

LLYC

NATO AND INFORMATION WARFARE

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE SCHEME OF
COLLECTIVE SECURITY

June 2022

PUBLIC AFFAIRS

PUBLIC OPINION AND NATO

Public opinion is a key arena of geopolitical confrontation, given its essential character in the construction of political leadership and public policies, which makes it a highly coveted target. Democracies have open systems in which opinion is freely expressed. However, for some time now and through social networks, the society in which we live has been facing a serious problem of unfair intrusion in the digital conversation by groups linked to authoritarian states.

We have known for years that **NATO is dealing with digital communities orchestrated by pro-Russian** groups that try to destabilize countries by influencing the opinions of their citizens. And one of the tools they use the most is **interference in the digital conversation**, knowing the impact they have in shaping social debates. Social networks have become a key source of information for citizens, in fact, the main source for those under 25 years of age.

But the Atlantic Alliance has deployed strategies to address this threat. The La Vanguardia - LLYC Monitor study of June 2022, whose main results we present, reveals the **presence of disinformation campaigns in the NATO digital conversation**. It also shows an imbalance in the debate, with a prominent presence of the extremes (pro and anti NATO communities) with a predominantly negative tone towards the Alliance. In this report we present

several revealing facts from the study to then draw some conclusions.

On the 40th anniversary of Spain's membership of NATO, LLYC Public Affairs team publishes this analysis to **highlight the importance of institutional communication in national defense and security**. Based on the data, we have consulted experts to learn about the risks of not acting and some particular characteristics of Spanish public opinion on the NATO.



EXTREMES ACCOUNT FOR 80% OF THE SOCIAL CONVERSATION ABOUT NATO

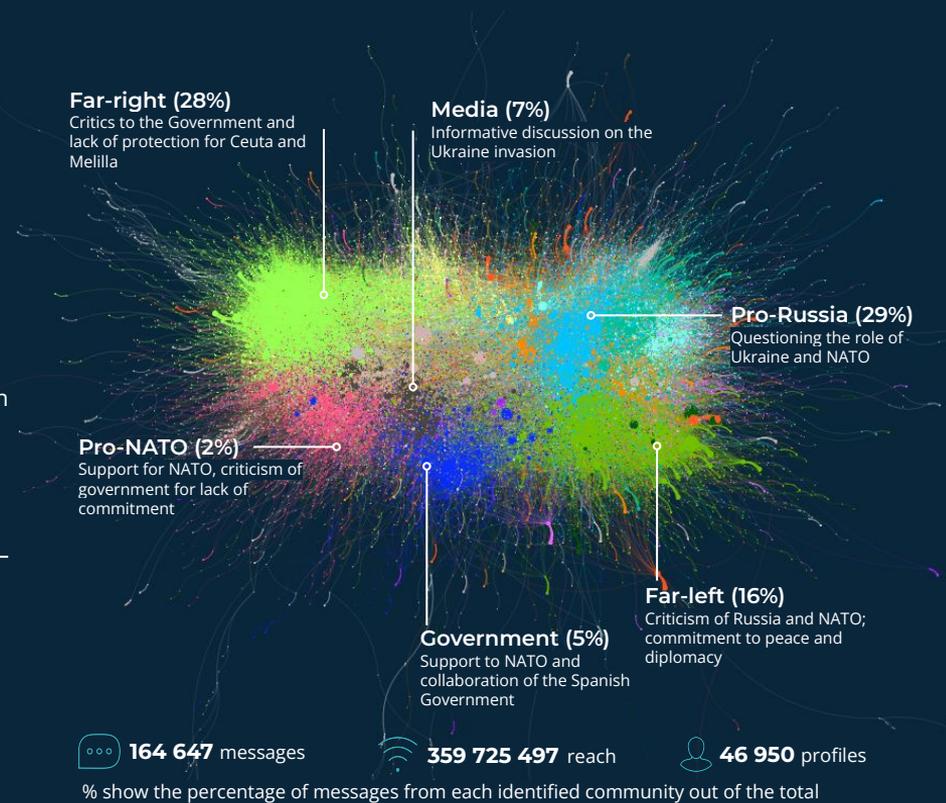
In the last four months, since the outbreak of the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, the communities led by Santiago Abascal (critical of the Government); Pablo Iglesias (critical of Russia and NATO) and the pro-Russian community concentrate 77% of the messages, and 63% of the profiles in the conversation.

Although it is true that the volume of conversation is low in general terms, the conversation is dominated by the most belligerent positions in both directions. The space of those who support the Atlantic Alliance and/or the role of Spain and its government in the organization is certainly reduced and its influence as well.



