

Dehumanisation in Russian and Ukrainian Telegram in 2022: Strategic vs. Reactive Approaches

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Abstract: This paper presents a comparative analysis of dehumanising language on popular Telegram channels in Ukraine and Russia during the 2022 Russian invasion, examining differences between the two countries and how this language evolved over time. We use a mixed-methods approach to address two questions: who are the primary agents of dehumanisation in each country; and how did the use of dehumanising language develop both qualitatively and quantitatively following the invasion? Preliminary findings reveal a significant post-invasion rise in dehumanising language on both Russian and Ukrainian channels. However, Russian dehumanisation predominantly originates from state-affiliated channels, reflecting a top-down, strategic approach, often relying on clichés and disinformation amplifying historical grievances. In contrast, Ukrainian dehumanisation emerges from independent voices, including bloggers and community leaders, showing a bottom-up, reactive pattern. It appears more varied and emotionally expressive, showing a dynamic response to the immediate context. These findings suggest that dehumanisation in Russian Telegram may be strategically deployed to reinforce unity and historical grievances, whereas Ukrainian dehumanisation seems reactive, potentially serving as a protective response. This contrast highlights the importance of tailored strategies to address dehumanisation on social media from the perspectives of aggressor and defender in wartime.

Keywords: Dehumanising Language, Telegram, Russian War in Ukraine, Social Media

1. Statement of Relevance

Intergroup dehumanisation is a pressing concern for contemporary society, hindering empathy (Bastian *et al.*, 2011), and fuelling between-group aggression (Viki, Osgood and Phillips, 2013). During military conflicts, it exacerbates support for war (Jackson and Gaertner, 2010), political violence, extreme outgroup policies (Maoz and McCauley, 2008; Leidner, Castano and Ginges, 2013), and genocide (Haslam, 2006; Kuchenbuch, 2016). Mass media often plays a key role in dehumanising perceived enemies, facilitating acts of atrocity against them (Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014). On the contrary, media disseminating restorative narratives can improve outgroup perceptions and reduce aggression (Bilali, Vollhardt and Rarick, 2016; Hameiri *et al.*, 2016; Bruneau, Kteily and Laustsen, 2018; Landry *et al.*, 2022; Moore-Berg, Hameiri and Bruneau, 2022). Despite extensive research on dehumanising language in conflicts, little attention has been paid to how these dynamics differ between aggressors and defenders. Motivated by these considerations, we focus the proposed research on exploration of blatant forms of dehumanisation towards an outgroup defined in political or national terms as represented in the language of the most popular Ukrainian and Russian Telegram channels in the time of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Evidence from the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine and other conflicts (see Landry *et al.*, 2022; Bruneau *et al.*, 2022) suggests that media interventions can be effective in promoting outgroup re-humanisation and support for peace and reintegration. Therefore, we expect that conclusions to be drawn from this study will inform on the strategies for between-group reconciliation, tailored for an aggressor and defender in the post-war period.

2. Introduction

Dehumanisation is understood as “the act of perceiving or treating people as if they are less than human” (Haslam and Stratemeyer, 2016, p. 25). It manifests in denial of agency and communality in outgroup members (Kelman, 1973), their deindividuation (Haslam, 2006), extreme negative evaluation, and delegitimising beliefs such as perceiving outgroup members as not sharing prosocial values (Schwartz and Struch, 1989) and being fundamentally different from the ingroup, which ties to the phenomenon of psychological distancing (Mendelsohn, Tsvetkov and Jurafsky, 2020).

Using these conceptual dimensions, we developed a labelled dataset of Telegram posts from Russian and Ukrainian channels, categorising them as either dehumanising, neutral or borderline. To investigate differences in dehumanising language between an aggressor and a defender, we analysed dehumanising posts to address the following research questions:

RQ1: Who are the primary agents of dehumanisation in each country?

RQ2: How did dehumanising language evolve both qualitatively and quantitatively after the 2022 invasion?

