



The Role of Social Identity, State Ideology, and Digital War Narratives of a Russian Military Blogger on Telegram

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Abstract

Along with the cyber war and media manipulation under government control since the Russian military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian government has blocked public access to popular Western social media, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. As a result, a Russia-based social media called Telegram gained popularity and is used by pro-Russian military bloggers to spread awareness of the issue that was currently in focus among society. This research seeks to explain the motivation underlying the dissemination of information on @maryananaumova Telegram channel. By utilizing content analysis methods, authors identified recurring content patterns dominated by accusations and expressions of hatred towards Ukraine, as well as Russia's image branding narrative throughout April-May 2023. The findings of this research demonstrate that Maryana's national identity and political affiliation exert influence in shaping the narrative on the Telegram channel, which tends to prioritize the dignity of pro-Russian groups.

Keywords: content analysis, military blogger, social identity, social categorization

Paper type: Research paper

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INTRODUCTION

Since February 2022, the long-standing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has reignited with the deployment of special military operations into Ukraine. This prolonged dispute has garnered widespread attention and raised concerns among various stakeholders. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has evolved beyond a physical battlefield to encompass an information and propaganda war. In this digital era, the role of social media in shaping public perception has grown increasingly significant. Social media exerts a profound impact on how conflicts are reported and perceived by the public. This is because social media can alter the information disseminated by the conflicting parties, thereby influencing the trajectory of the conflict itself (Zeitsoff 2017).

Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have emerged as primary channels for disseminating news and information about the Ukrainian conflict. However, amidst the rapid flow of information on social media, Moscow's Tverskoy court, on March 21, 2022, recognized the American company Meta, which oversees Facebook and Instagram, as an extremist organization (Известия 2022). Meta was deemed to have engaged in "extremist activity" for allowing several posts that advocated violence against Russian soldiers. Moreover, beyond Facebook and Instagram, other applications like Twitter pose challenges for individuals in Russia to access. According to the Russian government's online statement cited in National Public Radio (2022), authorities have imposed restrictions on accessing Twitter based on federal laws regulating calls for riots, extremism, protests, and the dissemination of false information. These access restrictions sever the online information and expression avenues for millions of Russian citizens (Perrett 2022), compelling social media users to migrate to alternative platforms that remain accessible.

Many Russians are seeking alternatives by utilizing virtual private networks (VPNs) to gain unrestricted access to social media networks and news sites that have been blocked. Conversely, a significant number of Russians continue to rely on the Telegram application. Telegram has enjoyed enduring popularity in Russia and has successfully evaded regulations targeting technology companies such as Meta. The application offers several advantages as a medium for information

dissemination. Telegram's founder, Pavel Durov, conceived the application as a platform advocating for unrestricted and uncensored communication, with minimal impact from content removal (Bond and Allyn 2022). According to Reuters (March 21, 2022), Telegram has surpassed WhatsApp as the most widely used messaging app in Russia. This shift can be attributed to the Russian populace increasingly adopting these services following Moscow's restrictions on various Western digital platforms. Megafon, one of Russia's primary telecommunications operators, reported that Telegram's market share surged to 63% in the first two weeks of March 2022, up from 48% in the preceding two weeks of February. In contrast, WhatsApp's market share declined from 48% to 32%.

Applications like Telegram have been widely utilized by journalists and war correspondents from Russia, including pro-Russian right-wing military bloggers known as military bloggers (Milblog). These pro-war bloggers have emerged as popular sources of information on the conflict in Ukraine, amassing a substantial online following through the Telegram application, with some boasting over a million followers. This group of bloggers includes individuals with connections to Russian officials, as well as those affiliated with the Wagner mercenary group. Some are former security officers or journalists for Russian-controlled news agencies. Notable examples of these military bloggers include Semyon Pegov (@WarGonzo), Aleksander Kots (@KotsNews), and Alexander Sladkov (@Sladkov_plus).

Among the military bloggers are individuals with prior military backgrounds or significant experience in war reporting for the media. One such figure is a former Russian weightlifter who has dedicated himself to war journalism. Maryana Naumova, the owner of the @maryananaumova channel, lacks professional journalism experience but has been actively involved in humanitarian activities since 2014, particularly in the Donbas region. Naumova obtained accreditation from the Russian Ministry of Defense in 2022 (Radio Sputnik 2023) and received training from the Wagner Private Military Company (PMC). Currently, Naumova actively manages her Telegram channel and hosts programs on the national TV Channel One Russia.

The inherent openness of social media renders it vulnerable to misuse and manipulation. It's undeniable that publications from both Russian and Ukrainian authorities, as well as actors like military bloggers, often propagate narratives

aligned with their own interests. These bloggers share comprehensive updates from the front lines, disseminating information through text, images, and videos to shape perceptions and sway public opinion both domestically and internationally. Drawing from this context, the authors pose a research question: 'What motivates the content of Maryana Naumova's publications, and how does her social identity influence the dissemination of information on her Telegram channel?.'

METHODS

The method employed in this study is content analysis. Berelson (1952) defined content analysis as a research technique to create objective and systematic descriptions of the content contained within media. Content analysis also aims to identify the intentions of communicators; reflect cultural patterns of groups, institutions, or societies; uncover the focus of attention of individuals, groups, institutions, or societies; and explain trends in communication content (Weber 1990).

This method is utilized to analyze all forms of communication found on Maryana Naumova's Telegram channel, whether in textual or visual form. In analyzing textual data, content analysis techniques focus on the tendencies of communication/message content. In other words, this analysis technique involves classifying the words or symbols used in communication. Similarly, with visual content, the method of visual content analysis aims to draw conclusions based on the identification of patterns in the use of visual material on the @maryananaumova Telegram channel. The analysis stages are conducted based on the steps of analysis proposed by Krippendorff (2019: 87-90), which are:

Unitizing

At this stage, authors collect various relevant data according to their research interests. The data include texts, images, and videos uploaded on the Telegram channel @maryananaumova operated by a Russian military blogger named Maryana Naumova. We chose this Telegram channel due to its accessibility and freedom to discuss issues related to the Russian military operation in Ukraine. As of October 2023, the @maryananaumova Telegram channel has amassed 79,000 followers. As a military blogger, journalist, and war correspondent, Maryana's

persona and her publications are often covered by official Russian news portals such as Russia Today (RT) and Channel One Russia TV. The content published on the channel @maryananaumova receives considerable response and attention from followers, as evidenced by comments and emoticon reactions.

