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Creating Good Young Patriots

Russian Youth Leaders on Telegram and the War against Ukraine

ABSTRACT This article investigates the role of two state youth group leaders in disseminating patriotic discourses to young Russians on Telegram in the first six months after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The authors argue that these leaders use social media influencer (SMI) techniques to "launder" and propagate narratives that align with the Kremlin's agenda. The methodological approach involved a comprehensive critical discourse analysis of six months of posts from the Telegram accounts of Nikita Nagornyy, leader of *Iunarmiia* [Youth Army], and Olga Zanko, leader of *Volontery Pobedy* [Victory Volunteers]. By cataloguing and comparing the thematic and rhetorical elements of these posts, the study identifies key strategies used to disseminate discourses around patriotic behavior and active engagement with state politics. "Good patriots" were deemed to be those who aided other Russians, took part in the perpetuation of memory politics, and engaged in militarized activities. "Good patriots" were able to participate equally in physical or virtual activities. Feed followers were given the impression of choice and active participation in the construction and dissemination of state discourses. Choices were, however, limited to state-approved activities. The findings reveal a coordinated effort to amplify state-approved messages, leveraging the personal appeal and wide reach of these influencers to legitimize and normalize the official stance on the war. This research contributes to the understanding of digital propaganda and the instrumentalization of social media in modern warfare, highlighting the critical role of influencers in the information landscape of conflict.
KEYWORDS Russia, social media, influencers, youth, militarization, discourse, Telegram

Two weeks after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin announced plans to crack down on domestic usage of Western-owned social media. The Russian government labeled Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as "extremist" platforms and restricted their use in Russia (at least, for those without VPN technology). This came as a shock for many young Russian internet users, who are heavy social media users: a quarter of those aged 13–24 spend more than five hours a day on social media (Badalyan and Gavrov 2021). The Kremlin's decision was the latest of its long-term efforts to limit the Russian population's access to information that might challenge pro-state narratives. As a result, domestic and other friendly platforms have grown in popularity. The big social media winner from the events of 2022 was Telegram, the purportedly independent service founded by Russian citizen Pavel Durov but based in the British Virgin Islands

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and Dubai. Today, Telegram is Russia's most popular messaging service for young Russians, who often see it as a secure channel free of both adult and state interference (*Re:Russia* 2023).

In this article, we examine discourse construction on the Telegram feeds of two leading figures in Russia's major patriotic youth groups prior to and following February 2022: Nikita Nagornyy (b. 1997), an Olympic gymnast and the nominal head of *Iunarmiia* (the "Youth Army"), and Olga Zanko (b. 1990), a United Russia Duma deputy and founder of *Volontery Pobedy* ("Victory Volunteers"). Both figures have large followings on platforms including VK, Instagram, and YouTube (indeed, Nagornyy is still followed by 825,000 users on Instagram). *Iunarmiia*, established in 2015, aims to develop the spiritual and moral, social, physical, and intellectual skills of members aged 6–18 with the explicit intent of preparing them for military careers ("O dvizhenii," n.d.). As of June 2024, the group claimed to have 1.6 million members—300,000 more than in February 2022—and 89 regional offices.[1] *Volontery Pobedy*, aimed at older teens and university-aged students, was established in 2015 to mark the 75th anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War. It seeks to aid Great Patriotic War veterans, share veterans' memories online and in various in-person forums, and participate in civic action relating to the memory of Victory ("O dvizhenii," n.d.). *Volontery Pobedy* claims a membership of 650,000 with 89 regional offices as of June 2024 ("O dvizhenii," n.d.).

Our first aim is to identify core themes and discourses that both leaders promote through their social media sites in the first six months following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. We conduct a detailed content and critical discourse analysis (CDA), closely examining material from each feed. This work reveals that Nagornyy and Zanko promoted discourses aligned with the state's goals of enhancing and fostering patriotism. These discourses emphasized civic engagement, respect for the past, and support for the military. Our second goal is to examine *how* the leaders are engaging with youth. Both feeds exhibit aspects of "social media influencer" (SMI) behavior by posting videos, interactive polls, memes, "clickbait" posts, lifestyle content, and hashtags. SMIs—even if their followings are relatively small—are "strategic communicative actors who perform authentic political identities with the goal of influencing public attitudes and behaviors" (Boichak 2023). We consider whether each leader qualifies as an SMI and, if so, how adopting SMI techniques might be important for leaders trying to engage Russia's young people with state-sanctioned discourses. We argue that each leader shared an almost identical set of discourses around patriotism, civic responsibility, and militarism, albeit using SMI techniques to varying degrees. Through the comparative aspect of our work, we demonstrate that, when deployed effectively, SMI techniques "launder" the discourses we observe in our CDA, making them appear as if they emerge spontaneously from *within* a group of young people, rather than being imposed from above by state-appointed leaders.

1. Although we treat these official figures with some skepticism—the group does not release detail about its membership beyond headline numbers—anecdotal evidence suggests that participation is widespread, particularly in Russia's southwest (Garner 2023, 182).

The research results provide useful data for area specialists exploring the youth movements that are rapidly becoming an ordinary feature of daily life for young Russians and yet which remain a relatively understudied phenomenon. Moreover, they provide scholars of authoritarian regimes with vital clues about how changing mediums of political communication affect participation in and dissemination of restrictive state-approved discourses in times of war.

Engaging Youth Through Telegram

Young people have long been central to propaganda, identity, and statehood for Vladimir Putin's regime (Hemment 2015; L. Gudkov et al. 2022; Nartova 2021; Garner 2023). Despite an apparent policy of inculcating political apathy among its younger generations, the state seeks to engage its young citizens in active citizenship (Lev Gudkov 2020; Blackburn 2020) by participating in limited state-sponsored projects that encompass controlled civic activism, volunteering, and social engagement (Edwards and Mathers 2025). Since the early 2000s, the state has sponsored numerous youth groups that encourage young Russians to take part in activities that combine these behaviors (Hemment 2015). Nonetheless, engaging citizens in such projects has not always proved easy. Early youth groups like *Nashi*, despite their public profile, were fickle. Even the most widespread messaging about patriotic behaviors is not uniformly adopted by Russians (Goode 2016; Krawatzek 2022). Demographic and geographic differences have limited success among apathetic young people (Baekken 2021). As a result, the state has continued to experiment with different modalities and delivery methods to engage young people.

