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Social Media Discourse in Malaysia on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Rationales for Pro-Russia Sentiments

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A woman in front of her destroyed house in the village of Moshchun, northwest of Kyiv, on 20 April 2022. Picture: Genya SAVILOV, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In late February 2022, Russian forces launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine which sent shockwaves around the world. As the world responded with sanctions against Russia, Moscow increased its public relations campaign to justify its invasion and recast the narrative in the media and on the internet.
- The Malaysian government's initial responses were mixed, with the Prime Minister refraining from naming Russia as the aggressor but ultimately voting to support the UN resolution to condemn the invasion.
- Malaysian social media were abuzz with discussions on the conflict, with different groups articulating both condemnation and support for Russia.
- The research in this paper, using digital ethnography, examines pro-Russian sentiments and unpacks them for possible explanations for why such views prevail amongst Malaysians.
- Four key themes emerged from our analysis. These were: perceived Islamist solidarity, pervasive animosity towards Western hegemony, preference for neutrality and pacifism, and the delegitimization of Ukrainian President Zelenskyy.

INTRODUCTION

Another battle was raging online even as Russian rockets dropped on Ukrainian cities. Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which sent shockwaves throughout the world, generated a polarising debate online. As the United States, Canada, and the European Union enforced harsh sanctions on Russia for its invasion, Moscow intensified its public relations efforts to exert control over the narrative expressed in the media and on the internet, blocking Facebook in tit-for-tat fashion, as Google imposed restrictions on Russia's state-controlled media outlets in Ukraine and elsewhere.¹

Two days after the invasion, Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri issued a statement saying Malaysia was "seriously concerned over the escalation of conflict in Ukraine" and urging for de-escalation without explicitly mentioning Russia as the aggressor.² Although Malaysia eventually voted in favour of the UN resolution condemning Russia,³ several questions were raised over Malaysia's purported condoning of Russia's conduct and over its ostensible claims of "neutrality".

To many pro-Russia sympathisers across the political spectrum in Malaysia, Russia is perceived as the potent alternative "superpower" that can compete with Western neo-colonialism and influence on equal grounds, even as Moscow is engaged in direct acts of imperialism. They subscribe to the belief that global politics can only be interpreted through the binary framework of corrupt and evil western imperialists versus honourable and wrongfully accused benevolent Eastern superpowers (as framed by western media and experts).

Malaysia's administration is no stranger to sending confusing signals and contradictory messages. Former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad openly defended Russia, despite the fact that Bellingcat's open-source intelligence reports and the Dutch Safety Board's extensive investigations established that Russia was involved in the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 in 2014 by providing the Buk surface-to-air missile launcher to Moscow-backed separatists.⁴ Known for being scathingly anti-West, Mahathir Mohamad, who is well-known for being sceptical of Western media, argued that Russia had been "scapegoated" for the plane's downing over eastern Ukraine.⁵

Given the escalating geopolitical tensions across the world, it is critical to study how cyberspace can be a highly contested environment for powerful state actors. Information warfare has become an integral part of adversarial state and non-state actors' non-kinetic strategic approaches to influence foreign policy, undermine diplomatic relations, erode public confidence, and distort the truth. This paper will present key narratives that appear to resonate amongst pro-Russian Malaysians and will unpack the potential rationales behind them.

MALAYSIA'S INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT: IMPLICATIONS

Malaysia is not short on information access; according to one study, around 89.6 percent of Malaysians are likely to be online by 2025.⁶ But in Malaysia's pursuit to become a highly developed nation in terms of information technology, policymakers and local stakeholders have neglected to consider public resiliency (through media literacy) towards maligning campaigns being part of their strategic communications framework. As a consequence, Malaysia, like the rest of the world, was unprepared for this era's reiteration of one of the oldest forms of warfare – the weaponisation of information – which was further exacerbated by a raging worldwide pandemic.

It is crucial to understand that deception, misinformation, and mal-information are not a new problem; they have existed for millennia. Nonetheless, the arrival of social media and the proliferation of multiple platforms have aggravated the matter, since social media provide a permissive environment for the weaponisation and cross-pollination of contaminated information. Among the most pernicious consequences of this phenomenon is the public's deteriorating faith in mainstream news media and their government, causing people to seek alternative sources, even if these are unverified or derived from untrustworthy sources.

