prokhanov not only did not age into oblivion, as my younger self assumed, but well into his 80s, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has been receiving official state honours and was publicly acknowledged by Vladimir Putin, who demonstrated familiarity with his writing.

Shaping policies or legitimising them?

Looking at the prominent role of ideology in official discourse in Russia and the extent to which the worldview expressed by the Kremlin aligns with those of the “Russians Hawks”, it may be tempting to conclude that indeed, their hard ideological and organisational work has paid off, and they finally managed to influence state policy. *Zavtra* itself on its official website boasts that “over the years, we at *Zavtra* have created several ideologies, several powerful trends that have entered and continue to enter the public consciousness.”

In practice, however, the adherence of the Kremlin's policy with the views expressed by *Zavtra* and the *Izborskii Klub*, has been all but steadfast. Indeed, the views expressed by *Zavtra* have been marginalised throughout the early 2000s, briefly co-opted in 2014 to legitimise the annexation of Crimea and the potential expansion of political objectives towards “Novorossiia”, but soon sidelined again as the Kremlin's inched towards turning the Donbas into a more conventional “frozen conflict” rather than a highly ideologised frontline (the “Russian Hawks” were lobbying in favour of a more expansive military intervention and a more assertive position towards Ukraine and the West already in 2014).

As Faure argues, what the Kremlin has been doing is to favour “managed ideological pluralism”, promoting or demoting different idea networks, ensuring that “a range of lines and narratives [would be] available to justify various policy courses.” At times, the views expressed by Prokhanov and his peers have proved to be useful to the Kremlin, and they have been picked up, à la carte, from among available policy options; at others, they have been unceremoniously dismissed.

How much does ideology really matter?

The account offered by Juliette Faure of how radical thought coalitions emerged and evolved through recent decades taking increasingly purposeful efforts to get closer to

policy-making circles is gripping and convincing. Faure posits that “ideology plays a pivotal role within the Russian political system by shaping the collective language constitutive of elite groups”; “the competition of these groups, in turn, shapes the set of policy options available.” My own research confirms that indeed, some of the most prominent keywords that accompanied Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have originated in the cultural and intellectual spaces described in Faure’s book.

And yet, even acknowledging that they served as inspiration for official and public discourse, it is less clear that they did actually influence policy options. Besides, if we accept [Jeremy Morris’](#) view that “any national ideology [in Russia] is skin deep, and certainly most elites are entirely cynical, if not incredulous at pretensions about expanding the ‘Russian World’”, we must also question how relevant these ideological debates really are for understanding contemporary Russian politics and, more specifically, the Kremlin’s motivations for invading Ukraine.

Surely, Putin’s own radicalisation journey has not happened in a void. His thinking may well have been shaped more by Soviet-time stereotypes and [spy-fiction series](#) than by elaborate ideological constructions, but the role of these intellectual groups in building ideological underpinnings for turning a late-imperial fantasy into state policy should not be dismissed. However, as far as policy options related to war termination or actual negotiation dynamics are concerned, there is little evidence that they can really constrain the Kremlin’s choices.

The “hawks” themselves may well be trying to establish their cultural hegemony but they understand that radicalisation of public discourse in contemporary Russia is a top-down process led by the presidential administration. They have been sidelined in line with political convenience after the annexation of Crimea, and they must be aware that this can happen again; even as the “hawks” are enthused by increasing alignment of the Kremlin with their policies, they express constant worry at conspirators and traitors even in the highest echelons of power willing to reverse course.

Indeed, even more than Ukraine or NATO, it is the changes happening within Russia itself that matter most to these ideologists, who point at Russia’s awakening, the re-discovery of its imperial identity as a distinct civilisation, and internal cleansing as the main priorities. As argued at length on the [website of the *Izborskii Klub*](#) by one of its leading figures, “all the reasons we can name, such as protecting the Donbas, the issue of NATO expansion [...] and many others, none of them are decisive factors. [...] To put it bluntly, the issue isn’t about bringing the Ukrainian people, our brotherly nation and dear brothers, back into the Russian world. This is merely an external aspect of what’s happening. There is a far deeper trend underlying this. The trend is that until 2022, Russia continued to remain in a quasi-colonial dependency on another civilization. [...] For us, what’s most important is that Russia’s cleansing has begun. [...]. Ukraine is merely a pretext for a great event. [...] What’s most

important in this whole story isn't the course of the special military operation, although it is certainly crucial, but whether the top-down revolution happening within Russia itself will not collapse."

Conclusions

Enhanced understanding of ideological debates driven by the "Russian Hawks" offers important context for policy-makers trying to understand the potential contours of a settlement to the ongoing war.

Firstly, it emerges clearly that there is no plausible concession that a legitimate Ukrainian leadership could offer in the course of negotiations that would placate these "Russian hawks", as their ambitions lie at an entirely different level. Of course, the renewed civilisational empire they dream of would subdue Ukraine and re-shape security arrangements in Europe and beyond, but, to this end, specific territorial or administrative compromises are immaterial, if not as the inevitable acknowledgement of the strength of a rejuvenated imperial Russia. Domestic cleansing and ideological consolidation inside Russia's core are more fundamental.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that even the "hawks" still see the radicalisation of Russia's society as a "top-down revolution". In spite of public display of hyper-patriotic narratives, there is little evidence of any actually bottom-up push for maximalist demands, nor any hint that the "Russian hawks" are edging closer to the cultural hegemony they aspire to either among elites or the public at large. The presidential administration continues to define the contours of acceptable public discourse and intellectual debates through mechanisms of managed ideological pluralism, making it possible for the Kremlin to pick legitimising narratives, as if from a buffet of pre-packaged ideological formulas. It is fair to question how resilient this configuration really is, but all sorts of concrete issues – including economic degradation, challenges from the regions, and frontline developments – represent more realistic constraints to the Kremlin's actions than ideology-driven unrest.

Originally published on: <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Russia/The-Russian-Hawks-and-the-Kremlin-240083>

Technical posts

Analysing Russian news via Telegram, processing them with open LLMs

 See full details in the on-line version

Some sections of this post are interactive and only available in the on-line version.
<https://tadadit.xyz/posts/2025-03-telegram-ru-news/>

 What is this about, in brief

Starting point: What if we used LLMs (commonly referred to as “AI”) to categorise Russian Telegram channels and extract information from posts?

If responses are consistent, this would be vastly more efficient than human coding; as categorisation choices are expressed in natural language, results would be easier to interpret for non-technical users, who would be able to better appreciate results and provide feedback that could be immediately implemented. As the approach relies on open LLMs (rather than ChatGPT or the likes), this would be fully replicable.

Preliminary conclusions: the whole thing is quite promising, as others have been noticing, and especially if combined with other established approaches for content analysis, can become part of reasonably efficient and effective workflows.

For R users: I’ve developed a package to streamline local operations with this specific use case in mind, see more on the [package’s documentation website](#).

Disclaimer: if you’re interested in substantive results, rather than tentative methodological explorations, you can safely skip this post, and wait a few more weeks for the more content-relevant follow-up.

This post points at possible solutions for two issues that are common to studies analysing different types of public discourse in Russia.

- finding textual sources that are meaningful and representative of different types of discourse, while being accessible and easy to process

- find an approach to text categorisation that is straightforward to implement for the technical user, but also easy to understand by non-technical readers, enabling engagement and substantive feedback

In contrast to my [previous work](#), I will address the first issue by focusing on public Telegram channels (rather than text-mining websites), and the second by testing locally deployed Large Language Models (LLM), rather than plain pattern-matching or bag-of-words approaches. Both solutions are of course complementary to tried and tested approaches, and are outlined here primarily as a tentative contribution to methodological debates.

After offering some context, this post will tentatively address a substantive question, i.e. when Russian public discourse refers to territories Russia lays claim to and partially controls since its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, what does it focus on? Are military affairs central to news coverage about these regions?

In order to facilitate processing of data with these approaches, two dedicated packages for the R programming language have been developed:

- [telegramparser](#), streamlining the process of reading Telegram export files into R; at this stage, this is just a basic package collecting some convenience functions, but may be developed further.
- [quackingllama](#) is a more fully-featured and documented R package that facilitates interacting with open LLMs deployed locally with [Ollama](#), efficiently caching results in a local [DuckDB](#) database (hence, the name of the package).

On Telegram as a source

Similarly to other authoritarian regimes, Russian authorities have long demonstrated a keen awareness of the role of digital media in shaping public discourse. For example, they made efforts to increase the visibility of pro-Kremlin voices on YouTube (Fedor e Fredheim 2017), even as Navalny was reaching millions denouncing government corruption on the same platform (Glazunova 2020). As Russia invaded Ukraine, pro-war Telegram channels often referred to as “Z-bloggers” or “war correspondents” (Farbman 2023) gained considerable visibility on a platform that has become increasingly prominent in Russia’s news landscape.

Telegram’s relevance may be further growing, as the functioning of services such as YouTube that have long been central to Russia’s on-line culture are being significantly degraded, and - besides TikTok - no big challengers are emerging (other US-based platforms that had a

relatively significant user-base in Russia such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have been banned since 2022).

Alyukov characterises the current situation as a “hybrid media system in which the government attempts to synchronise reporting across broadcast and digital media” (Alyukov 2024, 401), and points at the fact that scholars have dedicated limited attention to “autocrats’ simultaneous use of different media” (Alyukov 2024, 401), insisting on the complementary nature of different segments of the media environment.

What is worth noticing is that at this stage Telegram is effectively the main on-line space where different facets of Russian public discourse appear, including traditional media (TV, newspapers, news agencies), state officials, Z-bloggers and “war correspondents”, independent media outlets, and all sorts of public figures. All of these contents can be reached without obstacles by Russia-based users, even if not all of them are easily accessible from Western Europe.¹ Telegram does limit access to some major channels based on the user’s sim card; for example, users with mobile phone registered in an EU-country wouldn’t be able to access Russian news agency “Ria Novosti” or Russian nationalist TV channel “Tsargrad”. A wide variety of channels remain however available.

For scholars interested in analysing public discourse in Russia, Telegram has an important advantage: considering how easy it is to export the entire archive of Telegram channels, it is possible to get access to a full-text archive of a wide variety of sources in a few minutes.

Although some of these channels have a substantive photo or audio-visual component, the textual part remains predominant for most of them, and even video-bloggers would mostly provide substantial hints about the content of their clips. Targeted analyses may require further attention to pictures, video, or audio contents, as was the case with [this analysis of Prigozhin’s audio files](#). But overall, any and all big themes and trends in the Russian *Runet* would inevitably appear in the textual contents of major Telegram channels.

At the most basic level, exporting the textual contents of Telegram channels can be used as a speedy proxy solution in lieu of retrieving full-text contents from their original sources, as e.g. (Ptaszek, Yuskiv, e Khomych 2024) did for their analysis of Russian and Ukrainian news agencies. In order to catch big trends, the short summary of news posted by the agencies of Telegram was functionally equivalent to retrieving the original posts in full, but it was much more efficient in terms of time and/or money (no need for lengthy scraping or access to expensive services).

At present, exploring Telegram channels allows for access to more varied types of contents compared to established media. Besides variety of contents, some additional approaches

¹On 10 March 2025, access to Telegram has been suspended in Chechnya a Dagestan; it is unclear if this is just a temporary measure.

are enabled by Telegram’s specificities, including references and reposts between channels, providing additional hints about network effects and news distribution dynamics. Indeed, services that rank the influence of Telegram channels in Russia (such as [tgstat](#)) do not rely exclusively on the number of subscribers to a channel, but look also at how much they are cited.