Since 2022, the regime's attempts to encourage active citizenship have become more prominent and better resourced. In 2024, the state has afforded over $500 million dollars to projects promoting patriotism (Manley 2024)—a marked increase on previous years' budgets—which is, as is the norm, supplemented by funds from state banks (Gorozhaninova 2016; "Putin Adds Patriotism," 2023). *Iunarmiia* and *Volontery Pobedy* have received increased funding and are more visible in the everyday (for example, delegates from both groups take part in key events, such as Red Square Victory Day activities and trips abroad with the foreign minister Sergey Lavrov). As part of this trend, the government and associated domains have increasingly turned to digital platforms as a key means to incentivize active engagement with political projects—part of a long-term realignment of outreach methods (Alava 2021, 254). Indeed, state funding for *Iunarmiia* is partially intended for "information-propaganda work . . . including . . . on the Internet" (Minoborony Rossii 2021). Both *Iunarmiia* and *Volontery Pobedy* members are encouraged to join social media discussion groups, participate in viral trends, and play online games (Anisimov and Inshakova 2022; Garner 2024). A major aspect of the "digitization" of youth political activity has been in the recruitment of SMIs, who function both as vehicles for official discourse and as ersatz "friends" for online communities of young Russians. The role of the SMI is to make the untrustworthy trustworthy, to encourage participation in a shared discursive community, and to whitewash discourses of power.

Telegram provides a fertile arena for examination as it is both increasingly popular among young Russians and quasi-political influencers seeking what purports to be an

independent platform. As well as offering messaging and calling functionality, Telegram hosts "channels," where channel moderators/owners can share messages directly with their followers. Followers can interact with each other in comment threads and like and share content on their own channels and in private messages. Telegram thus combines the private messaging capabilities of services like WhatsApp and the public aspects of platforms like Twitter: it is a between space that combines interactivity, public features, and private features, creating both fragmented and shared spaces. While this might indicate that Telegram is a threat to a Russian state that often seeks to limit citizens' access to external information and to discussion, the Kremlin and its proxies—propagandists, fellow travelers, and pro-state activists—use the platform to engage citizens in what has been called the first "smartphone war" (Serafin 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A large amount of scholarly work explores the Kremlin's use of digital platforms to influence populations both at home and abroad. Social media has become an "everyday" apparatus of communication in Russia, particularly for political participation (Sherstobitov 2014; Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020). Much of the work on Russian social media focuses on how the state has cracked down on internal opposition by shuttering unfriendly social media feeds on its own platforms and restricting access to foreign-owned social media platforms such as Meta and X/Twitter (Alieva, Moffitt, and Carley 2022; Dolgopolov and Eremeeva 2023). Scholars have often focused on the state's use of brute force instruments like trolls, botnets, DDoS attacks, and hackers to restrict Russians' access to "unfriendly" messaging online (Vesselkov, Finley, and Vankka 2020; Swed, Dassanayaka, and Volchenkov 2024) and on how what is loosely termed the "opposition" has gathered in self-created virtual hubs to transgress the norms of accepted, state-approved discourse in Russia (Andreevskikh and Muravyeva 2021). The scholarly overemphasis on the latter phenomenon has been obvious for almost a decade (Gunitsky 2015).

Overtly state-aligned online groups (state-led and organic) on VK, Telegram, and other "friendly" social media platforms have not gone unstudied in recent years (Kulichkina, Righetti, and Waldherr 2024; Alieva, Kloo, and Carley 2024; Kuznetsova and Makhortykh 2023; Garner 2022). These studies reveal the Kremlin's sophisticated use of digital culture to impact young people, representing examples of what Sheena Greitens (2013) describes as regime activism, which can involve the promotion of participatory forms of pro-state online activity.

Nevertheless, scholarship on the regime's online activity has mostly focused on state-level approaches with the emphasis on the content provided, rather than the generic vehicles used to provide that (Hoskins and Shchelin 2022). In this sense, the (constructed) *persona*, which is key to SMI behavior, of the information disseminator(s) remains understudied. SMIs seek to create an image of "authenticity" by "position[ing] themselves as experts and trusted sources of inspiration and recommendation" to their

audiences (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017). By adopting their target audience's language and behaviors, SMIs appear to come from within the group they seek to influence (Gräve 2017). They thus function less as hierarchical superiors and more as "fashionable friends" (Suuronen et al. 2022) who can model behavioral change for young people (Archer and Robb 2024). A growing body of work on SMIs and political influence suggests that these "fashionable friends" effectively and ordinarily also play the role of "political friends" that can effectively alter both opinions and behaviors in their followings (Suuronen et al. 2022; Ki and Kim 2019; Naderer 2023; Shmalenko, Yeftieni, and Semenets-Orlova 2021).

This topic is particularly significant not just in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine but also as (a) authoritarian regimes appear to be turning toward *semi*-organic campaigns—or those that appear to be so—and away from the blunt bot-driven approaches that have often been the topic of research vis-à-vis Russian state influence online (Woolley 2022) and (b) SMIs play an increasing role in digital warfare itself as war is transformed into a participatory, virtual phenomenon that involves both civilians and soldiers (Forest 2021; Ford and Hoskins 2022). In Russia, this means the spate of "war bloggers," who run the country's most popular Telegram accounts, present themselves as simultaneously within and without the state-controlled space, allowing them to project the SMI's aura of authenticity and thus engage in interactive exchanges with their followers while also spreading pro-war messaging. In turn, the state seeks to appoint youth leaders who appear to come from within the youth sphere (Palitai and Devochkina 2024) *and* to instrumentalize the knowledge that their most effective online influencers are those who are not explicitly "political" figures, that is, politicians (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, and Blekanov 2016).

The state strives to implement an *everyday* version of militarization that scholars like Enloe (2000), Åhäll (2016; 2019), and Gaufman (2023) deem a powerful tool of coercion and control. For Enloe, the power of militarization in the everyday is not necessarily in its ability to lead more people to the battlefield but in its capacity to move people toward the acceptance of the military as a norm in society (2000, 4). Åhäll notes that those norms reference discourses that are explicit in the world and also those that convey values and ideas that are hidden or taken for granted (2019, 5). One such method the state has used to integrate military values into society is what Gaufman (2023) describes as "militainment," which packages the idea that fighting for one's country is a worthy cause into various forms of entertainment, including films, novels, and video games. Social media is a newer front for the military-entertainment complex; and when military values are promoted on a seemingly independent and organic platform accessible at any time of day and in any place, militarization can become an even more everyday occurrence. Given this context and the rapidly accelerating youth militarization projects underway in Russian politics, it is timely to ask not just how Kremlin-aligned youth leaders such as Nagornyy and Zanko have used Telegram to reach their followers, but also to what extent they explicitly attempt to use SMI tactics and techniques.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the rest of this article, we use data from three Telegram feeds to ask:

- As the full-scale invasion unfolded, how did state-sponsored politicians involved in official youth politics use Telegram to construct discourse and what were the major discourses present on their feeds?
- How were SMI techniques used to persuade young people to interact with the state's projects?
- Were these behaviors and discourses impacted by the advent of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

METHODOLOGY

Case Studies

State-aligned SMIs in the Russian social media sphere may seek—through modeling behaviors and discourses—to create the impression of a shared, participatory community in which politics and daily life become blurred (as per Gaufman, 2023). To explore the creation and dissemination of everyday power within that context, we conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Nagornyy's and Zanko's Telegram channels as case studies, treating each of these feeds as examples of SMI or SMI-adjacent feeds.