Sampling

As the available unit coverage is too extensive to be examined in its entirety, the authors need to limit the research by simplifying the data collection process and gathering units with similar themes. At this stage, authors restrict the collection of research data to publications from the @maryananaumova Telegram channel from April 4, 2022, to May 2022. This timeframe is chosen based on the receipt of military accreditation from the Russian Ministry of Defense to the owner of the Telegram channel (Radio Sputnik 2023). Since receiving military accreditation, Maryana has been traveling intensively to Donbas to highlight the situation and assist the people in that region. During this period, authors found a total of over 80 posts with various types of content.

Table 1.

Details of @maryananaumova Content Themes

Content Types/Focuses	Amount
Support for the Russian armed forces	14 Contents
Glorification of the Soviet Union	6 Contents
Reports on attacks and war crimes committed by Ukraine	15 Contents
Humanitarian stories	30 Contents
Others	20 Contents

Recording

Authors collect and record additional data tailored to complement and correlate with the primary data to support the research. Data recording aims to facilitate authors in processing and analyzing the content of text and visual materials from the @maryananaumova Telegram channel.

Reducing

At this stage, authors filter and simplify the data by removing irrelevant information for the research. This step is useful for progressing to the next stage to establish new understandings. Authors categorize content according to four main

themes. From the four main themes identified on the @maryananaumova Telegram channel, authors select four publications for each theme that tend to attract a larger audience. The audience numbers listed in Table 2. are as of October 18, 2023.

Table 2.
Details of Publication Types and Number of Viewers on
@Maryananaumova's Posts

No	Publication Content	Date of Publication	Form	Total Viewers
Support for the Russian armed forces				
1	https://t.me/maryananaumova/67	26 April 2022	Text, Photo	2,000,000
2	https://t.me/maryananaumova/36	12 April 2022	Text, Video	495,200
3	https://t.me/maryananaumova/55	18 April 2022	Text, Video	73,400
4	https://t.me/maryananaumova/16	6 April 2022	Text	38,100
Glorification of the Soviet Union				
1	https://t.me/maryananaumova/69	30 April 2022	Text, Video	41,000
2	https://t.me/maryananaumova/70	1 Mei 2022	Text, Video	40,100
3	https://t.me/maryananaumova/12	4 April 2022	Text, Picture	31,200
4	https://t.me/maryananaumova/76	9 Mei 2022	Video, Picture	26,500
Reports on attacks and war crimes committed by Ukraine				
1	https://t.me/maryananaumova/29	8 April 2022	Text, Video	247,700
2	https://t.me/maryananaumova/25	8 April 2022	Text, Picture	65,000
3	https://t.me/maryananaumova/17	6 April 2022	Text, Video	44,400
4	https://t.me/maryananaumova/13	30 Mei 2022	Text	23,800
3				
Humanitarian stories				
1	https://t.me/maryananaumova/47	14 April 2022	Text, Video	1,800,000
2	https://t.me/maryananaumova/48	15 April 2022	Text, Picture	1,800,000
3	https://t.me/maryananaumova/31	11 April 2022	Text, Picture	79,300
4	https://t.me/maryananaumova/30	8 April 2022	Text, Video	78,100

Inferring

After analyzing the collected data, authors draw preliminary conclusions and attempt to uncover the existing context with the assistance of theories or concepts to gain new understanding through these hypotheses.

Narrating

Upon completing the research stages, authors make decisions based on the existing research findings by examining the analysis results with relevant sources.

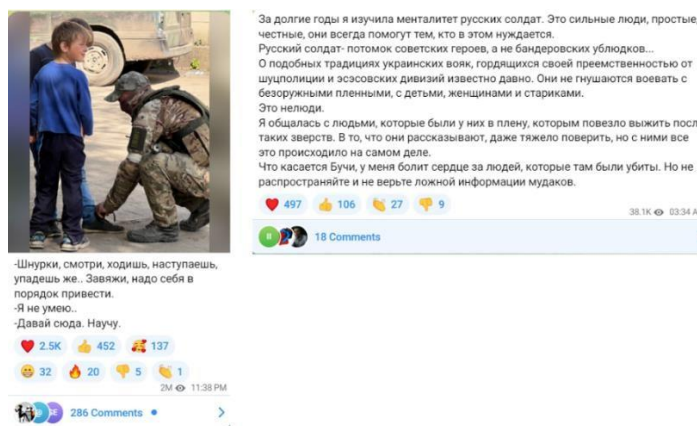
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Support for the Russian Armed Forces

The ongoing warfare situation between Russia and Ukraine serves as a primary driving factor for Maryana's publications on her private Telegram channel. In her posts, Maryana frequently conveys messages of support for the Russian armed forces as one of her content focuses. Several posts also attempt to disseminate positive impressions of the soldiers at the forefront of the conflict. From the four sample posts with this focus, authors found one instance where Maryana endeavors to showcase the positive aspects of Russian soldiers and refute the negative perceptions held by some segments of society towards Russian armed members. These publications were uploaded on April 6 and April 26, 2023.

Figure 1.

