

The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on French-speaking fringe communities online

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Introduction

In the lead up to the 2022 French presidential and legislative elections, ISD France mapped some of the main online French ecosystems spreading disinformation and polarizing content on Twitter and Facebook. This mapping served as a basis for ISD's latest research report "A France divided by the pandemic: The disinformation ecosystem leading up to the 2022 elections" hereafter referred to as the disinformation ecosystem report. Conducted during a period when the COVID-19 pandemic was still at the centre of online discussions, this analysis allowed ISD analysts to identify four communities, that were classified into clusters:

- **Anti-restriction left-wing:** The anti-restriction left-winger cluster is composed of actors who reject the COVID-19 health restrictions, who are opposed to the French government and identify themselves or have some sympathy for radical left or extreme political movements in France. While many accounts in this cluster have shared at one point content from politicians from the France Insoumise or supported Jean-Luc Mélenchon during the presidential election, they should not be considered as fully representative of this political party's positions on the pandemic or the war in Ukraine.
- **Eric Zemmour's supporters:** This group includes most of the public figures and activists' Twitter accounts who openly supported the far-right politician Eric Zemmour's bid to become the next French president during the presidential campaign.
- **COVID-19 opposition opportunists:** This cluster is dominated by actors who have been since the beginning of the pandemic at the forefront of the anti-COVID-19 movement in France. It includes some alternative websites and online activists who have propagated disinformation around the COVID-19 pandemic and some sovereigntist political figures who have been trying to position themselves as leaders of the protest against health restrictions.
- **Anti-system protesters:** The anti-system protesters cluster is made of communities and people who have no specific political affiliation but who spread anti-system positions and discourses. This cluster includes for example some Gilets Jaunes activists who have been hostile to the government's health policy.

During the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, multiple French media outlets wrote about how the focus of some of these communities seemed to have shifted from their traditional topics of discussion, especially the COVID-19 pandemic, to the promotion of narratives favourable to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (see [here](#) and [here](#)). The objective of this study is to understand how much of this assessment is true and to analyse how these communities and ecosystems, which often spread the same narratives and had converging positions around the pandemic, reacted to the beginning of this major international crisis, highlighting the similarities and divergences in the content they shared and produced about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is important to note that ISD analysts had a global look at the messages about the Ukrainian conflict produced by this cluster. While some analysed content could be classified as disinformation or as including a clear pro-Kremlin bias, other discussions in these clusters were more general or raised some legitimate questions and debates about the war. The selected timeframe for this follow-up analysis covers a one-month period after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, from 24 February to 25 March 2022. The "COVID-19 consensus activists" cluster was excluded from this analysis as it was not found to be a substantial source of disinformation in the disinformation ecosystem report.

Main findings

- While the Russian invasion of Ukraine generated a sizeable volume of discussion within the four clusters between 24 February and 25 March 2022, it is not an overwhelming topic that replaced all the other major subjects of conversation for this cluster of discussion such as the presidential campaign (for the anti-restriction left-wing and the Eric Zemmour's supporters clusters), the criticism of the current government embodied by Emmanuel Macron and the system in general (Anti-system protesters) or the responses to the COVID-19 (COVID-19 opposition opportunists).
 - The interest in the Russian invasion of Ukraine also decreased as France approached the first round of the presidential election in the four clusters ISD analysed.
 - Some political pro-Russian narratives partly or fully blaming NATO or Western powers (EU, USA, France) and even sometimes the Ukrainian government for the conflict circulated in the four clusters according to ISD's analysis of the top 100 most shared links and top 10 most shared posts.
- There are some similarities between clusters:
 - When talking about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, both the "pro-Eric Zemmour" and "anti-restriction left wing" clusters focused on amplifying messages of Eric Zemmour and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's positions about the conflict, respectively. Accounts of both these clusters were actively sharing speeches and media appearances of both candidates around the conflict in the context of the electoral campaign.
 - In both "anti-system protesters" and "COVID-19 opposition opportunists" clusters, the conflict was also used to continue to indirectly increase distrust against actors regularly targeted by these ecosystems (media outlets, social media platforms, EU institutions, the French government embodied by Emmanuel Macron).
 - Some international conspiracy theories that have circulated since the beginning of the war globally have intermittently made their way through some clusters, including the conspiratorial Russian claims about US-funded military Biolabs that has resonated with some audiences in France.

I: The volume of discussions about the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the four clusters

To understand the level of interest for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, ISD analysts had a look at the overall volume of mentions (tweets, retweets and posts) generated by each cluster during the period covered by the study and compared it with the volume of shared messages including a mention of “Ukraine” or one of its French derivatives (“Ukrainien”, “Ukrainienne”, “Ukrainiens”, “Ukrainiennes”). To identify all the messages included words linked to Ukraine in each cluster, we used a query using the short expression “Ukrain”, which allowed us to cover all these words.

