Graphika

How to Lose Influence And Alienate People

Examining the Activities of Russian State-Controlled Media on Facebook And Instagram One Year After the Invasion of Ukraine

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Takedowns

How to Lose Influence and Alienate People

Examining the Activities of Russian State-Controlled Media on Facebook and Instagram One Year After the Invasion of Ukraine

By Avneesh Chandra and Rodrigo Ferreira

Key Findings

On Feb. 24, 2022, Russia illegally invaded Ukraine. The invasion started the largest military conflict in Europe since World War II and prompted social media platforms to take unprecedented actions to curtail the reach of Russian state-controlled media entities. One year on from the invasion, Graphika worked with industry partners at Meta to better understand how those actions have impacted the activities of Russian state media outlets on Facebook and Instagram.

Using data provided by CrowdTangle, we analyzed the posting volumes and engagement levels for a set of 299 Facebook pages and Instagram accounts labeled as "Russian state-controlled media" by Meta that were active between Feb. 1, 2022, and Feb. 1, 2023. The set includes prominent outlets, such as RT and Sputnik, as well as lesser-known digital content producers with reported ties to the Russian state. The pages and accounts operate in 28 different languages, ranging from Bulgarian to Vietnamese, with the highest volumes of posting activity in Russian, Arabic, Spanish, English, and Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian (BCMS).[1]

Our analysis found that posting volumes and engagement levels increased in the weeks immediately prior to the invasion, as Western officials warned of an imminent military assault and the Kremlin issued spurious denials, fueling a swirl of online speculation. Following Meta's actions between Feb. 26 and March 8, 2022, to restrict the reach of Russian state media outlets on its platforms by geoblocking access at the request of certain governments, demoting content, and demonetizing accounts, the levels of posting activity and engagement dropped sharply. Later in March 2022, Russia also took steps to limit access to Facebook and Instagram, likely deepening the decline. By Aug. 24, 2022, six months after the invasion, posting volumes were down 43% and engagement levels had fallen 80% compared to the same day a year earlier. These lower levels of activity and engagement persisted throughout the rest of the year.

[1] "Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian language," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Feb. 17, 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian-language

This closely mirrors findings by researchers at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab and the Brookings Institution, who analyzed Russian state outlets' social media activity in Spanish. We saw the same dynamics represented in data for all of the top languages used by Russian state media entities on Facebook and Instagram, with posts and engagement in Russian, Arabic, Spanish, and English increasing ahead of the invasion and then falling rapidly after Meta introduced restrictions.

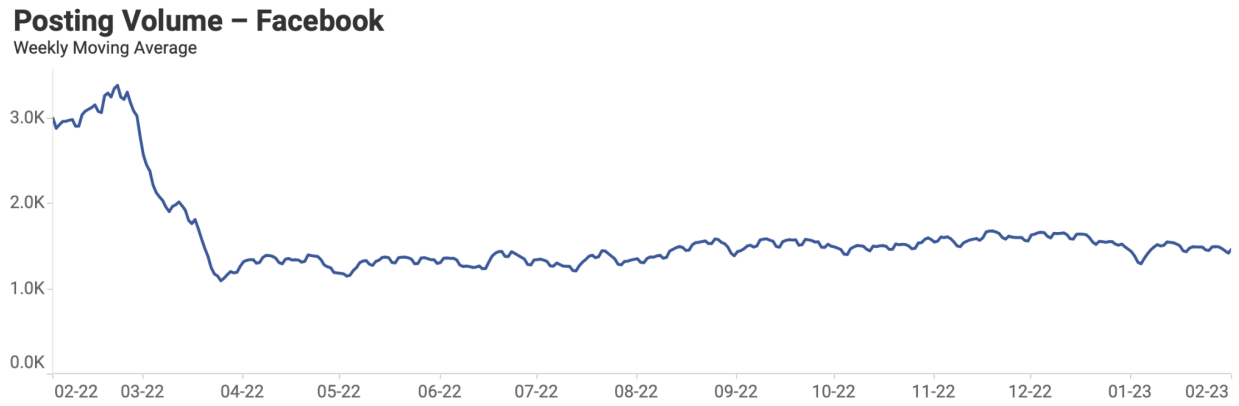
The analysis in this report gives a snapshot of the activities and performance of Russian state media outlets on just two social media platforms over a one-year period, leaving multiple avenues for further research and investigation. Subsequent analysis, for example, should consider how the same actors have performed on a wide range of different platforms, including those that have not restricted their activities. This may shed light on any parallel effects caused by the Russian government's own restrictions on Facebook and Instagram - a ban that we note has not stopped Russian government entities from using those platforms.

