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# Communicating With the Russian People: How to Break Through Putin's Digital Iron Curtain

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## Foreword

Losing control of Russian public opinion has always been the Putin regime's worst insecurity and fear. The ongoing invasion of Ukraine in conjunction with the toughest Western sanctions imposed on the country may eventually become a turning point for Russian citizens, encouraging them to speak up and request change. The increasing restrictions on access to information and repression of the independent media demonstrate that the Kremlin is concerned about losing the support of the Russian population, should people be given the chance to receive objective information with regards to Russian war crimes in Ukraine. In the age of social media, the truth has become the Kremlin's main enemy.

While it is crucial for the West to have a firm and unwavering approach towards sanctions, which are targeting all segments of the population, it is also important to keep communication lines with Russian citizens open in order to expose Russian propaganda and false narratives, particularly with regards to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Western intentions.

With the help of state-sponsored media used as a propaganda tool, the Russian government has been increasingly trying to demonise the West because of the imposition of sanctions and to unite Russian citizens behind President Putin. One of the main propaganda narratives is the claim that Russia is a victim of "cancel culture". The West has to debunk such claims and use remaining channels while delivering key messages to ordinary Russians and revealing the consequences of the Kremlin's unjustified aggression in Ukraine.

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## Overview: Beyond Putin's Digital Iron Curtain

Following his invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin is establishing a new Iron Curtain – a blackout that shields the Russian people from outside media and permits access to state-sanctioned news and information only. This shelters large swathes of the Russian population from the realities of war and any likely reckoning for their leader while skewing moral perspectives and hindering understandings of how the conflict is progressing. This new “digital iron curtain” – a weapon of war – will cause further bloodshed and delay any peace settlement by turning off the most effective pressure valve on Putin: the perception of Russian citizens.

Ending the war in Ukraine requires navigating around and beyond the new digital iron curtain. This paper sets out why and how Western governments should do this. It will require the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) and the dark web to enable direct communications with the Russian people and the sharing of clear and credible information on the war through social media and other content. This would counter the narratives the Kremlin is using while offering compelling alternatives from authentic message-carriers, such as the growing Russian diaspora and Ukrainians themselves. This strategy should sit alongside ongoing support to Ukrainians fighting Russia on the ground, economic sanctions and a reduction in Western reliance on Russian oil and gas.

Fundamentally, our short-term priority must be to build Russian support for a negotiated end to the conflict in Ukraine. Longer term, it should be about helping empower those in Russia, who are open to closer relations with the West, to speak up and bring about change from within.

This should be accomplished by seeking to break down the narrative that Putin has built among the Russian people: namely, that he is improving living standards and defending Russia's national interests. By combining trusted voices with the right messaging, this communications campaign should show that in launching his war, Putin is damaging Russia, the country's economy and its living standards. While we welcome the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's recent message directly appealing to the Russian people, we acknowledge efforts like this must fit within a broader, coherent strategy. As Jonathan Powell concludes: “The challenge of how to get truthful information to the Russian people is key to ending the war in Ukraine peacefully. Only they can put effective pressure on Putin. This paper looks at imaginative ideas for how that can be done.”

## Recommendations

- **Craft a compelling narrative:** We need bespoke polling to work out the right messages to share with the Russian population, recognising that different sections of the population will respond best to different messaging strategies.
- **Carefully select message-carriers:** Information should be conveyed by a diverse pool of convincing message-carriers to successfully reach all segments of the Russian population.
- **Identify the right mediums:** Monitoring which social-media channels remain open, understanding how they work operationally and exploring creative means of communication will be key to creating a sustained messaging campaign.
- **Be clear on responsibility:** Any communications strategy should be built on absolute clarity about its aim: tackling misinformation directed by the Kremlin. It requires being clear and consistent with the Russian public on the author of their suffering – Putin – and that he is equally the agent to end that suffering.
- **Message of hope:** While the campaign must be clear-eyed in detailing what is happening in Ukraine and, as a result, in Russia, it must also set out a clear message of hope: the West is not predestined to poor relations with Russia, nor is it a natural enemy. The West wants to work more closely, collaboratively and effectively with Russia, but the barrier is the Kremlin. The messaging should outline the steps that Russia could take to de-escalate and end the war in Ukraine while explaining what this will mean for a step-by-step removal of sanctions.
- **Create a Digital Communications Alliance:** Establishing a new global body, independent of any nation states or governments, to convene cyber and communications expertise and provide resources would facilitate the delivery of this unprecedented communications effort.

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## Understanding the Russian People

Reaching the Russian people requires understanding them, how they feel about the war and their views on the country's direction more generally. In the current climate and because of the digital iron curtain, this is more difficult than it's ever been. However, it is vital that the West bases its messages on genuine understanding of what motivates Russian nationalism and support for Putin, or else it risks stoking polarisation among the Russian people. This means not only reaching out to younger, more tech-literate people, but also to an older, pro-Putin demographic that tends to have less exposure to non-state media sources.

We cannot afford to drive more of a wedge between those already opposed to Russia's invasion and those currently in favour, who may well see the withdrawal of Western brands and "manipulation" of communication channels as further evidence of NATO-backed meddling.

