

Patriotism and National Symbols in Russian and Ukrainian Elections

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Abstract

How do political parties leverage patriotic appeals in their online campaigning within the context of autocracies and hybrid regimes? This study delves into the digital campaign strategies deployed by political parties during the most recent legislative elections in Russia (2021) and Ukraine (2019). In light of the armed conflict between Russia-backed separatists and Ukrainian forces in the eastern area of Ukraine, war-related themes and patriotic rhetoric emerged as pivotal concerns for politicians in both countries. The “rally around the flag” phenomenon posits that, in times of crisis, citizens often experience an intensified sense of national identity and patriotic fervor. Consequently, references to patriotism and related topics may evoke positive responses and prove instrumental for politicians during elections, serving to engage, mobilize, and attract voters. Drawing on a manual content analysis of the underlying communication strategies, we assessed whether parties’ reference to patriotic gestures and symbols or their attention to related policy topics (defense, war and military conflicts, and foreign policy and international relations) yielded an increased level of user engagement. Our findings reveal that references to patriotic symbols engendered increased user engagement within the Russian context, albeit without significantly affecting the engagement of Ukrainian voters. The latter tended to exhibit greater engagement with posts addressing defense and foreign policy matters though. Interestingly, Russian parties conspicuously avoided war-related topics, while Ukrainian voters displayed a propensity to penalize such content by generating fewer reactions to it.

Keywords

legislative elections; national symbols; patriotism; political campaigning; Russia; Ukraine

1. Introduction

Patriotism's influence on political discourse and electoral strategies has been pervasive across the globe. It wields the power to sway public sentiment, mobilize citizens, and influence election outcomes. Within the realm of political campaigning, the strategic utilization of patriotic appeals has attracted significant attention for its potential to rally support and secure voters' approval. This article embarks on a comprehensive exploration of patriotic appeals, measured through the usage of national symbols and patriotic gestures of politicians, within online political campaigns, with a particular emphasis on two post-Soviet countries, Russia and Ukraine.

Both states emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, adopting semi-presidential systems with direct parallel voting for members of parliament. However, the political regimes in the countries diverge significantly in the level of competitiveness and general adherence to democratic standards, along with media freedoms. In the political narratives of both nations, patriotism's impact has been notably significant, especially in the aftermath of pivotal geopolitical events. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine have forged an environment where patriotism, in its various forms, has become a dominant fixture of political discourse. These events have triggered what political scientists often call the "rally around the flag" effect, a phenomenon where populations undergoing crises exhibit heightened patriotic sentiments. In Russia, this effect manifested clearly, as evidenced by the substantial surge in President Putin's approval ratings following the Crimea annexation (Kizilova & Norris, 2023; Rogov, 2016). Ukraine, too, witnessed a surge in national self-identification and patriotic sentiment in the wake of the Euromaidan uprising and Russian aggression (Doroshenko et al., 2019; Kulyk, 2016).

While patriotism and the rally around the flag effect are well-studied in democratic states, less attention is given to autocratic and hybrid regimes. Understanding communication strategies in non-democracies is crucial given the global rise of autocratic tendencies and democratic backsliding (Nord et al., 2024), as evidenced by literature on informational authoritarianism, which demonstrates autocratic leaders' concern for public opinion and support (Greene & Robertson, 2022; Guriev & Treisman, 2023).

The outbreak of war against Ukraine emphasizes the need for analysis in this region. Some scholars (Kizilova & Norris, 2023) argue that the Crimea annexation and the 2022 Russian invasion could stem from similar motives, potentially leading to a rally around the flag effect, warranting further study. Existing literature on the post-Crimea rally around the flag effect primarily focuses on Putin, with limited exploration of other political actors (Sirotkina & Zavadskaya, 2020). In contrast, our analysis examines the effects of patriotic appeals and related topics.

Addressing these research gaps, this study delves into the effects of patriotic appeal, along with related policy topics (including defense, international relations, and foreign policy), conducting a content analysis of political parties' Facebook posts during the legislative elections in Ukraine (2019) and Russia (2021). Subsequently, we systematically assess how these thematic appeals impact user engagement and delve into the distinctions across the two countries while exploring the driving forces behind these variations.

2. Online Campaigning and User Engagement

In the social media era, political actors utilize direct mass communication platforms, bypassing traditional media gatekeeping mechanisms (Magin et al., 2017). This digital space expands audience reach (Bene et al., 2022; Papp & Patkós, 2019) and can lead to favorable political outcomes (Bene, 2018).