We also need to examine the actions of the actors themselves. In particular, how the content they use to target online audiences varies by language. While multiple researchers have studied Russian influence efforts in Spanish, for instance, we found that Arabic was the most-used non-Russian language by state media accounts on Facebook and Instagram, accounting for 20% of all posts over the last year. And we should explore how these actors have adapted their behaviors in response to platform enforcement actions. From March - June 2022, we observed a possible effort by some outlets to direct their audiences to other platforms, most notably Telegram and Odysee.

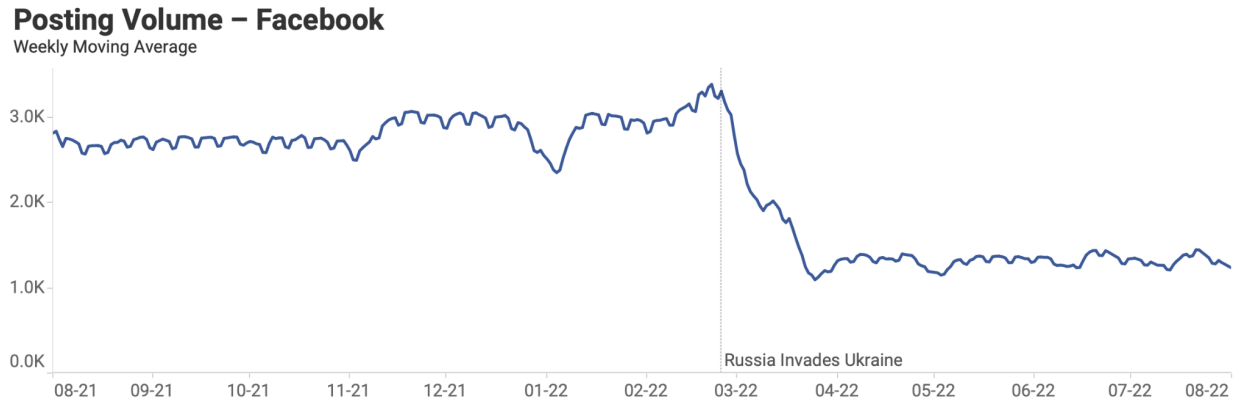
Lastly, our findings are a compelling illustration of the significant impact social media platforms can have limiting the reach of actors engaged in overt influence operations. Those same limitations, however, can also be applied to other accounts, raising important questions about when and how to use such powerful tools. As with all content moderation decisions, these questions should be subject to robust public debate. When are these actions appropriate, if ever? Once imposed, how long should the restrictions last? And what kind of precedent does this set for freedom of expression at a time when Ukraine and its people are fighting for the right to self-determination?