Both Nagornyy and Zanko straddle the line between political actor and celebrity, and each has long operated on social media, giving them a cachet to act as an SMI within the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. Nagornyy is better known for his gymnastic achievements—he has won four Olympic medals and three world titles and continues to compete, despite sanctions, at a high level—than for his role as head of *Iunarmiia*, which appears to consist of fronting PR campaigns rather than completing directorial work. As of February 2025, Nagornyy had 29,700 followers on Telegram. Meanwhile, although Zanko is a politician—she has been a United Russia Duma deputy since 2021—she is also one of the most recognizable youth leaders in today's Russia (Selezneva, Bozhedomova, and Lukanina 2022). She has long, through her VK feed, interacted with young followers and posted lifestyle updates about her day-to-day behavior. As of February 2025, Zanko had 10,100 subscribers on Telegram.

Both Zanko and Nagornyy posted regularly on Telegram during the period at hand. Zanko's posts have a more serious and information-driven tone, although sometimes they are dressed up in relatively colloquial language, picture, and video content. Nagornyy's posts, however, are filled with the heavily colloquial visual and linguistic tone of platforms like Instagram and TikTok. His posts are filled with pictures, video clips, and similar materials that were accessible to children of any age rather than long written posts. While we do not suggest that these figures represent the most famous or popular influencers within the Russian social media sphere—they have small followings compared to the country's most popular Telegram accounts, so this study is merely an illustration of state-sponsored communication techniques within two small

community spaces—it is important that (a) their channels enjoy favorable engagement rates when compared to those of competitors[2] and (b) they function as examples of how state-aligned actors may blur lines between celebrity, friend, and influencer on social media.

Analysis

We examine Nargornyy's and Zanko's Telegram posts from the accounts' creation and up to 6 months after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (August 31, 2022). Nagornyy and Zanko established a presence on Telegram either just before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine: the former created @nikitanagornyy in February 2022; the latter created @O_Zanko in November 2021. The posts included in this study are those both authored and reposted by the individual accounts.[3]

We adopted a mixed-methods approach. Data for the period at hand—including text, images, and videos—were downloaded direct from Telegram's desktop app. We examined a total of 1,246 posts. Nagornyy posted 714 times; Zanko 532 times. An initial thematic analysis was conducted, which was crucial in helping us to identify key themes at the macro level (Bouvier and Machin 2020). For this analysis, we fed raw txt files into Voyant Tools, established the most frequently occurring words and collocations in each feed and across the feeds, then used a simple Python script to categorize posts and establish the percentages of posts that touched on major themes. In this initial thematic analysis, we identified four core themes shared by both Nagornyy and Zanko subjects, including:

1. Youth engagement, inclusion, and empowerment
2. Volunteerism and civic engagement
3. National identity
4. Education initiatives and intellectual development

We then conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to ask what discourses underlay posts that referred to these themes. CDA scholars consider discourse to be a "social interaction" that reveals power dynamics (Van Dijk 2015, 467; Fairclough 2002, 25). Interrogating and identifying discursive "power" is a central tenet of CDA scholarship (Van Dijk 2015, 469). Therefore, our decision to use CDA is informed by its capacity to reveal social power dynamics, with particular reference to the values that holders of power seek to normalize in society.

Foucault suggests that spaces of mass communication have power as "political and economic apparatuses," especially when accessible by a broad audience in everyday contexts (Dowling 2021). Social media can be considered a political and economic apparatus. SMIs

2. According to tgstat.com, Nagornyy's posts are read by 35% of subscribers with a 5% engagement rate. For Zanko, the figures are 59% and 12%. The most popular of the so-called war bloggers cannot boast such figures, which for @wargonzo are 16% and 1% and for @boris_rozhin 25% and 1.4%. While figures might be manipulated by bots and trolls, the impression the viewer receives on Nagornyy's and Zanko's channels is of a lively community.

3. Since these posts are on public feeds and authored by public figures, our paper did not require ethical approval.

therefore, through harnessing social media, are agents of knowledge who use their access to mass audiences through their social media accounts to promote select discourses and values that also happen to be prescribed by the state. Given our focus on SMIs, CDA is thus an appropriate approach and the reason we choose to focus primarily on written and visual discourses in social media posts. These span both discourses produced specifically by the authors themselves but include the discourses of others, which authors (channel owners or moderators) share by reposting or opening comment threads.

As Bouvier (2015, 152) observes, however, it is not only the discourse itself but the "algorithms [that have] themselves become realisers of discourse, of forms of social relations, signalling up what your user community values, and signalling what kinds of ideas and attitudes are common across the section of connectivity": thus the construction of power, access to power, and identity across social media—the behaviors we identify as correlated with a user's position as an SMI—may incorporate users' own choices, others' choices, and the algorithmic restrictiveness of a given platform. As a result of this interplay, discursive agendas are established and disseminated among (or hidden from) distinct audiences. Thus, as we conduct CDA, we consider the ways in which facets of SMI behavior, which pursuant to our literature review we define as the blurring of hierarchical boundaries between channel owner and follower to create an atmosphere of trust and "authenticity" between "fashionable friends," interact with textual and visual discourses (for example, through calls for interactivity, competitions, games, and other elements of behavior common among both SMIs and Russian youth groups' recent digital activities).

PATRIOTISM, RESPONSIBILITY, PARTICIPATION IN TELEGRAM FEEDS

According to *Iunarmiia*'s official position, to be patriotic is to be "useful to the motherland" ("Iunarmeitsy strany postiat" 2022). Scholarship helps us unpack the implications of this framing. "Patriotism" connotes feelings of affection and especially loyalty toward one's country (Primoratz 2016; Kateb 2006; Smith 2021). That loyalty is "perhaps the most demanding [and] problematic form of loyalty because it may require the ultimate sacrifice" (Smith 2021, 12). In Russian political discourse, the notion of sacrifice is presented as an essential element of civic identity to both adults and children. The hostile worldview discourse, which suggests that Russia is surrounded by hostile neighbors and that every Russian will experience war, has likewise been a core part of (pre-) Putinist discourse (Yablokov 2018, 1). Therefore, fostering patriotism in Russia typically means teaching youth that good patriots are self-sacrificial in the defense of their national community (Edwards 2024). In their feeds, Nagornyy and Zanko consistently framed patriotic discourses within a series of subdiscourses that link the self to sacrifices past, present, and future. These were embodied in ideas linked to civic responsibility and military memory politics. Each of the feeds suggested to young users that sacrifice and responsibility to act were vital to counter efforts by the West to diminish Russia's history and support for the military.