From the available public-opinion polling, these are the top insights:

- Public opinion appears to remain strongly in favour of Putin.
- Although the Russian people are largely supportive of their country and their leader, they are more sceptical of how the government as a whole handles the state.
- The majority of Russians see the West as the aggressor in the current conflict.
- Younger people are the primary anti-Putin demographic and the main users of social media.
- There is a strong sense of unity among Russians that they and Ukrainians are "one people", even if the majority of Ukrainians themselves don't feel the same.

All recent polling from Russia must, of course, come with certain caveats, but overall support for Putin still seems high. As Lord Ashcroft put it in a recent report:

*"First, the Putin regime effectively controls what Russians see and hear about the 'special military operation' in Ukraine. Second, with protests crushed and prison terms for spreading of 'fake news' about the war, many might be cautious in talking about their views to a stranger. We also know, however, that a crisis can often prompt a surge of national loyalty. However, [polling] suggests that Putin has managed to shape Russian opinion strongly in his favour – at least for the time being."*

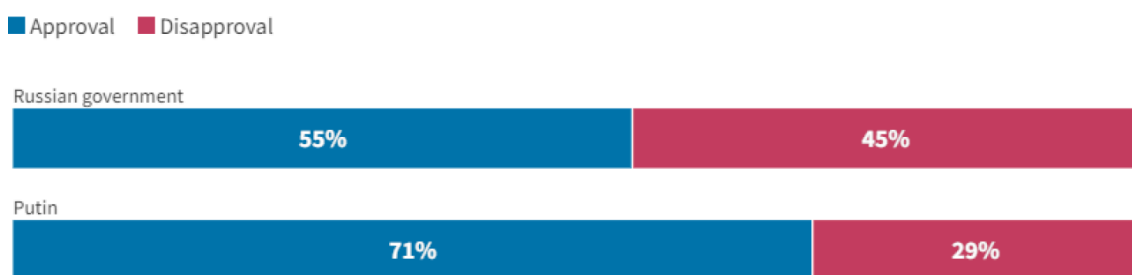
### Public Opinion of Putin Reflects a High Level of Support

Finding reliable polling data conducted within Russia has become progressively more difficult as Putin's regime has cracked down on dissent and freedom of speech. Nevertheless, data produced by the Levada

Center, one of the more reliable sources inside the country, has been yielding results showing Russian public opinion has consistently favoured Putin in the past few years.

Throughout his time in power, Putin has used military assaults such as those in Georgia, Syria and Crimea to boost his popularity at home – successes he may have been trying to replicate this time around too. Russians generally support Putin’s imperial ambitions, partially as a means of rectifying perceived historic injustices and proving Russia’s place as a world power. Russia’s state-sponsored propaganda apparatus is, of course, all too happy to feed into these existing narratives.

**Figure 1 – Approval ratings for the activities of Putin before the Russia-Ukraine war were far higher than for the country’s government**



Source: Levada Center

The result is that, in general, public opinion favours Putin’s activities, with the lowest approval figures being 59 per cent in April and May 2020 when Russia faced a mishandled spike in Covid-19 cases. The rest of the dates are consistently above 60 per cent.

This consistently strong approval reflects the general view held within Russia of Putin’s ability to increase living standards for many Russians, particularly since the chaos of the 1990s. According to the Russian Monitor of the Economic Situation and Health of the Population (RMEZ), which has been recording such data since 1992, the average income of the Russian family has almost doubled from 6,087 roubles to 11, 425 roubles between 2000 and 2006.<sup>1</sup> This increase in living standards may have slowed considerably in the years since – or even actively stagnated – but the idea that Putin provides a path to greater prosperity still forms the fundamental basis of his political legitimacy.

### Government Fares Worse Than Putin on Approvals

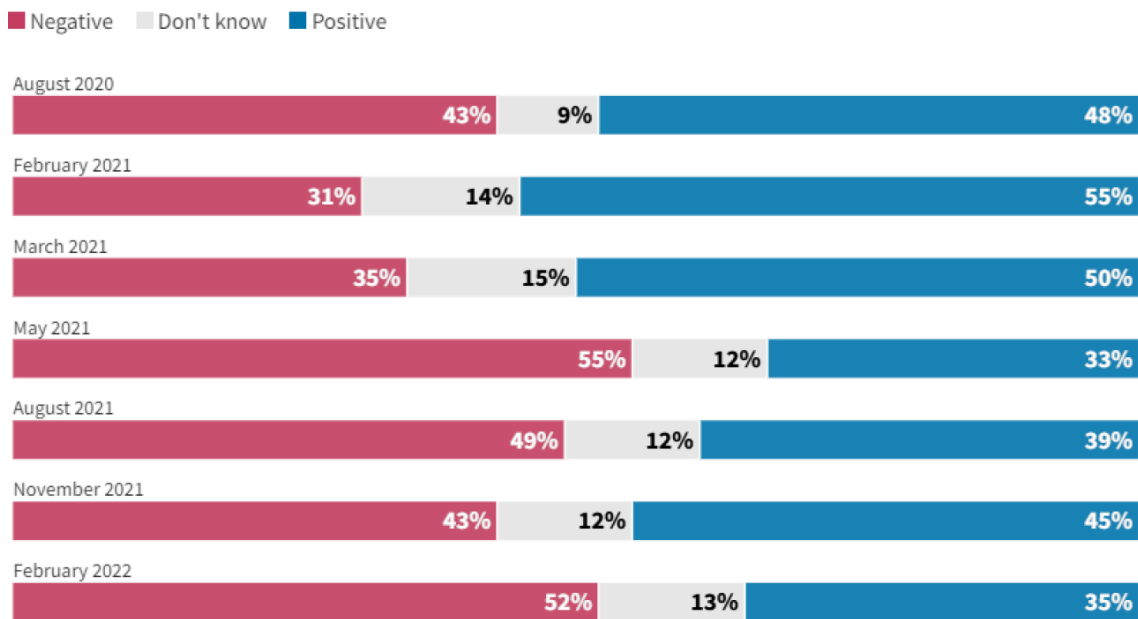
Between the instability caused by the Covid pandemic as well as the growing tensions between Russia and the West, public opinion of government activities over the past two years has remained almost evenly split – although there has been a slight uptick in government support since January 2022.<sup>2</sup>