Content from @maryananaumova Telegram Channel



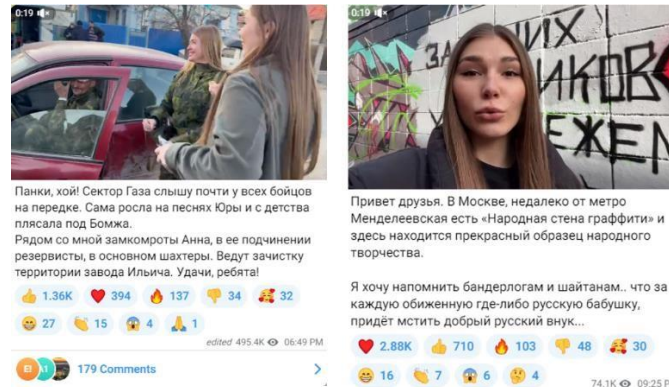
The content uploaded on April 26, 2023, features a portrait of a Russian soldier tying the shoelaces of a young boy. Maryana accompanies the picture with a caption depicting a dialogue between the soldier and the child. Additionally, the content uploaded on April 6, 2023, consists of text containing Maryana's personal opinions and expressions about Russian and Ukrainian soldiers. Through this post, the authors highlight sentences that indicate Maryana's tendency to support Russian soldiers and her efforts to build a positive image:

“За долгие годы я изучила менталитет русских солдат. Это сильные люди, простые, честные, они всегда помогут тем, кто в этом нуждается. Русский солдат- потомок советских героев, а не бандеровских ублюдков...”

Translation: “For years, I have studied the mentality of Russian soldiers. They are strong, humble, honest people, always ready to help those in need. Russian soldiers are descendants of Soviet heroes, not Bandera scoundrels”

Figure 2.

Content from @maryananaumova Telegram Channel



The next two contents also exhibit a pattern, namely expressions of encouragement directed towards Russia, as well as sentences justifying Russian military actions. On April 12, 2022, Maryana uploaded an 18-second video showing herself with a Russian soldier named Anna. They dance while listening to the song of the Russian rock band, *Сектор Газа* (Sektor Gaza). Maryana also adds a caption to explain the video context and introduces Anna as a soldier responsible for cleaning the area around the Ilyich steel factory. This cleaning task is related to the seizure of two large steel factories in Mariupol (Taylor and Masih 2022). At the end of the sentence, Maryana adds the phrase *Удачи, ребята!* which means "Good luck, guys!" This sentence is addressed to the Russian soldiers on duty at that position. Furthermore, Maryana's expression of justification is found in the content dated April 18, 2022, which shows her standing in front of a graffiti-covered wall, not far from the Mendelevskaya metro station in Moscow. Maryana writes that "the grandchildren of Russia will come to avenge every Russian grandmother insulted anywhere".

In the two preceding contents, Maryana writes the terms "Bandera" and "Banderlog" in the text captions. "Banderlog" is a combination of the word "Bandera" from the name Stepan Bandera, and "bandar-log," which is a term for monkeys in Rudyard Kipling's work, "The Jungle Book" (1894). Stepan Bandera was the leader of the Ukrainian Nationalist Organization, increasingly glorified by the Ukrainian people since the Russian special military operation in Ukraine. Bandera and his nationalist group are said to have allied with Nazi Germany during World War II, and his figure remains controversial to this day, even among

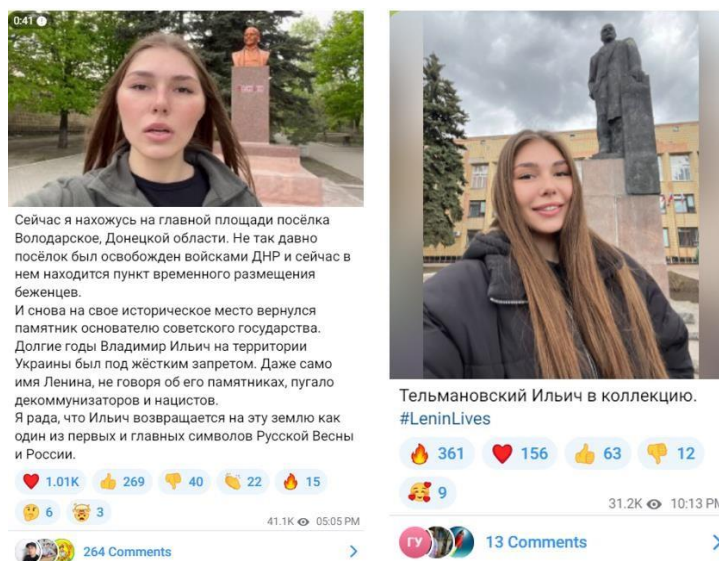
Ukrainian society. In western Ukraine, Bandera supporters still show respect every year on Bandera's birthday celebrations (Goncharenko 2022). Bandera was a radical figure who was eventually killed by Soviet intelligence agents. Putin himself mentioned in his speech on May 9, 2022, that Bandera supporters (Banderites), whom he claimed were neo-Nazis, were a group that Russia was trying to confront (Goncharenko 2022). The essence of these four contents is to spread the impression to the public that Russia is not the "villain" in this conflict; instead, Russian actions are portrayed as self-defense against Ukraine's attacks, which threatened Russian society first.

Glorification of the Soviet Union

As a member of the Leninist Communist Youth Union of the Russian Federation (LKSM RF), Maryana frequently demonstrates her connection to the history of the Soviet Union and its prominent figure, Vladimir Lenin. The origins of this youth organization can be traced back to 1918 when the Komsomol organization was formed to unite youth organizations involved in the Russian Revolution (Britannica 2016). The youth organization was disbanded after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, but efforts were made to restore and modernize it in the early 2000s. According to the organization's official website, LKSM RF aims to preserve the Soviet heritage, combat historical falsification, and oppose all manifestations of anti-communism and anti-Sovietism.

Figure 3.