Zanko regularly lectured her Telegram followers on what patriotism means, using "patriot," "patriotism," etc. 67 times. She considers herself an embodiment of what she refers to as the "three facets of patriotism," which are linked to education, national

identity, and volunteerism and—according to the author—are mutually constitutive (@O_Zanko, March 29, 2022).[4] She depicted these facets in visual form (Figure 1).

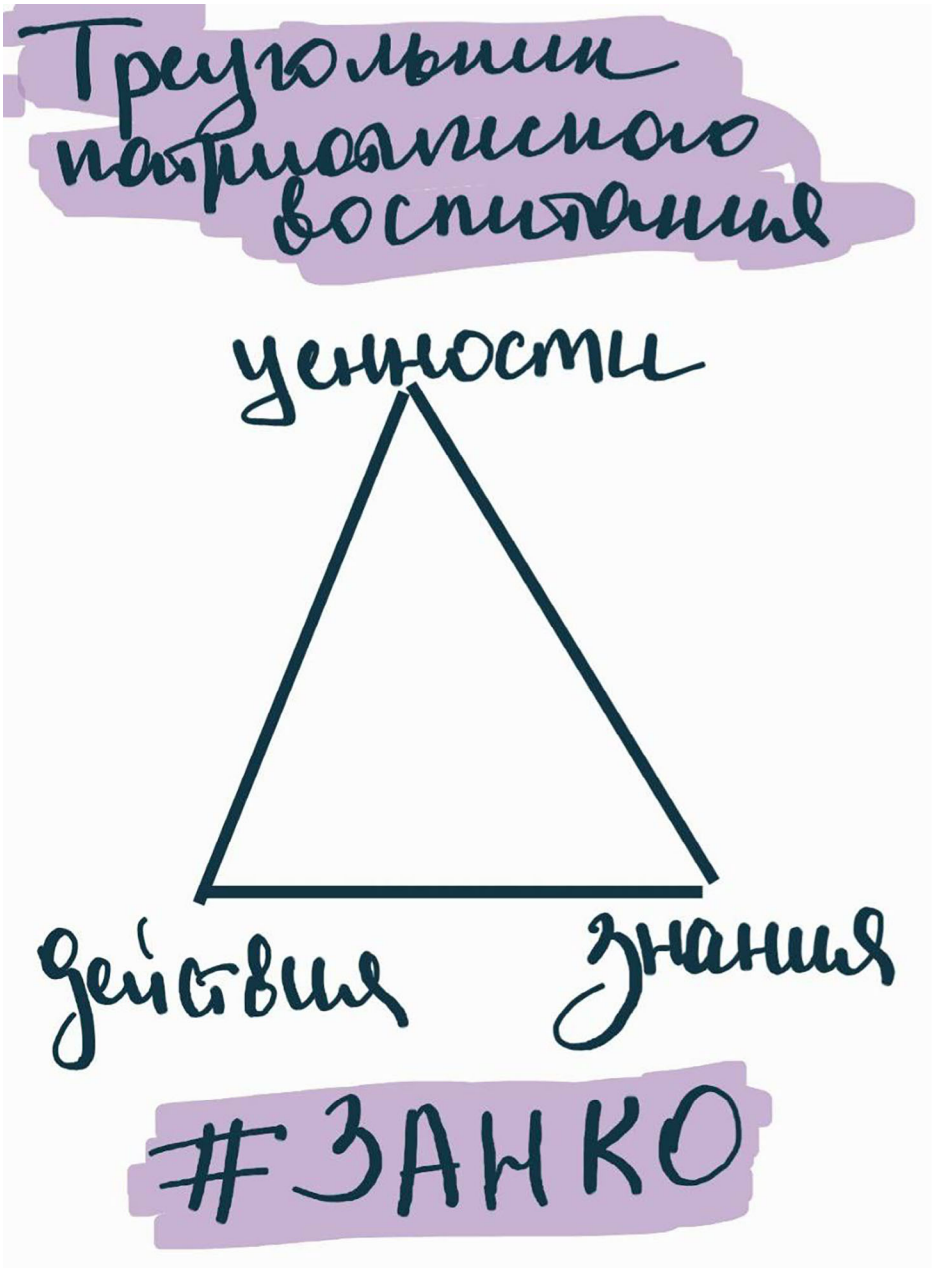

FIGURE 1. Zanko's Patriotic Triangle (Zanko May 31, 2022).

4. All citations refer to data we downloaded from Telegram and have made available on a free online data repository. The dataset with the Telegram feed of Russian youth leader Nikita Nagornyy can be found at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.26411749.v1. The dataset with the Telegram feed of Russian youth leader Olga Zanko can be found at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.26494330.v1.

The first facet, "knowledge" (*znaniia*), educates Russians about topics to take pride in. These explicitly include "achievements [and] heroic exploits." The second, "values" (*tsennosti*), includes fostering a moral value base that popularizes respect for elders and family (for example, the Victory Volunteers are regularly portrayed as part of a quasi-family showing "respect" for elderly veterans of the Great Patriotic War). The final facet is "actions" (*deistviia*), which Zanko explains as occasions "when you not only express your love for the country in words, but also do something real for its development" (@O_Zanko, March 29, 2022; April 20, 2022; May 31, 2022). Her posts reflect her own action, whereby she reports on patriotic initiatives including protection of historical memory and support for youth involvement in activities; these are also reflected in her own law-making activities within the State Duma ("Itogi goda: Zanko, O.N." 2023).

Though Nagornyy only uses the word "patriotism" twice in the material studied, the posts analyzed below revolve around the same trio of ideas: achievement and heroism, active involvement in state-sponsored group projects, and respect for the past. Nagornyy may not explicitly opine on "patriotism," but the discourses he constructs situate his followers within the "three facets of patriotism" framework. However, while the two feeds equally equate *digital* and *physical* participation as means for young people to behave patriotically, Zanko tends to speak from an elevated rhetorical position whereas Nagornyy frames his discourse within a flattened hierarchy in which young people themselves appear to initiate and define patriotic behavior.

Civic Responsibility: Perfecting the Self, Perfecting the Collective

The data show that a core part of patriotism is *civic responsibility*—a common feature of discourses on patriotism (Brubaker 2004). Telegram posts expose Russian youth to the idea that to be patriotic is to engage in both individual and collective actions to better the self and society.