A preliminary overview of different types of Telegram channels

Here is a table providing a set of examples for Telegram channels across different types of sources that are relevant to Russian public discourse. This is not a systematic review, and just aims at providing some hints about the main types of sources that can be found on Russian-language Telegram relevant to political issues and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

	channel_name	earliest_post	total_posts
Russian mainstream media	ВЕСТИ	2015-12-14	144 489
	Первый канал. Новости	2017-02-07	37 796
Russian news agency	Интерфакс	2017-10-24	52 164
	ТАСС	2016-06-12	293 416
Russian newspaper	Московский комсомолец: главное сегодня	2016-03-02	74 628
	Коммерсантъ	2016-03-21	75 830
Russian news on Telegram	Раньше всех. Ну почти.	2018-07-05	193 823
	Readovka	2018-03-05	90 607
	Baza	2018-09-13	34 028
Z-blogger, etc.	Kotsnews	2017-02-01	49 322
	Операция Z: Военкоры Русской Весны	2018-04-30	79 877
	WarGonzo	2017-06-07	22 726
	Караульный Z	2017-01-05	529 505
	НЕЗЫГАРЬ	2016-12-11	2 017
	Два майора	2022-06-26	61 110
Russian state official	Дмитрий Медведев	2022-03-14	533
	Мария Захарова	2021-05-31	9 259
	Kadyrov_95	2017-05-22	5 259
pro-government media figure	Маргарита Симоньян	2017-11-27	12 765
	СОЛОВЬЁВ	2019-05-26	286 334
official accounts related to Russia-controlled Ukrainian territories	Администрация Херсонской области	2022-03-18	25 651
	Владимир Сальдо	2022-07-06	5 476
International media with Russian-language version	BBC News Русская служба	2015-11-04	73 847
Russian independent media	Медуза — LIVE	2016-04-06	118 796
	Телеканал Дождь	2015-09-25	82 559

On categorising texts with open LLMs

There's a growing literature on relying on LLMs to classify texts (e.g. Weber e Reichardt 2023; Plaza-del-Arco, Nozza, e Hovy 2023), and relatively encouraging results on how, in the right conditions, LLMs show accuracy that is reliably consistent with human coders (Bojic et al. 2025). ². Building upon a naive previous attempt at text categorisation, this time I will rely on the structured outputs feature introduced in Ollama in December 2024, enabling more consistent parsing of results.

As an early and tentative test, I will proceed and try to establish how many of the posts that mention one of the Ukrainian regions partly controlled by Russia in a mainstream media outlet refer to military issues or to anything else, and will then parse posts that are *not* about military issue to extract some information about them.

I will proceed with the following steps:

- take the Telegram channel of a mainstream media outlet, in this case, “Vesti”
- extract all posts that make reference to “Kherson”, one of the Ukrainian regions partly under Russian control
- ask different LLMs to categorise these text based on a binary option, i.e. to reply either **TRUE** or **FALSE** when prompted if a given text is “about military”
- ask LLMs to tag posts that are not “about military”, and extract named entities such as names of individuals and locations
- check processing time with different models
- preliminarily evaluate consistency of results

About the source: Telegram Vesti

Vesti is the all-news channel of Russia's state broadcaster. As of March 2025, its Telegram channel boasts about 170 000 subscribers. As you'd expect, most of its posts are news updates, sometimes accompanied by pictures or video clips. It is reasonable to expect that its news agenda reflects practices of the TV channel itself.

Here are some summary statistics about Vesti's Telegram channel at the time of writing:

The question we want to answer at this stage is: “how many among the 1 742 posts that mention “Kherson” are about the military, and how many are not?”.

²Find some more context in this [previous post](#) dedicated to text categorisation with LLMs; the implementation is much more consistent in this post.

Feature	Value
Earliest post	14 December 2015
Latest post	03 May 2025
Total posts	150 939
Total posts with reference to Kherson	1 742

How many posts with reference to Kherson are about military affairs?

We proceed with asking this question to LLMs. There are surely more adequate techniques to get this kind of response, but for the sake of this exercise, I passed to the LLM only the most basic set of instructions:

- a system message: “You are a helpful assistant. You tag and classify Russian texts.”
- a schema set to receive a structured response, forcing the LLM to reply `TRUE` or `FALSE` to the expression “About military”; I also allowed it to pass tags as a string, but this is ignored in the analysis for the time being (a better prompt and forcing to give results as a list rather than as a string would have been more effective).
- the text of the Telegram post in full in the prompt.

I passed the very same prompt to a bunch of open LLMs, including models of different sizes by established companies active in this space (Meta, Microsoft, Google), Olmo as an example of a fully open LLM (others have only open weights), a version of Deepseek, and a few small models optimised for Russian language.³

Larger models are generally expected to be of higher quality, but slower and more demanding in terms of resources. Newer models are often more performing than older ones (in this set, Google’s `gemma3` and Microsoft’s `phi4-mini`, are the most recent additions). Of course, a major factor determining processing speed is the hardware used for this task, in this case my own laptop, including availability of GPU and vRAM (in my case, a relatively powerful but oldish laptop, with a GPU that made 3.6 GiB of vRAM available to Ollama).

While all of these models have generic capabilities, different models excel at different tasks, as well as in their capability to interact with different languages.

model	author	parameter
llama3.2	Meta	3b
phi4	Microsoft	14b
phi4-mini	Microsoft	3.8b

³For benchmarks of LLMs for tasks in Russian, see Ru Arena General; RuSentNE-LLM-Benchmark; Multimodal Evaluation for Russian-language Architectures (MERA); brief outline of Russian-language optimised models available for Ollama.

model	author	parameter
gemma2	Google	9b
gemma3	Google	4b
olmo2	Ai2	7b
deepseek-r1:8b	deepseek	8b
mistral	Mistral	7b
owl/t-lite	T-bank	4.7b
akdengi/saiga-gemma2		5.8
lakomoor/vikhr-llama-3.2-1b-instruct:1b		1b

How many of these posts are about military affairs?

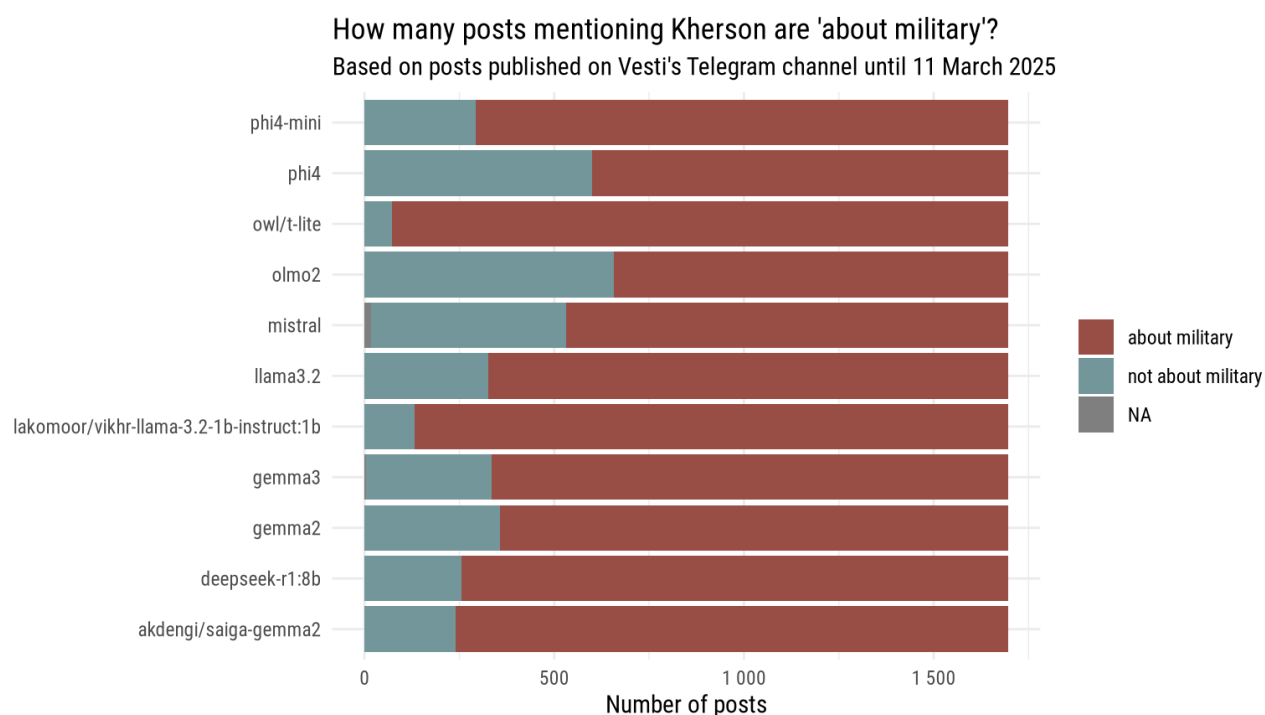
Looking at the result, it soon emerges that the answer to this question in many cases is not so straightforward, and that unless criteria were more clearly defined, human coders would surely have a lot of disagreement.

Indeed, unsurprisingly, different models do not reply very consistently, although larger models seemingly agree more. For example, if we limit the selection to only two of the largest models (`phi4` and `mistral`) included in this test, we get a *Krippendorff's Alpha* showing a moderate but relatively good result of inter-coder reliability.⁴

`phi4` and `mistral` have a score close to 0.8, while all others have much lower scores.⁵ A better definition of categorisation criteria would surely help.

⁴It should be noted, that these are all understood to be “small” models compared to those most often available to consumers through established commercial offers.

⁵The measure known as “Krippendorff Alpha” is commonly used to evaluate inter-coder reliability. Broadly speaking, a value of 1 indicates perfect agreement among raters, a value of 0.80 or higher is generally considered acceptable, a value above 0.66 but below 0.8 indicates moderate agreement (results should be looked at with caution); a lower value indicates low agreement.



Even with such a broad and rather unsatisfying definition, it appears that according to all LLMs queried, about two thirds of posts (or more) are about military affairs.

If not about military affairs, then about what?

In conducting structured analysis, we'd review more carefully the source dataset (is Telegram's Vesti channel really relevant?), the definition of the categorisation criteria, as well as the consistency of results (including consistency with human coding for at least part of results). As this is just a preliminary test of the workflow, I'll proceed with processing further the dataset based on the results of the biggest among the models included (*phi4*).

Passing to LLMs this new list of posts (599 posts that are supposedly not about military affairs), I ask them to extract:

- name of locations
- name of individuals
- named entities

and to describe each post with:

- title
- summary
- tags

Even if in the system message I insisted that the response be in English, some LLMs effectively responded in Russian. Arguably, at least for named entities recognition, keeping the source language may well be more effective.

These are some observations after skimming through results:

- there's some inconsistency in the response language; even more explicit clarity in the prompt may help, or perhaps it's wiser to process data in Russian and, if needed, translate results as late as possible in the process;
- all models do a decent job of extracting information, with perhaps `phi4-mini` performing worst and `llama3.2` more prone to invent things (e.g. if a Russian institution is mentioned, then other institutions or officials not present in the post are also reported)
- all models occasionally add some information not present in the post, e.g. if there is only a surname they tend to add a supposedly plausible first name (e.g. if only "Peskov" is mentioned, a reference to "Evgeny Peskov", rather than "Dmitry Peskov" may be added); this is however not very common.