8/10 messages in the social conversation about NATO are emitted by extremes

Source: La Vanguardia-LLYC Monitor. *The social conversation of Spaniards in the face of NATO.*



Source: La Vanguardia-LLYC Monitor. *The social conversation of Spaniards in the face of NATO.*

IN SOCIAL NETWORKS ONLY THOSE WHO ARE AGAINST IT SPEAK OUT

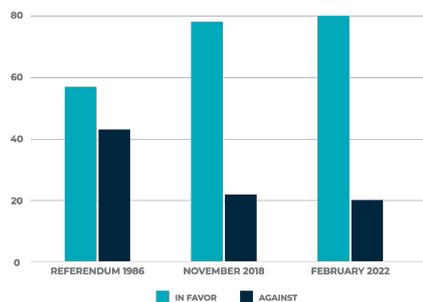
Despite the fact that the traditional support for NATO has been reinforced since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, reaching 80% according to the Elcano Royal Institute, the sentiment expressed on social networks does not correspond: **only**

5.7% of profiles show a positive sentiment towards NATO, in contrast, we find 24% of messages about NATO negative towards the organization. Moreover, only 1 in 5 users intervenes in favor of the organization in the social conversation.

Considering that social networks already account for 70% of society's information sources, especially among young people*, this imbalance of the digital conversation may have an impact on the general perception of NATO.

8 out of 10 Spaniards support Spain's NATO membership

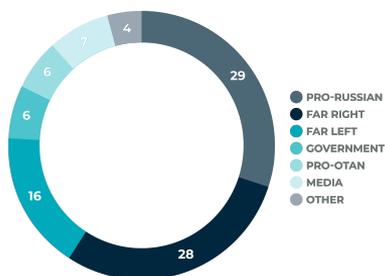
% rating NATO membership



Source: Elcano Royal Institute (2022).

Only 1 in 5 users intervene in favor of NATO

Share (%) of social conversation by user community



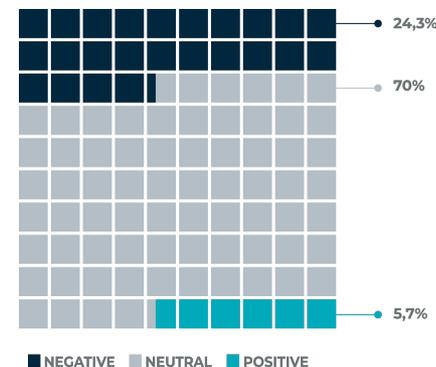
Sentiment towards NATO in social networks

x4

times more negative messages than positive messages about NATO

24%

of messages about NATO are negative towards the organization



Source: La Vanguardia-LLYC Monitor. *The social conversation of Spaniards in the face of NATO.*

*Sources: APM 2019 Annual Report; IAB Millennials vs GenX Report.

THE ARTIFICIAL CONVERSATION OF THE PRO-RUSSIAN COMMUNITY

The patterns of activity, activation, share and behavior detected show abnormal values in the pro-Russian community involved in the conversation, according to the study of the La Vanguardia-LLYC Monitor.

The activation of the pro-Russian community is **double that of the far-right community**, which presents relatively high patterns compared to other communities such as the media, closer to moderate positions and with clearly informative content.

In that sense, the community identified as pro-Russian presents 84% more shares than the next most influential community in the social conversation about NATO, which is the identified as far-right.

This **abnormal behavior is also observed in the times and frequency of publication**, especially when comparing the communities identified.

While pro-Russian users present a fairly homogeneous activity throughout the day and throughout the week, in the rest of the communities, variations of greater and lesser activation can be observed at certain times and days, more compatible with what is understood to be a natural behavior of the conversation.

These data suggest a strong use of inorganic profiles, which allow such high levels of activity on a permanent basis during the period studied.

THE PRO-RUSSIAN COMMUNITY, THE MOST ACTIVE

Activation level of three communities representative of the social conversation between February 2022 and May 2022.



x2 times more active
84% more shares

The pro-Russian community spreads information to a greater extent than the far-right community, the next most influential in the conversation.

Source: La Vanguardia-LLYC Monitor. *The social conversation of Spaniards in the face of NATO.*

TYPICAL PATTERNS OF PROPAGANDA ACTIONS

Whether through bot farms or through the mere aggregation of users, the propagation of pro-Russian content is constant. This frenetic activity is supported by, among other variables and according to the experts

consulted, because of the power of the **Russian propaganda apparatus in Latin America** through amplifying tools such as *RT en Español*, one of the most watched and most shared channels in Latin America, that

potentially, also affects digital conversation in Spain. An example of this is the language used, which is closer to Latin American grammatical constructions than to the Spanish ones. Also through some of the

instant **messaging applications** that favor the coordination of Russian propaganda and dissemination channels (including institutional ones) that make it easier for it to reach the largest number of users.

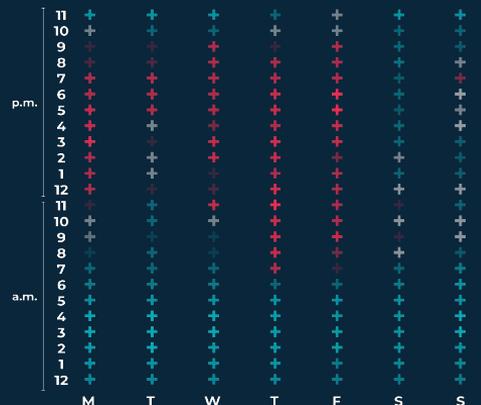
RUSSIAN CONTENT ALL WEEK AND ALL DAY LONG

Behavioral data of the identified communities.