While this methodology doesn't cover all the content linked to the war in Ukraine, the figures still suggest that the interest for the Ukraine war in all the cluster has been limited compared to other topics. Even though the difference is marginal, it is also interesting to note that the clusters with stronger political orientations seem to have talked less about Ukraine than the ones which are more structured around antisystem and conspiracy narratives.

An overview of the volume of messages including a mention of Ukraine or one of its French derivatives also shows that interest for the Ukrainian war decreased in all the clusters over the one-month period covered by our study.

Table 1 Table comparing overall volume of mentions (tweets, retweets and posts) generated by each cluster with only “Ukrain” mentions from 24 February to 25 March 2022.

Clusters	Global volume of mentions	Mentions including a reference to “Ukraine”	Percentage of messages including a reference to “Ukraine”
Anti-restriction left-wing (145 Twitter accounts)	241 200	20 642	8,5%
Eric Zemmour's supporters (229 Twitter accounts/2 Facebook pages)	547 080	46 909	8,6%
COVID-19 opposition opportunists (545 Twitter accounts/ 3 Facebook pages & groups)	1 018 099	108 846	10,7%
Anti-system protesters (146 Facebook pages & groups/ 6 Twitter accounts)	106 794	10 571	10,1%

Figure 1, 2, 3 and 4: Volume of posts mentioning Ukraine in the Anti-restriction left-wing, Eric Zemmour's supporters, COVID-19 opposition opportunists and anti-system protesters clusters.

Figure 1
Volume of posts mentioning Ukraine -
Anti-restriction left-winters



Figure 3
Volume of posts mentioning Ukraine -
Covid opposition opportunists cluster



Figure 2
Volume of posts mentioning Ukraine -
Eric Zemmour's supporters cluster



Figure 4
Volume of posts mentioning Ukraine -
Anti-system protesters cluster



II: The war in Ukraine seen through 2 French presidential candidacies

1- The anti-restriction left-wing cluster

Top 100 most shared links in the anti-restriction left-wing cluster

Out of the top 100 most shared URLs, almost a third (31) is related to Ukraine in some way. ISD analysts noticed that among the references to Ukraine, there were links (6) redirecting to articles, videos or screenshots of mainstream media covering the conflict like TF1, l'EXPRESS and others. The online discussions around Ukraine in this cluster are more focused on the impact of the conflict on the presidential elections and criticisms of Western powers' geopolitics, including the USA, the EU and France, than on international pro-Kremlin conspiracy narratives (e.g., the US manages secret biological weapons labs in Ukraine to target Russia or the bombing of a maternity in Mariupol was staged) that have circulated since the beginning of the war.

In this cluster, pro-Mélenchon stances around the conflict were particularly salient. Indeed, out of 31 links related to the war, 9 are clearly sharing or indeed praising the far-left candidate's media statements, geopolitical positions, opinions and rhetoric around the situation in Russia and Ukraine. One of the main narratives ISD identified is the fact that Jean-Luc Mélenchon had been warning the European Union and others about the situation in Donbass since 2014. The four links with this underlying narrative were shared in 183 posts within the cluster. (Figure 5).

Among the most shared links related to Ukraine in the cluster, ISD observed some anti-Western positions, blaming either NATO for having heightened tensions across Europe or the West in general targeting specifically the USA, the European Union or France for their attitudes ahead of the outbreak of war in Ukraine (Figures 6 and 7). The two main URLs displaying clear anti-NATO stances were shared in 234 posts within this cluster.

The analysis of Ukraine-related narratives also highlighted a strong criticism of Emmanuel Macron's geopolitical attitude ahead of the invasion of 24 February 2022. For example, an interview seen over 300,000 times on Youtube with the journalists Marc Endeweld and Denis Robert for the independent media Blast exemplifies a narrative according to which French President's foreign policy is a "disaster" and that the war is an example of this ongoing failure (Figure 8).

ISD noted that some of the online conversations around Ukraine in this cluster were focused upon refugees, spreading a narrative highlighting the discrepancy of treatment between white and European refugees, in this case Ukrainians, compared to non-European populations. These types of narratives are relatively consistent with the stance of European far left movements relative to migration and refugees' issues, implying at times that the lack of action to protect vulnerable populations represents hypocrisy and racism of some European states. (Figures 9, 10 and 11)

Of the top 100 links shared within this cluster, 49 are related to the presidential elections. And within those 49, 26 URLs are supporting Jean-Luc Mélenchon's candidacy and campaign, including meetings, links to the candidate's program/campaign website, Twitch and videos about the budget of his electoral program, overall shared in 1281 posts in the cluster. After a thorough qualitative analysis, several links to, for instance, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's meetings in Lyon and in La Réunion were even shared several times, showing that this cluster was actively spreading pro-Mélenchon content during the selected timeframe. One significant difference with the disinformation ecosystem report for this cluster is that the online discussions are not dominated by COVID-19 restrictions or sanitary measures anymore. Indeed, only three links related to the pandemic were shared in 111 posts in the cluster.