Being a world-shaking event, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict resulted in the proliferation of disinformation, misinformation and malinformation as people attempted to explain the conflict and understand it. On social media platforms that are highly frequented by Malaysians (such as Facebook, Twitter and Tik-Tok) and online forums, the most prevalent argument was that "Ukraine had provoked Russia first".

Given that the vast majority of studies on propaganda and narratives is focused on the Western audience, little is known about the Global South audience and their response to the West's confrontation with Russia. Because of this, Western observers are perplexed that many in the Global South are bolstering support for Russia's right to attack Ukraine and reiterating the assertion that Ukraine and NATO "provoked" Russia by being increasingly a danger to Russian national security. This article focuses on Malaysia as a case study for examining the narratives that the country's social media users subscribe to where that conflict is concerned.

In this article, disinformation is defined as, "the deliberate and coordinated spread of falsehoods", while misinformation is defined as, "the unintentional spread of falsehoods".⁷ Malinformation is described as "Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country".⁸

METHODOLOGY

This study includes collecting materials across social media platforms between early February and late March 2022, with a particular emphasis on accounts, pages and posts that proclaim pro-Russia attitudes. The data were gathered via digital ethnography, and then analysed through the use of critical discourse analysis using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Data was gathered from 1142 tweets on Twitter, and dozens of posts and threads from Facebook and the Lowyat.net forums which drew significant responses, to perform this research. A Twitter search for relevant phrases and hashtags was conducted, and data were manually collected from Twitter’s platform. The study focused specifically on Malaysian users and the content they shared between February and late March, and covered both Bahasa Melayu and English-language sources.

The posts selected were those which had at least 40 responses, which resulted in the smallest post studied being one that had 42 responses, and the largest being one that had 8,088 comments. We coded comments that showed clear support for Russia in the conflict, after which we coded and categorised them into several overarching themes that represented the different rationales used in support of the invasion. We hope to shed light on the key themes that resonate with Malaysians and to understand why they have taken root amongst them.

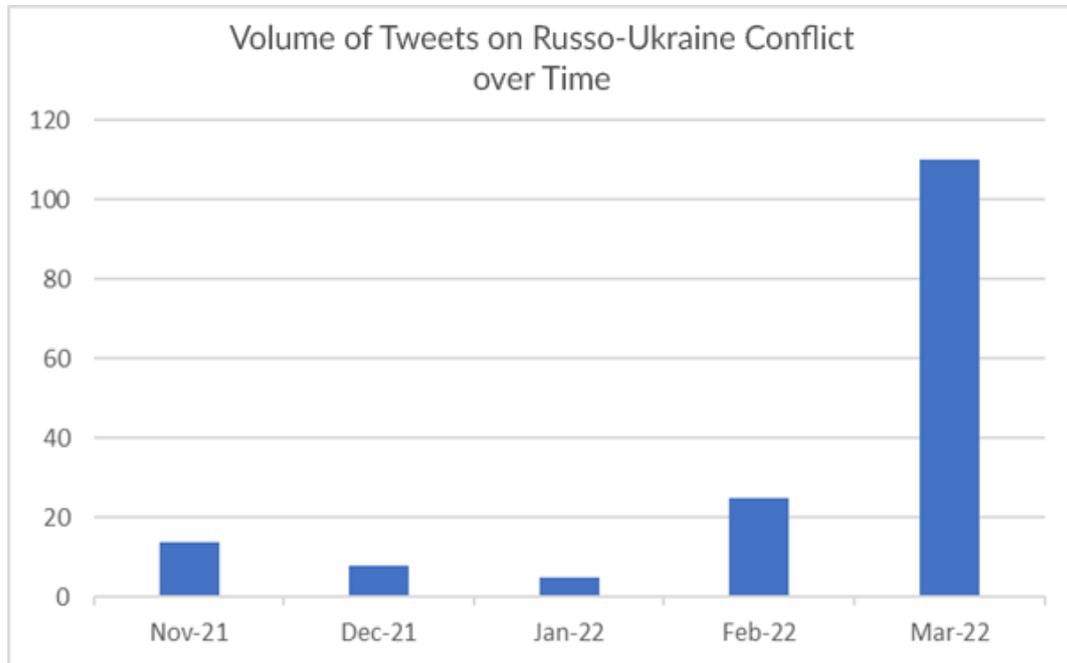


Figure 1: Based on the selected data, the graph illustrates a surge in public interest following the February invasion.