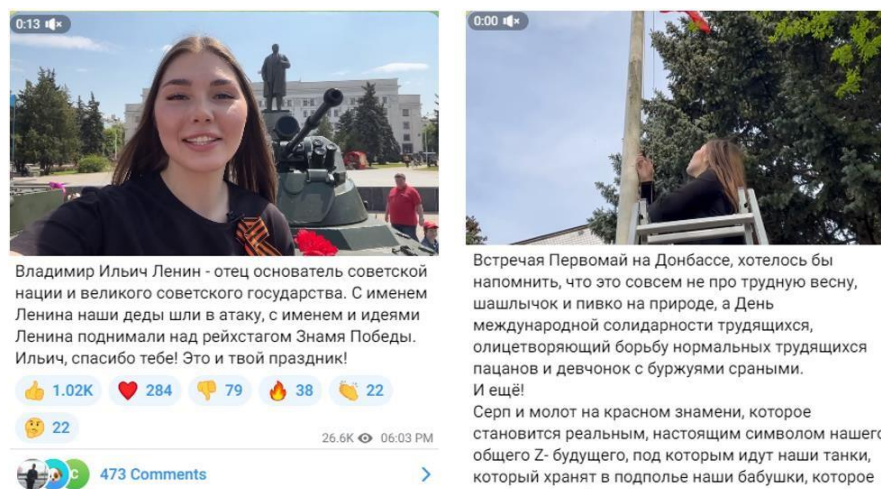
Content from @maryananaumova Telegram Channel



Through her Telegram channel, Maryana expresses happiness over the presence of the Vladimir Lenin monument in Donetsk. In the video uploaded on April 30, 2022, she provides a brief history of the strict ban in Ukraine on Lenin. This prohibition was caused by the fears of anti-communists and Nazis regarding Lenin's name and monuments. Ukraine has its story of fighting against the Soviet communist government until it eventually became the independent Ukraine we know today. Several efforts to dismantle and relocate Lenin monuments in Ukraine are events that demonstrate the process of eradicating Soviet remnants (Gaidai 2021), such as the mass demolition of Lenin statues in 2013–2014, known as the Leninopad or Leninfall phenomenon. Therefore, the presence of the Lenin monument in Ukraine is considered a return to Soviet history in its place and a resistance against anti-Soviet manifestations.

Figure 4.

Content from @maryananaumova Telegram Channel



Two other posts that fall under the content of glorifying the Soviet Union are the celebrations of Labor Day and Victory Day (*День Победы*) that Maryana celebrated in the Donbas region. In the Victory Day celebration content, Maryana is shown in a video holding roses at the Lenin monument. She commemorates Vladimir Lenin's contributions as the founding father of the Soviet Union and recalls Russia's struggle for victory against Germany in World War II.

“Владимир Ильич Ленин - отец основатель советской нации и великого советского государства. С именем Ленина наши деды шли в атаку, с именем и идеями Ленина поднимали над рейхстагом Знамя Победы. Ильич, спасибо тебе! Это и твой праздник!”

Translation: “Vladimir Ilyich Lenin is the founding father of the Soviet nation and the Soviet superstate. With the name Lenin, our grandfathers launched attacks, with the name and ideas of Lenin, they raised the Banner of Victory over the Reichstag. Ilyich, thank you! This is your celebration day too!”

Furthermore, in the Labor Day celebration content, Maryana shows a video of herself hoisting the red flag and expresses her opinion in the caption:

“Серп и молот на красном знамени, которое становится реальным, настоящим символом нашего общего Z- будущего, под которым идут наши танки, который хранят в подполье наши бабушки, которое реет над освобожденными администрациями - явно говорит о необходимости так этих буржуев добить...”

Translation: “The hammer and sickle on the red flag, which are the tangible symbols of our collective future, where our tanks lie, kept by our grandmothers underground, which soar above the liberated government, clearly speak of the need to eliminate the bourgeois class...”

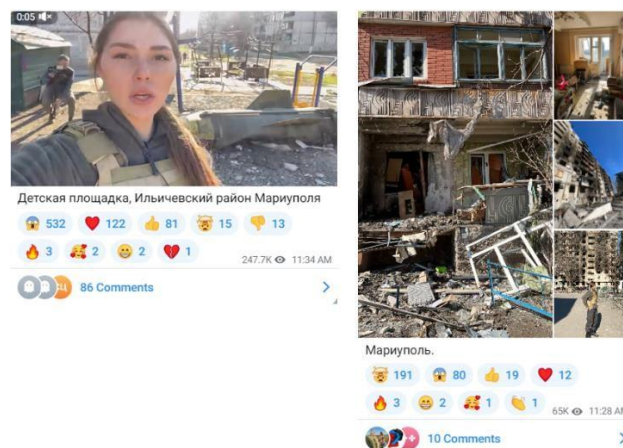
Maryana symbolizes the celebration as the struggle of workers against the bourgeois. She also emphasizes the hammer and sickle as symbols of the Z struggle, which serves as Russia's capital in the struggle against the bourgeoisie. The letter "Z" itself symbolizes support for the Russian military and serves as propaganda for military operations in Ukraine among supporters of the Russian authorities (Kovalev 2022). The symbol Z can mean *Заканчиваем войны* (ending wars), *За мир* (for peace), or *За победу* (for victory) (Kovalev: 2022). The focus of this content is to spread Soviet communist ideas to readers and to report the return of Soviet history to Ukrainian soil, symbolized by the placement of Lenin monuments in Ukraine.

Reports on attacks and war crimes committed by Ukraine

On April 8, 2022, Maryana uploaded two publications reporting the current conditions in Mariupol following an attack by the Ukrainian military. Maryana posted a video showing the wreckage of a rocket booster found in a children's playground in the Ilyichevsky District, Mariupol. She also uploaded several pictures depicting the conditions in residential areas. In these two posts, Maryana

did not provide much context and explanation in the text captions, but the content is clearly aimed at exposing the war crimes committed by Ukraine, which targeted civilian residential areas, such as the use of explosive weapons with wide-ranging effects such as bombs and large-sized missiles, directed artillery and mortars, and multi-barrel rocket launchers prohibited for use in urban or other populated areas, which would result in humanitarian consequences (ICRC 2022).

Figure 5.
Content from @maryananaumova Telegram Channel



In the video showing the rocket booster in the children's playground, Maryana stated the phrase "*...вот такие подарки прислала Украина своим родным,*" which translates to "...this is the kind of gift Ukraine sent to its own people," implying that the rocket became a "gift" sent by Ukraine to its relatives. Considering the shared history between Russia and Ukraine as part of the Soviet Union, Maryana's statement is a harsh criticism of Ukraine, which seems to be trying to ignore its long-standing relationship with Russia, even launching attacks on its fellow countrymen in Mariupol.