Figure 5 Example of social media post praising Jean-Luc Mélenchon's positions on Ukraine



Figure 6 Tweet including a video of the former General Vincent Desportes making harsh comments about the alleged NATO's responsibility in the outbreak of the Ukrainian war



Figure 7 Video blaming the US and NATO's alleged broken promises for the war in Ukraine



Figure 8 Tweet accusing Emmanuel Macron's foreign policy of having created the perfect context for the outbreak of the war in Ukraine



Figure 9 Tweet criticizing the difference in treatment between Ukrainian and non-European refugees

Replying to [redacted]

Pour avoir la #Compassion et l'#Empathie des #Occidentaux, il faut remplir #2Critères :
 ➤ être de la bonne couleur de peau
 ➤ appartenir à la bonne religion.

Voyez ce qui se passe au Yémen, à cause des ventes d'armes françaises : c'est l'indifférence totale.

[Translate Tweet](#)

6:38 AM · Feb 26, 2022 · Twitter Web App

83 Retweets 6 Quote Tweets 146 Likes

Figure 10 Tweet criticizing the difference in treatment between Ukrainian and non-European refugees

Certains établissent une hiérarchie dans le malheur, c'est ainsi que pour eux, il y a :
 ➤ les #BonsRéfugiés
 ➤ les #MauvaisRéfugiés

[Translate Tweet](#)

10:14 AM · Feb 27, 2022 · Twitter Web App

15 Retweets 1 Quote Tweet 31 Likes

Figure 11 Tweet highlighting the controversial comment from a French editorialist about the need to welcome Ukrainian refugees in France because they are “cultural Europeans”

Caisse de grève
@caissesdegreve

"Il y a un geste humanitaire évident parce que la nature des réfugiés n'est pas contestable, on voit bien ce qu'ils fuient.
 Ensuite parce que ce sont des européens de culture. Et puis nous ne sommes pas face à des migrants qui vont passer dans une logique d'immigration"

[Translate Tweet](#)

BFM 104.44 DIRECT TV.
L'EUROPE PRÊTE À ACCUEILLIR LES RÉFUGIÉS ?
est-ce que vous êtes vraiment des réfugiés ?

Top 10 most shared posts produced by the “anti-restriction left wing” cluster

Of the ten most shared posts on Twitter produced by accounts in this cluster, four come from party executives or people close to the far-left party France Insoumise, including Jean-Luc Mélenchon himself, Adrien Quatennnes, Bruno Gaccio, and Thomas Portes. The two other accounts among those top shared posts are two Twitter accounts that are critical of the governing party and Emmanuel Macron: one is a Twitter account in favour of the France Insoumise party and the other is a Twitter news account, Brèves de Presse, which has been identified by Liberation as one of the most viral online news accounts and often tweets about news topics that are not favourable to Emmanuel Macron from the perspective of other French mainstream media.

Only three posts in this top 10 are related to the war in Ukraine in some way: one is a tweet from the far-left Twitter account Caisse de Grève including a video capturing a speech from the former French general Vincent Desportes during a TV show which was used to criticise NATO and asserting that France is subservient to the US (shared 5,129 times on Twitter). Ukraine is also referred to by one tweet of Bruno Gaccio, a humourist who joined one initiative from the France Insoumise during the presidential campaign, to highlight the alleged government’s inability to deal with any crisis, as the COVID-19 pandemic had also already proven according to him. Lastly, the most shared post by far is a video published by the account far-left Twitter account “Caisse de Greve”, which claims to show how the statements of some French journalists and politicians about the Ukrainian refugee crisis illustrate the alleged racism existing in France towards refugees from other parts of the world. This video montage was retweeted over 20k times between 24 February and 25 March 2022 and is consistent with one of the main themes of the cluster targeting the difference in treatment between Ukrainian refugees and refugees from other continents. It is important to mention that the global debate around the differences in treatment between Ukrainian refugees and other refugees has some legitimacy. For example, this issue was raised by the head of the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) a few weeks after the beginning of the Russian invasion (see [here](#)).

Figure 12 Tweet from the far-left account Caisse de Grève highlighting the statements of some French public figures about Ukrainian refugees that could be perceived as racist



2- Eric Zemmour's supporters cluster

Top 10 posts produced by the Eric Zemmour's supporters cluster

Between 24 February and 25 March 2022, among the top 10 tweets produced by the Eric Zemmour's supporters cluster, which generated the most shares on Twitter, four were linked to the war in Ukraine.