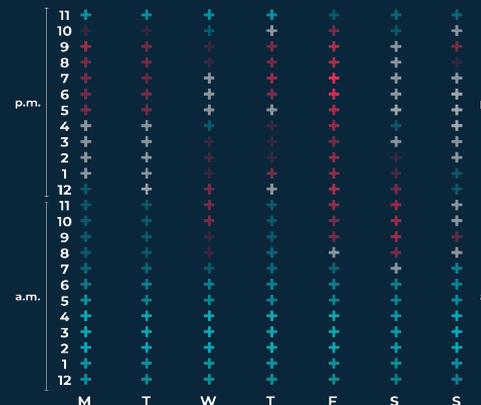
Y-axis, hours of the day; **X-axis**, days of the week. The higher the frequency of publication, the warmer the colors; the lower the frequency, the colder the colors. A pattern of organized participation is observed every day of the week at all hours when Spanish public opinion is awake.

Source: La Vanguardia-LLYC Monitor. *The social conversation of Spaniards in the face of NATO.*

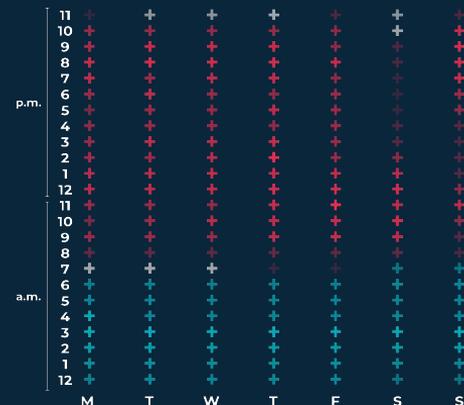
MEDIA



FAR RIGHT



PRO-RUSSIAN



KEY FINDINGS

SECURITY AND DEFENSE EXPERTS ANALYZE STUDY RESULTS

01.

We must fight the battle for ideas, which requires ensuring an **institutional vision in the debate**. Currently, supporters of NATO (and the organization itself) do not make themselves visible, favoring a polarization that intoxicates and distorts the conversation. NATO relies on the work of member states to make an effort to communicate better, which does not always work. The need to foster a positive narrative around NATO is evident.

02.

We must assume that we live in a **context of cognitive warfare**, whose scenario of confrontation is mental and individual, even outside the framework of an armed conflict. The intention is to *"fragment public opinion in economic, social and cultural spheres, conditioning its capacity to react"*.

Given this scenario, it is more appropriate to treat social networks as one more front, incorporating this domain to the traditional ones of land, sea, air, space and cyberspace. We must work proactively to *"develop a counter-narrative that minimizes exposure to criticism while leveraging the Alliance's strengths, within a larger movement that generates a true culture of defense"*.

03.

Russian interference in Spanish public opinion is organized and continuous, and may have very serious consequences in the medium term. The value of non-military means has increased and *"Russia is well aware of this, placing the information warfare as one more piece in its global strategy"*. Its efforts are focused on establishing discursive frameworks that sow doubts about the legitimacy of Western institutions.

This fact is *"extremely worrying"* as it *"highlights the threat posed by Russia without the need to share a border."* This new dimension of geopolitical conflicts that *"we will see more and more often, as it allows confronting militarily superior powers"*.

KEY FINDINGS

SECURITY AND DEFENSE EXPERTS ANALYZE STUDY RESULTS

04.

Spain is a relevant country in the strategy of the pro-Russian communities in the destabilization of the European Union. Partly because it is one of the European countries where the polarization of public opinion works best as a deactivation tool. That explains, for example, the efforts to disinform about independence in Catalonia through the Sputnik news agency and other media to then be disseminated through social networks and their armies of bots and trolls. In the case of the invasion of Ukraine, this modus operandi has been used in the same way.

05.

We found a **certain benevolent attitude of a part of the Spanish public opinion towards Russia.** *"In the study we also observed it in the prominence of the neutral tone in the conversation."* There are historical and cultural reasons for this. *"Soviet aid during the Civil War and the subsequent opposition to the Franco regime, as well as the instrumental legitimization of the dictatorship by the United States, have served as a spur to NATO detractors to build a counter-narrative and sow doubts among moderates, who avoid taking sides."* But there is also a connection

with the *"rise in nationalist sentiment and revisionist"* in both countries. The fascination with the imperial past of both nations is very present in some communities in Spain. From a cultural perspective, both Russian and Spanish elites share ties in art, literature or music, especially strong throughout the 19th century. In a context in which the center of the world passed through London and Paris, *"two countries considered the periphery of Europe and economically backward saw each other as equals"*. This connection has also survived to the present day.

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TECHNICAL SHEET LA VANGUARDIA-LLYC MONITOR

UNIVERSE

2,67 Million messages
295.546 profiles

QUOTAS

- Gender
- Work occupation
- Geographic scope

PROCEDURE FOR COLLECTING INFORMATION

Analysis of massive data through the combination of semantic techniques, network topologies and trust.

FIELDWORK DATES

MAY 2022

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

Spain



OBSERVED TIME PERIOD

01/04/2018 **15/05/2022**

General analysis

01/04/2011 **15/05/2022**

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