In another post, Maryana uploaded a video containing an interview with a civilian named Olga Seletskaya. In the video, Olga describes her experience as a prisoner in the secret prison at Mariupol Airport called the "*Библиотека*" or "Library." The secret prison served as a place for separatists, and where people were detained for pro-Russian ideas. Olga suffered severe torture by the Security Service of Ukraine (CSU) for supporting Donbas and participating in pro-Russian demonstrations. According to her testimony, Olga was subjected to brutal beatings and suffocation. In another post, Maryana expressed her disappointment with

Ukraine due to attacks on three educational institutions in Donetsk on the same day.

Maryana accused Ukraine of deliberately targeting residential areas.

“В Донецке за одно утро прилеты по трем учебным заведениям... Две директрисы только что мне лично рассказали, что в школах ожидалась раздача гуманитарной воды и чудом... чудом!!! жертв не оказалось намного больше...

Я лично видела четверых погибших...

Украина целенаправленно бьет по жилым кварталам”

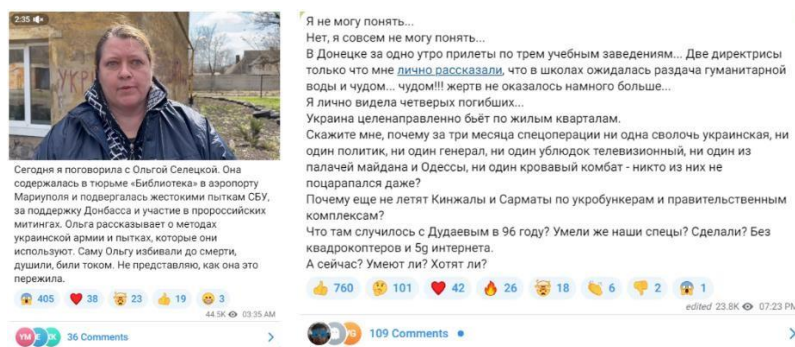
Translation: “In Donetsk, three educational institutions were hit (by missiles) this morning... Two school principals have just told me personally that the distribution of humanitarian aid water is expected to take place at the schools, and it's a miracle... a miracle!!! Not many casualties...

I personally have seen four people dead...

Ukraine deliberately attacks residential areas.”

Figure 6.

Content from @maryananaumova Telegram Channel



Maryana also expressed disappointment and questioned why, during three months of special operations, the Ukrainian elite group has not yet been targeted by Russia.

“Скажите мне, почему за три месяца спецоперации ни одна сволочь украинская, ни один политик, ни один генерал, ни один ублюдок телевизионный, ни один из палачей майдана и Одессы, ни один кровавый комбат - никто из них не поцарапался даже? Почему еще не летят Кинжалы и Сарматы по укробункерам и правительственным комплексам?”

Translation: “Tell me why during three months of special operations, not a single Ukrainian scoundrel, not a single politician, not a single general, not a single scoundrel on TV, not a single perpetrator of murders in Maidan and Odessa (Ukrainian nationalists), not a single Ukrainian battalion commander has been scratched? Why haven't the Daggers and Sarmatians (missiles) flown to the bunkers and government complexes in Ukraine?”

In the caption above, Maryana also used the term “укро,” which is a sarcastic nickname for Ukrainians. The posts above focus on providing evidence of war crimes committed by Ukraine. The analysis indicates the producer's intention

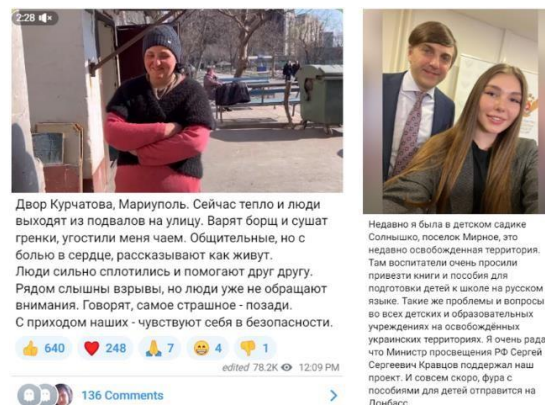
to spread the facts of Ukrainian war crimes found and to shape the readers' opinion about the bad nature of the Ukrainian armed forces. Maryana's intention to urge Russia to launch attacks on Ukraine as a form of retaliation and self-defense against previous attacks on residential areas was also found. This criticism reflects Maryana's position as an independent pro-Russian journalist supporting military operations in Ukraine and voicing criticism of the Russian military's insufficient response to Ukrainian attacks.

Humanitarian Stories

In two posts published on April 14 and 15, 2022, Maryana addressed important issues related to children's rights on the Russia-Ukraine border. In one of the posts, Maryana discussed the need to prioritize humanitarian assistance to residents and communities in Russia who are on the 'front lines' of the war. Maryana also appealed to legislators in Russia to pay attention to the challenges that arise in the process of sending dual-use goods. Dual-use goods refer to items that can be used for both civilian and military purposes, such as walkie-talkies, quadcopters, helmets, and bulletproof vests. According to European Commission regulations, these types of goods are strictly controlled because they can be classified for civilian use and then modified for military purposes, or worse, used for terrorism. In another post, Maryana also published a picture with the Minister of Education of the Russian Federation, Sergey Sergeyevich Kravtsov. In her caption, she thanked Kravtsov for his support for humanitarian assistance projects in the field of education for children in newly liberated areas of Ukraine.

Figure 7.