While not impeccable, the data seem of good-enough quality to answer some basic questions, or else hint at interesting aspects that may then be validated with other methods. For example, if it emerges that a given official is mentioned particularly often, or a location particularly prominent, this can then be systematically checked with basic word matching.

The following tables report the results for each of these responses (e.g. what title each of these LLMs gave to a given post? which individuals or entities did it identify?); by clicking on the first column on the left, you'll see the original post on Telegram. These are shared here in order to let the reader form their own opinion on the quality of results.

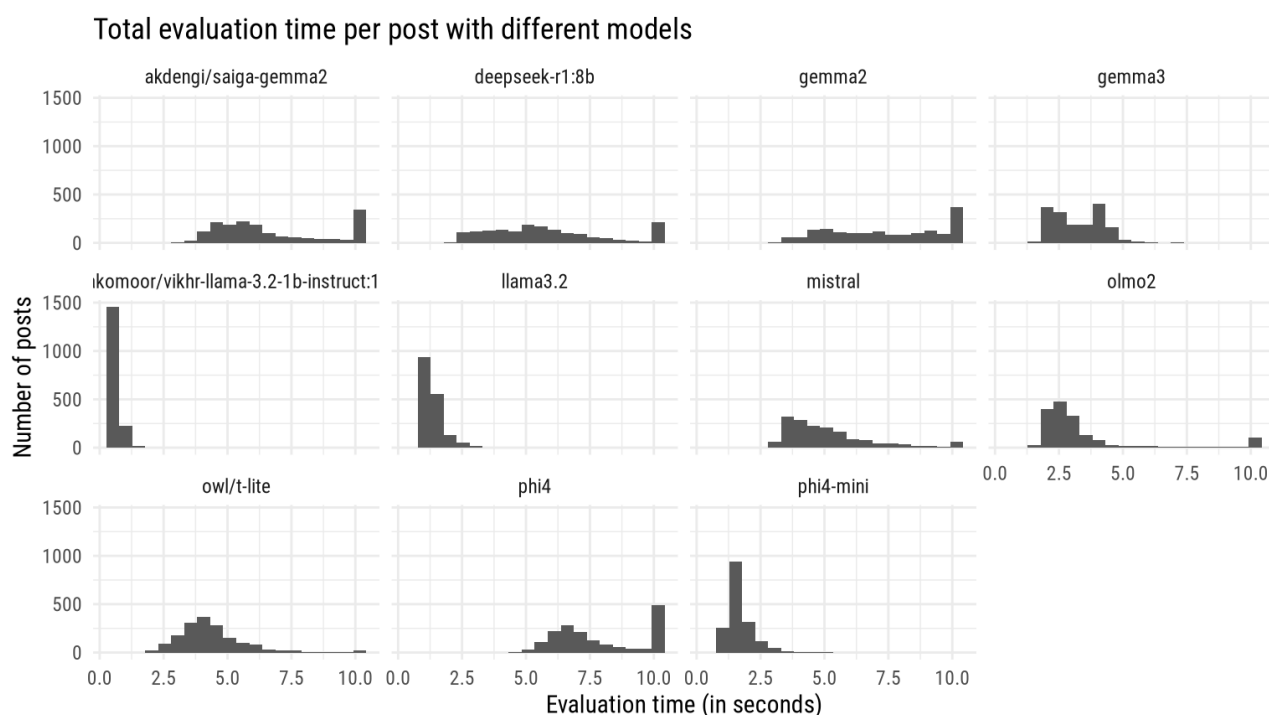
These can also be downloaded as csv files (or all together in a single rds file, allowing for nested columns).

- title
- summary
- tags
- name of locations
- name of individuals
- named entities

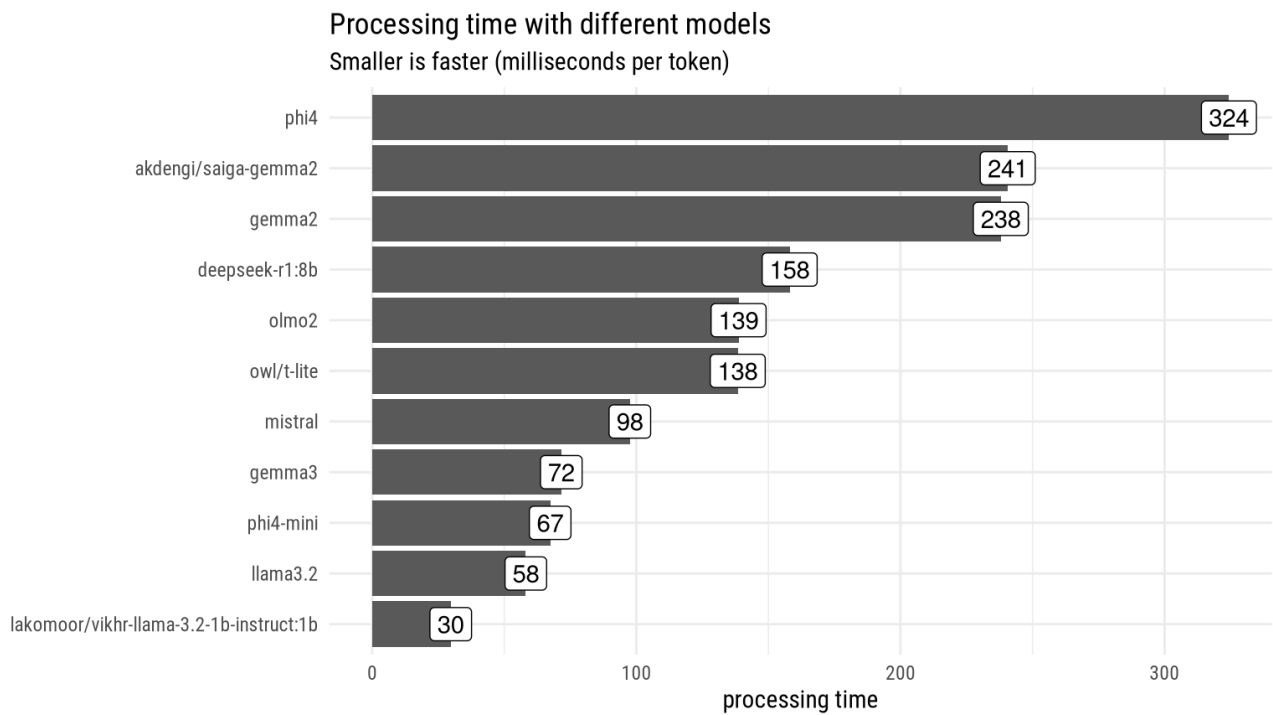
Processing time

LLMs are notoriously demanding in terms of resources: it is possible to filter millions of posts by pattern matching in a matter of seconds, while it may well take a few seconds to process a single post with a locally deployed LLM. Of course, much depends on the hardware (and/or resources) available, but some issues of scalability emerge quite soon. The size of the model also matters significantly.

The following graphs shows how much it took to process each Telegram post in this dataset: less than a second with the smallest models, but usually about six seconds (and not infrequently more than 10 seconds) per post with the largest of those included, `phi4`.



The following graphs shows average processing time *per token* (i.e. adjusting for the length of input), which is likely to inform the choice of model. If, for example, in terms of named entity recognition `gemma3` performs just as well as `phi4` but is almost 5 times faster, then there's good reason to prefer it.



Conclusions

This post tentatively introduces a workflow for processing and categorising on-line sources with open LLMs based on two packages for the R programming language developed (and still under development) by this author , [telegramparser](#) and [quackingllama](#).

The results presented are not inherently meaningful and have not been validated; further validation of data quality issues, including matters of inter-coder reliability, will be discussed in a dedicated post.

In terms of methods, this preliminary exploration suggests that systematic processing of contents with locally-deployed open LLMs is likely feasible, if the relevant tasks are clearly defined. Due to resource constraints, these methods will likely be used in combination with more traditional approaches for filtering contents or extracting structured information from them. Indeed, this emerges even from the approach chosen for this post: first filter contents based on simple pattern matching (i.e. if a post makes reference to “Kherson”), then refine further, then query again for details.

Even if LLMs are vastly less efficient than other computing techniques, they enable a different type of transparency compared to other approaches: indeed, as the prompts are expressed in natural human language, even non technically inclined readers will be in a position to propose alternative approaches for querying the dataset or different

categorisation. Unlike traditional human-based coding, it will mostly be possible to re-process data without disproportionate human efforts. This approach can realistically be applied to replicate studies based on human coders, exploring slight variations in categorisation criteria.

Further adjustments to workflows, and considerable validation efforts, are still needed to include results in substantive research.

From ‘residents of the Donbas’ to ‘root causes’

i See full details in the on-line version

Some sections of this post are interactive and only available in the on-line version.
<https://tadadit.xyz/posts/2025-05-donbas-residents-root-causes/>

Context

In some instances, it is useful to conduct a quick check about the relative prominence of certain concepts in Russian media and official discourse. There are, of course, many ways to achieve this result. In this post, I will outline an approach that is exceedingly fast and simple, while offering results that may be reasonably valid under basic assumptions.

Telegram allows to export the entire archive of a channel in a matter of minutes in a format that is amenable to further data processing. Indeed, no further data cleaning steps are effectively needed.

Rather than engage in time-consuming text-mining or checking across a wide variety of sources, in this post I outline a more minimalistic approach.

In brief:

- I export the archive of two Telegram channels, an all-news TV broadcaster (*Vesti*) and a news agency (*TASS*). Channel selection is based on the fact that they both focus on news and their posts routinely include quotes from government officials; at the most basic, they are meaningful proxies of mainstream news diet offered to Russian residents
- I conduct basic word-frequency analysis and check keywords in context

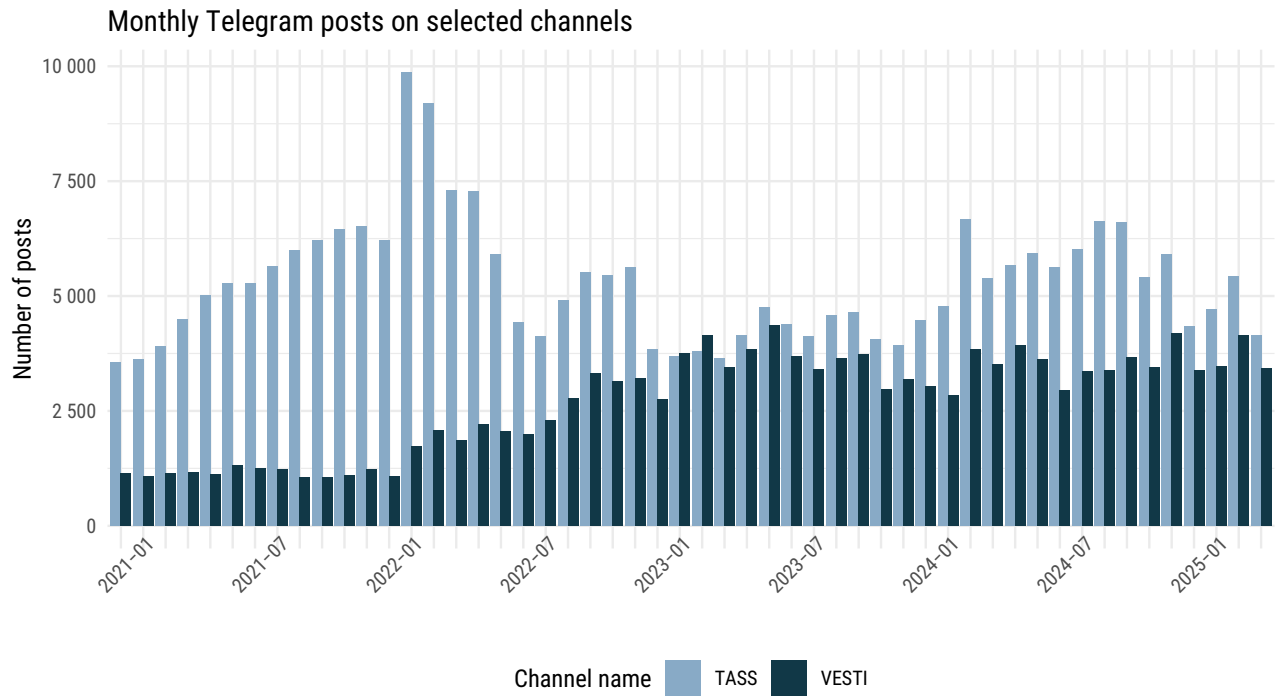
Once relevant workflows have been defined, these steps can be conducted in a matter of minutes.