Recognizing online audiences' reluctance to engage extensively with political content (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013), political actors strategically tailor messages to user preferences to generate engagement and enhance content virality (Kalsnes, 2016). User engagement, including reactions, comments, and shares, acts as a viral mechanism, extending content visibility (Anspach, 2017; Bene, 2017). It influences Facebook algorithms, with highly reacted posts more likely to appear prominently in users' news feeds (DeVito, 2017).

Within the realm of online political communication, user engagement involves observable activities tied to specific candidate communications (Xenos et al., 2017, p. 5), such as comments, likes, and shares on Facebook posts. Stromer-Galley (2000) defines interaction as the manifestation of responsiveness, where users actively participate in the discourse surrounding political content. Motivations for engagement—commenting linked to social interaction, liking to presentational motivations, and sharing to information-sharing motivations (Macafee, 2013)—vary in cognitive demand. Clicking the Like button may require minimal effort while sharing demands more profound consideration. Commenting, involving responses and evaluations, adds an additional layer of cognitive involvement. Common motives underpin user engagement, with the agreement, alignment with posters' behavior, and emotional attachment driving clicks on the Like button (R. A. Hayes et al., 2016). In essence, user engagement is not merely a metric; it is a dynamic interaction shaping the visibility, impact, and reception of political content in the digital age.

In the pursuit of enhanced online popularity, political actors might adopt a self-centered communication style (Bene et al., 2022; Papp & Patkós, 2019), aiming for an agenda-setting position. Content focusing on salient topics, certain policy issues (Heiss et al., 2019), emotional messages (Brady et al., 2017; Eberl et al., 2020; Soroka, 2014), and populist rhetoric (Bene et al., 2023; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Jost et al., 2022) can increase user reactions, although with heterogeneity across different political contexts.

Within the context of non-fully democratic regimes, wherein opposition forces often occupy an influential agenda-setting stance on social media, the digital sphere takes on a pivotal role for ruling authorities. This is especially true as they endeavor to vie for the attention of a potentially dissenting online audience (Guriev & Treisman, 2023). In this specific context, regime actors strategically concentrate their efforts on specific subjects, thereby exerting influence over or moulding public opinion in a favorable direction (King et al., 2017).

3. The Dynamics of Patriotism: Factors and Effects

Regarding patriotism, definitions converge on deep allegiance to a nation, often expressed through symbolic elements. In its extreme form, patriotism may encompass ideas of national superiority and the nation's vital role in forging bonds with citizens (Hurwitz & Peffley, 1990; Spinner-Halev & Theiss-Morse, 2003; Sullivan et al., 1992). Essentially, patriotism reflects profound love and unwavering loyalty to one's country, rooted in dedication to the political community, institutions, values, and geographical identity (Parker, 2010; Violi, 1995). This attachment often involves emotional and rationalized sentiments through national

symbols (e.g., flag, anthem, coat of arms) invoking feelings of pride, love, and unwavering loyalty (Finell & Zogmaister, 2015).

Considering this, patriotism and nationalism share common elements: National pride is fundamental to both (Smith & Kim, 2006). Patriotism is characterized by love, attachment, or support for one's own country, differing from nationalism by not advocating superiority over other nations (De Figueiredo & Elkins, 2003). However, we tend to acknowledge the intertwined nature of patriotism and nationalism (Bieber, 2018; Ernst et al., 2019; Howe et al., 2022; Kizilova & Norris, 2023), recognizing that these concepts often overlap. In our study, we operationalize patriotic appeal through national symbols and patriotic gestures of politicians. The emotional valence of these symbols is crucial for our research, attracting user attention and fostering engagement. Users may experience feelings associated with national superiority or pride, enhancing national identification. The significance lies in the emotionally charged nature of these symbols, vital for capturing users' attention and fostering engagement.

In Ukraine, far-right nationalist parties surged during the 2014 elections, using connective action logic through interactive social media (Doroshenko et al., 2019). Non-democratic regimes like Russia also employ nationalism to bolster legitimacy, especially amid economic challenges (Bieber, 2018).

Nationalists combine appeals to the nation with policy promises, addressing political, cultural, and socio-economic concerns (Howe et al., 2022). They strategically shape perceptions of the social order and divert attention from class identities. Successful nationalist mobilization depends on the relative strength of national versus class identities (Solt, 2011). Patriotism shapes citizens' views of related policies and political behavior. In the US, patriotism influences support for military policies and attitudes toward foreign states (Hurwitz & Peffley, 1990).