Content from @maryananaumova Telegram Channel



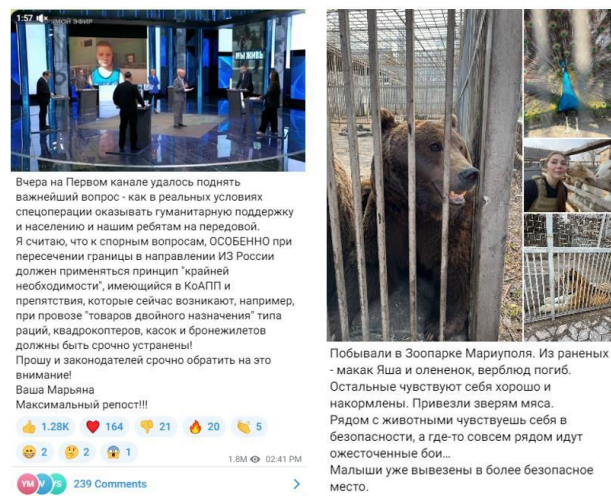
In another post, Maryana attempts to share the stories of people affected by the war in Mariupol. Maryana engages with one family and explains the conditions of the residents in Mariupol:

“Двор Курчатова, Мариуполь. Сейчас тепло и люди выходят из подвалов на улицу. Варят борщ и сушат гренки, угостили меня чаем. Общительные, но с болью в сердце, рассказывают как живут. Люди сильно сплотились и помогают друг другу. Рядом слышны взрывы, но люди уже не обращают внимания. Говорят, самое страшное - позади. С приходом наших - чувствуют себя в безопасности”

Translation: “Kurchatov Street, Mariupol. Now the weather is warm and people are coming out of the underground shelters onto the streets. They are cooking borscht and dry croutons, offering me tea. Friendly but with pain in their hearts, they tell me about their lives. The community has come together strongly and is helping each other. Explosions can be heard nearby, but people no longer pay attention. They say the worst is over. They feel safe with our arrival.”

Figure 8.

Content from @maryananaumova Telegram Channel



Additionally, Maryana also showed her concern by visiting the Mariupol Zoo. She reported several injured and dead animals, but the rest have been fed and evacuated to a safer place.

“Побывали в Зоопарке Мариуполя. Из раненых - макак Яша и олененок, верблюд погиб. Остальные чувствуют себя хорошо и накормлены. Привезли зверям мяса. Рядом с животными чувствуешь себя в безопасности, а где-то совсем рядом идут ожесточенные бои...”

Translation: “We visited the Mariupol Zoo. The monkeys and the young deer named Yasha were injured, and one camel died. The others are healthy and have been fed. We brought meat for the animals. I felt safe being near the animals, while somewhere very close, fierce battles were taking place...”

The core message of these two contents is to share stories of both the people and other living creatures, such as animals, greatly affected by the war. Maryana endeavors to touch the emotional side of readers by depicting the reality in Mariupol. Additionally, Maryana seeks to showcase Russia's concern and contribution in providing humanitarian aid to the people living in the Mariupol area, especially in regions that have been liberated by Russia. In this content, similar patterns to other content are also found, such as the intention to glorify Russia as a 'hero' for the people in wartime conditions.

Content analysis reveals that Maryana often highlights specific patterns of content that she publishes on her Telegram channel during April and May. The data is presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

Details of Content Patterns in the Telegram Channel @maryananaumova

Prominent Content Patterns	Frequency
Image branding of Russia	7
Accusations and hate speech against Ukraine	10
Glorification of Lenin and communist values	4
Reports on societal conditions	4
Messages and criticisms for the Russian government	2

Social Identity Process and Its Implications on Maryana Naumova's Telegram Content

To explain the motives behind Maryana Naumova's publication in her Telegram channel, we extend our conceptual framework drawn from the social identity theory (Reid, Giles, and Abrams 2004). According to Tajfel (1982), this theory posits that individuals view themselves within the context of social groups. An individual's identity entails both social and personal types. Social identity *“results from the categorization of the world into ingroup and outgroup and the labeling of oneself as a member of the ingroup”* (Tajfel 1982). This notion fosters comprehension of communication dynamics within different intergroup settings. All individuals commonly categorize their social surroundings, thereby enhancing

their self-esteem through differentiation between the in-group and the out-group (Eisenbeiss, Blechschmidt, Backhaus, and Freund 2012).

Major advancements in understanding identity have emerged from the establishment of Social Identity Theory (SIT), initially introduced by Henri Tajfel and John Turner during the 1970s (Abrams and Hogg 1990). This theory regards social identity as a fundamental component of an individual's self-perception. Tajfel (1984) characterizes social identity as "the individual's awareness of belonging to specific social groups, coupled with emotional and value-based significance attached to such group membership" (Abrams and Hogg 1990). Similar to how individuals aim to uphold a favorable self-image as distinct individuals, they also endeavor to establish or uphold a positive social identity, which involves appraising the in-group as valuable, positive, and esteemed. Social groups, comprised of individuals striving to maintain positive self-perceptions, serve a parallel evaluative role by seeking favorable comparisons with other groups. This is often achieved by selecting specific categories that enable them to view themselves favorably in contrast to various out-groups.

Social media have become deeply ingrained in various aspects of life such as work, education, politics, and family dynamics, shaping processes of self and identity in return. In this paper, we explore the application of the social identity theory (Reid, Giles, and Abrams 2004) to emerging material realities and how these realities inform theoretical frameworks. It is evident that individuals not only utilize digital social technologies but also evolve alongside them (Deuze 2011). Consequently, theorists in the realm of digital media can draw insights from the extensive theoretical groundwork laid by social psychologists, particularly identity theorists. Similarly, theories concerning the self within society must adapt to accommodate the rapidly evolving empirical landscape. To understand how the war or conflict setting had affected the social identity of individuals, we apply the social identity theory developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, which outlines three cognitive processes in how individuals make in-group and out-group classifications.

The first process is **social categorization**, wherein Maryana defines herself based on the group to which she belongs. Group members are aware of their membership and capable of distinguishing similarities and differences between themselves and out-group members (Dholakia et al. 2004). These categories exist

unconsciously in an individual's mind. So, when someone sees themselves as part of a group, they will begin to think about their group identity, its relevance, and the stereotypes associated with it. This will influence how Maryana evaluates things based on her group affiliation (Dru 2007). Maryana's identity as a Russian citizen and her affiliation with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation align her with the pro-Russia and pro-war groups. Thus, the pro-Russia and pro-war groups are considered Maryana's in-group, while the pro-Ukraine group is classified by Maryana as an out-group.