In comparison, a recent 2022 poll by the Levada Center shows Putin’s approval ratings consistently outstripping those of his government and also increasing in the days prior to the invasion. In January 2022, Putin’s personal approval rating was 69 per cent, rising to 71 per cent in February. This almost 20-point split between Putin’s approval ratings and those of his government reinforces the need for a narrative that singles out Putin himself, and his inability to deliver on the promises that saw him rise to power, rather than one that attacks the everyday workings of the Russian state.<sup>3</sup>

### Russian Attitudes Towards Ukraine Vary but Blame Lies Primarily With the West

The Levada Center’s data for February show that 60 per cent of respondents believe the US and NATO are responsible for initiating the military escalation in Ukraine while 14 per cent consider Ukraine to be responsible. Tellingly, and in line with the Russian media narrative, only 3 per cent believe Russia to be the initiator of the conflict.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 2 – Russian attitudes towards Ukraine have been in decline since November 2021**



Source: Levada Center

### Desire for Peace

Savanta ComRes, a UK-based consultancy, conducted polls in February 2022 on behalf of CNN. They found that just 21 per cent of Ukrainians expect to see a peaceful end to tensions with Russia while 65 per cent of Russians expect a peaceful outcome. On issues of national culture, 64 per cent of Russians said that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people” while only 28 per cent of Ukrainians believe the same.



However, in eastern parts of Ukraine, the number increases to almost half with 45 per cent thinking of Russians and Ukrainians as “one people”. If the aim of outreach to the Russian people is to encourage support for negotiated peace in Ukraine, then this is welcome news.

### **Deep Support for the Military**

What will be less easy to overcome is the Russian public’s deep support for its military – an institution trusted even more than Putin himself. Data from 5 March 2022 provide an important insight into Russian people’s attitudes towards the military and the war in Ukraine. A high 84 per cent of Russians trust the Russian army, with only 10 per cent actively expressing distrust.

Asked about the current conflict, 71 per cent of Russians supported their country’s decision to conduct a “special military operation” in Ukraine, with only 21 per cent unsupportive. When asked why Putin had launched his operation, 46 per cent believed the “special military operation” in Ukraine aims to protect their country and prevent the deployment of NATO military bases in their neighbouring territory, while 19 per cent believed the intervention intends to actively change politics in Ukraine. Those who consider the goal of the conflict a defensive one, which aims to protect the Russian-speaking populations of both the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, stands at 18 per cent. Only 5 per cent of Russians believe the purpose of the military operation in Ukraine is to occupy the country and secure its annexation.

### **Kremlin Narrative Deeply Embedded**

Research from Lord Ashcroft Polls, <sup>5</sup> released on 18 March, provides further evidence that Putin’s narrative is widely accepted at home. The survey found that more than nine in ten believe Crimea should be part of Russia, with 68 per cent saying the same of Donetsk and Luhansk. A considerable 79 per cent believe that NATO expansion is a threat to Russian security and sovereignty, and two-thirds say it is necessary to – in Putin’s words – “demilitarise and de-Nazify” Ukraine. The United States, NATO and Ukraine are most widely blamed for the conflict. Looking more broadly, 78 per cent said they thought Putin had the best interests of ordinary Russians at heart, although a sizable third said that life for ordinary Russians had got worse over the last two decades that Putin has been in power – something that any messaging strategy focusing on Putin’s inability to deliver should take into account.

### **Russian Reputation Damaged**

The problem is that much of Russia’s decline in recent years has been attributed to international influence. Nearly half (45 per cent) believe that Russia’s international reputation has been damaged in recent years while 53 per cent say that Ukraine seems to be resisting Russian forces more strongly than

expected and 55 per cent agree that economic sanctions have begun to affect them or people they know. It is also notable that respondents aged between 18 and 24 are much more sceptical of the Kremlin narrative on all issues and are the only group most likely to oppose the invasion (46 per cent) than support it (40 per cent).

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## The Rise of the Digital Iron Curtain

When Putin was appointed prime minister in 1999, he held a meeting between Russian authorities and tech leaders and innovators. While he expressed a desire at the time to maintain the internet as a free and open resource for information and communication, in the years since, his attitudes to the internet – and its potential impact on influencing public opinion – have hardened.