3. Methodology

3.1 Forming a Sample for Analysis

The dataset includes posts in Russian and Ukrainian languages from 185 leading news and political Telegram channels (see Table 1), spanning from December 24, 2021, to April 24, 2022, covering pre- and immediate post-invasion periods.

Table 1: The sample size

Country	Number of Channels	Number of Posts
Russia	90	403548
Ukraine	95	429875

To identify dehumanising posts, we first filtered relevant content using group-specific labels, such as city names and prominent political figures. A manually labelled test set of 225 posts was then used to optimise prompts for classification with the GPT-3.5 Turbo model. This process involved a two-iteration auto-classification, retaining consistently classified dehumanising and neutral posts, with borderline cases analysed separately.

3.2 Agents of Dehumanisation

To address the first research question, we qualitatively categorise Telegram channels in the sample (e.g., state officials, state-affiliated media, pro-government bloggers, opposition politicians, independent media, and independent bloggers). We estimate the proportions of dehumanising posts within each category and compare these to identify which actors are statistically more likely to use dehumanising language in each country.

3.3 Dynamics of Dehumanisation

To address the second research question, we track the weekly proportions of blatantly dehumanising and borderline posts published by Russian and Ukrainian channels, revealing temporal patterns in the use of dehumanising language.

3.4 Approaches to Dehumanisation

To explore qualitative changes in language, we analyse the frequencies of group-specific derogatory labels from previously developed dictionaries. This helps identify whether new dehumanising frames and metaphors emerged over time.

4. Results

At the time of writing, data collection and filtering are complete, and post classification is nearly finished. While final quantitative results will be presented at ECSM 2025, we share preliminary findings on dehumanisation in Russian and Ukrainian Telegram during the 2022 invasion, addressing three key questions: Who (4.1), When (4.2), and How (4.3). These findings are based on a dictionary-based classification of posts as dehumanising (containing derogatory terms with at least one manifestation of dehumanisation) or neutral.

4.1 Who: Agents of Dehumanisation

Qualitative analysis of blatant outgroup dehumanisation reveals it predominantly originates from state-affiliated channels in Russia (e.g., @solovievlive) and local media or bloggers in Ukraine (e.g., @huyovy_kharkiv). Preliminary dictionary-based classification supports this pattern, though formal results testing whether state-affiliated channels in Russia and public-oriented channels in Ukraine are more likely to use dehumanising language will be presented at the conference.

4.2 When: Dynamics of Dehumanisation

As shown in Tables 2-3, there is a significant rise in dehumanising language on both Russian and Ukrainian Telegram channels post-invasion, albeit more evident in Russian channels. More detailed analysis of dynamics will be presented at the conference.

Although the dataset's timeframe limits longitudinal analysis, research conducted by authors, Burovova and Romanyshyn, (2024) shows that dehumanisation of Ukrainians on Russian Telegram peaked seven months before the invasion, with a local spike during the invasion, suggesting possible pre-war strategic preparations by the Russian state.

Table 2: Dynamics of referring to and dehumanising outgroup in Ukraine

Ukrainian Telegram Channels	Total Posts	Posts about Rus. Outgroup	Posts Dehumanising Rus. Outgroup	Dehumanising Posts out of Those About Rus. Outgroup
Before 24.02.22	61274	19937 (32.5%)	1118 (1.8%)	5.6%
After 24.02.22	368601	182243 (49.4%)	22193 (6.0%)	12.2%
Total	429875	202180 (47.0%)	23311 (5.4%)	11.5%

Source: Original data collected by the author for this study (2024).