Overview

Posting Activity



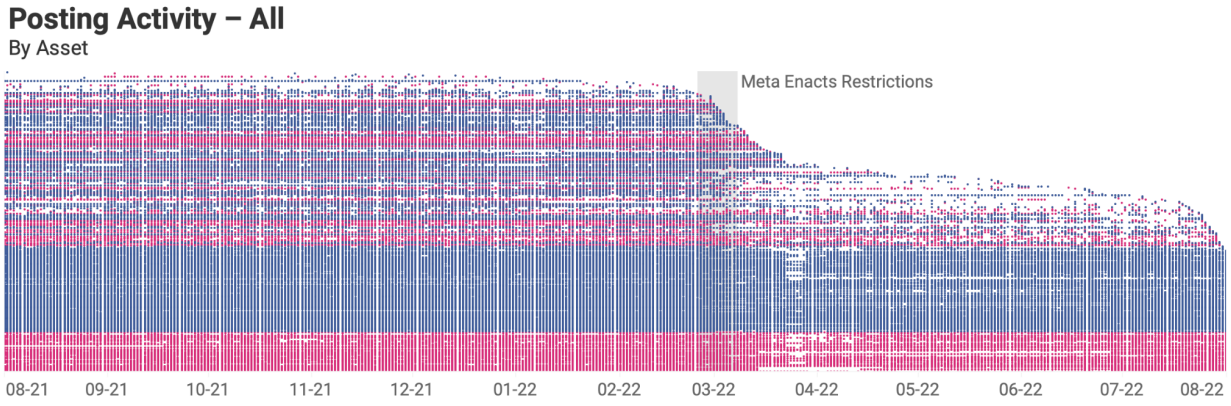
Posting volumes for Russian state-controlled media on Facebook between Feb. 1, 2022, and Feb. 1, 2023, show a sharp drop after Meta introduced on-platform restrictions in late February 2022, with a steady volume of posts since



Posting volumes for Russian state-controlled media on Facebook between Aug. 1, 2021, and Aug. 1, 2022, show an increase in posting in the weeks ahead of the invasion

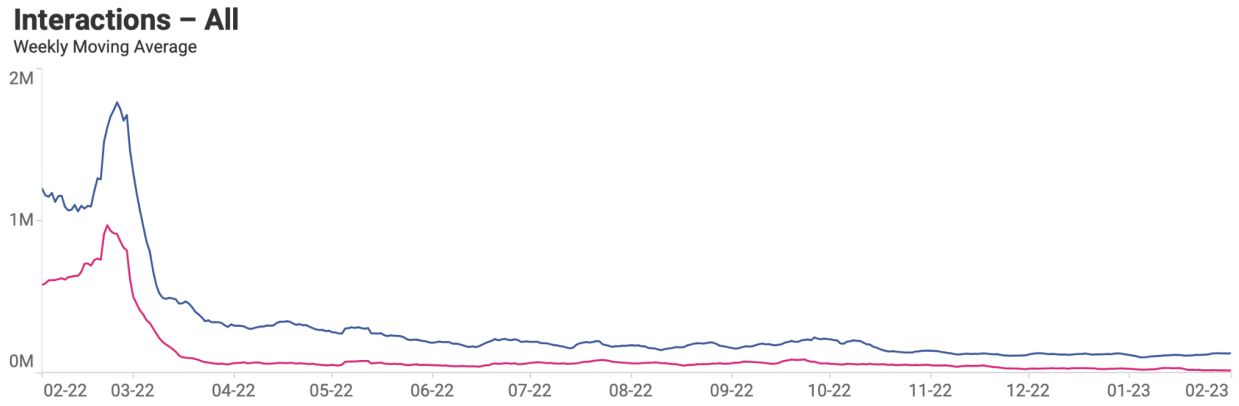
Posting volumes for Russian state-controlled media on Instagram between Feb. 1, 2022, and Feb. 1, 2023, show a sharp drop after Meta introduced on-platform restrictions in late February 2022, with a further decline at the end of 2022

Posting volumes for Russian state-controlled media on Instagram between Aug. 1, 2021, and Aug. 1, 2022, show an increase in posting in the weeks ahead of the invasion