In non-democratic electoral landscapes, nationalism and patriotism play pivotal roles, often wielded by autocrats to consolidate support and navigate challenges. The concept of nationalism, fostering a sense of community within a polity, is harnessed by autocratic regimes to build broad popular backing (Dukalskis & Patane, 2019). Autocrats strategically employ patriotic and nationalist appeals to create an image of themselves as the defenders and leaders of the nation, equating any opposition to a stand against national unity (Goode & Stroup, 2015). This tactic becomes particularly pronounced during elections and international crises, offering autocrats a means to divert attention from economic troubles and rally their main supporters (Aytaç, 2021; Baturo & Tolstrup, 2024; Solt, 2011).

For post-Soviet countries like Russia and Ukraine, communication strategies vary. Yet, patriotism is consistently emphasized during elections, mobilizing supporters amid crises (Baturo & Tolstrup, 2024). In weak democracies like Ukraine, the "nationalist card" is a common electoral strategy, allowing leaders to avoid substantive issues by relying on patriotic appeals (Mansfield & Snyder, 1995). In Russia, post-2014 sanctions create a powerful mobilization frame, increasing the demand for public displays of support (Hellmeier, 2021). This external challenge not only facilitates the mobilization of regime supporters but also heightens the demand for public displays of support, aligning with the rally around the flag approach (Hellmeier, 2021).

The intensity of patriotic sentiments is strongly correlated with external crises and a country's military involvement (Murray, 2017). Empirical studies consistently highlight the connection between conflicts and

national identification (Gibler et al., 2012). During crises or war, blind patriotism often surges (Parker, 2010). Individuals align closely with the nation for comfort, seeking solace in political authorities. Blind patriotism emerges as a reaction to external threats. By identifying with the state and its policies, individuals satisfy a need for protection, often manifesting as unconditional support. The diversionary theory of war suggests that states may deliberately engage in conflicts to bolster national cohesiveness (Levy, 1989).

Indeed, many politicians strategically incorporate patriotic appeals into their communication strategies and electoral campaigns. Empirical studies have shown that this strategic choice paid off with increased electoral support (Sullivan et al., 1992). By employing national symbols and other overtly patriotic elements, politicians aim to signal their commitment to the nation, eliciting specific positive attitudes associated with these symbolic objects. In some cases, political forces have employed patriotic appeals consistently over time, effectively establishing ownership over the issue of patriotism (D. Hayes, 2005) and related topics, including foreign policy (Petrocik, 1996). As such, we posit the following:

H1: The higher emphasis on patriotic rhetoric and patriotic themes increases user engagement.

However, the impact of national and patriotic symbols on voter attitudes is not always straightforward and universally positive, as it can vary depending on individuals' political predispositions and the appeal source. Some researchers posit that national symbols can influence perceptions of specific policies (Ariely, 2018) or alter the perception of individual candidates' political image.

The rally around the flag effect can also matter, suggesting that patriotism benefits ruling parties. The rally around the flag effect refers to the surge in approval state authorities experience at the onset of a major national security crisis, followed by a subsequent decline. This phenomenon involves threats to collective national security, leading to a patriotic truce and cross-party support for defending the nation. It often includes a heightened sense of national identity and increased support for the governing group (Theiler, 2018). Typically triggered by events like interstate wars, terrorist attacks (e.g., 9/11), or disasters like the Covid-19 pandemic, this concept, introduced by Mueller in the 1970s, outlines criteria for such events to induce the rally effect, including international scope, dramatic focus, and direct involvement of the country and its leadership (Mueller, 1970).

The dynamics of the rally around the flag effect vary based on key factors, influencing its occurrence and duration. Murray (2017) highlights conditions such as the salience of the issue in the media and public agenda, bipartisan consensus on the threat, and the country's war status at home or abroad. Defensive actions are more likely to trigger a rally than offensive ones, though this distinction can be ambiguous (Entman, 2004). The duration of improvements in public support for leaders following foreign affairs and military actions, such as the outbreak of wars, tends to last weeks on average (Kizilova & Norris, 2023).

In non-democratic societies, the rally around the flag effect becomes a tool for political legitimacy. Rulers facing foreign pressures or domestic challenges deploy patriotic rhetoric to rally supporters and legitimize their claim to power (Baturo & Tolstrup, 2024). This strategic use extends to election campaigns, where patriotic discourse aims to depoliticize the vote while making it ideationally salient, disarming ideological opponents (Goode & Stroup, 2015). Some autocrats leverage nationalist sentiments, framing support for the regime as a civic obligation to safeguard the nation from external threats (Frye, 2019). Thus, people in such countries

might express patriotic feelings during a rally around the flag due to perceived majority sentiment and social desirability concerns (Hale, 2022).