In Nagornyy's Telegram feed, the need to engage in humanitarian work was framed as an important act of civic responsibility. The feeds highlight humanitarian campaigns repeatedly through captions, shared news stories, images, and videos. Nagornyy mentions, for example, the "Relay of Kindness" (*Estafeta dobra*),[5] a Youth Army–run campaign to collect materials for "Russian" or "ethnic Russian" children (the terms are used interchangeably) in Donbas. The campaign's importance is clear: Nagornyy mentioned it in six instances of copy and five videos between March 18 and April 6, 2022. The "Relay" is portrayed as a collective act: Nagornyy shares photographs of himself at events, dressed in Youth Army–branded hoodies, alongside identically clad "young soldiers," local volunteers, and naval cadets. Moreover, while the campaign was organized by a state body, and Nagornyy's own feed elevates it to a central place in discourse about responsibility, he portrays the Relay of Goodness as an instance of spontaneous collective action. In one

5. The "relay" began in Moscow. Young people in different cities would commit and carry out humanitarian acts for Donbas "refugees" and those living in occupied territories. They would then "pass on the baton" to the next city until it reached Donbas. However, the relay ended abruptly without explanation in April 2022.

video, Nagornyy shows an event in Voronezh, interspersing footage of waving and smiling children waiting for autographs and painting murals with a vox pop interview: "I'm so grateful, thank you to everybody that was here . . . thank you." Nagornyy then speaks from a group of young charges: "What's up, friends? We're continuing our Relay of Goodness and today we're in Voronezh. I'm asking you to join us because the Youth Army always races to help out!" (@nikitanagornyy, March 18, 2022). The difference between the leader, the subject, and the initiative for taking responsibility to help others is elided through this discourse that focuses on "friends" and the "we." In reality, this is a state-sponsored event and what responsibility to young people's peers means is entirely dictated and mediated by the state: "responsibility" is limited to the act of participation *sans* agency.

Zanko highlights both individual and collective actions around humanitarian campaigns as emblematic of patriotism. The link is made explicitly when discussing individual Russians. Zanko, for example, singles out the actions of 23-year-old Victory Volunteer Dima, a serving Russian soldier. Dima, who purportedly spends his one-day leave from the war unloading "humanitarian aid" for residents in Donetsk, is an "example of true patriotism" (@O_Zanko, March 23, 2022). Dima implicitly sacrifices something—his free time—to act responsibly. Zanko calls on her followers to reiterate such patriotic sacrifices: "Victory Volunteers," she explains, "not only help on the holidays. We are a people of action" (@O_Zanko, March 1, 2022a). This *action* is explicitly linked to sacrifice, pain, and collectivity. On February 19, 2022, for example, Zanko asked: "Why do I love our country? Because we have never been indifferent to the misfortune of others. This is historical. And now, when terrible events are happening in Donetsk and Luhansk, and people are being evacuated from their homes, we cannot stand aside. This is a collective pain." Zanko notes that humanitarian points are open across Russia, providing a list of necessary items. The following day, she returned to the topic: "Have we ever abandoned our own? Never" (@O_Zanko, February 20, 2022a; February 20, 2022b). In a post from March 31, 2022, Zanko emphasizes the "difficult" conditions that volunteers struggle to work in. Reporting that Victory Volunteers received threats from regions in Ukraine that insulted the Russian army and the president, she explains that Volunteers "are persistent guys, [who] will not stop fighting to send humanitarian aid to refugees, regardless of the threats." To Zanko, the volunteers who support "refugees" are the "real [Russian] patriots" (@O_Zanko, September 27, 2022): *real* patriots struggle, suffer, and sacrifice to assist their peers. Implicitly, those who avoid participation not just physically but at this level of affect cannot be patriotic.

However, when it comes to civic responsibility, the onus is—according to Nagornyy's feed—on the individual to better themself through a personal struggle that is synonymous with the broader group struggle. This is encapsulated in the theme of participation in sport, which occurs almost daily in the feed, whether in the form of references to Nagornyy's own grueling training schedule, to admiration for other sportspeople (Russian UFC fighters, ice skaters, fellow gymnasts, and the hockey player Aleksandr Ovechkin [e.g., @nikitanagornyy, April 13, 2022]), or to Nagornyy's tours of local gymnastics clubs (within the six months after the February 2022, he depicts himself

visiting at least five regional towns to participate in training children [@nikitanagornyy, May 2, 2022]). Nagornyy thus models this discourse of sacrifice through his own status as star athlete.

However, rather than framing this participation as a painful, sacrificial national struggle, Nagornyy does so in terms of an SMI "lifestyle" influencer. For example, in one caption headed "About Discipline," Nagornyy claims that "you often ask about how sportsmen manage to stay on track and get results." He introduces a month-long collaborative event, the "Spring of Champions," to which young people can sign up and receive "exclusive" training assistance from experts. As motivation, the first 500 enrollees who complete 12 training sessions would win a trip to Moscow (@nikitanagornyy, August 4, 2022). Accompanying this is a picture of Nagornyy on a bicycle, followed by photographs and references to Nagornyy's grueling schedule. Those who participate in this and similar events are hailed as "awesome guys" (@nikitanagornyy, April 13, 2022): a colloquialized equivalent of Zanko's term "good patriots."

Nagornyy encourages and models sacrificial participation in sport, incentivizing it for his young followers by promising the creation of a body like his own and an enviable physical reward. The *responsibility* to transform one's body, to participate in sport, is thus transfigured as an *aspiration* to better the self—one framed in SMI terms.[6] In turn, young Russians can aspire to a patriotic ideal: participation in all-national and national competitions, which are regularly depicted through videos of Nagornyy's victorious gymnastics routines and images of athletics heroes swathed in the national colors, and success for the nation.

In comparison, Zanko speaks about her group's members' less individualistic motives for volunteering: "the call of the heart" (@O_Zanko, June 8, 2022). In a post about a veteran receiving a gift, she notes that *Volontery Pobedy* members "often give gifts to veterans. [We] congratulate our heroes on the holidays and make their dreams come true. We always do this from the bottom of our hearts" (@O_Zanko, March 22, 2022). In another example, when advocating for compensation for injured volunteers, she writes: "*Volontery* are the new driving force of our society. These are people with big and kind hearts who are first to help" (@O_Zanko, June 20, 2022). According to Zanko, "a volunteer, first of all, helps not for diplomas, points, hours in the volunteer book, but because his heart dictates so!" Zanko's volunteers are "kind, unselfish people" (@O_Zanko, December 6, 2021). The description of these young people as enthusiastic, selfless, and kind citizens fits into broader conceptualizations of patriotism as a "kind of emotion" or a spiritual experience that drives people to aid their country out of "love" (Wang and Jia 2015; Kulchytskyi and Sophia 2018). Good patriots, according to Zanko, love the nation, thus they spontaneously volunteer to assist it. For Nagornyy, good patriots are the "great guys" who are driven by individual success. Either way, *participation* is just as important as *outcome*.