THE POLITICAL DIGITAL DIVIDE: AN OVERVIEW

Many Malaysians actively participate in online discussions, and a considerable number of them show great interest in significant political events, both local and global. Russia's justification of its invasion of Ukraine generated an internet firestorm, and many Malaysian social media users framed Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a positive development necessary for "de-nazification" as well as a response to "NATO provocations". According to our findings, support for Russia's invasion is not concentrated in a single political camp, but rather is dispersed throughout the political spectrum, from reactionary right-leaning groups to militant left-leaning ones.⁹ Although the political right and left in Malaysia are diametrically opposed to each other, in this instance, many of them share common viewpoints, such as a shared contempt for the West (particularly the United States), and they hold favourable views of Russia as the preferred alternative "superpower", with President Vladimir Putin embraced as the "strongman" capable of withstanding Western leaders. Their support for Russia's actions in Ukraine is mostly motivated by two factors: first, a common bond of enmity with Putin against a Western world that they characterised as "anti-imperialist"; and second, Malaysian conservatives see Putin as more tolerant of Muslims, owing to Russia's developing ties with the Islamic world.¹⁰

Notably, this same segment of Malaysians who support Russia are unlikely to feel the same way about China, for a number of reasons. To begin, despite the fact that significant economic deals have been negotiated between China and Malaysia's political stakeholders, many Malaysians are wary of Chinese investments being used for graft, jeopardising Malaysia's sovereignty and resulting in the country deferring to China's sphere of influence and becoming financially dependent on them.¹¹ Second, Malaysians in general are suspicious of Chinese media outlets just as much as they are of Western news organisations, despite China's increased efforts to improve its image and control its narrative in the region.¹² This is because many of Malaysia's conservatives harbour strong anti-China sentiments, owing in part to China's adventurism in the South China Sea and its persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang, even despite a Malaysian minister's controversial blind acceptance of China's description of concentration camps as "re-education camps".¹³ Thirdly, China's influence operations are mostly focused on cultivating support among the region's Chinese diaspora.¹⁴ Finally, Malaysia's experience with the Communist insurgency from 1968 to 1989, aided by British propaganda, produced an antipathy to anything approximating Communism, and many Malaysians regard China as a Communist state, while Malay grassroots dread being overrun by Chinese people.¹⁵ In essence, China's superpower position is emphasised more at the policy level – specifically in economics and security – than among the public at large.

KEY NARRATIVES

Using critical discourse analysis, this study subjected the samples to an in-depth analysis to determine the narrative themes that appeared most often. These turned out to be: Antisemitism, anti-Western hegemony, power dynamics, strongman leadership, and pragmatic neutrality/pacifism.

Perceived Islamist solidarity against an Israel-supporting nation

A dominant narrative in the conservative spaces of Facebook and TikTok was one that appealed strongly to Islamists, tipping them to favour Russia against Ukraine in the conflict. Numerous arguments offered by the social media users are reminiscent of Islamist discourses prevalent in Indonesia, and is steeped in a strong “Us versus Them” mentality. These arguments portray Russia and Putin as allies of Islam and Muslims, and regularly highlight Ukraine’s condemnations of Palestinian aggression,¹⁶ Russia’s “humanitarian assistance” in Syria, and Putin’s “moderate” approach to Islam in comparison to that of Western nations. There are certain parallels between Malaysian Islamist rhetoric and Indonesian Islamist arguments, which have been extensively discussed by other researchers and the media.¹⁷

Pervasive Anti-Western posture (or “Whataboutism”)

The pervasive attitude, which is interestingly shared across the political spectrum online (even among those who profess support for Ukraine), is that of anti-Western hegemony. The period leading up to the invasion, during which NATO trainers withdrew swiftly from Ukraine as an invasion seemed likely, further cemented the notion that Western powers were the instigators of this crisis and, when the going got tough, simply abandoned their “friend.” They believe this exemplified the West’s duplicity in antagonising non-Western nations, and then fleeing when the stakes grew too high. In this context, Russia’s invasion is seen as a response to the “threat” to Russia instigated by NATO and its attempts to recruit Ukraine. Events such as the US-led intervention in Iraq in 2003 and the more recent US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan that led to the Taliban’s return, have solidified the view that the West tends to interfere with other nations with little or no consequences. Because of this, they would diminish the significance of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine through the use of “whataboutism” by bringing up America and NATO’s previous involvements in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