Two of them originated from the journalist Erik Tegner, who works for Livre Noir, a media accused of having a pro-Zemmour bias¹. Erik Tegner went on the ground to cover the war in Ukraine. In one viral tweet, which was the most viral tweet produced by an account from this cluster during the period (8200 shares), he claimed that the media are lying about the situation in Ukraine and that, according to what he had witnessed on the ground, the Russian army did not prevent civilians from escaping Mariupol through humanitarian corridors (Figure 13). However, it is worth mentioning that except for his tweet, the situation in Mariupol was not discussed much in the Pro-Zemmour cluster (1805 mentions of the word "Marioupol" and "Mariupol" over the period of our study). In another viral tweet, which is now deleted, he promoted a video he did about his experience in Ukraine, teasing that what he saw in the country was far from the apocalyptic picture drawn by French media (5592 shares) and accusing them of trying to scare the French people with the war to encourage the country to open borders to refugees, a situation that could also be used, according to him, to legitimise welcoming migrants from other parts of the world such as Africa or Middle East. (Figure 14)²

The third tweet about Ukraine in our top 10 originated from Jean-Sebastien Ferjou, the head of publication of the conservative media Atlantico. In this tweet, Ferjou highlighted that Germany had allegedly refused to impose sanctions on the Russian energy sector, which might heavily impact the country's strategic interests but supported sanctions linked to the agriculture and food industry, which would have negative consequences on France (5829 shares). He evoked the "(Un)United EU", suggesting that Germany has used the questions of sanctions against Russia to weaken France. (Figure 15)

The fourth tweet was directly produced by Eric Zemmour, asking Emmanuel Macron in an open letter to name Nicolas Sarkozy and Hubert Védrine as special peace envoys for the Ukrainian conflict. (5717 shares – Figure 16)

Figure 13 Eric Tegner's tweet accusing mainstream media of lying about the situation around humanitarian corridors in Mariupol



Figure 14 Eric Tegner's tweet claiming mainstream media exaggerate the scale and gravity of the war in Ukraine



Figure 15 Jean-Sebastien Ferjou's tweet accusing Germany of double standards about the EU sanctions against Russia



Figure 16 Eric Zemmour's tweet including his open letter asking Emmanuel Macron to name Hubert Védrine and Nicolas Sarkozy as special peace envoys for the Ukrainian war



Top 100 most shared links in the Eric Zemmour's supporters cluster

Among the top 100 most shared links in Eric Zemmour's supporters cluster, only 24 had some connection to the war in Ukraine. Moreover, most of them were not on the top of this list.

Among these 24 links, almost half of them were clearly connected to the French presidential elections (11 links), with the accounts in the cluster promoting content linked to Eric Zemmour's public statements & campaign events dedicated to the Ukrainian war (meetings, speeches). Articles and social media posts highlighted the far-right politician's positions on the conflict, and other publications argued against voting for Emmanuel Macron as the Russian invasion of Ukraine should be considered a consequence of his amateurish diplomatic policies. As such, the pro-Zemmour cluster's interest in the Ukrainian war focused primarily on how the conflict could profit the candidacy of the far-right polemist.

However, it is notable that the 13 other links related to the Ukraine war show that the pro-Zemmour cluster was at least partly receptive to some other Pro-Russian narratives blaming NATO or Ukraine for the conflict. For example, the 23rd most-shared URL in the cluster redirected Twitter users to a YouTube version of "Donbass", the 2015 documentary from the French journalist Anne-Laure Bonnel, which has been described as biased and pro-Russian by several media outlets and fact-checkers³. (Figure 17)

Several accounts in the pro-Zemmour cluster also tweeted or retweeted a YouTube video containing the interview with the former French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas conducted by the blogger Olivier Berruyer, where the former politician claimed that NATO did not respect its promise to not extend to Eastern Europe after the collapse of the USSR, an assertion contested by many experts⁴. (Figure 18) This misleading claim has been regularly recirculated online in France to give a false aura of legitimacy to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Interestingly, among the top 100 most shared URLs, there is also a link to a tweet from an ecologist French MP who posted a photo of him welcoming refugees arriving from Ukraine. The fact that most of the refugees in the picture were black was widely attacked by the pro-Zemmour activists on Twitter. Eric Zemmour himself made a tweet suggesting indirectly that the leftist MP lied and that these refugees didn't arrive from Ukraine (Figure 19). Even though only one link in our top 100 refers to the question of migration, it is aligned with some of the narratives spread by Eric Zemmour's supporters on other platforms that were monitored by ISD analysts, and which consisted of portraying the opening of borders for Ukrainian refugees as a risk as it would allow the acceleration of illegal migration from other regions of the world.