6. Though Zanko does not center sport in her own discourses on patriotism, her three tenets of patriotism laud sporting participation: "You can't be a patriot on the couch. Patriotism is [participation] in activities for the development of the city, region, country. . . . The main task of patriotic education is to find the 'key' to the child's heart" (Zanko March 30, 2022; May 31, 2022).

Previous research has suggested that today's Russian state portrays civic responsibility in negative terms—what *not* to do—or in terms of a series of dangerous choices to be avoided. However, Zanko and Nagornyy present a positive array of choices through which "responsible" young people can become "good patriots" (Sanina 2018). Zanko portrays these choices from the position of a hierarchical superior—for example, in her graphic depicting the "triangle" of patriotic behaviors—even though she strongly suggests that members of Russia's patriotic youth groups are driven by an innate desire—the "call from the heart"—to behave patriotically. However, the framing of Nagornyy's feed implies that the behaviors of a patriot are not just available in an array of options to young people but actually *defined* by young people. Despite these differences in presentation, each youth leader shares a similar set of discourses about responsibility and patriotism. Crucially, each leader continually highlights acts of individual and collective self-sacrifice as relevant to the success of the nation's efforts both in Ukraine and in competition with the West. The emphasis on volunteerism as an inherent good tacitly encourages the redistribution of responsibility for social policies from the state to youth.

Patriotism: Respecting History, Respecting Memory

Activities around the past are depicted as a vital element of patriotism—and Russia's contest with the West—in the present. This discourse is deeply ingrained in Putinist sociopolitical discourse (Wood 2011; Malinova 2017). Zanko suggests that young people should be the passive recipients of lessons about the past. Commenting on a criminal case against a man seen "mocking" a monument to a fallen soldier, Zanko remarks:

> It is important not only to punish people but to educate them. I am sure if the young people were Victory Volunteers, it would not have occurred to them to commit such acts of vileness. When you communicate with veterans, listen to their stories . . . you begin to adopt a completely different attitude of your country's history. . . . It is important to talk to young people about patriotism in simple and understandable words, to introduce new programs and projects. (@O_Zanko, January 11, 2022)

Zanko thus suggests that those who participate in state youth projects like *Volontery Pobedy* and passively "listen to [veterans'] stories" become immune to committing "acts of vileness": they are all but incapable of anti-patriotic transgressions. Zanko continually reiterates this hierarchical relationship between the state's memory projects and young people as recipients of knowledge (one of the three facets of her patriotism).

Yet youth are not merely passive actors: they are people of civic action. Zanko notes: "Victory Volunteers are people for whom memory, history, love for the motherland and duty to the fatherland are not an empty phrase" (Z@O_Zanko, March 1, 2022). For example, Zanko exhorts followers to "protect" the St. George's Ribbon, an emblem of World War II memory (@O_Zanko, April 27, 2022a).[7] This war symbol, which the

7. This act of protection can be understood through the lens of securitization. The St. George's Ribbon has been elevated to a part of discourse about national security through reference to it, like the nation being "under threat" and "in need of protection." Youth are called to "protect" and "defend" it as they defend the nation (Edwards and Mathers 2025).

Russian state has promoted for almost two decades, was banned in Latvia, Lithuania, and Georgia in 2022. In retaliation, Zanko highlighted the contemporary relevance of a long-running campaign that would see Victory Volunteers and other patriotic youth groups distributing the St. George's Ribbon to the public. Simultaneously, they would explain the ribbon's meaning and teach others how to wear it (@O_Zanko, April 27, 2022b). Later that day, she continued in the same vein: "The St. George's Ribbon acts as a symbol of patriotism, our symbol of truth, memory, and respect." Here, the language of *us* and *them*—"our" symbol of "respect"—which reiterates state-aligned discourse on the topic in other media sources is accompanied by an active call for young people to participate in a physical, state-sponsored memory campaign.

This campaign is purportedly significant for the current war. Zanko emphasized the St. George's Ribbon campaign in the lead-up to Victory Day 2022—a key event for *Volontery Pobedy*, since the group focuses on remembering World War II—in a post on April 27, 2022. She invited "patriots of our country" to wear their ribbon twisted into the shape of the letter Z, Russia's then newly created symbol of the war against Ukraine, "as a symbol of support for the Russian army and our soldiers" (@O_Zanko, April 27, 2022b). While not a novel act—numerous other figures were pictured in state media with the "Z" St. George's Ribbon—Zanko here explicitly links the responsibility to remember the past through physical actions in the present with morale and support for the "special military operation." She also references an exchange between a Victory Volunteer and a Donetsk resident, who after receiving a St. George's Ribbon reportedly said: "I've been waiting 8 years to put this on." Zanko ended her reference by noting "Victory Volunteers will always support the civilian population" (@O_Zanko, March 18, 2022). "Good patriots" are not in this world passive bystanders. In a post made just after Victory Day 2022, Zanko told her followers that "true patriots" oppose the St. George's ribbon ban (@O_Zanko, May 11, 2022a). "True" patriots *listen* to acquire patriotic "knowledge," then actively spread that knowledge to others in the community as an implied act of warfare.

However, Zanko's vision of patriotism is not limited to active involvement in *physical* memory projects. She equally implies that members of her online Telegram community are examples of good patriots. For example, in a caption to an image of *Volontery Pobedy* members working with a 98-year-old war participant, Zanko notes that the "real patriots are here" (@O_Zanko, April 16, 2022). Simultaneously, she implies that those volunteering in person—"here" in the photograph—and those viewing the photograph—"here" in the online space—are "real patriots." On Telegram, therefore, Zanko encourages a form of political participation in patriotic behavior through which *Volontery Pobedy* members feel able to bond with a geographically disparate group of peers (Garner 2023). Zanko's feed functions as a direct reiteration of familiar discourse about responsibility to protect memory. It is shared in a voice all but indistinguishable from other state sources and from a position that limits young people's agency in determining patriotic behavior. Nonetheless, she encourages young people to take political action around remembering the past that transcends the physical and the virtual and that supposedly has real benefits in the ongoing war against Ukraine.