As a comparison, the authors cite the content analysis of the Ukrainian Telegram channel, @UkraineNow. @UkraineNow clearly plays a vital role by providing real-time information about the war, such as bombing alerts and other important updates. Dominant topics on the @UkraineNow channel include news of attacks in Ukrainian territories, discussions about child casualties in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and clear dissemination of narratives to both Ukrainian and global audiences about the bravery of the Ukrainian people, especially the Ukrainian army, during the conflict (Ghasiya and Sasahara 2023). As part of the pro-Russia group, Maryana distinguishes herself as part of the pro-Russia group, with members outside her group being the pro-Ukraine group.

The second process is **social identification**, which involves Maryana identifying herself as a member of a group. This process directs Maryana to behave according to beliefs about how group members should behave. When Maryana 'remembers' aspects of her social group membership, her social identity is activated in her self-concept, or what can also be called identity priming. The phenomenon of identity priming is demonstrated through group symbols and images/words related to the in-group (Forehand et al. 2002).

This process is evidenced by Maryana when she invokes the hammer and sickle flag, the Z propaganda symbol, and the hashtag #LeninLives in content glorifying the Soviet Union. These three symbols explicitly represent Maryana's identity as part of the pro-Russia group. Maryana also demonstrates emotional attachment within her in-group. As a volunteer in the Donbas region, Maryana actively demonstrates her involvement in humanitarian actions, as shown in the four

humanitarian story contents. Through this content, Maryana adopts behavior consistent with the image and identity of her group.

The third process, **social comparison**, is when Maryana compares her group to other groups in terms of prestige and social status. This process is also referred to as a form of attachment and emotional involvement that can enhance Maryana's loyalty to group members (Dholakia et al. 2004). Social comparison is prominently evident in the production of content and narratives that depict a contrast between the portrayal of Russia and Ukraine in Maryana's posts. Various nicknames or terms associated with Russia and Ukraine are found. Maryana associates negative connotation terms such as "devil," "villains," and "Nazis" with the Ukrainian armed forces, while she uses the term "heroes" for the Russian military. On several occasions, Maryana often associates Ukrainian nationalists with Nazis and equates the Ukrainian military to the SS (Schutzstaffel), the military organization of the Nazi Party in Germany, for their actions harming children, women, and the elderly. The negative prejudice expressed by Maryana towards the out-group reflects an attitude based on her group membership. Based on the concept of social identity, these efforts are Maryana's way of gaining positive feelings from her group membership.

The process of social comparison also indicates a need for positive distinctiveness of Maryana's group. Positive distinctiveness is an effort to build positive evaluations of the in-group and unfavorable evaluations of the out-group (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Maryana conveys generous information from the in-group, while she disseminates information about the out-group based on individual needs only. Content analysis finds positively valenced news about Russia in the form of image branding content, justification of Russian attacks, and support for Russian soldiers. On the other hand, unfavorable assessments of Ukraine through accusations of war crimes and hate speech towards Ukrainian forces are repeatedly found within the data collection period. While the Ukrainian-origin Telegram channel attempts to disseminate information about various attacks from Russia and seeks to gather global support, Maryana utilizes her Telegram channel to counter such reporting by constructing narratives that elevate the values of the in-group.

Maryana Naumova's Telegram: Social Identity, State Ideology, and Digital War Narratives

As a Russian citizen, Maryana holds beliefs about her national identity. She has positive beliefs about her own nation, which drives the idea of identifying herself as a member of the Russian national group. Maryana's positive attitude towards her country is depicted as a belief that her nation and its membership are worthy of pride. In 2014, Maryana became part of the Komsomol, officially known as the Leninist Communist Youth Union of the Russian Federation (LKSM RF), indicating that she has embraced Marxist-Leninist ideas from a young age. Maryana's identity as a Russian citizen and her affiliation with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation align her with the pro-Russia and pro-war groups. Thus, the pro-Russia and pro-war groups are considered Maryana's in-group, while the pro-Ukraine group is classified by Maryana as an out-group.

Maryana's affiliations with the Russian Ministry of Defense and Wagner-affiliated training programs, viewed through the lens of social identity theory, reveal complex power dynamics that shape her self-presentation and content creation (BBC 2023; Newsweek 2023). Social identity theory posits that individuals derive their sense of self from group membership, influencing cognition and behaviour through processes like social categorization, identification, and comparison (Evans, Coffee, and Barker 2023; Tajfel 1978). Maryana's formal ties to state-aligned institutions position her within a powerful in-group that not only reinforces her Russian national identity but also amplifies her role as a communicator of pro-Russia and pro-war narratives. The internet, as a mass communication tool, enhances her ability to produce and distribute content that aligns with this identity, potentially blurring the line between grassroots expression and state-orchestrated messaging (Rice 1984).

Her social identity as belonging to the in-group of Russian nationalists and Marxist-Leninist groups and being aligned with these state-associated groups' norms and values suggests an evolved alignment with Kremlin interests. Through social comparison, Maryana likely elevates the status of her in-group by labelling pro-Ukraine groups as an out-group, thereby reinforcing stereotypes and state-friendly narratives. This trend raises critical questions about the legitimacy of her

content since her institutional affiliations leverage her social identity to spread state propaganda under the guise of independent journalism, utilizing online platforms to enhance the reach and impact of such messages (Eisenbeiss et al. 2012).

Maryana's youth makes her role in the talk of digital war more complicated, overlaying intersectional dimensions that shape the reception and validity of her narratives. Social identity theory points to how group membership influences the self-concept but suggests that gender and youth identity intersect with her militarized civic identity to build a unique communicative strategy (Tajfel 1978). As a young woman, Maryana is able to leverage social constructions of femininity, usually associated with nurturing or vulnerability, to counter her militarized, pro-war rhetoric, thereby projecting herself and making herself more visible and appealing in online communities. The juxtaposition can project her authority, particularly among audiences who see her as a new or authentic voice in a patriarchal, militaristic environment.