The examples provided in this post serve as background for this article.

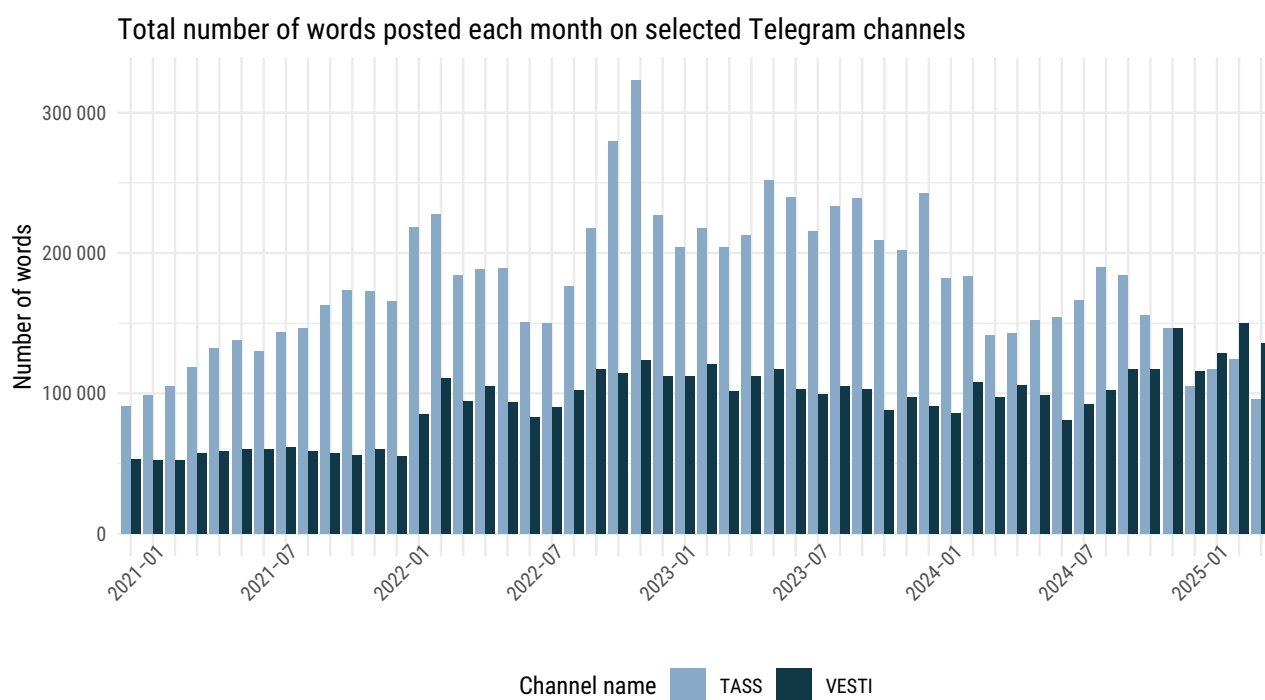
Frequency of posts on selected channels

Channel name	Earliest post	Latest post	Total posts
BECTM	2015-12-14	2025-05-03	150 989
TACC	2016-06-12	2025-05-03	310 389

Selected Telegram channels have published consistently on Telegram since at least 2021, and have shown a relatively regular publication volume for the last couple of years.



Rather than the number of posts, the following graph shows the total number of words per month posted by each channel.

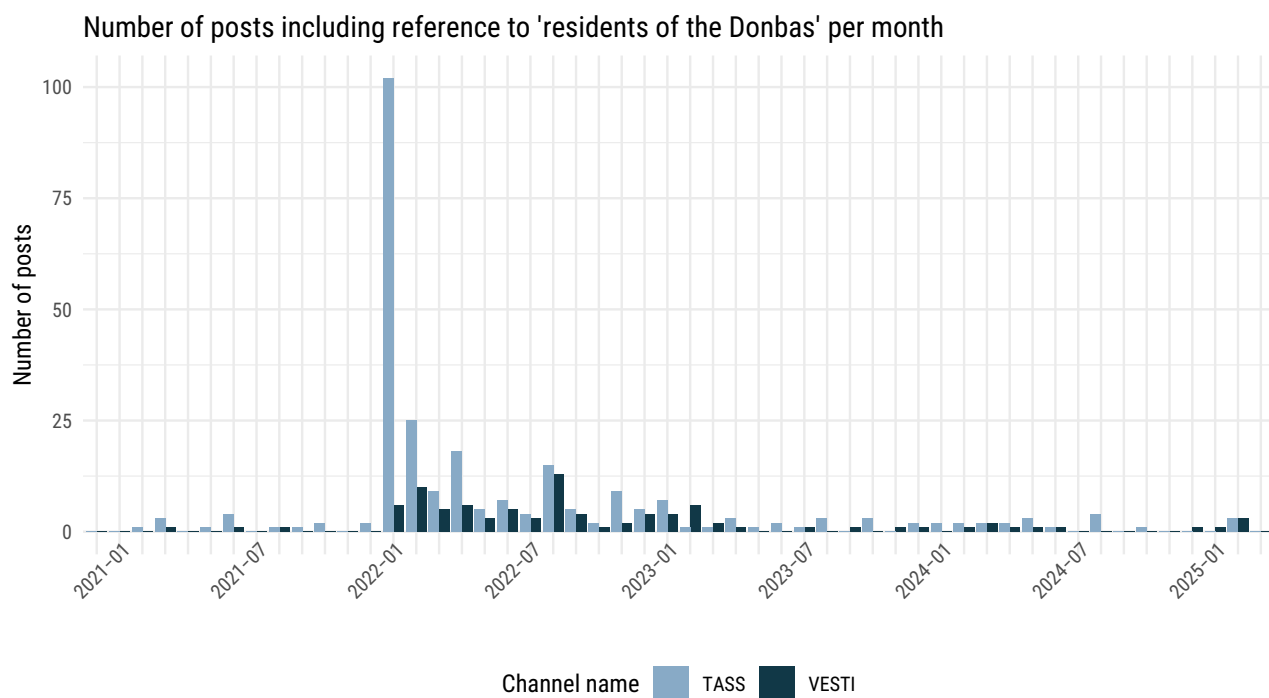


According to both measures, there is some change in the volume of publications, but nothing of a scale that by itself could explain the trends outlined in the following sections of this post.

Residents of the Donbas

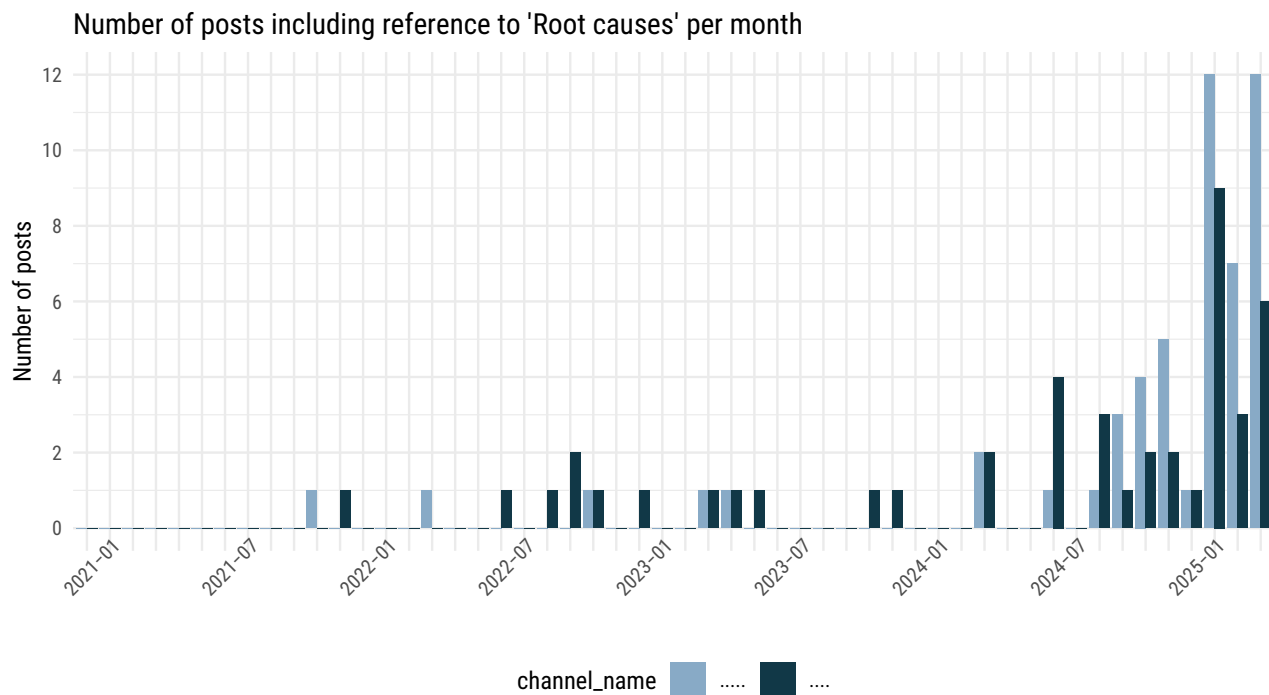
“Residents of the Donbas” (“жител* донбас”) have been a major object of news coverage in Russia, in particular in the days immediately before the beginning of the large scale invasion in February 2024, pointing at their prominence in the context of explaining to the Russian public the need for military intervention.

They have featured somewhat regularly in posts published by selected channels throughout the following year through February 2024, but references to them were scarcely to be found later.