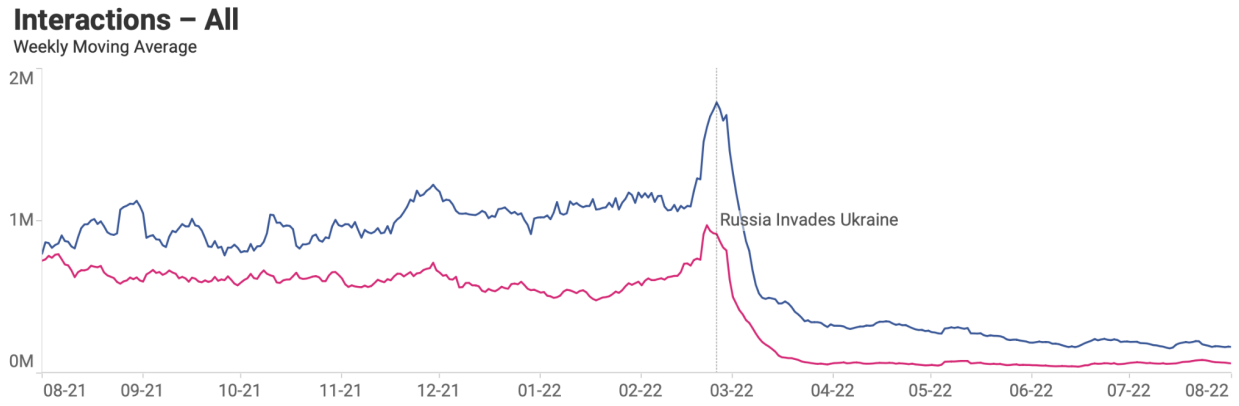


Posting times for Russian state-controlled media on Facebook and Instagram between Aug. 1, 2021, and Aug. 1, 2022, show that 25% of assets had stopped posting by April 2022

Engagement

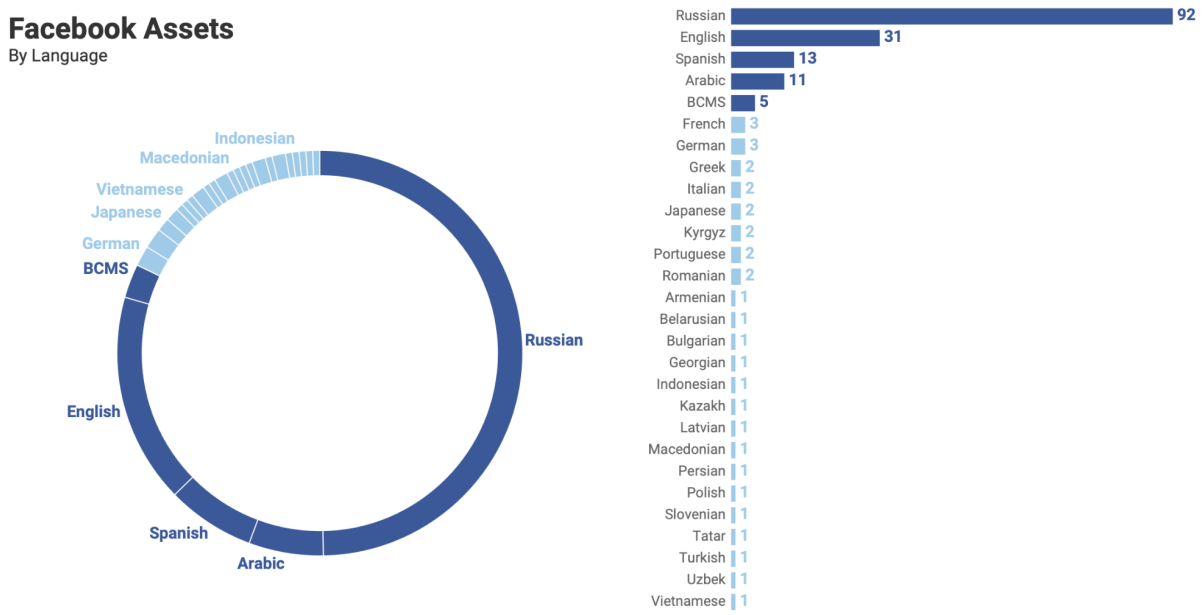


Interactions for posts by Russian state-controlled media on Facebook (blue) and Instagram (pink) between Feb. 1, 2022, and Feb. 1, 2023, show a sharp drop after Meta introduced on-platform restrictions in late February 2022