Figure 17 Tweet from an account in the Eric Zemmour's supporters cluster promoting Anne Laure Bonnel's documentary



Figure 18 Tweet from an account in the Eric Zemmour's supporters cluster claiming that the Roland Dumas' interview shows that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is due to NATO's broken promise



Figure 19 Eric Zemmour's tweet suggesting the ecologist MP Aurélien Taché lied when he tweeted that he met some refugees from Ukraine



III: Disinformation around the conflict as a way of criticising the system as a whole

1: COVID-19 opposition opportunists cluster

Top 10 posts produced by the “COVID-19 opposition opportunists” cluster

Among the top 10 most shared tweets and posts produced by the “COVID-19 opposition opportunists” cluster, three were linked to the war in Ukraine. The other viral posts and tweets were connected to the COVID-19 pandemic (3), high energy prices, but without mentioning Ukraine (2), and the controversy around the use of McKinsey consultants by the government (2). This suggests that Ukraine was still only one controversial topic among several ones at the time of our study for the cluster.

The most shared post is a Facebook post from France-Soir, a former French mainstream media now known for its role in the amplification of COVID-19 disinformation. This post includes a video of Emmanuel Leroy, a political scientist and former member of the far-right party Rassemblement National, about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In this video, which accumulated more than 174k views on Facebook, he claimed, among other things, that “about Russia, with the mainstream media, we are far from the truth”, that the Maidan revolution was a coup orchestrated by the “Anglo-Saxon oligarchy” and that the war in Ukraine is part of a larger plan from the Anglo-Saxon world to encircle Russia, which involved triggering the Syrian war. (Figure 20)

The third most shared post is a tweet from Damien Lempereur, a lawyer and former spokesperson of Nicolas Dupont-Aignan’s sovereignist political party, who shared a video of former French Prime Minister Dominique De Villepin. In this video, De Villepin explained all the factors that contributed to the Russian distrust towards the West (Kosovo, Iraq and Libya wars). This tweet collected 8603 shares over the period of our study. (Figure 21)

The fifth most shared post is a tweet from an anonymous sovereign activist account, which contains a video of a man in a street in Paris claiming that French people are “hypocrites” as they are ready to help Ukrainian refugees but do nothing for homeless people or victims of conflicts in Palestine and Yemen (8155 shares – Figure 22).

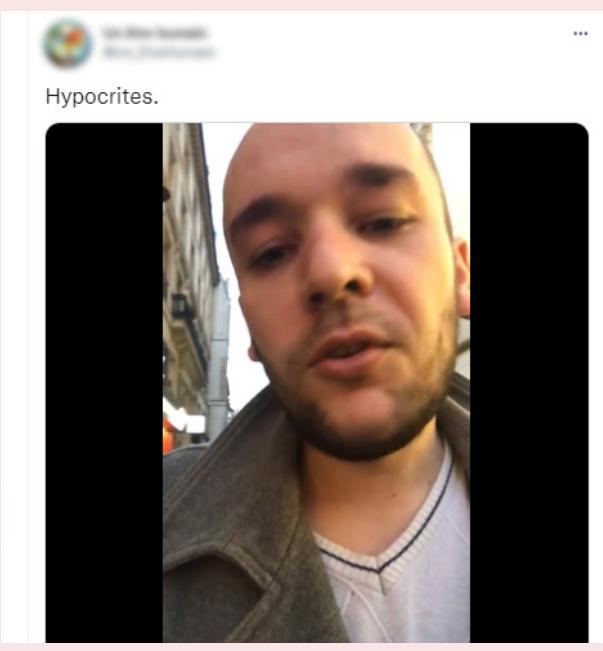
Figure 20 France Soir's Facebook page including a video from Emmanuel Leroy containing questionable claims about the war in Ukraine



Figure 21 Damien Lempereur's tweet including a video of Dominique De Villepin talking about the alleged responsibility of the West in the Russian invasion of Ukraine



Figure 22 Tweet including the sovereign activist's video describing the privileged treatment of Ukrainian refugees as a hypocrisy



Top 100 most shared links in the 'COVID-19 opposition opportunists' cluster

Twenty-eight of the top 100 most shared links in the 'COVID-19 opposition opportunists' cluster were connected to the war in Ukraine. While the topic of the Russian invasion of Ukraine certainly attracted a substantial amount of attention, URLs redirecting people to fringe, and political content linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines were still more present and viral in the cluster (53 links).