Since 2010, Putin has consistently framed the internet as a source of harmful influences and a safe space for extremism and terrorism that can subvert Kremlin interests. In 2014, his claim, “All this internet was created as a CIA special project, and it develops accordingly,” led to the passage of the Internet Sovereignty Law in 2019, which granted a mandate to the Russian authorities to be more active in their internet surveillance and to isolate Russia from the rest of the web via restrictive access to various types of content and Western platforms. By 2021, Putin had shifted his stance to an even more extreme position: the internet should be bound not only by state law but also by “moral laws”, arguing that the consequences of inaction would be the erosion of Russian society and values from the inside out.

Russian censorship of social media had been a developing problem long before the invasion of Ukraine. Between 2011 and 2020, Russia made the highest number of requests to delete content from Google searches or YouTube, with 123,606 requests made over this period – almost ten times the number of Turkey, the next highest requester. More than a third of these requests were made in the name of “national security” concerns.

The focus on internet censorship has also been extended to suppressing Putin’s primary opposition figure, Alexie Navalny, with the use of Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) blocking Navalny’s domains across half of Russian mobile networks. Prior to the 2021 Duma elections, there was also an alleged attempt to prevent Navalny’s Smart Vote campaign from being publicly accessible online in a cyber-attack which had the side-effect of causing a number of communication systems, including at the Central Bank of Russia, to fail.

Putin’s crackdown on free and accurate information online has been accompanied by a broader suppression of information and the active spread of disinformation in traditional media. Television remains the most popular source of information for the majority of Russians, particularly older cohorts and, since the invasion, the vast majority of independent television outlets have been shut down, leaving only state-affiliated ones operating. This monopoly on televised information has greatly increased the Kremlin’s ability to control the narrative that the population hears.

The Russian-state narrative has been dominated by an assertive attempt to characterise real-world evidence as fiction. The Russian invasion has been romanticised, drawing parallels between the current

invasion and the Soviet resistance against the Third Reich. Much like then, Russian state media claims that "de-Nazification" is among its top aims.

### **Calculated Misinformation Campaign**

Although the rationale that Russia has used to justify the war in Ukraine seems outrageous to many in the West, it is part of a calculated misinformation campaign to drum up support among Russians. In July 2021, Putin published an essay where he outlined his vision for Ukraine, stating that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" and that "Russia was robbed" of its historic lands by modern-day Ukraine. He concluded by saying he is "confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia." Putin's public statements around the legitimacy of Ukraine have grown more extreme over the years, but have been consistently tied into this historical narrative of grievance that paints an independent Ukraine as an existential threat and therefore justifies Russian aggression.<sup>6</sup>

This only ramped up as Russia launched its invasion on 24 February. Authorities began blocking sites that posted anti-war material, originally targeting Ukrainian news sources but later blocking any websites that spoke out against the invasion, including the popular Russian online retail forum TIU.ru, which was blocked on 2 March. The Ukrainian streaming service Takflix was also shut down, followed by global media outlets and organisations such as Amnesty International. Currently, about 8,000 sites have been banned across Russian<sup>7</sup> including 294 news sites.<sup>8</sup> With Western news sources now largely inaccessible to the Russian people, the Kremlin has focused on ensuring their narrative on the war can circulate unchallenged.

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## Deploying and Fortifying the Digital Iron Curtain

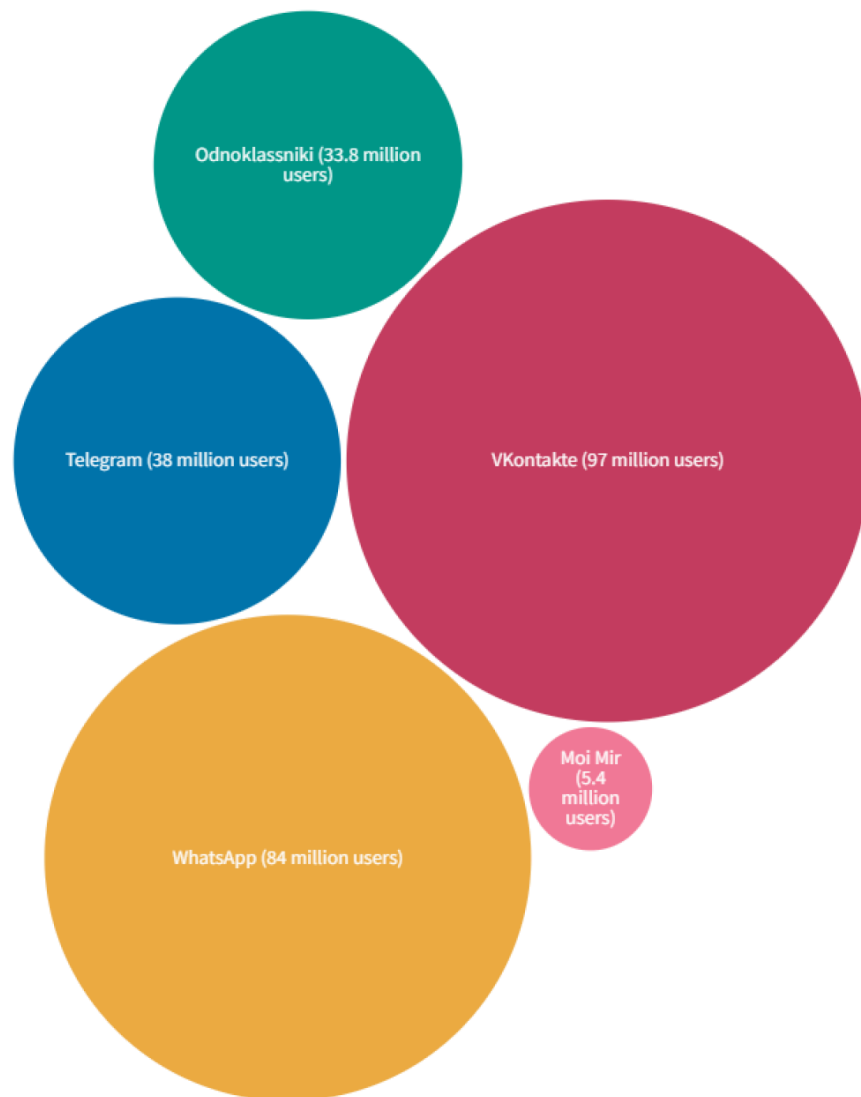
Since the start of the conflict in Ukraine, Russian authorities have moved to ban several international media outlets who have reported critically on the war. These include the Russian branches of the BBC, Deutsche Welle, Voice of America and the Latvia-based independent news website Meduza as well as several services of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