The strength and endurance of the rally around the flag effect are notably pronounced in closed authoritarian societies. Tight control over media, especially national TV, enhances its potency, showcasing its heightened impact (Kizilova & Norris, 2023). Evidence from Russia after the Crimea crisis, known as the “Crimean moment,” underscores the lasting positive emotional engagement with the leadership (Greene & Robertson, 2022). Therefore we expect that patriotism, due to the rally around the flag effect, benefits ruling parties:

H2: The higher emphasis on patriotic rhetoric and patriotic themes increases user engagement, only for the incumbent.

4. Legislative Elections in Russia and Ukraine

For the empirical part of the study, we focus on two post-Soviet countries: Russia and Ukraine. Ukraine is typically classified as a regime in transition or a partially free country, while Russia is mostly unanimously categorised as an autocratic country. Thus, according to the classification proposed by Marshall and Gurr (2020) in the 2016 Polity 5, both Ukraine and Russia were categorized as uninstitutionalized/weak democracies. Slipowitz (2021) categorized Russia as a not-free, consolidated authoritarian regime, and Ukraine as a partially free, transitional, or hybrid regime in both 2019 and 2021. The Index of Liberal Democracy (Coppedge et al., 2021) fluctuated around 0.1 points for Russia and was higher for Ukraine, averaging around 0.3 between 2019 and 2021.

Despite their Soviet Union roots and adoption of semi-presidential systems, both nations have distinct political landscapes. Ukraine held its latest legislative election in 2019 (originally scheduled for October but moved to July by President Zelenskyy), while Russia’s was in 2021. Each country had five parties pass the electoral threshold. In Russia, the incumbent United Russia (UR) party saw a slight decline to 50.88% from 55.23% in previous elections but maintained a wide majority. Allegations of fraud arose, particularly regarding electronic voting in opposition strongholds like Moscow. In Ukraine, the incumbent European Solidarity (ES) party suffered a significant decline. The newly formed Servant of the People (SP) party, backed by President Zelensky, won 43.16% of the vote, securing a majority.

Patriotism is a salient topic in the political discourse of both countries, particularly accentuated by events like the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the escalation of conflict in Eastern Ukraine, which has persisted to a lesser extent until the outbreak of full-scale war in 2022. Consequently, both countries have been embroiled in a prolonged military conflict since 2014. In light of such crises, linked with military conflicts, we can expect to observe heightened patriotic sentiments.

In Russia, the Crimea annexation boosted President Putin’s approval ratings significantly. Polls showed a surge from 65% in January 2014 to an impressive 85% in July 2014, lasting for years thereafter (Hale, 2018; Kizilova & Norris, 2023; Rogov, 2016). Some scholars suggest this move aimed to counter declining domestic support by triggering a rally around the flag effect through patriotism and nationalism. In Ukraine, the Euromaidan uprising saw a notable increase in national self-identification, further strengthened by subsequent conflict (Kulyk, 2016; Sasse & Lackner, 2018).

Following these events, since 2014 the Russian political elite reinforced anti-Western rhetoric by employing “us” versus “them” narratives. Criticizing modern Ukraine for its pro-EU attitudes, supported and incited by an allegedly hostile “collective West” presented as Russia’s main global rival, became the main narrative in state-sponsored Russian media.

Compared to other post-Soviet countries, Ukraine has had a dynamic political landscape, marked by two major uprisings: the Orange Revolution in 2004 and Euromaidan in 2013–2014. A significant cleavage centered on Ukraine’s relationship with the West, including potential EU integration, versus Russia’s dominance aspirations. Pro-Western and pro-Russian forces, backed by the Kremlin, often clashed over these visions. Since 2014, Ukraine has aligned more closely with the West, emphasizing national identity, language, and cultural symbols (Barrington, 2022; Bureiko & Moga, 2019). These became key points in public discourse and political rhetoric.

Ukraine has upheld overall more competitive and transparent elections (with some exceptions), whereas Russia has repeatedly faced allegations of election rigging and widespread government-backed frauds, leading—amongst other things—to the largest protests in modern Russian history (2011–2012). Furthermore, Russia’s political system is based on a personalized autocracy with Vladimir Putin being in power for over two decades. Another crucial distinction lies in the degree of media freedom: Russia’s legacy media is heavily controlled by the government, while Ukraine boasts a significantly more open and free media system (Nord et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, we can argue that patriotic attitudes in both countries have experienced an increase and may be associated with various positive political outcomes, such as greater engagement and political mobilization. Accordingly, we investigate how patriotic narratives were employed during political campaigns in both countries and analyze to what extent users engage more with patriotically related messages. Thus, our analysis evaluates the impact of patriotic appeals as well as that of topics related to war, military conflicts, and defense policies, which are considered in the literature as drivers or significant mediators of patriotic attitudes (Ariely, 2017; Sullivan et al., 1992).