Notably, many of the most shared links related to Ukraine contain underlying narratives that are also popular in other contexts with these antisystem and conspiracy communities. For example, the link about Ukraine that generated the most interactions in the cluster is an old article from Courrier International talking about how the Pandora Papers revealed that President Volodymyr Zelensky had hidden money in tax heavens. This article, the second most-shared link in this cluster, was used by some actors to claim that the Ukrainian president is not a "saint" but a pawn part of the global elites that should be fought. (Figure 23)

Similarly, the second and third most cited URLs about Ukraine in the cluster redirected people to two conspiracy Telegram channels and were shared in two viral tweets from a now-suspended Twitter account attacking the French media for its alleged biased coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Figures 24 & 25). This lack of trust in the French media's reports about the war in Ukraine is in line with the more general distrust against any mediatic and institutional actors existing in the COVID-19 opposition opportunists cluster. Even though they were less widely shared, it is interesting to mention that also among the top 100 URLs were:

- One link to an English Reuters article about "Facebook allowing war posts urging violence against Russian invaders", which was used for example by the sovereigntist politician François Asselineau to claim that Western countries do not respect democratic principles anymore. (Figure 28)
- Unsurprisingly, the cluster of the COVID-19 opposition opportunists also strongly amplified four links promoting content supporting the pro-Russian biolabs conspiracy theory. This claims that the US managed secret military biolabs in Ukraine to develop bioweapons to target Russia, which to some extent mimics unproven claims shared by accounts in the cluster about the origin of COVID-19. (Figure 29)
- Finally, accounts in the cluster also amplified on multiple occasions links redirecting to more mainstream pro-Russian narratives trying to blame NATO, Western countries, and the Ukrainian government for the conflict. Four of the most mentioned URLs in the top 100 included content connected to Anne-Laure Bonnel, the French journalist who gained visibility after she presented a pro-Russian analysis of the Donbass conflict, including some misleading information. Similarly, two widely shared links in the cluster amplified comments from the French General Vincent Desportes during a TV show blaming NATO in part for the Ukrainian war. His positions about the war were also amplified by other clusters covered by our study, such as the pro-Zemmour cluster or the far-left leaning anti-COVID-19 restrictions cluster. (Figure 30)
- Two links to tweets from RT France and its director's Twitter accounts about the ban of RT and Sputnik by the EU. These were re-shared in the cluster by figures such as Florian Philippot and Fabrice Di Vizio with messages supporting the Russian state media and describing the decision of the EU as an authoritarian measure. The fact that the decision was made by the EU Commission was also used to spread anti-EU narratives. (Figures 26 & 27)

Figure 23 Tweet from an account of the COVID-19 opposition opportunists cluster promoting the Courrier International's article about the involvement of President Zelensky in the Pandora Papers



Figure 24 Tweet including a video of a TV editorialist accusing mainstream media of biased coverage of the war in Ukrainian



Figure 25 Tweet claiming that the journalists of a French media were not comfortable with the interview of a woman who didn't repeat their "anti-Putin" narratives



Figure 26 Tweet from the sovereigntist politician Florian Philippot claiming that the EU decision to ban RT is illegitimate and shows a desire of the EU to inflame the tensions with Russia



Figure 27 Tweet from the anti-COVID-19 restrictions activist Fabrice Di Vizio labelling the EU decision to ban RT as scary



Figure 28 Tweet from the sovereigntist politician François Asselineau about the decision of Meta to change its moderation rules to allow some calls for violence against Russians



Figure 29 Tweet from the former French Senator Yves Pozzo Di Borgo sharing an article from an alternative website about "military biolabs financed by the US in Ukraine"



Figure 30 Tweet from an account in the COVID-19 opposition cluster praising the speech of former general Vincent Desportes about NATO and the Ukrainian war



2: Anti-system protesters cluster

Top 100 most shared links in the anti-system protesters cluster

Of the top 100 URLs, 22 are related to Ukraine. Among those links, 8 blame the West for the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict, mostly targeting the US, NATO, the EU and France. These anti-Western stances could be illustrated by two videos present in the main shared links of this cluster: one of the very influential activist and prominent figure of anti-colonialist resistance in francophone Africa Kemi Seba, spreading virulent anti-European, anti-US and anti-Western messages to justify Putin's invasion and to show that Putin is not the only "bad guy" (shared in 42 posts – Figure 31); and the other from the sovereigntist politician Francois Asselineau, criticising the NATO and EU attitude towards the war (shared in 51 posts – Figure 32).

Within the top 100 most shared links of this cluster, some posts adopt pro-Kremlin rhetoric and spread international conspiracy theories about the conflict. For instance, one post from an account identified by ISD as spreading pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives targeting a francophone African audience shared a TikTok video of a Chinese official claiming to reveal the so-called truth about the US having military biolabs in Ukraine (Figure 33). This post is consistent with ISD's analysis on the Chinese amplification of this particular international conspiracy theory related to the conflict. ISD analysts also highlighted that some pro-Kremlin voices, such as RT or the Russian ambassador in France (Figure 34) leveraged mainstream TV programs such as Telematin to spread messages justifying the invasion of Ukraine, claiming its objective was to stop the Azov Nazi battalion from bombing the population in Donbass. On Facebook, the extract of the interview of the Russian ambassador in France by Telematin has been seen over 2,4million times.