Table 3: Dynamics of referring to and dehumanising outgroup in Russia

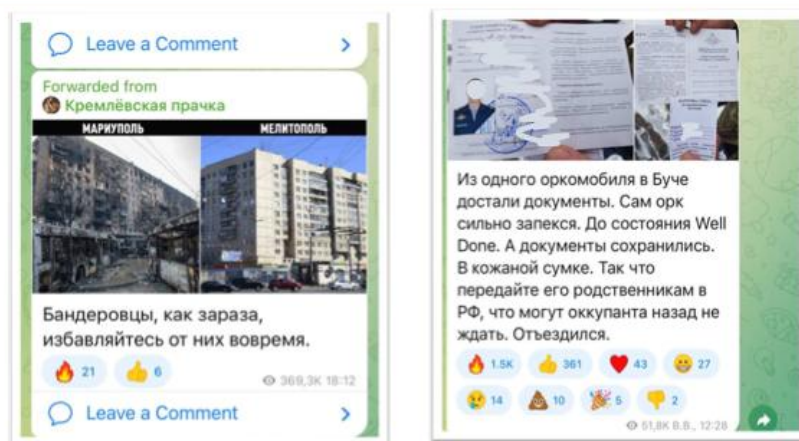
Russian Telegram Channels	Total Posts	Posts about Ukr. Outgroup	Posts Dehumanising Ukr. Outgroup	Dehumanising Posts out of Those About Ukr. Outgroup
Before 24.02.22	128611	27681 (21.5%)	1454 (1.1%)	5.3%
After 24.02.22	274937	136188 (49.5%)	19894 (7.2%)	14.6%
Total	403548	163869 (40.6%)	21348 (5.3%)	13.0%

Source: Original data collected by the author for this study (2024).

4.3 How: Dynamics of Dehumanisation

While a detailed analysis of dehumanising dynamics will be presented at the conference, Figure 1 illustrates typical examples from Russian and Ukrainian Telegram channels, with translations of the posts.

Russian dehumanisation relies on a narrow set of clichés amplifying historical grievances (e.g., "Bandera followers") and disinformation (e.g., falsely claiming the Ukrainian military destroyed Mariupol). In contrast, Ukrainian dehumanisation is more diverse (e.g. comparing a dead soldier to a well-done steak) and emotionally expressive (e.g., labelling as an "ork"), reflecting a dynamic response to immediate events. Dehumanising labels popular on Ukrainian Telegram in 2022 are more numerous (Chernenko, 2024a) with many emerging after the invasion, whereas Russian narratives inherit tropes developed since 2013.



"Bandera followers are like infection, get rid of them in time"

"They pulled documents out of an orc car in Bucha. The orc himself was badly baked. Well Done. But the documents were preserved. In a leather bag. So tell his relatives in Russia that they can not expect the occupier back. He's gone"

Figure 1: Examples of blatant outgroup dehumanisation in Russian (left) and Ukrainian (right) Telegram

Source: Swodki opolcheniya Novorossii Z.O.V. (Novorossiya Militia Reports Z.O.V.), (DNR, LNR, Ukraine, War) (2022) *Forwarded dehumanising message*, Telegram. Available at: <https://t.me/swodki> (left);

Dehumanising Message (2022) *Dehumanising message*, Telegram. Available at: <https://t.me/BerezaJuice> (right).

5. Conclusion

Our paper offers critical insights into the evolution of dehumanising language in conflict settings, highlighting distinct dynamics between aggressor and defender. By analysing popular Telegram channels in Russia and Ukraine during the 2022 Russian invasion, we observe contrasting patterns. Preliminary findings suggest that dehumanisation on Russian Telegram channels reflects a strategic approach, driven by state-affiliated media and present well before the invasion (as shown in Burovova and Romanyshyn, 2024). In contrast, Ukrainian channels exhibit reactive dehumanisation, emerging after the invasion and largely disseminated by the general public rather than official sources. This indicates differing natures of dehumanisation by aggressor and defender, suggesting tailored strategies for its mitigation in warfare contexts.

Our findings contribute to broader discussions on social media's role in conflict and offer important implications for addressing harmful content in polarised, high-stakes environments.

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