5. Data and Methods

We are focusing on Facebook, the main social platform in Ukraine and the second in Russia (StatCounter, 2021). It is essential to note that VKontakte (VK), the most widely used social network in Russia, is not as prevalent in Ukraine, where it holds the sixth position in popularity. We acknowledge that not incorporating VK in our study is a limitation, but we have chosen Facebook due to its significant audience in Russia, especially for political discussions (White & McAllister, 2014). It is worth mentioning that VK serves broader spare time interests, while Facebook is particularly relevant for political discourse in Russia and this is another reason to focus on it. While the Facebook audience in Russia tends to be more educated and more often located in larger cities, we should notice that these features apply also to social media users in many different countries (such as Twitter/X users in the Western world).

Through CrowdTangle, we gathered all Facebook posts published by the official accounts of parties that passed the 5% threshold in the last four weeks before the election (in Russia the elections lasted three days). Two weeks after the election, we collected data on user engagement, including the number of likes,

comments, and shares. The resulting dataset comprises 1,963 posts. Further details regarding the number of posts, user engagement, and vote share for each party can be found in the Supplementary File.

Subsequently, an expert coder with relevant expertise in the politics of the region conducted manual content classification for all the collected posts using the coding scheme developed by the DigiWorld research group, concerning the textual content as well as visual elements (images and videos) of the posts. After that another trained coder coded a 10% sample of posts to assess intercoder reliability. We computed Brennan and Prediger's kappa as part of our interrater reliability test. This method is well-suited for robust binary and sparse categories (Quarfoot & Levine, 2016). The obtained values indicate a high level of reliability, with Brennan and Prediger's kappa exceeding 0.8 for all categories used in the present analysis. This content analysis provided initial insights into the extent to which politicians from both countries emphasized patriotic appeals and related topics in their campaign communications.

As outlined earlier, our operationalization of patriotic appeal involves identifying references to patriotic symbols or intentional gestures by politicians. Therefore, our primary independent variable, patriotism, is a binary variable, with posts coded as 1 if they contain any of the specified elements. These elements include images featuring patriotic gestures (e.g., intentional hand-on-heart gestures during national references, salutes, or paying tribute to the flag) and posts featuring images with patriotic symbols like coats of arms and the national flag. The choice of symbolic elements may vary depending on the geographical context, incorporating symbols relevant to the specific territory or country region.

To provide examples of the independent variable, patriotism, consider the actions of Sviatoslav Vakarchuk, the leader of the Holos party and a prominent musician in Ukraine. During his campaign, Vakarchuk held numerous concerts across the country, which were extensively documented on Facebook. Posts on his Facebook page often featured photos and videos showing Vakarchuk symbolically placing his hand over his heart while singing the Ukrainian national anthem or appearing on stage wrapped in the national flag. Similarly, in Russia, the UR party frequently features its politicians in videos where the national flag serves as a prominent backdrop, occupying a significant portion of the screen. Additionally, these politicians may be depicted wearing the ribbon of Saint George, a patriotic military symbol in modern Russia commemorating the Second World War. Posts coded as including patriotism follow a similar pattern to the examples provided.

As the literature suggests (Ariely, 2018; Howe et al., 2022; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1990), patriotism is commonly associated with discussions on specific topics and policies, including war, military conflicts, defense, and foreign and international affairs. Therefore, these aspects are included as control variables in our analysis. Each control variable is binary, coded as 1 if the corresponding topic is mentioned in the post:

- War and military conflicts: This variable covers posts that reference wars and military conflicts involving the analyzed country, whether through active participation or involvement;
- Defense: This variable encompasses posts addressing various facets of defense policy, including national security, the military, external security, peace policy, and détente policy;
- Foreign policy and international relations: This variable includes posts that delve into foreign policy issues, covering topics such as relations with other countries, interactions with international organizations (e.g., UN, NATO), development policy, arms trade, sanctions, and more.