Without having a massive presence in this cluster, the controversial journalist Anne-Laure Bonnel accused of spreading some pro-Kremlin narratives in French – whose content has been circulating since the beginning of the invasion in French online and media ecosystems – made her way to the top 100 most shared links. Indeed, three links are mentioning her and were shared in 126 posts.

Impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the economic situation in France

The majority of the Ukraine-related links (12 out of 22) are mostly related to French domestic affairs in different ways. Indeed, this cluster is dominated by important leading figures of the Yellow Vests movement like Jerome Rodriguez, Maxime Nicolle, Olivier Rohaut, Remi Monde, etc. The different livestreams of those individuals on Facebook are not covering the geopolitical aspect of the conflict but focus more on the domestic consequences of the war, more precisely on the French economy and the oil prices rising, reactivating a robust Yellow Vests rhetoric. This is in line with some narratives observed by ISD in broader French antisystem communities, which have been portraying economic sanctions as having only a negative impact on the French people and not Russia.

Among the top 10 most shared links mentioning Ukraine, 2 are livestreams of one of the figures of the Yellow Vests, Jerome Rodriguez, who cast the discussion around Ukraine in terms of the national economic situation and more precisely the oil and gas prices rising for French people. In one of his live videos, he calls the Yellow Vests and French people to act against the economic situation driven by COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, implying that this time was a good moment to act. The video's underlying narrative about Ukraine is that French people are bearing the consequences of "other people's wars" (Figure 36). Both livestreams were shared in 176 posts in the cluster. ISD analysts also noticed a rhetoric characteristic of the Yellow Vests movement in this cluster that tends to frame the conflict as a power struggle pitting elites against the people, asserting that the victims are always the people and not the politicians leading the war. These types of narratives are consistent with the "anti-system" dimension of this cluster.

Besides tying the war in Ukraine to the domestic economic situation, ISD also noticed two other posts leveraging this economic narrative to assert that the explosion of oil prices is a conspiracy to enrich the French State and energy companies. (Figure 37).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the French Presidential election

Disinformation about the war in Ukraine was also spread by some actors of the cluster. Indeed, among the 22 links related to Ukraine, ISD analysts identified a video shared in 86 posts by 21 accounts, from “Le Canard Réfractaire”, an account identified by Conspiracy Watch as having spread false information since the outbreak of war (Figure 38). This video, which has accumulated over 755k views, is indicative of the idea that the conflict is seen through the narrow scope of anti-Macron sentiment by antisystem actors, which claimed that the French President tried to take advantage of the war to establish his authority and legitimacy during the electoral campaign. Among the narratives being spread in the video, one of the key narratives is that going from COVID-19 straight to a war is a boon for Emmanuel Macron, with the national unity required during war times precluding him from scrutiny. He also insinuates falsely that Macron could have avoided this war by not forcing the issue of Ukrainian membership in NATO.

Therefore, the war in Ukraine is not only seen through an economic perspective by some Yellow Vests actors but is also tied by them with the presidential campaign. One of the most shared links in the cluster was a video of Putin, including fake parodical subtitles pretending that the Russian President mocked French people for continuing to support liberal or right-wing politicians which destroy their standards of living for profit, as shown by the pre-election polls (Figure 39). This video has been seen 4.3 million times and is the main topic of a debunking article from CheckNews.

Nevertheless, the discussions within this cluster are not only dominated by Ukraine. The anti-system dimension of this cluster also demonstrates a virulent anti-Macron rhetoric, apparently the glue holding this cluster together ideologically. In fact, ISD identified 41 links sharing anti-Macron content, whether they are related to the Presidential elections, Ukraine, the Yellow Vests movement, or the McKinsey gate scandal. All these anti-Macron URLs were shared in 1986 posts in the cluster. This analysis is coherent with a research conducted by ISD ahead of the French elections, analysing this anti-Macron sentiment in anti-system online communities. Finally, among the top 100 links, only 14 URLs refer to COVID-19, either spreading antivax or anti-restrictions content.

Figure 31 Video of the Pan-African activist Kémi Seba attacking the West for its alleged responsibility in the outbreak of the war in Ukraine



Figure 32 Video of François Asselineau attacking the West for its alleged responsibility in the outbreak of the war in Ukraine



Figure 33 Facebook post including a video of the speech from a Chinese official claiming to expose the truth about the US military biolabs in Ukraine



Figure 34 Facebook post including an interview of the Russian Ambassador in France during the Telematin TV show where he echoed some Russian narratives to justify the invasion of Ukraine

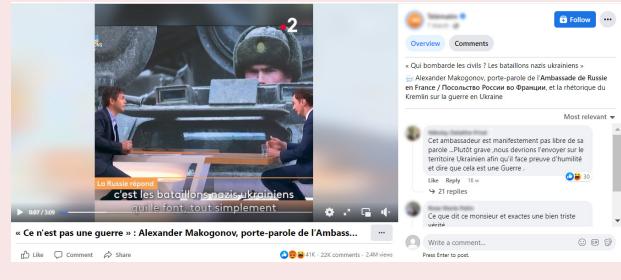


Figure 35 Facebook post sharing a BFMTV video about the controversial journalist Anne-Laure Bonnel accused of spreading pro-Kremlin disinformation