Her youth identity, supported by her early involvement with the Komsomol, makes her a relatable figure to young audiences, and her ties to the Russian Ministry of Defense and Wagner-affiliated programs provide her with an air of institutional legitimacy (BBC 2023; Newsweek 2023). But this intersectionality also confronts us to look at how purposefully her age and gender are appealed to make her messages of softening or validating state-endorsed stories, perhaps masking the militarization of her citizenship identity as patriotism gone viral. Through these intersecting points, we are better able to appreciate how Maryana's intersecting identity speaks to her contribution towards digital war communication (Evans, Coffee, and Barker 2023).

To fully understand Maryana's identity construction, a comparative analysis with pro-Ukraine communicators, such as those associated with @UkraineNow, is essential. Social identity theory highlights how in-group and out-group dynamics drive social comparison, and extending this framework to include competing narratives would illuminate the broader landscape of digital war communication (Eisenbeiss et al. 2012; Tajfel 1978). While Maryana's content reinforces a pro-Russia in-group through nationalist and militarized rhetoric, pro-Ukraine accounts like @UkraineNow likely construct their in-group identity around themes of resilience, sovereignty, and victimhood in response to Russian aggression. A comparative approach would reveal how these opposing groups categorize and

compare each other, shaping their respective audiences' perceptions through digital content. For instance, @UkraineNow's emphasis on global solidarity and humanitarian appeals may contrast with Maryana's state-backed, militaristic framing, highlighting different strategies for leveraging social identity in wartime propaganda. By analyzing these competing identity constructions, the study could better contextualize Maryana's role within the polarized digital ecosystem and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how social identities are weaponized in information warfare (Rice 1984).

To further complicate this examination, the combination of social identity theory and Gramscian hegemony provides a rich vein of analysis of how Telegram is an apparatus for the production and dissemination of ideology. Gramscian hegemony accounts for dominant groups maintaining dominance by moulding ideology and norms of culture, gaining people's consent through the use of media and communications (Gramsci 1971). Maryana's Telegram posts, a platform infamously badly moderated and riddled with niche ideological groups, are used by the hegemonic impulse to reassert Russian state narratives. Her pro-war, pro-Russia messages, amplified by her networking with the Ministry of Defense and Wagner-linked initiatives, contribute towards the construction of a nationalist ideology framing Russia as a justifiable world power (BBC 2023; Newsweek 2023). Telegram affordances such as encrypted channels and the efficiency of content broadcasting enable Maryana to produce and broadcast ideologically charged content addressed to her in-group and marginalizing out-group perspectives (Rice 1984). Integrating SIT with hegemony theory helps us to interpret better how Maryana's content functions as a device for state-imposed ideological domination, relying on her social identity to make Kremlin interests look naturalized in online environments (Tajfel 1978).

Maryana's use of derogatory labels such as "Bandera," "Nazi," or "Banderlog" to describe pro-Ukraine groups can be interpreted through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, which highlights how language perpetuates power imbalances by normalizing hostility (Bourdieu 1991). These terms, rooted in historical and political connotations, dehumanize the out-group, framing them as existential threats to Russian identity. Within the SIT framework,

such labeling reinforces social comparison by elevating the in-group's moral superiority while justifying aggression against the out-group (Tajfel 1978). By deploying symbolic violence, Maryana's content contributes to a broader narrative that legitimizes Russia's military actions as a defense against perceived ideological enemies. This rhetoric, circulated on Telegram, normalizes hostility and fosters a culture of enmity that aligns with state propaganda goals (Newsweek 2023). Analyzing these labels through symbolic violence reveals how Maryana's language not only reflects her social identity but also serves as a tool for ideological warfare, perpetuating power asymmetries in digital communication (Bourdieu 1991; Evans, Coffee, and Barker 2023).

Finally, analyzing the politics of power involved in Maryana's content generation brings into clear view how the institutional associations position her legitimacy among the Russian media. Her linkage to the Russian Ministry of Defense and Wagner-linked programs, and further potential alignments with state media outlets, establish her as an outlet for messages from the Kremlin (BBC 2023; Newsweek 2023). Social identity theory explains her identification with the pro-Russia in-group, but power dynamics emphasis reveals how her content is picked up through institutional amplification. State media and Telegram channels, often coordinated to further nationalist narratives, provide Maryana a platform to be heard by a larger population, adding a patina of officialdom to her content (Rice 1984). Her youth and gender can be tactically utilized by such institutions to diversify and make propaganda more people-friendly, and more appealing as a result. Such reliance on state infrastructure raises doubts about her independence, considering that her work will probably depend on the interests of the institution rather than that of independent reporting. By examining these relations of power, we can observe that the social identity of Maryana is co-opted to reinforce state power, which makes her a key figure in Russia's mediatized political communication strategy (Gramsci 1971; Tajfel 1978).

CONCLUSION

Maryana Naumova's presence on Telegram highlights the critical intersection of state ideology and war narratives in shaping public opinion. Her content, influenced by her identity as a Russian nationalist and Marxist-Leninist, amplifies the Kremlin's messaging, portraying Russia's military actions as a

defense of national pride and moral superiority. Through her connections with the Russian Ministry of Defense and Wagner-aligned programs, Maryana becomes a vehicle for state-driven propaganda, often presented under the guise of independent reporting. This institutional support adds credibility to her content within Russia's media landscape, raising questions about her independence and the extent to which her work reflects state interests. Telegram's encrypted channels provide an effective space for her to target pro-Russia audiences while sidelining pro-Ukraine voices, further reinforcing the ideological divide. Additionally, Maryana's use of her youth and gender identity plays a significant role in making her pro-war messages more relatable, enhancing her appeal. Ultimately, her digital activity underscores how state-backed narratives are spread through social identity frameworks, using platforms like Telegram to maintain ideological control and influence the broader digital discourse surrounding the war.

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