Table 1 illustrates the proportion of posts dedicated to specific topics out of all posts published by each party during the campaign. In Ukraine, the Opposition Platform for Life (OP), a pro-Russian and Eurosceptic party, stood out as the party that most prominently used patriotic appeal in its communication, with 18% of OP's posts featuring patriotic symbols. This was double the proportion of the second-largest share (9%), held by the SP and Holos parties. OP also allocated a substantial portion of its posts to other patriotism-related policy topics, particularly foreign and international relations, with over 20% of its posts covering this issue, nearly three times more than the second-highest scorer, SP, which dedicated 8% of its posts to this policy. All Ukrainian parties incorporated patriotic appeals and mentioned other patriotism-related policies, with the lowest emphasis on this rhetoric observed in the campaign of the incumbent party, ES.

In Russia, the incumbent party (UR), devoted huge attention to patriotism, allocating 18% of its posts to this appeal. This proportion was the highest among all parties. The main opposition parties, i.e., the Communists (which are traditionally the second-strongest parliamentary group in recent years, and also received some support from Alexey Navalny's network) and the newly created liberal party New People (NP) completely avoided patriotic rhetoric, as well as other related policy issues. Overall, other patriotism-related policies were not particularly popular among Russian parties, with the second-most "patriotic" party being the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), which included some messages not only appealing to patriotism but also discussing defense (2%) and foreign and international relations policies (5%). All Russian parties completely avoided referencing war and military topics.

6. Analysis and Results

We now turn to examining user engagement, our dependent variable, which encompasses all types of user interactions: all reactions' emoji (e.g., Like, Love, Sad, Angry, etc.), comments, and shares that were generated by each post. Hence, "engagement" is a count variable that signifies the total sum of reactions, comments, and shares garnered by the post. Given that actions such as commenting, sharing, and reacting with likes or other emojis may be linked to distinct cognitive demands (Xenos et al., 2017), we have included separate models in the Supplementary File that treat reactions, comments, and shares as individual dependent variables.

Table 1. Posts allocated to specific issues out of total posted messages.

Country	Party	Patriotism (%)	War and military (%)	Defense (%)	Foreign and international relations (%)	No. of posts
Ukraine	SP	9	4	7	8	230
	OP	18	4	9	21	380
	Fatherland (Fthl)	8	3	4	2	190
	ES	5	1	2	3	221
	Holos	9	6	14	7	511
Russia	UR	18	0	1	1	191
	Communist	0	0	0	0	72
	A Just Russia—For Truth	1	0	0	0	90
	LDPR	2	0	2	5	64
	NP	0	0	0	0	14

The primary findings remain consistent, with the exception of the non-significant effect of patriotic appeal on shares in the case of Russia.

Our key independent variable, patriotism, identifies posts featuring or mentioning patriotic symbols (e.g., national flags, coats of arms) or showcasing party politicians engaging in patriotic gestures (e.g., paying tribute to the flag). We also examined the impact of three patriotism-related topics: posts referring to war and military, defense, and foreign and international relations policies. To address potential confounding factors, we incorporated a range of control variables pertaining to specific policy topics (e.g., family and social issues, corruption, infrastructure, energy), framing strategies (populism, polity vs. politics, positive/negative tone), post elements (video, photo). These variables are traditionally deemed relevant by the literature (e.g., Bene et al., 2022), given their potential impact on user engagement. The original questions describing each category from the classification codebook are listed in the Supplementary File.

Given the overdispersed count nature of our dependent variable, we employed a negative binomial regression model (as commonly done in the literature) with party-fixed effects and interaction terms to assess the use of patriotism appeals across parties.

Table 2 presents the results of the regression models, separately for Russia and Ukraine (though, as a robustness check, we also ran a single model for both countries with country-fixed effects). Model 1 includes the main independent variables and the controls, while in Model 2 we also add the interaction term between patriotism and the dummy variables for each political party.

In Model 1, we observe that the patriotic rhetoric was linked to a significant increase in audience engagement in Russia. However, this seems associated with a potential decrease in audience engagement in Ukraine, though this result is significant only at the 90% level of confidence.

Table 2. Negative binomial model of campaigning strategies effects on users engagement.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Ukraine	Russia	Ukraine	Russia
Intercept	5.806*** (0.117)	-31.23 (5.7e+06)	5.802*** (0.119)	-33.27 (7.7e+06)
Patriotism	-0.171† (0.091)	0.399** (0.124)	-0.300 (0.301)	0.239 (0.703)
War and military	-0.375** (0.145)	N/A	-0.366* (0.145)	N/A
Defense	0.459*** (0.105)	0.481 (0.408)	0.455*** (0.105)	0.482 (0.408)
Foreign and international relations	0.223* (0.104)	0.170 (0.333)	0.211* (0.105)	0.172 (0.333)
Populism (anti-elite)	0.062 (0.087)	0.258* (0.101)	0.066 (0.087)	0.258* (0.101)
Populism (pro-people)	0.052 (0.066)	-0.073 (0.161)	0.069 (0.066)	-0.074 (0.160)
Polity	-0.096 (0.118)	0.563* (0.231)	-0.094 (0.118)	0.564* (0.231)