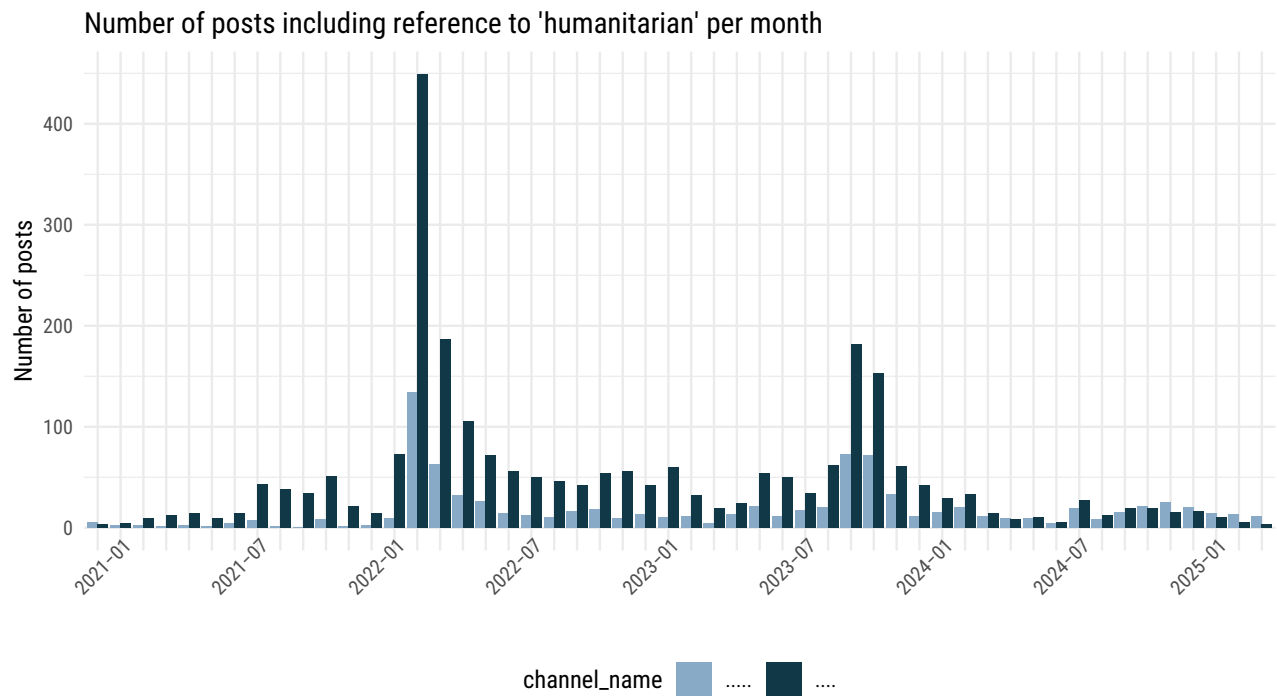
“Root causes”

How frequent are mentions of “root causes” (“первопричин”)? Overall, there is a rather limited number of references to “root causes” across both channels, but while they were sporadic until mid-2024, they appear more routinely, especially starting with 2025.



In principle, the expression “root causes” can refer to any issue (e.g. “the root causes of the economic crisis”), looking at the source text it appears clearly that it is only starting in late 2024, and more clearly since November 2024, that the expression “root causes” appears more consistently in quotes attributed to Russian officials and is applied more consistently to the conflict in Ukraine.

Humanitarian



Credits and disclaimers

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The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

See project page.

Russia and the “root causes” of the conflict

💡 What this research note is about, in brief

Questions

1. when did Russia’s leadership and state media really start to talk about the “root causes of the conflict”, in reference to Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine?
2. does a structured analysis of mentions, in particular early mentions, offer hints about what these “root causes” really are?

Answers

1. there’s basically no relevant mention of “root causes” in reference to the ongoing war before 2024; “root causes” in this context effectively enters the Kremlin’s dictionary in November 2024, right after Donald Trump’s victory in the U.S. presidential election
2. the “root causes of the conflict” may well be a fuzzy expression that can be adapted to different contexts; however, in Kremlin-speech as of early 2025, it effectively refers to Russia’s place in the international system and in Europe’s security architecture, not to Ukraine itself.

This is best summarised by prominent Russian commentator [Mikhail Leontyev](#), as he was about to explain why there shouldn’t be expectations about any breakthrough in the negotiations with Ukraine in Istanbul in his famous *Odnako* programme on Russia’s *First Channel* . Leontyev first included a Putin quote about the “root causes of the conflict” and then spelled out clearly what they are about, as well as the fact that the “root causes” cannot possibly be object of negotiation with Ukraine.

Putin: “We are in favour of solving the problem by peaceful means, but while eliminating the root causes that led to this situation. It is necessary to ensure Russia’s security in a long-term historical perspective.”

Leontyev: “We are talking about a new global world order that guarantees our interests and our security. Discussing the global world order with Ukraine is idiotic. We don’t do that.”

See the broadcast on Pervy Kanal’s website.

See the relevant segment with English subtitles (about 1 minute).

Context

In a [recent article](#), I argued that no amount of unilateral Ukrainian concessions would put an end to the conflict, as they couldn’t possibly address what Russia considers the “root causes” of the conflict.

In this post, I will unpack some of the premises to that argument and conduct more robust checks of some of its premises after [a preliminary analysis of Telegram posts of Russian news media](#) seemed to confirm observations that the Kremlin’s insistence on the “root causes” of the conflict were a recent phenomenon. I will do so by trying to answer the following two questions:

1. when did Russia’s leadership and state media really start to talk about the “root causes of the conflict” in reference to Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine?
2. does a structured analysis of mentions offer hints about what these “root causes” really are?

We’ll approach this question based on all the publications that have appeared on the website of Russia’s *First Channel* (*Pervy Kanal*, 1tv.ru) and on Kremlin.ru, which includes all official presidential statements.

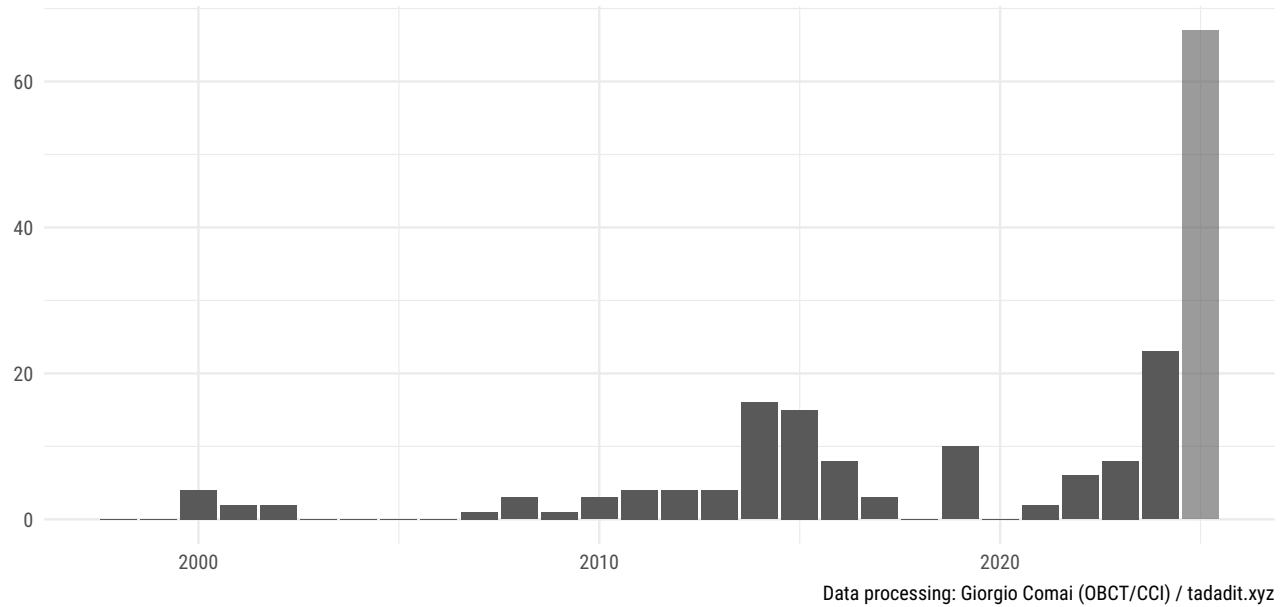
There are many possible reasons to talk about “root causes”, as it is a generic expression that can be used in reference to all sorts of issues completely unrelated to Ukraine, but as it will emerge clearly, it is after all not so common to talk about “root causes” in either news reports or official occasions.

Root causes on Russia’s First Channel

The following graph shows how many times references to “root causes” were made in news items that appeared on the website of Russia’s *First Channel*. In spite of the fact that in

recent years the length of transcripts offered on the website has decreased substantially (see [more information on the 1tv.ru corpus on the dedicated page](#)), it appears very clearly that the frequency of mentions to “root causes” has boomed in 2025, with dozens of mentions in the first months of the year, compared to a grand total of zero mentions in 2020 and just a few references in most other years.

Number of references per year to 'root causes' on 1tv.ru
Based on 502 674 items published in Russian between 22 December 1998 and 29 May 2025
Query: '.....'

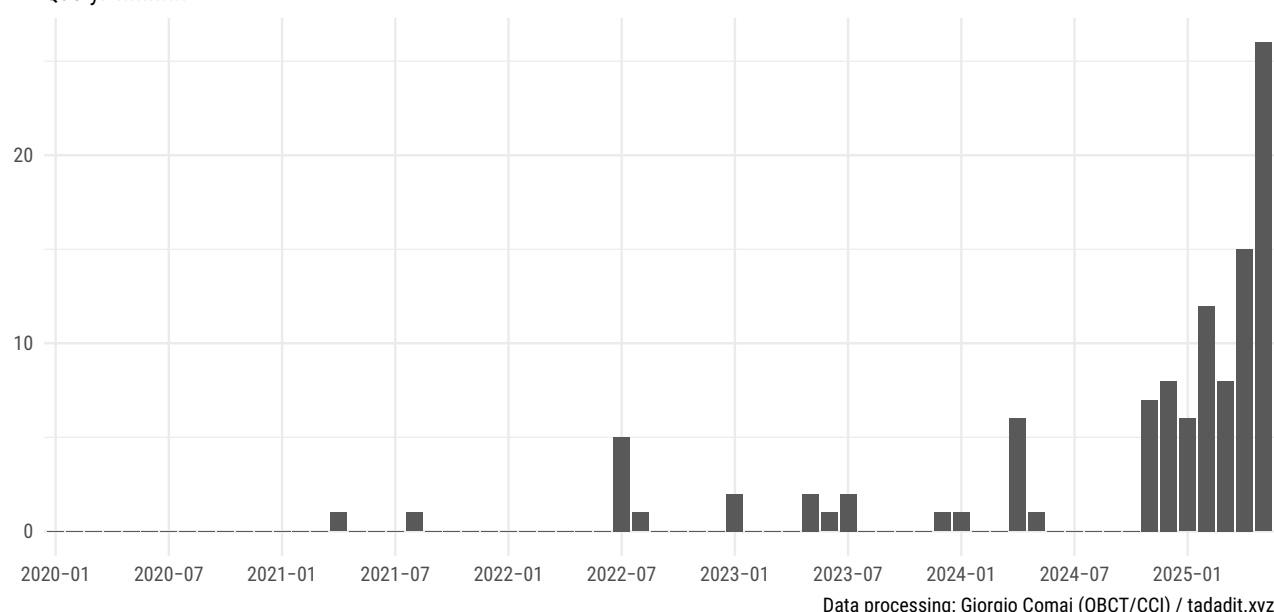


Zooming in and looking at results by month, it appears quite clearly that references to “root causes” became routine starting with November 2024, and increased significantly in May 2025.

Number of references per month to 'root causes' on 1tv.ru

Based on 128 220 items published in Russian between 01 January 2020 and 29 May 2025

Query: '.....'



The following table shows all mentions since 2020 in context (**available in the on-line version**).

Early mentions are unrelated to conflict or to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

The first mention related to the conflict is a quote by Russia’s Foreign Minister Lavrov during a visit to Ethiopia on 27 July 2022:

“Our African colleagues are well aware of the root causes of what is happening. The root causes are the attempt of the collective West to slow down the objective historical process, the formation of a just, democratic order and to cling to the elusive prospect of a so-called unipolar world” - Source

The next relevant mention appears only in [January 2023](#), and it’s again by a diplomat, Russia’s ambassador to the UN, who again puts the blame on the “Collective West” for the ongoing conflict.