Discourse around protecting memory in Nagornyy's feed made more explicit use of that physical-virtual liminality. As in Zanko's feed, notions of historical memory and present participation were inextricably linked. References to the military past, which took the form of appeals to remember the past—a key feature of Putinist rhetoric directed at young people (Laruelle 2011)—appeared in several posts. These posts can be divided into two forms. In the former, Nagornyy reiterates directly stock language familiar from state textbooks, war stories, and similar artifacts about the past (whereas Zanko tends to use the political language of the *present*). For example, on a trip to Taganrog, Nagornyy photographs himself at the Samobekskie Vysoty memorial complex, adding a caption comprised of an unedited paragraph about the monument available on numerous Russian websites that perpetuate state-aligned narratives of the war (@nikitanagornyy, March 25, 2022a). The language resembles the stilted, stock language familiar from textbooks: "It symbolizes the friendship of the nations that defended the Motherland through the bitter war years and preserves the memory of the heroic battles that occurred on the Mius-Front." Nonetheless, by posting a selfie of himself as a "pilgrim" at this memorial—the pilgrimage being a key state-approved behavior vis-à-vis war memory (Tchouikina 2022)—Nagornyy suggests a way for his audience to interact with this memory: they need not simply absorb the text, nor participate in a mass campaign like Zanko's St. George's ribbon effort, but can physically act by reiterating his own actions.

Nagornyy consistently (re)framed war memory as an everyday, participatory activity. On his visit to the Taganrog memorial complex, Nagornyy also posts a silent ten-second selfie video in which the camera pans clumsily from his face to the memorial then back again (@nikitanagornyy, March 25, 2022b). The seemingly unmediated placement of such videos, of which there are another seven examples, within the space of the SMI feed renders them an innocuous part of the virtual present. For example, on a trip to Nizhny Novgorod, material about training, dinner with Nagornyy's wife, and a video of cheering children in a gymnastics hall is interspliced with a video of a local war memorial (@nikitanagornyy, May 2, 2022). Again, the video is amateurishly shot and unnarrated: it achieves its discursive power through implication and juxtaposition. On the rare occasions when Nagornyy adds a textual component to representations of the past—for example, on a post from Moscow on Victory Day—he frames his activities as part of collective activity: "*We* remember, *we* respect, and *we* thank" veterans (@nikitanagornyy, May 9, 2022). The discourse of war memory is thus not just represented here; it is synonymous with other day-to-day—and desirable—activities that belong both to the world of the influencer and to their audience.

The most frequent manifestation of militarism discourses is in constant references to *Iunarmiia*, which appears overtly in 68 posts (over 10% of the entire set of data from Nagornyy's feed). However, these mentions are rarely about overt militarism in the sense of fighting, violence, or the war in Ukraine. With the exclusion of a triptych of posts in which Nagornyy shows the benefits of shooting an M4 from a seated, rather than a standing, position, no overt military activity—shooting, fighting, etc.—is presented anywhere in the feeds. Indeed, Nagornyy is at pains to dismiss the link between the

Youth Army and real fighting, branding a claim that Youth Army members may be drafted as "fake news" (@nikitanagornyy, March 20, 2022).

Rather, Nagornyy depicts the Youth Army as a fun and desirable place to be. In strings of videos set to upbeat music—the same "selfie"-style videos and shorts in which Nagornyy depicts his celebrity lifestyle—uniformed Youth Army children are depicted as a happy collective (@nikitanagornyy, March 18, 2022). In this discursive world, Nagornyy depicts militarism as "making friends; we leave all the adult questions for our elders." Yet fun is not the end goal. The organization is designed to enable children to perpetuate national greatness and their own self-realization—the former a discourse of the state; the latter a common feature of individualistic SMI culture. For example, Nagornyy links the founding of new Youth Army outposts in occupied territories to "reaching great heights in the development and preservation of the traditions and culture of our nation [*narod*] and giving young people the opportunity of self-realization and self-discovery in life" (@nikitanagornyy, May 27, 2022). Those "self-realized" young people are able to enjoy everyday, fun lives—just one aspect of which is going on pilgrimages to military monuments and engaging in Victory Day activities.

Children take part in the activities around national identity and civic responsibility under the aegis of the Youth Army's militarism. They do so to gain skills, help others, and belong to a community of friends—one that reiterates the community Nagornyy's feed creates—rather than (explicitly, at least) to fight in a war of the present. Moreover, they live in a deliberately isolated world—one in which difficult questions, challenges, and choices belong outside the realm of youth militarism and outside the realm of the SMI feed. Indeed, even in Zanko's feed, which is often more didactic, the discourse of memory and war is *not* framed in terms that demand great sacrifices of young people: if they simply listen, participate, and reiterate appropriate discourses, they can be considered "good patriots" or "great guys." Despite the fact that Russian memory of World War II is dominated by the idea of individual and national sacrifice, these youth leaders avoid making the link between self-sacrifices and discourses around the war of the past.

This phenomenon thus reveals Enloe, Åhäll, and Gaufman's everyday militarization, within which norms reference discourses, values, and ideas embedded in the everyday sphere. While youth leaders here avoid making an explicit link between self-sacrifices and discourses around past wars, values of sacrifice are already entrenched in what it means to be a good Russian patriot and to defend and protect the country. Edwards and Mathers (2025) found that the state's attempt to package military values into fun and exciting projects and programs (defined by Gaufman [2023] as "militainment")—including in the activities of groups like *Iunarmiia* and *Volontery Pobedy*—sought to engage young people with militarism on a deeper and more emotional level. Social media engagement of the type described here makes militarization more possible even in the everyday as it inserts these discourses, eliding differences between self-sacrifice, the past, and the present, in a technology that is always on and always available.

Using SMI Techniques to Build Patriots

As we have noted repeatedly, while each feed shares almost identical discourses around patriotism, the aesthetics and framing of each feed are substantially different. We contend that this is because Olga Zanko does not qualify as an SMI, choosing to play on her elevated status as a Duma deputy to remain distinct from her audience while giving them limited means to interact with her. Nikita Nagornyy does qualify as an SMI and effectively "launders" discourses by appearing to come from within the audience and creating the impression that young Russians shape the terms of patriotic behavior within his Telegram group.

Although she often appears in photographs meeting civic actors, politicians, and children, Zanko refers relatively little to *herself* in her feed. Rather, she attempts to center the activities of youth in her messages by, for example, either responding to questions that have been set by her audience or, more frequently, responding to hypothetical questions. For instance, she begins one post: "What do people meet Duma deputies for?" (@O_Zanko, December 1, 2021). Implicitly, this is a question that her followers are asking her. Nonetheless, she responds in semiformal language, rather than in the spontaneous expressions of excitement, strings of emojis, and video selfies that Nagornyy uses. However, Zanko relentlessly uses her position to promote young people for their achievements in volunteer work, regularly singling out examples of "good patriots" who meet the behaviors expected in her "triangle." While communicating and interacting with her followers, offering them opportunities for praise and reward, and encouraging them to participate in patriotic activity virtually, Zanko plays the role less of "friend"—as an SMI would—and more as older sibling, who guides her young charges in appropriate patriotic behavior.