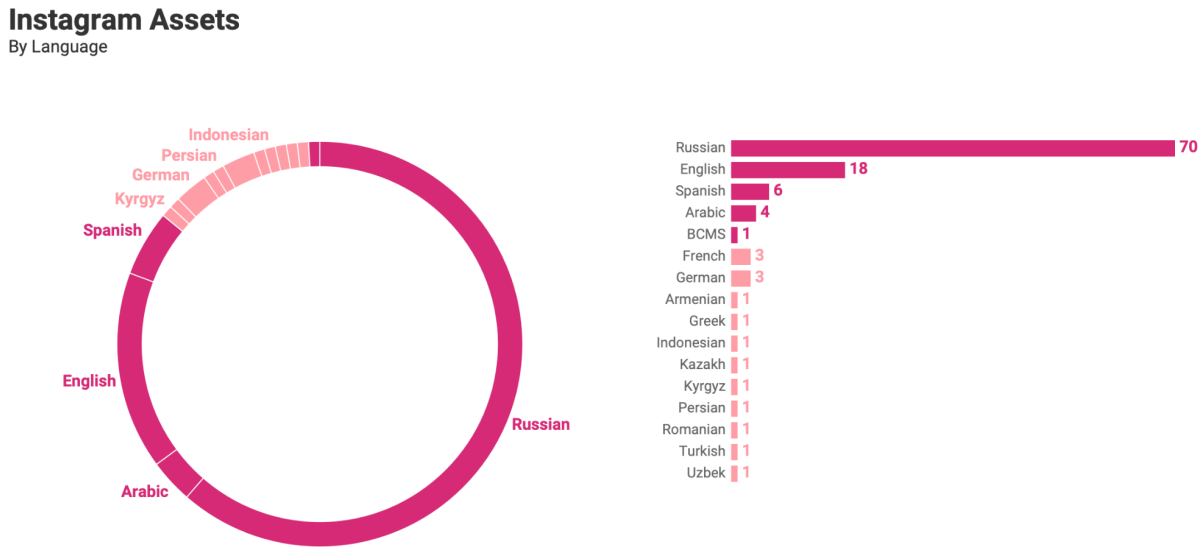


Interactions for posts by Russian state-controlled media on Facebook (blue) and Instagram (pink) between Aug. 1, 2021, and Aug. 1, 2022, show a spike in engagement in the weeks ahead of the invasion

Language Breakdown



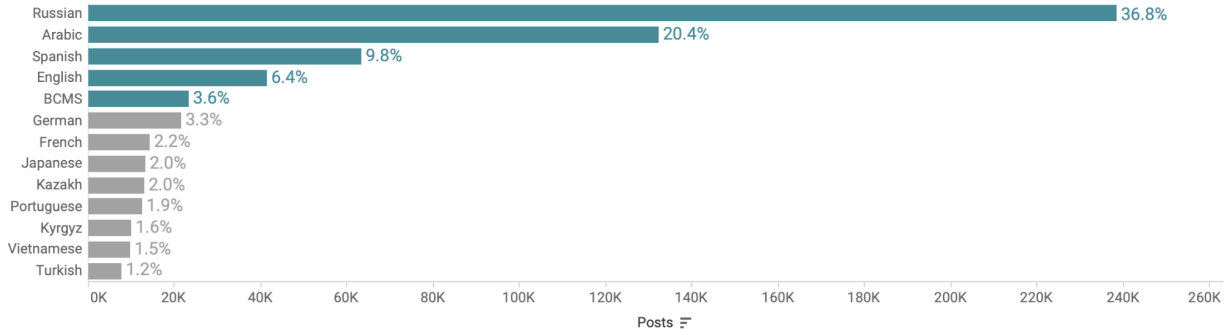
A breakdown of Russian state-controlled media pages on Facebook by language shows Russian and English are the most used operating languages, followed by Spanish and Arabic