### News Outlets

In addition, several independent Russian outlets, such as Ekho Moskvy, Znak, TV Rain, Novaya Gazeta and TV2, were forced to close following the tightening of laws around free speech. On 24 February, the Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) stated that all media outlets must use only information provided by official Russian sources. On 4 March, Russia updated its criminal code to implement fines and prison sentences of up to 15 years for anyone spreading “false information” about military operations or discrediting the country’s armed forces.

By blocking foreign-media outlets including the BBC, DW Akademie, Euronews and Google News, restricting what Russian outlets can say and criminalising the spread of accurate information, the government is attempting to ensure Russian state media is ordinary Russians’ only option for information on their country’s “special military operation”.

**Figure 3 – The most popular remaining messaging services used by Russians**



Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/867549/top-active-social-media-platforms-in-russia/>

## Social Media

Russians are active social-media users, with the average Russian spending 2.5 hours a day on social-media platforms. But a combination of the Kremlin’s information crackdown and Western tech firms suspension of operations in Russia means that many of the most commonly used social-media channels – particularly those that we are most operationally familiar with – are no longer accessible.

Currently remaining platforms include WhatsApp and Telegram, as well as the widely popular Russian platforms VK (VKontakte), OK (Odnoklassniki), and Moi Mir (My World).

VK is an equivalent to Facebook but with superior file-sharing capabilities and is used by more than 97 million active social-media users per month. Odnoklassniki is a reunion platform similar to Friends Reunited, which allows former classmates to reconnect and organise reunions. It has more than 71 million users, is more popular with older social-media users, and allows them to create a profile, send messages and make video calls. Moi Mir is the third most popular Russian social-media platform, with 5.4 million users accessing it each month, and it operates similarly to Facebook, acting as more generalised social media. RuTube is a video platform which, despite having been outstripped by YouTube in recent years, still draws a monthly audience of 3 million .<sup>9</sup>

Since the invasion, Roskomnadzor, Russia's federal media agency, has restricted access to Twitter, and blocked Meta's Facebook and Instagram, deeming their parent company "extremist". This blocking has served as retaliation for these platforms banning Russian-state news outlets.

However, several global social-media platforms have escaped the bans to date including Telegram, which has increasingly become the medium of choice for Russian civilians and Russian-language news channels to communicate information. Russian telecom operator MegaFon reported that Telegram's share of mobile internet rose from 48 per cent to 63 per cent in the first weeks of February.<sup>10</sup> Numerous media outlets, including the BBC, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, alongside pro-Kremlin channels are providing news via Telegram.

While WhatsApp's share of mobile-internet traffic has fallen, it had 84 million monthly users as of January 2022, making it one of the most popular communications mechanisms in Russia. It is generally used for social rather than political communications, with the court ruling that it was exempt from its parent company's (Meta) block because of its unsuitability for the public dissemination of information.

Similar to WhatsApp, YouTube has a huge audience in Russia. According to data from Statista, 85.4 per cent of Russians accessed YouTube in the third quarter of 2020. Thus, it remains one of the best avenues for reaching many Russians, particularly younger people who utilise YouTube more than any other platform.

Clubhouse is a social-media app that allows users to exchange audio clips instead of images, videos or text. While it may not be the most widely used of all the platforms, it did reach a peak of 802,000 iOS downloads in 2021. The app has gained more popularity recently as it remains one of the only Western platforms not blocked by the Kremlin.<sup>11</sup>

While the Kremlin's decision-making about which apps or platforms should be blocked may seem inconsistent, it is largely balancing the need for communications channels it can use for its own purposes with the need to avoid widespread political backlash in a population already suffering from sanctions and shortages.

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## Breaking Through the Digital Iron Curtain

Despite Putin's best efforts, there are still a number of ways to circumvent the digital Iron Curtain. But the challenge will be ensuring that accurate, free information makes it to the hardest to reach – not just the tech-savvy young people already most likely to oppose the war.

### Virtual Private Networks (VPNs)

As access to websites and sources began to be blocked, Russians increasingly turned to virtual private networks (VPNs) as a means to communicate and bypass information restrictions. A VPN service, designed to protect and encrypt online activity, changes the geolocation on a device, which allows users to access websites as if they were in the country where the VPN has servers.