There’s only a handful of other mentions in 2023, and they all relate to official meetings with African countries, including Somalia ([26 May 2023](#)), Algeria ([15 June 2023](#)), and the Africa-Russia summit ([28 July 2023](#)).

Focusing on 2022-2023, it appears that references are infrequent and clearly used only instrumentally as a rhetorical device when interacting with African leaders in order to shift the blame for the ongoing war on Western imperialism, rather than Russia itself. References to “root causes” appear seldom and only in well-defined contexts, and are obviously not addressed to either domestic audiences, the West, or Ukraine.

In April 2024, there are a few references to the 2023 peace proposal advanced by China the previous year, pointing at how the proposal addresses the “root causes” of the conflict (in particular, [here](#) and [here](#)).

There are no substantive mention until November 2024, when the frequency of references to the root causes starts to increase. A first mention attributed to the MFA on 1 November 2024 is inconspicuous, even if the relevant news report spells out what these root causes supposedly are about:

“NATO eastward enlargement, threats to security interests of Russia, violation of the rights of Russian and Russian-speaking residents of Ukraine [Source](#)

In the following weeks, mentions become more frequent, and involve not only the MFA, but also the Kremlin, including quotes from both Vladimir Putin himself and his speaker Dmitri Peskov.

The first reference to root causes found on Russia’s *First Channel* quoting Putin refers to a call with German Chancellor Scholz on 15 November 2024.

In the following weeks, references to “root causes” became more common. It is worth highlighting how the surge in references to “root causes” of the conflict effectively coincides with Donald Trump’s victory in the U.S. presidential election held on 5 November 2024. Indeed, in clear contrast with earlier pre-2024 references to “root causes”, at this stage the expression is clearly targeted at Western leaders, and specifically the United States.

Reference to “root causes” has become routine, to the extent that it does not require an explanation of what it is about. Statements from Russia’s MFA point at the three above-mentioned elements (NATO, Russia’s security, right of Russian-speakers in Ukraine), but the Kremlin leaves this definition more open-ended (see also below). Territorial control of regions in Eastern Ukraine, however, never features among “root causes” of the conflict.

As all of these references are found in news items broadcast on Russian TV, there is obviously also a message for the domestic audience, who is to be primed about what to expect of direct negotiations with Ukraine. If peace can be reached only when the “root causes” of the conflict are removed, and root causes mostly do not stem from Ukraine, then the effectiveness of direct negotiations with Kyiv seems logically doubtful.

This is best summarised by prominent Russian commentator Mikhail Leontyev, as he was about to explain why there shouldn’t be expectations about any breakthrough in the negotiations with Ukraine in Istanbul in his famous *Odnako* programme on Russia’s *First Channel*. Leontyev first included a Putin quote about the “root causes of the conflict” and then spelled out clearly what they are about, as well as the fact that the “root causes” cannot possibly be object of negotiation with Ukraine.

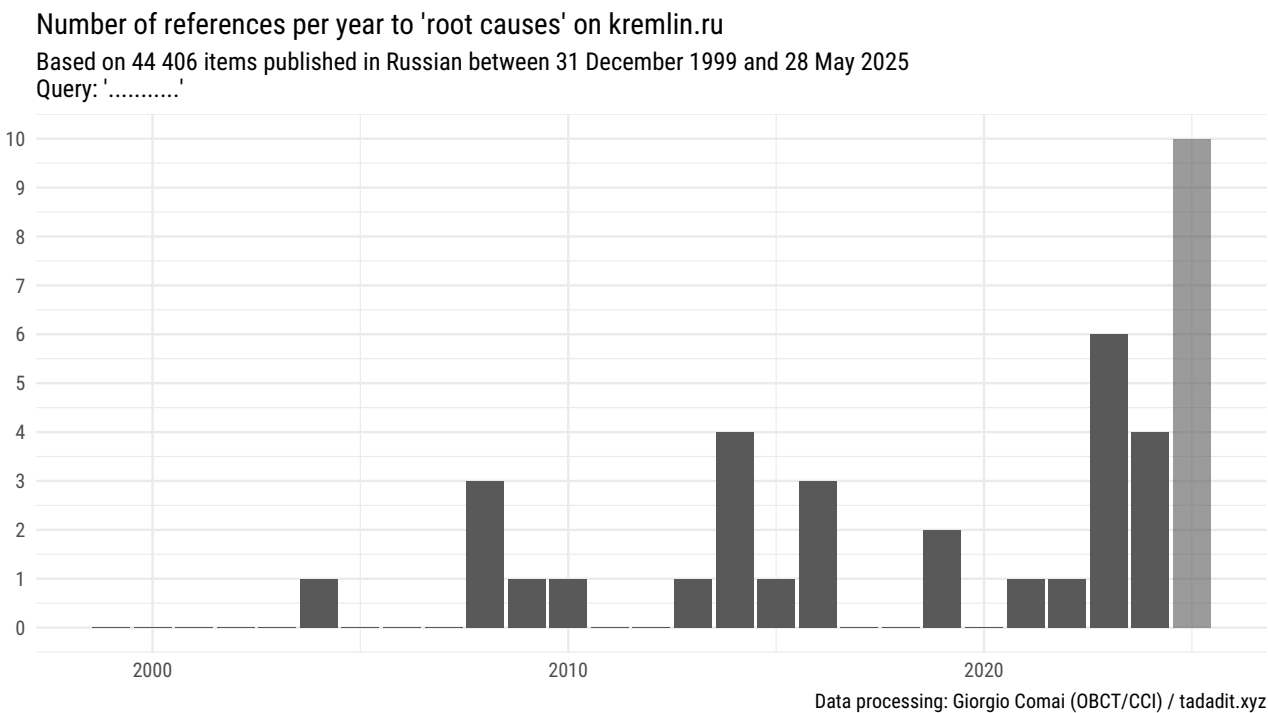
Putin: “We are in favor of solving the problem by peaceful means, but while eliminating the root causes that led to this situation. It is necessary to ensure Russia’s security in a long-term historical perspective.”

Leontyev: “We are talking about a new global world order that guarantees our interests and our security. Discussing the global world order with Ukraine is idiotic. We don’t do that.”

See the broadcast on Pervy Kanal’s website.
Here is the relevant segment with English subtitles:
[odnako50.mp4](#)

Root causes on Kremlin.ru

Analysing the Kremlin’s official website shows broadly similar trends, although with fewer overall mentions.



Here is a similar set of quotes from the Kremlin’s English-language website (discrepancies in availability are due to translation issues).

[**See online version for full list**]

Again, we find mention of “root causes” during the [July 2023 Africa - Russia summit](#); “root causes” is however here used in reference to the hikes in food prices, and in order to point out that they are not due to the war in Ukraine, but rather to “fundamental mistakes of industrialised countries in financial and energy policy”.

We also find a relevant mention in reference to China’s peace plan, long after it was initially proposed; I will quote this excerpt from an interview to Xinhua News Agency at length, as it provides substantial context about the “root causes”/“underlying causes”:

We commend China’s approaches to resolving the crisis in Ukraine. Beijing is well aware of its root causes and global geopolitical significance, which is reflected in its 12-point plan [...]. The steps build on the idea that we need to forego the “Cold War mentality” and ensure indivisible security and respect for international law and the UN Charter in their entirety and interrelation. They could therefore lay the groundwork for a political and diplomatic process that would take into account Russia’s security concerns and contribute to achieving a long-term and sustainable peace.

Unfortunately, neither Ukraine nor its Western patrons support these initiatives. They are not ready to engage in an equal, honest and open dialogue based on mutual respect and consideration of each other’s interests. They are reluctant to discuss the underlying causes, the very origins of the global crisis, which has manifested itself, *inter alia*, in the dramatic situation around Ukraine. Why? Because today’s global shocks have been provoked precisely by their policies in the previous years and decades.

Source

From this quote, it appears that Ukraine is only a facet, an “*inter alia*”, while the core issues of the conflict, the “root causes”, are rather to be found among global geopolitical issues.

There are multiple references to “root causes” in the following months, perhaps most noticeably in the read-outs of phone calls between Putin and Trump held in [February 2025](#), in [March 2025](#), in [May 2025](#), although in none of them they are presented or debated meaningfully. In a few instances they are associated with Russia’s security.

Conclusions

It is always important to resist the temptation to engage in mind-reading Russia’s president based on a few scattered quotes. Ultimately, references to “root causes” can

be highly contextual; for example, it is understandable that when addressing a Chinese audience, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is explained in terms of geopolitical competition, and not in terms of Russia's imperialistic obsession with Ukraine.

Given how much Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been left out of the loop in so many matters related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it would scarcely make sense to seek explanations for the war in quotes by Sergey Lavrov, who in many ways seems to be himself trying to make sense of the situation with little access to the Kremlin.

Still, this analysis shows that references to "root causes" used when engaging with Western leaders is a phenomenon that started in November 2024, effectively coinciding with Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election.

Throughout these quotes, "root causes" are not associated with Ukraine itself, if not as a last point among others in some of the quotes stemming from the MFA. On the contrary, the expression seems mostly to be used to differentiate it from the more concrete matters related to Ukraine: there may be territorial issues and security matters related specifically to Ukraine, and then there are "the root causes of the conflict".

My own understanding is that the expression gained prominence and relevance in the context of negotiations only after Trump's comeback to the White House, because Trump seemed to think that a deal based on Ukrainian territorial concessions would be enough to put an end to the conflict. As a deal involving some form of acknowledgement of Russia's territorial conquests in Ukraine was becoming more realistic both because of battlefield dynamics and Trump's own positions, Vladimir Putin started to insist on the "root causes" of the conflict that must be addressed for the conflict to end. In the Kremlin's view, territory won in battle cannot be object of negotiations: the negotiations must be about "the root causes" of the conflict, i.e. Russia's place in the international system and in Europe's security architecture, not Ukraine itself. As I [recently argued](#), "Ukraine, of course, remains central to Russia's interests. But [...] [in Moscow's vision] once Western geopolitical ambitions and weapons are removed from Ukraine, Ukraine would inevitably fall back within the Russian political and cultural space where it naturally belongs. Western quiescence to Russia's demands and Moscow's neo-imperial design to control Ukraine, and indeed subsume it in the Russian cultural and political space along with Belarus, are inextricably intertwined, as one set of objectives cannot be achieved without the other."

I appreciate, however, that the expression "root causes" remains fuzzy and prone to different understandings. Brian Whitmore, for example, [argues](#) that "the root cause of the war is the very existence of Ukraine as a sovereign state". Lavrov's understanding of the "root causes" may only partly overlap with Putin's understandings. Ultimately, the fuzziness of

the expression allows for it to take and adapt its meaning in context, and it may well be futile to try to pinpoint a specific, static meaning.

Analytically, perhaps what is most important at this stage is to appreciate its use in the context of the ongoing negotiations, and in setting expectations for domestic audiences. The fuzziness of the expression in the long-term may allow for adaptation and leeway in eventual negotiations. But in the short term, the quote by Leontyev presented earlier in this note seems to be most informative: by shifting the focus on matters well beyond Ukraine and in lowering expectations for domestic audiences, insistence on “root causes” does not bode well for direct Ukraine-Russia talks.

i Credits and disclaimers

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The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

See project page.

