

Using PAI to Detect Russian Disinformation

As a real-world use case of Babel Street Insights, our analysts applied the full power of our capabilities to identify a propaganda and disinformation campaign against Kyiv in the year leading up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

We began tracking this activity as early as January 2021, thirteen months before the war began. Our findings led to the conclusion that Russia was systematically building a justification for war against Ukraine.

Eyes on Kaliningrad: Key Judgments

Babel Street maintained continuous monitoring of a vast amount of social media content since early 2021 and detected a Kremlin-led information campaign on social media alleging Western aggression against Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast. Moscow accused NATO and the European Union (EU) of threatening Russia by creating an unstable economic and political situation in Kaliningrad.

The intent of this information campaign was unclear, but likely served President Putin's objectives, including bolstering support for the war at home and providing justification for his war in Ukraine. It did not signal an imminent military threat to NATO but was likely aimed at undermining alliance unity.



Kaliningrad Under Threat

In our analysis, we identified key themes in the disinformation messaging on Kaliningrad, including:

Kaliningrad was under direct threat — Using state-controlled media outlets in Russia and pro-Russian accounts and networks on social media, accusations that NATO and the EU increasingly threatened Kaliningrad were trending since early March 2021.

Three topics emerged:

1. Sanctions were causing fuel and food shortages, as well as increased travel restrictions
2. NATO military exercises occurring near Kaliningrad were provocative and aggressive
3. Plans for expanding the alliance to include Sweden and Finland would destabilize the balance of power in the Baltic region

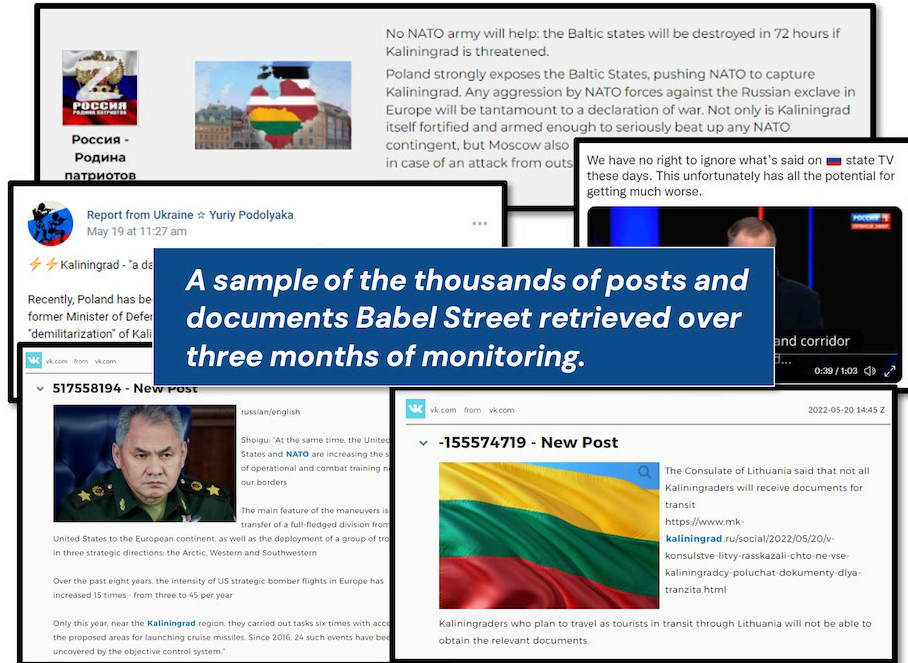
Would Russia respond? — As witnessed with Ukraine, pro-Russian networks accused their perceived enemies of aggression against Russian interests to justify action. Pro-Putin commentators on Russian TV called for creating a corridor to Kaliningrad, likely through the Suwalki Gap, which would cross into Polish and Lithuanian territory, a clear violation of NATO's article 5, forcing an alliance response.

Given the hard-line calls for action, critical questions remained. Would the messaging we observed with Kaliningrad evolve to a response by Moscow? What type of action would Putin choose, if any?

Continuous Monitoring of the Message

Using Babel Street Insights in conjunction with our advanced social network analysis tool, Synthesis, we were

able to identify key voices and influencers from the chatter. The graph below shows one of several anti-Western, pro-Russian influence networks identified on VKontakte. Babel Street monitored this network, allowing us to follow the latest claims and threats being generated by an array of pro-Russian accounts (shown in red below).

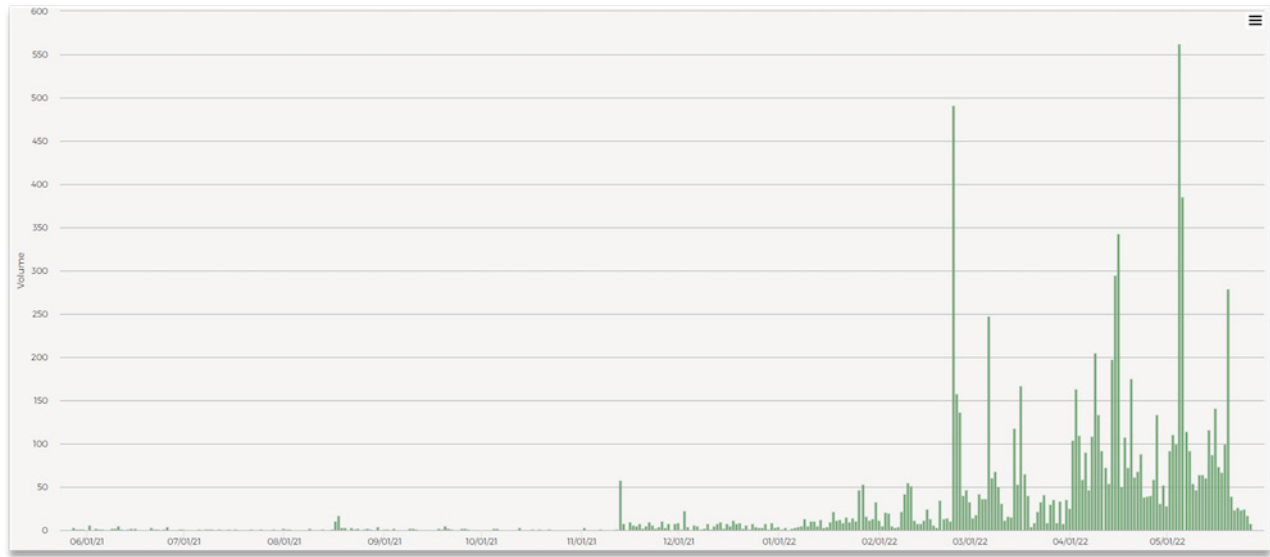


Persistent search in Babel Street Insights can monitor activity daily and filter for the most relevant information on a topic. Beginning in June 2021, our volume detection capability revealed a marked increase in topics connected with Kaliningrad and NATO/EU through February 2022, just as the war in Ukraine commenced.

Summary

While Putin’s intent regarding Kaliningrad remained uncertain, the large upturn in anti-Ukrainian messaging spread by pro-Russian networks on social media during the three months of March, April, and May 2022 suggests the need for continuous monitoring.

OSINT in general and Babel Street Insights, including Synthesis, are well positioned to provide leading-edge indications of Russian intent.



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