A breakdown of Russian state-controlled media accounts on Instagram by language shows Russian and English are the most used operating languages, followed by Spanish and Arabic

Posting Volume

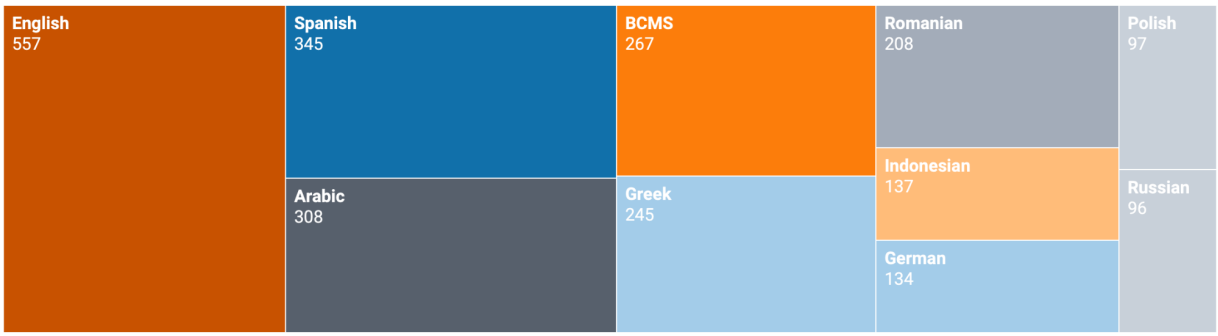
By Language



A breakdown by language of posts from Russian state-controlled media on Facebook and Instagram between Feb. 1, 2022, and Feb. 1, 2023, shows more than 50% of the activity was in Russian and Arabic