This anti-Western bias manifests itself in extreme distrust of any mainstream media outlets linked to the West. Many of the social media commentators across all platforms have been eager to label reports from Western sources as “propaganda,” “fake news,” and other derogatory phrases. At the same time, they do not hesitate to use Russian-affiliated media outlets (particularly RT) to bolster their assertions. As social media platforms began to

prohibit Russian-affiliated media outlets for propagating disinformation, these Malaysian commentators began to use that as proof to support their belief of duplicity on the part of Western corporations.

Dedication to abject neutrality and pacifism

Many felt the need to support Russia, or at the very least, support the invasion as a way to maintain pragmatic neutrality, and condemned the act of directly dressing Russia down, which they saw as a breach of Malaysia's "neutral position". The rationale was that since Malaysia was not a party to the war, it should abstain from any verbal involvement in it.

These viewpoints overlooked the invasion's broader consequences, which could promote the harmful idea that military strength is a sufficient justification for invading one's sovereign neighbours. Proponents of this viewpoint believe that Russia as a "superpower" can win this "special operation", and they are convinced that it may shift its focus and target "Third World" countries that ally themselves with the West against them.

This narrative seems to imply that resisting an overwhelming greater force is a fundamentally foolish endeavour and a losing ideology. Proponents of this viewpoint appear to believe that it is much more preferable that a nation relinquishes its autonomy to survive as opposed to organising resistance which may eventually be crushed. This idea is likely to be borne from Malaysia's political landscape which is frequently dominated either by strongman-style politics or political blue-bloods which entitled them to immediate fear and respect. There is a notion of self-serving pacifism which these so-called neutrals prioritise as a tactic to avoid any confrontations.

Delegitimization of President Zelenskyy

A contempt for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy resonated almost universally among those supporting Russia. Almost every allusion to Zelenskyy online would be framed as "pelawak" (comedian) or "badut" (clown). Before entering politics, Zelenskyy was both a comedian and an actor. This is despite Zelenskyy's formal credentials as a trained lawyer.

Zelenskyy was also described as a "pawn of the West" engaged in a personal conflict with Russia against the will of the Ukrainian people. Some commenters viewed him with scorn because of his Jewish ancestry, while others believed him to be a reckless leader who was using common Ukrainian people as his "shield". Throughout the invasion's early stages, many questioned Zelenskyy's determination, assuming he would abandon the country in order to save himself. When Zelenskyy made no indication of doing anything of the sort, rather than recognising his tenacity, commitment to his people and devotion to the war cause, they began to claim that he was really hiding in Poland or another country due to the secrecy surrounding his movements and activities.

Numerous commenters hastened to dissociate Zelenskyy from the Ukrainian people, with many making allegations that Ukrainians were coerced into war by Zelenskyy's hubris in "provoking" Russia. There were various arguments raised about whether he was a Western agent (i.e., for NATO or Israel) or a clueless populist.

CONCLUSION

This paper's main findings give insights into online behaviour regarding this conflict, and highlight several significant pro-Russia arguments circulating within Malaysia's social media and information space.

A substantial portion of the problem stems from poorly executed regulations governing information access, fact-checking, and expertise by government stakeholders. Malaysia's own conflicted portrayal of the country's stance has also contributed to further distorting the narrative and weakening faith in mainstream news outlets.

Government stakeholders' policies for navigating this digital environment still need a significant amount of work in order to improve public resilience. This is because structural deficiencies in the country, such as educational institutions and strict government regulation of the media, can limit people's ability to develop the critical thinking and media skills necessary for navigating the digital reality. Social media firms should also step up efforts to prevent malicious messaging from being disseminated via their platforms (e.g. Twitter's "state affiliated media" warning readers of potential bias and propaganda in the tweet). A majority of the narratives studied being written in Bahasa Melayu underlines the challenges faced by social media companies in mitigating the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories owing to certain languages being a continuous policy blind spot for them.

ENDNOTES

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