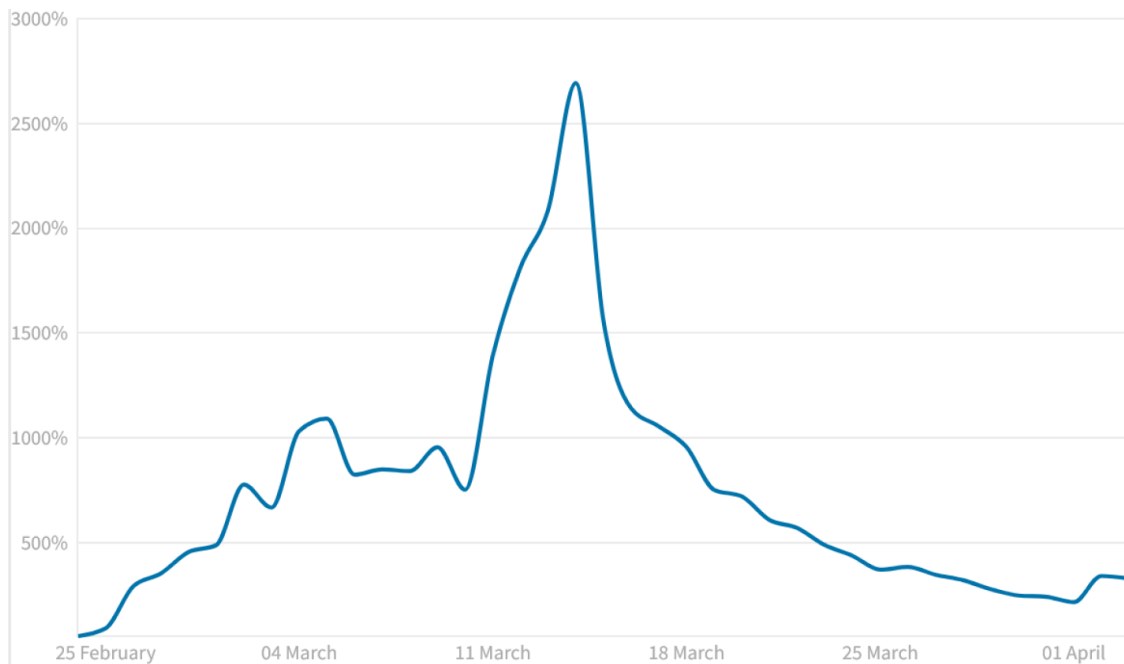
Although Russia has banned a number of VPN providers over recent years, demand for VPNs soared to a rate 1,000 per cent higher than the previous two respective days when Twitter and Facebook were blocked. A peak demand of 2,692 per cent was then reached on 14 March when Instagram was shut down.<sup>12</sup> While this has since levelled off, demand is still 873 per cent higher than average.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, supported by the Open Technology Fund, have been providing Russians with free access to VPNs via nthLink or Psiphon alongside detailed guidance in Russian explaining how to use VPNs – particularly useful for older generations and those less familiar with the technology.<sup>13</sup>

However it is still possible that the Roskomnadzor could tighten restrictions, forcing remaining VPN providers including NordVPN, Express VPN and Surfshark to exit as well.



**Figure 4 – Daily VPN demand shoots up in Russia when platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are shut down**



Source: Top10VPN

Although many Russians have downloaded VPNs, others – particularly the older generation – do not know how to use them and therefore will still be reliant on Russia’s mainstream information networks.

### Mirror Sites on the Dark Web

In response to Russia’s blocks, several websites have sought alternative strategies to mirror their own sites or disseminate information. In early March, Twitter launched a version of its service accessible via the Tor browser (the standard dark-web browser) to try to bypass Russian censorship and surveillance. Many other key outlets have mirror sites accessible via the Tor browser including the BBC, Facebook and *The New York Times*. But access is a real problem – not only is the Tor browser not commonly used outside the most tech-literate circles, downloads of the browser were blocked back in 2021.<sup>14</sup>

### Shortwave Radio

Although the BBC World Service had stopped its Russian-language broadcasts in 2011 amid budget cuts, the increased use of its Russian-language website, prior to it being shut down, has prompted it to reinstate shortwave-radio broadcasts. In the first week of the invasion, the BBC tripled its year-to-date weekly average user numbers, with 10.7 million people (up from 3.1 million) accessing its Russian-

language news website and Russian visitors to [bbc.com](http://bbc.com) up by 252 per cent.<sup>15</sup> To meet this increased demand, the BBC started broadcasting four hours of English news daily on two shortwave frequencies from 2 March 2022, both of which are received clearly in Kyiv and parts of Russia.

Other radio stations have also reinstated their shortwave offering to try to provide news to Ukraine and Russia including Ö1, the main news channel of Austrian public-service broadcaster Österreichischer Rundfunk, which has expanded distribution of its morning, midday and evening news programmes to shortwave. Ö1's radio journals can now be received easily by German-speaking listeners throughout Europe, including in Ukraine. Grassroots efforts in the US led by the former director of the broadcasting division of the US Agency for Global Media – Voice of America's (VOA) parent company – to try and reinstate VOA/RFE shortwave broadcasts, have been likened to providing a torch in a power cut.<sup>16</sup> Pushing forward with Russian-language radio broadcasts will be a central part of attempting to communicate with harder-to-reach parts of the population.