Table 2. (Cont.) Negative binomial model of campaigning strategies effects on users engagement.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Ukraine	Russia	Ukraine	Russia
Politics	0.158* (0.078)	-0.192† (0.110)	0.165* (0.079)	-0.191† (0.110)
Economic policy	0.271* (0.122)	-0.081 (0.152)	0.293* (0.122)	-0.080 (0.153)
Family and social policy	-0.478*** (0.114)	-0.065 (0.104)	-0.483*** (0.114)	-0.066 (0.104)
Corruption policy	-0.411* (0.201)	-0.123 (0.310)	-0.422* (0.201)	-0.123 (0.309)
Infrastructure and energy policy	-0.225† (0.123)	-0.403* (0.163)	-0.200 (0.123)	-0.403* (0.163)
Other policies	0.280*** (0.076)	-0.181† (0.101)	0.292*** (0.076)	-0.176† (0.101)
Positive/negative tone	-0.106*** (0.031)	0.073† (0.045)	-0.104*** (0.031)	0.075† (0.045)
Personal framing	-0.064 (0.059)	0.111 (0.078)	-0.053 (0.059)	0.112 (0.078)
Video	0.489*** (0.092)	35.22 (5.7e+06)	0.492*** (0.092)	0.373 (7.6e+06)
Photo	0.340*** (0.089)	35.59 (5.7e+06)	0.327*** (0.089)	0.376 (7.6e+06)
ES/LDPR	1.793*** (0.111)	-1.463*** (0.126)	1.731*** (0.113)	-1.467*** (0.127)
Holos/Communists	0.941*** (0.100)	0.904*** (0.117)	0.953*** (0.103)	0.902*** (0.117)
OP/UR	-2.910*** (0.108)	0.471*** (0.095)	-2.916*** (0.112)	0.468*** (0.096)
SP/NP	1.267*** (0.112)	-0.317 (0.221)	1.266*** (0.116)	-0.320 (0.221)
ES/LDPR * patriotism	—	—	0.797† (0.439)	0.261 (1.007)
Holos/Communist * patriotism	—	—	-0.121 (0.341)	N/A
OP/UR * patriotism	—	—	0.162 (0.336)	0.161 (0.716)
SP/NP * patriotism	—	—	0.108 (0.384)	N/A
Log-likelihood	-23,033.87	-4,569.71	-23,026.37	-4,569.64
Dispersion parameter	0.86 (0.03)	2.15 (0.14)	0.86 (0.03)	2.15 (0.14)
AIC	23,080	4,613	23,080	4,617.6
N cases	1,532	431	1,532	431

Notes: † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; standard errors in parentheses.

As previously mentioned, Russian political parties avoided discussing the topic of war entirely, while Ukrainian audiences tended to respond less favorably to messages referencing war and conflict. Interestingly, messages that mentioned defense policies garnered more attention from Ukrainian users, generating more engagement compared to other types of posts. However, discussing defense policies by Russian parties did not significantly affect audience engagement. Similarly, messages covering international relations policies had no significant impact on audience engagement in Russia, whereas, in Ukraine, such messages tended to attract more attention and generate more engagement.

In Ukraine, the party that consistently received more engagement was the incumbent European Solidarity, followed by the election winner, SP (with The Fatherland serving as the reference category for the model in Ukraine). Conversely, the pro-Russian OP received lower engagement compared to all other Ukrainian parties. In Russia, the Communists garnered the highest level of user engagement, followed by the main regime party, UR (with A Just Russia as the reference party for the model in Russia). The party that struggled the most in generating audience reactions was NP.

Examining other factors associated with a significant increase in audience engagement, we find that in Ukraine, posts talking about politics and economic policies, and posts featuring visual elements (photos or videos) were positively associated with a higher engagement. Conversely, Ukrainian users interacted significantly less with messages related to family and other social issues, corruption-related policies, and negative messages (negative messages refer to the emotional framing variable, in which higher scores are associated with a greater level of negativity). In Russia, anti-elite rhetoric and posts related to politics generated more attention, whereas messages mentioning infrastructure and energy-related policies were less appealing to Russian users.