Datasets

Introducing ‘Russian state institutions full-text datasets’ (2024 edition)



Quick links

- stable link for download from *Discuss Data*
- interactive web interface for basic filtering and word-frequency analysis
- more details on each of this datasets [available on this website](#) (same information as that included in pdf format along with the release)

I am happy to announce that I have finally publicly released with a permissive license a set of textual datasets extracted from the website of Russian institutions.

They are free to download, accompanied by detailed documentation at the following stable address (and, for redundancy, on [Zenodo](#)):

Giorgio Comai (2024): **Russian state institutions full-text datasets – A collection of corpora based on contents extracted from the websites of Russian state institutions**, v. 1.0, *Discuss Data*, <https://doi.org/10.48320/0578D7FE-35F7-4E9E-A29D-926618A5C6BD>

You can also find the same information for the following datasets on [tadadit.xyz](#):

institution	language	start date	end date	n_items
Russia’s president	en	1999-12-31	2023-12-31	33 165
Russia’s president	ru	1999-12-31	2023-12-31	45 538
Russia’s MFA	ru	2003-01-02	2023-12-31	56 203
Russia’s MFA	en	2003-01-04	2023-12-31	25 943
Russia’s government	ru	2012-04-24	2023-12-30	17 135
Russia’s government (archived version)	ru	2008-05-07	2013-05-21	7 103

institution	language	start date	end date	n_items
Russia's prime minister (archived version)	ru	2008-05-07	2012-05-07	3 323
Russia's Duma	ru	2006-04-05	2023-12-30	29 094
Russia's Duma (transcripts)	ru	1994-01-11	2023-12-15	6 032

Find more context about the file formats and the data included [on the page dedicated to this release](#). The [official release on Discuss Data](#) includes a pdf file for each of these datasets, outlining data processing and data quality issues.

These are the same datasets I have used in some of my previous posts, including:

- [Traditional, conservative, Christian, distinct... how supposedly old values emerged in the official and media discourse in Russia since 2012](#)
- [Who said it first? 'The collective West' in Russia's nationalist media and official statements](#)

This is a stable release, and is expected to be updated once a year. The current version includes all posts published until the end of 2023; you may expect an updated version in the early months of 2024.

All datasets include for each item a title, a date, and the text, as well as further metadata according to availability: for example, if a website also showed a “tag” section along with each post, or a field dedicated to named individuals, these are also made available.

For the dataset based on the Kremlin's website, an additional attempt has been made to geolocate the location from which each of the press releases was issued. This may not be 100% accurate, but should tentatively enable some more approaches for analysis. Also, it allows for exploring speeches and statements [through an interactive map](#) (posts issued from Moscow are excluded).

These datasets are free to download in full and should be easy to import in any content or text analysis software you may be using. For quick searches or basic word frequency exploration, I have made them [available also through a basic web interface](#) that enables basic operations, as well as filtering and exporting of text. The interface is not a finalised product and will eventually be updated, but should be mostly functional (although slow when the “keyword-in-context” option is enabled).

Corpus based on the website of Russian weekly newspaper ‘Zavtra’ (in Russian, 1996-2024)

Official release

Official release with DOI now available on *Discuss Data*:

doi:10.48320/EF3EBDDA-53CC-4078-88D9-BC9F3E7CF970.

Giorgio Comai (2025): *zavtra.ru_ru - Full text corpus based on the website of Russian weekly newspaper ‘Zavtra’ (in Russian, 1996-2024)*, v. 1.1, Discuss Data, doi:10.48320/EF3EBDDA-53CC-4078-88D9-BC9F3E7CF970.

Browse an LLM-generated English language summary of a sample of articles published by *Zavtra*.

Scope of this corpus

This corpus is based on the website of Russian weekly newspaper zavtra.ru.

The structure of the website suggests a strict correspondence between the online and the printed version: the website includes an archive with a separate section dedicated to each issue of the printed version of the newspaper. Archive pages show also which contents supposedly appear on which page of the printed version. Exact correspondence, however, has not been checked.

The website also hosts additional contents, such as podcasts, which are not included in this corpus. Only contents linked from the archive page of an issue of the newspaper are included in this corpus.

The earliest issue included in this corpus is issue 149, published on 14 October 1996. The most recent issue included in this corpus is issue 1 614, published on 31 December 2024.

Summary statistics

Dataset name: zavtra.ru_ru_2025

Dataset description: all items published on zavtra.ru

Start date: 1996-10-14

End date: 2024-12-31

Total items: 33 331

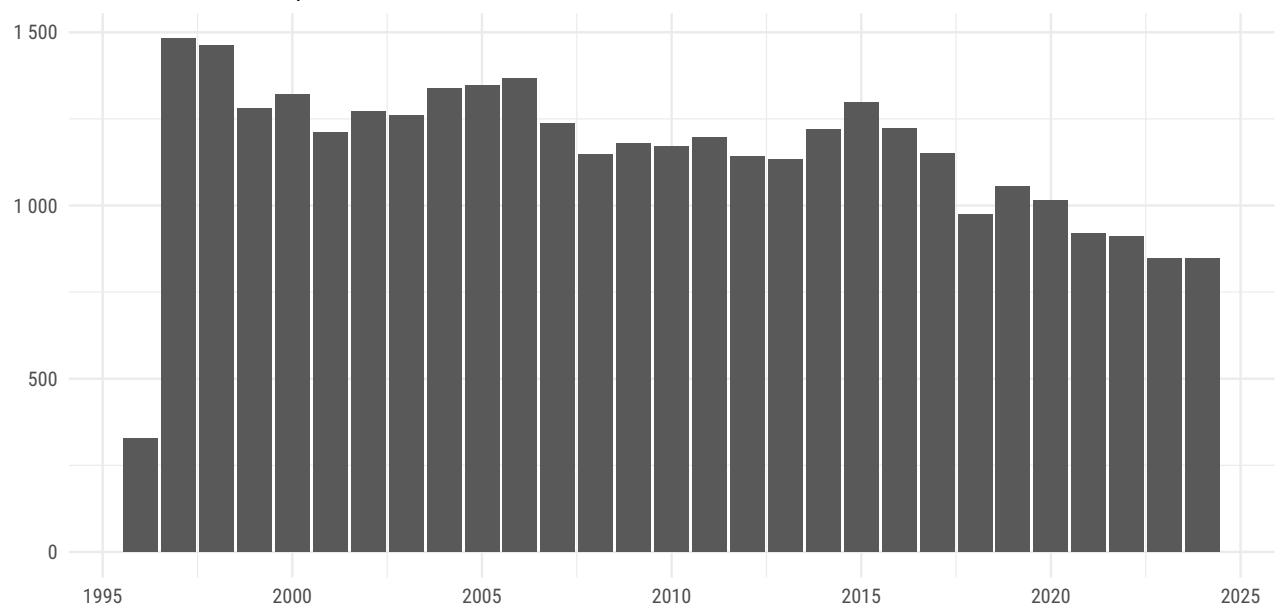
Available columns: doc_id; text; title; date; datetime; author; intro; tags; issue_year; issue_month; issue_number; id; url

License: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International

Link for download: [zavtra.ru_ru_2025](#)

Number of items per year published on zavtra.ru

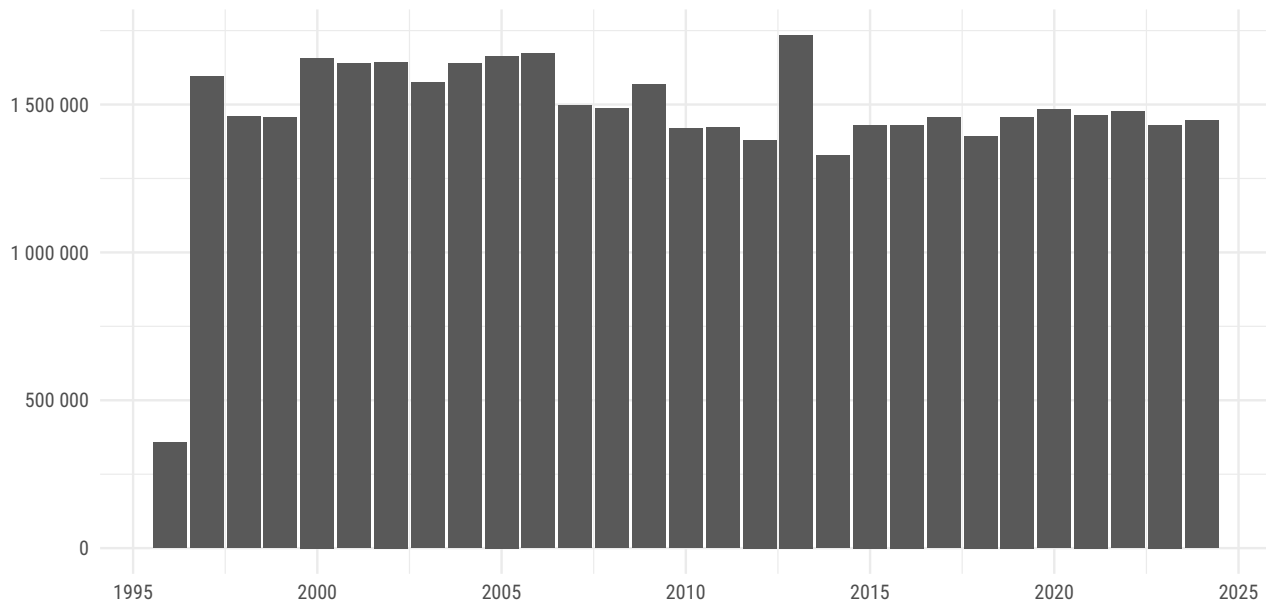
Based on 33 331 items published between 14 October 1996 and 31 December 2024



Source: Giorgio Comai / [tadadit.xyz](#) / zavtra.ru_ru_2025

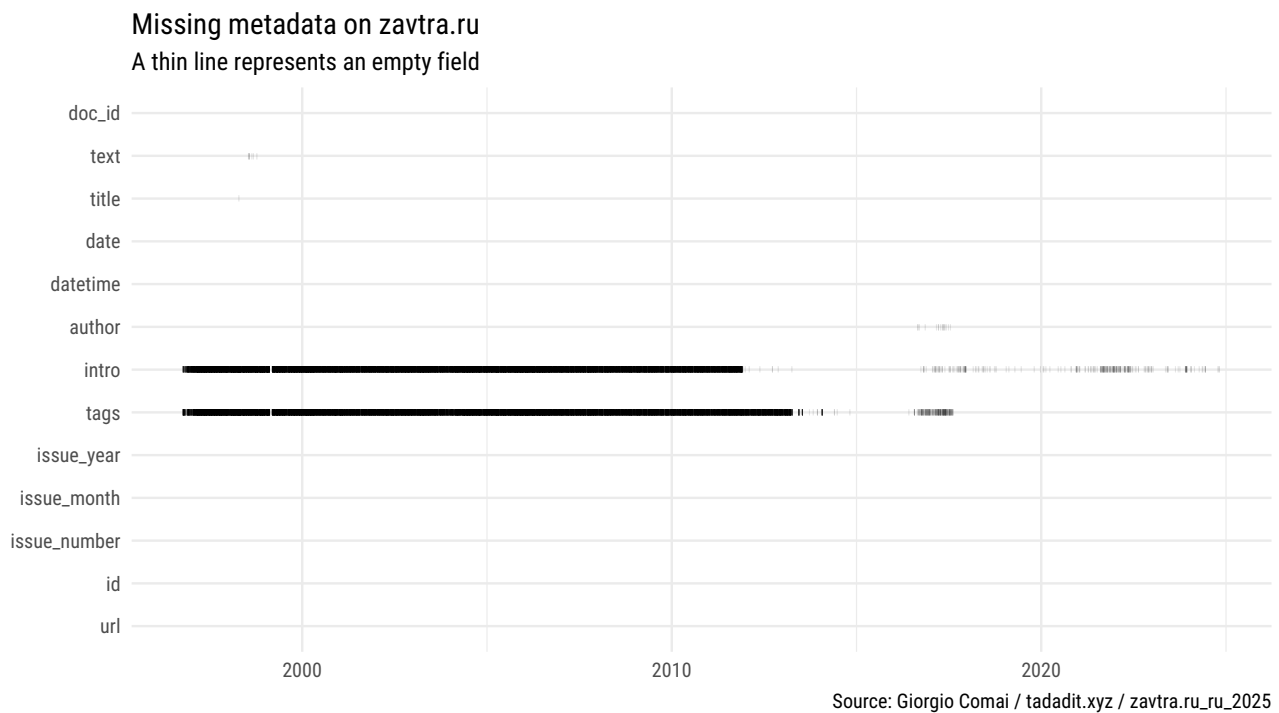
Number of words per year published on zavtra.ru