## Creative Communication

As information sources shut down or were blocked, people have found increasingly creative ways to share reliable information beyond Putin's iron curtain. This has included using restaurant-review websites, Tinder profiles, Tripadvisor and gaming platforms such as Minecraft. A number of websites, including Tripadvisor, have responded by suspending reviews for certain listings.

Numerous independent entities have sought ways to disseminate information on a mass scale. A Norwegian computer expert, for example, started sending information via spam emails to known Russian email addresses.<sup>17</sup> Hactivist collective Anonymous joined forces with the Polish hacking group Squad 303 to set up a website that allows members of the public to send messages to random Russian phone numbers, with more than 20 million WhatsApp and SMS messages sent to date.<sup>18</sup>

In response to the communications crackdown, "Call Russia" – set up by a group of people in Lithuania on 8 March – invites Russian speakers across the world to call someone in Russia to bypass the information blocks and share information about the war in Ukraine. By clicking on the "Call Russia Now" button on the website, the user receives one number selected from 40 million across the country. In the first few days of operations, 32,000 calls were made with the aim of increasing communications between Russians and generating Russian support internally to pressure Putin to stop the war.<sup>19</sup>

Ukrainians themselves have also turned to increasingly imaginative means, including a website that allows Russian mothers to get in touch with their captured sons. For a Russian public that places so much faith in its military, centring the voices of soldiers who have seen for themselves the horrors of the conflict could prove a particularly powerful way of cutting through.

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## What the West Needs to Say

It isn't enough just to be able to reach the Russian public, we need to know what to say to them too. The Kremlin narrative is sufficiently embedded that providing accurate information alone will not change the tide of public opinion in and of itself. Instead, the exact messages relayed to different parts of the Russian public need to be adaptable to the different priorities, loyalties and concerns of each demographic. This will mean thinking creatively about how we frame the dissemination of information – there might be opportunities to, for example, push back against Putin's distortion of Russian Orthodox values and appeal to the moral codes of religious believers.

In order to establish what the most effective messages might be to break through Putin's propaganda among the Russian people, focus groups and polling should be conducted by organisations with accurate knowledge and connections to those groups and members of society who are closest to this crisis.

The messages should be stress tested, monitored and refined as needed, acknowledging the nuances that will be required to appeal to Russia's geographical and demographic diversity. But this campaign must take place at pace in order to keep up with the events unfolding rapidly on the ground. Time is of the essence, so efficiency needs to be front and centre in deploying this campaign. Russia has faced mounting losses and a lack of progress in achieving its original mission. As a result, the state's communication and information operations against its own people are likely to increase dramatically too.

The tone and manner in which information is delivered in order to be effectively received is therefore critical to any measure of success. Fundamentally, messaging needs to revolve around a few key themes:

- First, that the conflict in Ukraine is not the Russian people's fault.
- Second, outlining the realities of the conflict and how it might end.
- Third, what Ukraine and the West are calling for.
- And finally, the outlook for Russia once peace is reached.

The core message should be one that instils hope, encourages critical assessment of the Kremlin's narrative and, crucially, doesn't seek to prove the superiority of Western culture or ideals, instead stressing that this is a matter of Putin failing to deliver on his own promises to the Russian people.

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# Deploying Trusted Messengers with Credible Messaging

Using bespoke and targeted messaging to communicate with the Russian public is only half the battle. The message is only as credible as the message-carrier.

There are a number of viable routes to deploying the right messengers. In this paper, we focus on two in particular: 1) making strategic use of the growing international Russian diaspora; 2) deploying non-Russian voices who poll credibly within Russia.

## Russian Diaspora

Increasing numbers of citizens have fled Russia since the start of the invasion of Ukraine. By some estimates, approximately 200,000 had already left the federation by mid-March 2022.<sup>20</sup> This is part of a trend seen over the past ten years of increasing numbers of Russians leaving their country.

Of those who have left the country since 2000, the majority are aged between 25 and 45 and are highly educated.<sup>21</sup> Since the war in Ukraine, high-skilled workers also now make up a core segment of emigres. Russia's Association for Electronic Communications reports that 70,000 IT professionals have left the country in recent weeks – and that as many as 100,000 may leave in this month of April 2022.<sup>22</sup>

This means that there is a cadre of educated, young and skilled Russians who can be deployed to share the right messages via the right media with the right audiences. Credible Russian citizens, drawn from a cohort who should represent the future of the country, could play a vital role in explaining the situation that the federation finds itself in as well as the potential routes available to a more outward-looking and prosperous future.

## Credible Western Voices

Part of the communications campaign also involves deploying the right non-Russian voices. There is an obvious chance to amplify the voices of Ukrainians themselves here – many Ukrainians speak Russian, allowing them to share their experiences of the Russian invasion in far more compelling ways than media reports alone.