Interactions Per Post – Facebook

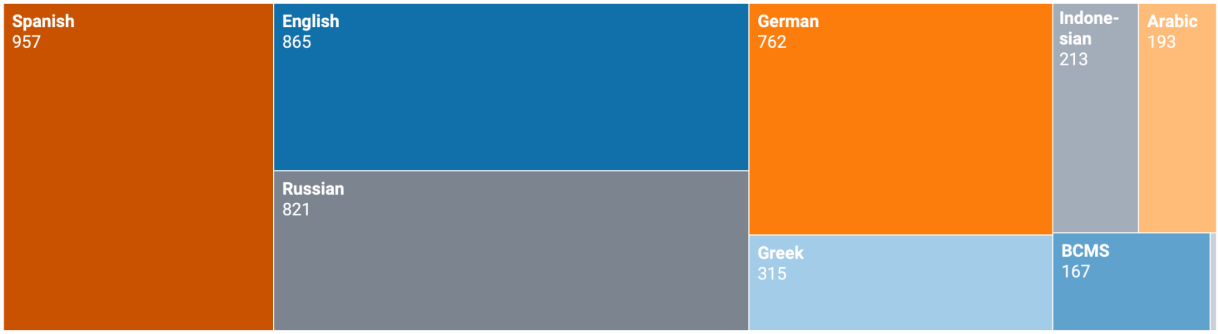
By Language



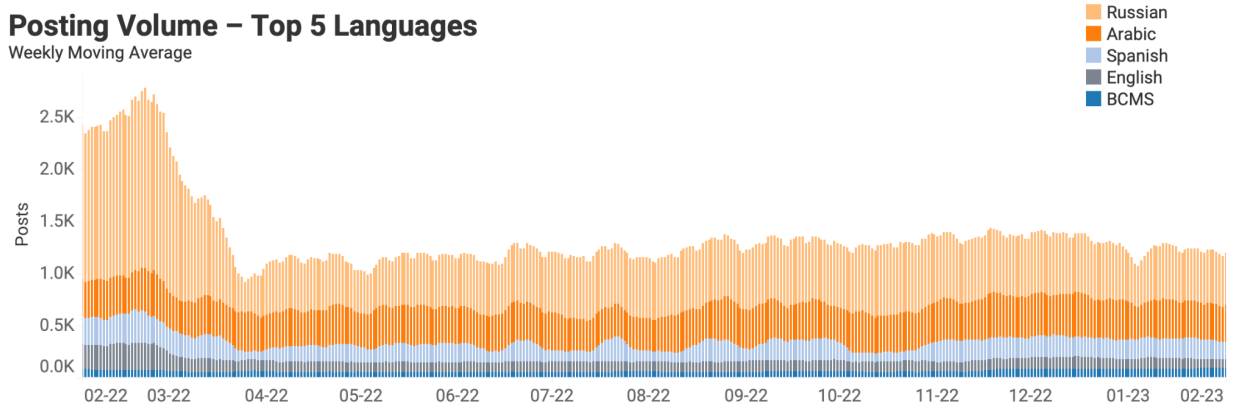
The average number of interactions per post for Russian state-controlled media on Facebook between Feb. 1, 2022, and Feb. 1, 2023, shows English-language pages generated the highest levels of engagement

Interactions Per Post – Instagram

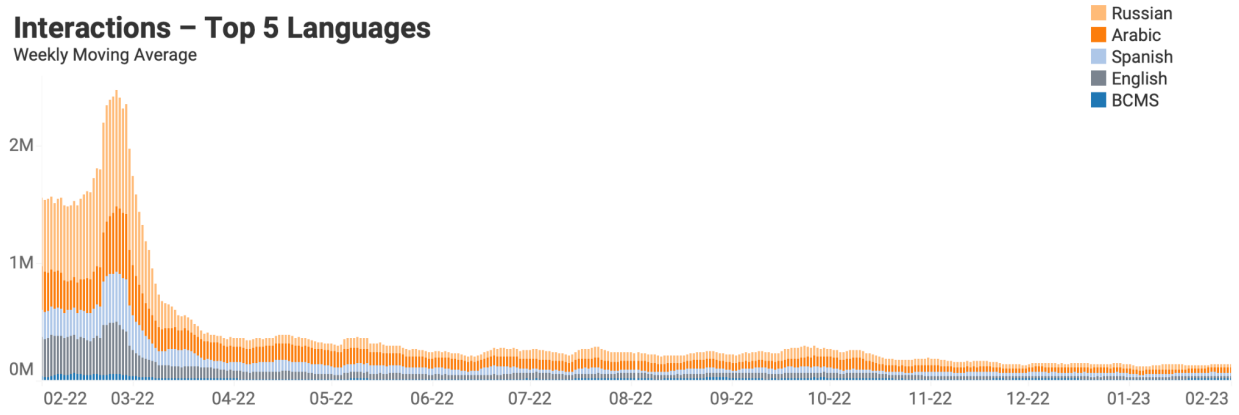
By Language



The average number of interactions per post for Russian state-controlled media on Instagram between Feb. 1, 2022, and Feb. 1, 2023, shows accounts operating in Spanish, English, Russian, and German generated the highest engagement



Posting volumes for the top five languages used by Russian state-controlled media on Facebook and Instagram between Feb. 1, 2022, and Feb. 1, 2023, show a sharp drop after Meta introduced on-platform restrictions in late February 2022



Interactions for posts in the top five languages used by Russian state-controlled media on Facebook and Instagram between Feb. 1, 2022, and Feb. 1, 2023, show a spike in engagement in the weeks ahead of the invasion

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About Us

Graphika *is an intelligence company that maps the world's online communities and conversations. We help partners worldwide, including Fortune 500 companies, Silicon Valley, human rights organizations, and universities, discover how communities form online and understand the flow of information and influence within large-scale social networks. Customers rely on Graphika for a unique, network-first approach to the global online landscape.*

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