Based on 33 331 items published between 14 October 1996 and 31 December 2024



Source: Giorgio Comai / [tadadit.xyz / zavtra.ru_ru_2025](https://tadadit.xyz/zavtra.ru_ru_2025)

field	present	missing	missing_share
doc_id	33 331	0	0.0%
text	33 324	7	0.0%
title	33 330	1	0.0%
date	33 331	0	0.0%
datetime	33 331	0	0.0%
author	33 315	16	0.0%
intro	14 356	18 975	56.9%
tags	13 311	20 020	60.1%
issue_year	33 331	0	0.0%
issue_month	33 331	0	0.0%
issue_number	33 331	0	0.0%
id	33 331	0	0.0%
url	33 331	0	0.0%



Narrative explanation of how this textual corpus was built

Zavtra keeps a full archive of its publications starting from 1996. This corpus was built through a script that retrieves archive pages for each year (e.g. [this](#) for 1996), then retrieves the link to the page dedicated to each issue, and from there, extracts links to individual articles. Hence only articles attached to an issue are effectively included in the corpus.

The number of the issue in which each article supposedly appears is obtained based on the archive page where link to the given page was found (see below for potential issues).

Metadata such as author, date, and tags have been retrieved from the article page itself, based on relevant html tags. In particular:

- `title` is retrieved from `<div>` of class `header__title`
- `date` and `datetime` have been parsed from the `<span>` of class `header__data`
- `author` is retrieved from `<span>` of class `avtor-name`
- `intro` is retrieved from `<div>` of class `header__anonse`
- `tags` is retrieved from `<span>` of class `artags`
- `text` is retrieved from `<div>` of class `article__content`

Data quality issues

No major issues have emerged during extraction of text and metadata from the website.

As appears from the above graphs, fields such as “tags” and “intro” have been used somewhat consistently on the website only in the last decade.

Some minor issues are listed below:

- especially in articles related to earlier years, title, date of publication, and issue number may be repeated at the beginning of the article itself
- the date of publication included in such cases may be off by a few days in respect to the date of publication reported above the title
- the issue number may also be off by one, e.g. this inline text makes reference to issue 228, but is linked from the archive page of issue 227.
- a very small number of issues includes only one article

Here is an example showing all of the above issues.

Issue 227, available from the archive page related to 1998, includes only one article. This article, includes at the very beginning of its text the title, and then the following string: “15 (228) Date: 17-04-98”. This would suggest that the article was originally published on 17 April 1998 and belonged to issue 228. Yet on the very same web page, 13 April 1998 is presented as date of publication, and the article is linked from the archive page of issue 227.

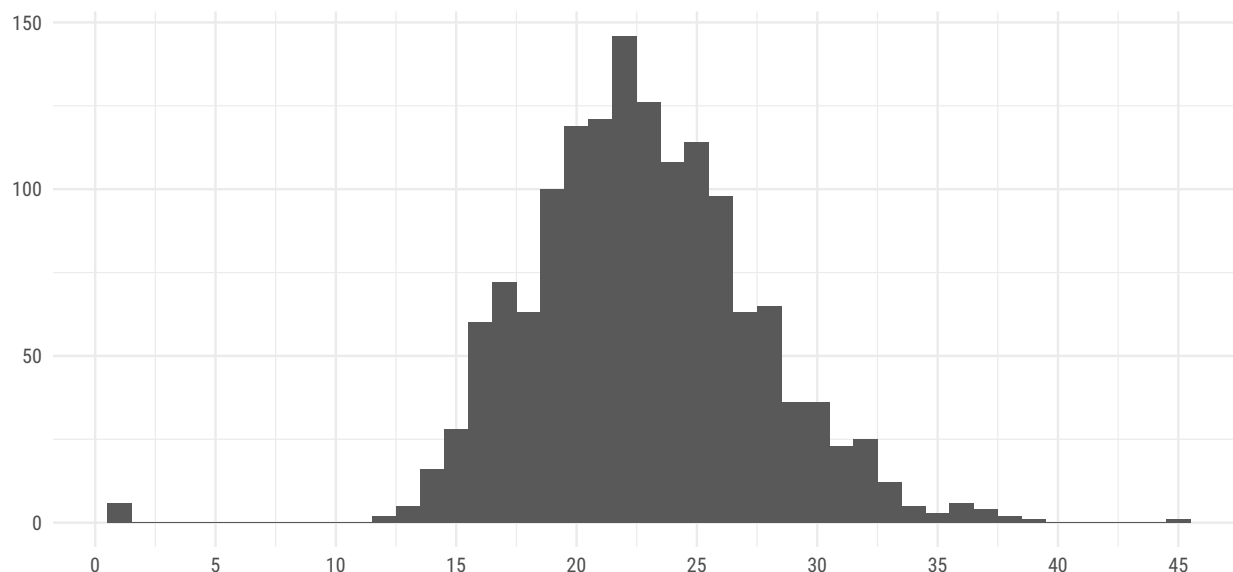
Metadata in this corpus consistently rely on website metadata, hence these are kept as points of reference; metadata included within the text itself, are ignored..

As the difference is only of a few days, these issues are likely of negligible impact for analyses looking at long term trends, but should be kept in consideration by researchers for whom exact date of publication is of the essence. Time of publication (hour and minute) should probably be disregarded for earlier years: the 3.00am time of publication reported for many articles is probably just an artefact of importing contents from previous versions of the website, which may have assumed GMT as the default time. Again, as these are the metadata currently visible online, they have been dutifully included in the published corpus, but should be looked at with caution.

The vast majority of newspaper issues includes between 15 and 30 articles (see histogram below). In a small number of cases, as mentioned above, only one article is included in each issue. This may or may not hint at missing articles (perhaps, these were actually published as double issues, and the lone remaining article has been mis-attributed to an effectively non-existent issue). No additional checks have been conducted on these outliers.

Distribution of number of articles per issue published on zavtra.ru

Based on 33 331 items published in 1 466 issues between 14 October 1996 and 31 December 2024



Source: Giorgio Comai / tadadit.xyz / zavtra.ru_ru_2025

License information

At the time contents were retrieved, the footer of *zavtra.ru* made clear that all contents are available under a Creative Commons license:

Все материалы сайта доступны по лицензии: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

The contents of this dataset - *zavtra.ru_ru_2025* - are distributed in line with this license. To the extent that it is possible, the corpus itself is also distributed by its creator, Giorgio Comai, with the same CC-BY license, as well as under the Open Data Commons Attribution license (ODC-BY).

Dataset cleaning and reordering

The following columns have been added to the original dataset before exporting:

- introduce an *id*, based on the row number after reordering for issue number; this is used for reference, and does not necessarily represent order of publication
- introduce a *doc_id* column (composed of the website base url, the language of the dataset, and the *id*) and set this as the first column of the dataset

Consistency check with previous version of this corpus

There are some minor inconsistencies with the previously published dataset, due to the fact that a few items disappeared from the on-line version of the website. They are three in total: a poem, an article about an artist, and an advertisement related to investments that probably was not supposed to appear on-line in the first place. Supposing there's reason for them to be taken offline, and the reason does not seem to be research-relevant, they are dropped from the updated version of the corpus.

The id of items remains however consistent across versions of this corpus.

Besides, the text of a few dozens articles differs slightly between the two versions of the corpus. In the vast majority of cases, this seems to be related to small adjustments and polishing of metadata (especially in older article, metadata could be repeated inside the text, and this has now been adjusted on Zavtra's website). In a small number of cases, this is related to more consistent adjustments: for example, a few paragraphs of introduction have been added to this 2004 interview (see e.g. [older version on the Internet Archive](#), as well as the [newer version with added text in bold](#)).

Overall, these seem to be minor differences, unlikely to have substantive impact for any research-relevant task. These may however lead to minor inconsistencies in the figures generated with different versions of the corpus, in particular those based on relative word frequency: if the total number of words published in the course of a given year, for example, changes by a few hundreds, then relative word frequency may well result in a slightly different figure.

Additional options for exploring the data

- this corpus is available for download: [compressed csv / ods](#)
- you can explore this corpus in an [interactive web interface](#)
- to get a feeling for the contents and style of *Zavtra*, you can browse an LLM-generated English language summary of a sample of articles published by Zavtra.

Why LLM-generated summaries

For readers unfamiliar with *Zavtra*, especially those who do not read Russian, it may be difficult to get a broad impression of the thematic focus of the articles and the general tone of the writing. The fact that titles of publications are often not descriptive, makes it more

difficult to skim through them and get a feeling of the thematic priorities of the editors, as well as the tone and style characteristic of the magazine.

An English-language collection of pre-compiled LLM-generated summaries of a random sample of articles makes it easy to skim through the contents and get a meaningful first impression. Even if the dull style of LLM-generated summaries does not fully convey the stylistic verve or the scathing or sarcastic criticism of public figures often found in *Zavtra*, it does offer an meaningful overview of both contents and style. It also allows to get a glimpse of the thematic priorities, including a long-term preoccupation with Russia (as a nation, understood in civilisational terms, more than short-term issues), the prevalence of opinion pieces, the attention to the arts, etc.

As is characteristic of LLMs, these summaries may include inaccuracies.

Relevant scholarly publications

In the book “The Rise of the Russian Hawks”, Faure (2025) highlights the centrality of *Zavtra*, its founder and director, and the cultural circles that developed around it, for debates on ideology in contemporary Russia.

Faure, Juliette. 2025. *The Rise of the Russian Hawks: Ideology and Politics from the Late Soviet Union to Putin’s Russia*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009542661>.

For the connection between *Zavtra* and the Izborsky Klub, see in particular Laruelle (2016)

Laruelle, Marlene. 2016. ‘The Izborsky Club, or the New Conservative Avant-Garde in Russia’. *The Russian Review* 75 (4): 626–44. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43919640>

Outputs related to this corpus

- Comai, Giorgio (2023), “Who said it first? ‘The collective West’ in Russia’s nationalist media and official statements”, *tadadit.xyz*, 14 March 2023, <https://tadadit.xyz/posts/2023-03-who-says-it-first-nationalist-media-kremlin/>
- Comai, Giorgio (2023), “Who said it first? Investigating the diffusion of the Kremlin’s buzzwords before they entered the mainstream”, ASN conference, Cluj-Napoca, 6 July 2023. [Conference slides: <https://tadadit.xyz/slides/2023-07-asn/>]

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