This isn't just a question of language, it's a question of identity too: while Ukrainians themselves may not feel the same, many Russians buy into the narrative that Ukrainians and Russians are "one people". Hearing first-hand accounts of Russian aggression from people that Putin has attempted to frame as Russia's brothers and sisters is one of the most powerful potential ways to cut through the Kremlin's narrative, without unduly feeding suspicions that NATO is co-ordinating disinformation. And, much like the Russian diaspora, many Ukrainians also have personal and family links to Russia, allowing for the dissemination of information beyond those actively seeking out non-state media sources.

There is also a role for Western voices to play in reinforcing and complementing an alternative to the Kremlin's narrative. Certain messages about the intended focus of Western sanctions, the aim of the West's policy in Russia and what an acceptable end-state for the Ukraine conflict looks like would need to be conveyed by those outside Russia.

Who is deployed and how they are used would need to be carefully stress tested. The role of Western political figures, public personalities, companies and business figures should all be carefully assessed and the right people deployed to share the right messages. Certain figures will appeal more strongly to different parts of the Russian population, which means this level of testing is required as part of any plan to put in place the communications strategy.

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## The Digital Communications Alliance

Any individual or organisation embarking on the mission to reach beyond the digital iron curtain will be subject to scrutiny. Intentions will be rigorously examined. With no room for confusion or conflicting messages, it is essential that the communications strategy proposed in this paper is built as a tool for peace rather than a weapon of war. Trust is critical.

Therefore, we propose new global architecture to manage what will be an unprecedented communications effort. This new body should draw on resources from nation states, such as communications and cyber-experts, while remaining independent of any one government.

Building on the commitments set out by the G7 Digital and Technology Ministerial Declaration in 2021 to counter internet shutdowns, network restrictions and similar measures that undermine democratic values – as well as the recommendations laid out by the Tony Blair Institute for increased cooperation to protect the free and open internet – we propose a new Digital Communications Alliance. Starting with G7 countries and other nations with shared values, the DCA would draw on the expertise of global media outlets, communications platforms and leading tech companies to provide both the coordination and resources required to disseminate information within Russia, all the while preserving the security and the integrity of the open internet.

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## Conclusion

The international community's overarching strategy to respond to Russia's invasion of Ukraine will fail without ensuring effective, credible and direct communications with the Russian population. This is a three-part challenge: we need to work out who we need to reach, how to reach them, and what we should be saying.

Without building the right understanding of what the West is trying to achieve in its policy towards Russia, and how it is aiming to achieve this, there is a real danger that we reinforce the Kremlin's internal propaganda, rather than discrediting it.

Such a communications strategy requires careful and timely preparation. This paper includes polling that demonstrates the current views of the Russian population. This can and should be built upon to further understand which population group holds which views so that a three-dimensional picture of the Russian people can be built.

With this detailed understanding, the right messaging can then be designed and deployed via the right message-carriers.

The goal of this strategy should be clearly stated and widely understood. It should aim to give the Russian people the fullest picture of the Ukraine crisis and enable them to reach their own conclusions about both the causes of the international standoff and how it can be resolved. In the immediate term, the priority must be building public support for negotiating a return to peace.

Ultimately, this is likely to mean equipping those within Russia who are open to a change in policy with the information they need to achieve this. But it will not only mean this. It will also involve challenging the Kremlin's domestic propaganda and attempting to get our message through to harder-to-reach groups. The overall message should be as Russia-centric as possible. This is not a cultural battle to prove the superiority of Western or Russian values. It's a question of Putin failing to deliver on his basic promises to the Russian population to provide a better life.

Tension between Russia and the West isn't inevitable. There are ways to transcend this divide and, over time, build closer links, but only by working with, not against, the Russian people.

## Recommendations

### **Craft a compelling narrative**

- Bespoke polling should be conducted to identify the right messages to share with the Russian population, recognising that different demographics will respond to different core messages and language.

### **Choose the right message carriers**

- The recent military intervention has not only resulted in a significant exodus of residents from Ukraine, but also from Russia. This creates a valuable pool of potential message-carriers to deploy in the effort to directly reach the Russian population. There are also popular independent Russian journalists and bloggers who have large followings and who could be instrumental to boosting these messages.

### **Identify the right mediums**

- Monitoring which social-media channels remain open, understanding how they work operationally and exploring creative means of communication will be key to creating a sustained messaging campaign. The Kremlin has shown its ability to quickly shut down avenues of communication on social media, so we must prepare for our strategy to evolve, turning to new means of influence and continuing to invest in and revive older tech like shortwave radio.

### **Be clear on responsibility**

- The communications campaign should be built on absolute clarity about its target: tackling misinformation directed by the Kremlin. It requires being clear and consistent with the Russian public on the author of their suffering – Putin – and that he is equally the agent to end that suffering.

### **Provide a message of hope**

- While the campaign must be clear-eyed in detailing what is happening in Ukraine and, as a result, in Russia, it must also set out a clear message of hope: the West is not predestined to poor relations with Russia, nor is it a natural enemy. The West wants to work more closely, collaboratively and effectively with Russia, but the barrier is the Kremlin. The messaging should outline the steps that Russia could take to de-escalate and end the war in Ukraine while explaining what this means for a step-by-step removal of sanctions.

### **Push for global efforts**

- Create a Digital Communications Alliance – a new global body, independent of any nation states or



governments – which convenes cyber and communications expertise and provides the resources to facilitate the delivery of this unprecedented communications effort.

Charts created with [Highcharts](#) unless otherwise credited.

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## Footnotes

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