In Model 2, which accounts for potential differences in the use of patriotic appeal across political parties, including an interaction term between patriotism and parties, the results indicate no significant variation at the party level regarding the effect of patriotic symbols in Russia (though the incumbent party UR was basically the only one to adopt such rhetoric). In Ukraine, the incumbent European Solidarity party seems to benefit more than its rivals from using patriotic symbols (though this effect is statistically significant only at the 90% level of confidence).

7. Discussion

This study analyzed patriotic appeals and patriotism-related issues in online political campaigns within legislative elections in Russia and Ukraine. Our aim was to understand how political parties employed these issues and how users interacted with such content. The findings reveal significant variations between the two countries, both in the communication strategies of political parties and in user engagement.

One of the most significant disparities we observed pertained to the use of patriotic appeal. In Ukraine, all political parties incorporated patriotic symbols to varying degrees within their campaigns. Notably, the pro-Russian OP allocated a substantial 18% of its campaign messages to this theme. The party's unique positioning, which supported the autonomous status of the Donbas region within Ukraine, led them to frequently employ Ukrainian patriotic symbols in conjunction with domestic symbols from the eastern territories. This emphasis on the reintegration of Donbas and renegotiations with Moscow in this regard, alongside potential collaboration in political, economic, and energy domains with Russia, formed a central

pillar of their electoral pledges. Strikingly, despite the extensive use of patriotic symbols by all Ukrainian parties, our results indicate that such types of posts were associated with lower user engagement in Ukraine.

The reasons behind this might be multifaceted. While certain empirical studies have suggested a strengthening of Ukrainian national self-identification in the aftermath of the 2014 conflict, our results do not concur with increased user reactions to patriotic symbols. Factors such as persisting geographical and political cleavages in Ukraine, with eastern regions differing from central and western areas in their stance on pro-Europeanism, could contribute to this phenomenon. Additionally, it is important to note that the 2014 crisis was primarily concentrated in eastern regions, leaving other parts of the country less exposed to military conflict. It is possible that these factors collectively influenced the relative inattention of the Ukrainian audience to patriotic symbols. Future research might explore how these dynamics evolved after February 2022, in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian war, as heightened susceptibility to patriotic appeals could emerge after a tougher “rally around the flag.”

Contrastingly, in Russia, patriotism over the last years evolved into one of the central propaganda narratives, mainly framed in an “us” versus “them” dichotomy. The strong emphasis on patriotic appeal in Russian state media and propaganda narratives likely plays a role in pre-establishing and reinforcing the salience and positive perception of patriotic symbols. The incumbent UR party appears to strategically craft campaign messages to leverage the positive effect of such references. Interestingly, Russia’s main opposition parties opted to completely avoid patriotic symbols and related policies, indicating that these topics were not a salient issue for the dissenting audience.

The findings of this study shed light on the distinctive dynamics of patriotic appeals in two different political landscapes. In Russia, an autocratic country, the straightforward patriotic appeal characterized by references to national symbols, appears to be largely monopolized by the regime party and elicits increased audience reactions (in line with H1). On the contrary, in Ukraine, characterized by more competitive and democratic elections, such “blind patriotic” references do not seem to stimulate (overall) any particular engagement from the platform audience. Nevertheless, when focusing on the incumbent (H2), we notice that the positive effect of patriotism in the Russian case (where almost only the incumbent UR resorted to it) partially overlaps with Ukraine, since the incumbent party seemed to benefit from such rhetoric also in the Ukrainian context.

In conclusion, this study fills a substantial gap by analyzing political campaigning in non-fully democratic countries, a context that remains relatively understudied despite its huge relevance amid increasing trends toward autocratization. The cases of Russia and Ukraine, especially in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics of patriotism in non-fully democratic settings.

This study has some limitations though. First, we did not filter for bot accounts, which could potentially inflate engagement metrics. Nonetheless, our findings reveal that the party of power in Russia, UR, did not achieve the highest engagement rate, with the main opposition party, the Communists, outperforming it (therefore the usage of bots may not have boosted engagement that much). Furthermore, even if bots had been used, there are no specific reasons to argue that their impact should have focused on some types of posts rather than others, so that their effect may not affect our findings. In Ukraine, the incumbent party, ES, had a popular Facebook page and greater engagement compared to other parties in the sample, while the pro-Russian OP received the smallest number of followers, suggesting that genuine user engagement played a substantial role.

Lastly, as a case study, the generalizability of our findings is inherently constrained. Future research efforts should consider expanding the number of countries and exploring various election types, including presidential campaigns, to deepen our understanding of patriotic rhetoric in contemporary political campaigns.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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