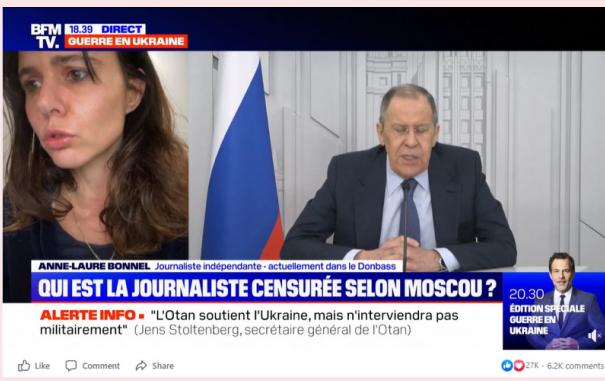


Figure 36 screenshot of a Facebook livestream from Jérôme Rodrigues about the increase of fuel prices in France

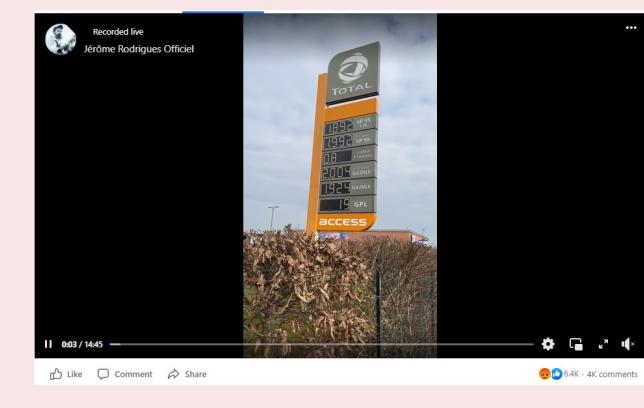


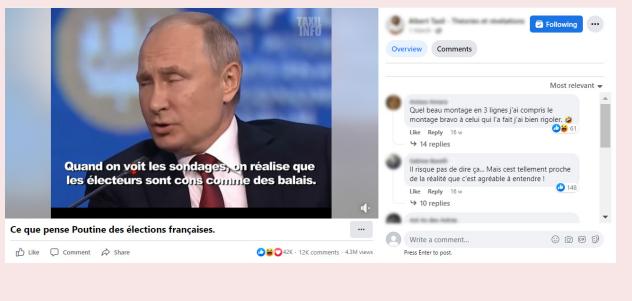
Figure 37 Facebook post including the video of a fuel station owner claiming that the increase of fuel prices in France is a "State's lie"



Figure 38 Le Canard Réfractaire's Facebook post including his video claiming that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a political opportunity for Emmanuel Macron



Figure 39 Viral post including the video of Vladimir Putin with fake subtitles about the French elections



Top 10 most shared posts produced by the “anti-system protesters” cluster

Seven of the ten most shared posts produced by accounts and pages included in this cluster originated from the online media Brut. These include one video on the McKinsey gate scandal (23,903 shares), two covering the consequences of the gas and oil prices on French people's lives (57 905 and 20 951 shares), and three covering the war in Ukraine (46 106, 24 432 and 17 463 shares). Among the three posts from Brut about Ukraine, one included a video report from a Brut journalist who gathered the testimonies of African students claiming that they suffered abuses at the hands of the Ukrainian police and military when they tried to leave Ukraine. The two other posts were news reports about some events during the first day of the invasion (one was about the reactions of world leaders to the invasion and the other one contained a map highlighting how the air traffic stopped above Ukraine with the start of the invasion).

Besides this mainstream media account, the three other most shared posts were produced by Nicolas Dupont-Aignan. The most viral Facebook post from the sovereignist politician included a livestream video of him where he accused the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky of playing on emotions and of having a dangerous strategy that would force European countries to go to war. In the same video, he defended his own peace plan. (30 029 shares & 1 million views for the post on Facebook – Figure 39). In a second post, Nicolas Dupont Aignan shared a video of him encouraging people to vote against Emmanuel Macron for the presidential election due to the McKinsey scandal (18 114 shares and 266k views for the post on Facebook). In a third post, he also amplified anti-vax content, namely a short and decontextualized video montage of American medical representatives asserting that the vaccine against COVID-19 is not efficient and even aggravates the virus. (17 756 shares and 340k views for the post on Facebook)

Figure 40 Nicolas Dupont-Aignan's Facebook Live where he accused the Ukrainian president of having a dangerous strategy that would force European countries to go to war





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