On the other hand, Nagornyy is indubitably the star of his own feed and actively uses the capacities of the social media platform and SMI behaviors to flatten the discursive hierarchy that Zanko perpetuates. Nagornyy uses SMI techniques to portray youth activities as a collective enterprise, creating the impression that the discourses disseminated within that feed have been formed by community members'—young Russians'—spontaneous, self-defined choices. For example, in one post, Nagornyy uploads a video clip showing a TV screen playing a clip from the 2019 patriotic, state-produced World War II movie *T-34* (@nikitanagornyy, March 11, 2022a). In the clip, a tank commander speaks to his crew before they launch into an apparently hopeless attack: "The hour we've waited for years for is here. We will not fear death. Filled with anger and hatred for the enemy, we'll trample the fascist scum!" Nagornyy adds a caption: "I've watched *T-34* 5 times [praying emoji]." Nagornyy demonstrates the "correct" memory of the war and its relevance to the present: given state rhetoric in 2022 around Ukraine as a "fascist" country, the clip is implicitly linked to the contemporary conflict. Nagornyy models the "correct" way to engage with war memory by consuming it on his own television repeatedly.

In the following post, Nagornyy then transforms his own behavior into a participatory act by asking his followers, "Have you watched *T-34*?" Sixty-five percent of respondents

claimed they had watched the film, 28% had not, and 7% said they "definitely will" (@nikitanagornyy, March 11, 2022b). In this sense, Nagornyy appears not to be a member of the state apparatus but one of the two-thirds of people who perpetuate a particular discourse around war and, by implication, the present conflict. The choice to do so appears to come from the collective—of whom Nagornyy is simply one member. When the same approach is repeated throughout the feed—through polls, repeated questions about what users would like to engage with and see on the feed, exhortations to share their own stories, and so on—Nagornyy effectively "launders" the discourses of the state. They appear not to be vertically imposed by untrusted politicians and elders but choices made by young people themselves. Of course, in these instances, it is impossible to say whether those voting in the poll were real Russian youths, paid trolls, bots, or those otherwise incentivized to choose the "correct" option. Nonetheless, the *appearance* of a flattened hierarchy is projected for real viewers and community members.

Be that as it may, Nagornyy uses his position of power as the channel's most influential figure—and, of course, as moderator—to clearly dictate what is right and wrong. At times, this is made explicit: we're "here to do things correctly [so] don't read fake news, follow us on social instead," he declares in one selfie video from a Youth Army event (@nikitanagornyy, March 20, 2022). Exposing oneself to the "correct" discourse community is equated with truth and, implicitly, safety. The "real decisions" are left to adults while "young soldiers," Nagornyy says, are there to have fun. Nagornyy, although the center of attention and on occasion depicted as a leader who marshals his troops, always appears alongside, within, and dressed identically to his followers. He speaks in their language and gives them—or appears to give them—abundant opportunities to speak too. In this sense, Nagornyy plays the role of a "political friend" and therefore acts as a true SMI. Consequently, the discourses that he shares around patriotism are framed as young people's own, rather than the state's, choices.

CONCLUSION: GOOD PATRIOTS AND THE EVER-PRESENT WAR

Since 2012, the Russian state has poured vast financial and political resources into militarizing its youngest generations. These resources have been greatly increased since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine: millions of young Russians purportedly now belong to groups like *Iunarmiia* and *Volontery Pobedy*. They encounter them in schools, as extracurricular activities, in the media, and, especially, online. Our research questions asked which discourses two Russian youth leaders shared on Telegram in the weeks leading up to and the six months after February 24, 2022, how those discourses intersected with events in the war against Ukraine, and the extent to which leaders were able to use the Telegram platform to take advantage of (SMI) techniques and thus frame the perception of discourses. We conducted a critical discourse analysis of more than 1,000 individual posts. We found that the leaders in question privileged the creation of *patriotism*—embodied in narratives of self-sacrifice, civic responsibility, remembering, and militarism—throughout their feeds. In posts that reiterated broader state discourse around an isolated Russia facing down external threats, "good patriots" were asked to actively

participate in state projects to better themselves and their community: good Russians used Telegram over untrustworthy external platforms; good Russians defended historical memory against enemy states; and good Russians prepared themselves physically for struggle.

The war of the present loomed large in these feeds, more explicitly in the case of Zanko and implicitly in the case of Nagornyy. Nonetheless, Zanko explicitly mentioned the "special military operation" (or synonyms) only 15 times throughout the data at hand. Nagornyy never mentioned it explicitly. Despite leading a paramilitary youth group charged with preparing children for war, his feed *never* included any references, textual or otherwise, to serving soldiers or events in Ukraine. As with Zanko, the war was framed as an event linked to active patriotic behaviors in the present: defending memory, preparing oneself physically, and so on. The discrepancy may be explained by the difference in target audience age: Zanko's *Volontery Pobedy* are older teens; Nagornyy's "young soldiers" may be as young as six. When considered within the state's broader attempts to portray the war in Ukraine as a long-term, metaphysical war against the West for Russia's survival—and, on occasion, as the literal reincarnation of the hallowed Great Patriotic War—the links made between desirable patriotic behavior and militarized activities are significant.

Despite some superficial similarities, while Olga Zanko's feed only used some features of SMI behavior, Nikita Nagornyy situated himself as a member of his target audience—a participant in, rather than a dictator of, discourse and behavior. During our research, we could not find another state-aligned youth leader who used SMI techniques as explicitly as Nagornyy. Nagornyy's feed blurs the lines between state and subject—an indistinctiveness embodied in Nagornyy's own representation in the feeds as both a leader and one of the led, as a heroic sporting champion and a struggling sporting participant. As distinct from traditional media, therefore, the Telegram platform gave young Russians an opportunity to feel that they are actively involved in the shaping of community and political discourse. In an era when, despite high approval ratings, Putin and the state are not trusted widely by younger demographics, this approach to using social media, which is just one part of a multi-year project of digital engagement of young people, may prove effective for the state.

Nonetheless, the social media discourses around patriotism we describe are a powerful tool of restriction. Despite giving the impression that young people have *choice* in the self-construction of their patriotism, the discourses reinforce a clear divide between the good and the bad. Participation in sport, for instance, is by nature exclusionary when it is framed as civic responsibility: those who cannot participate in an approved activity—and Nagornyy only highlights *state*-organized sporting events and activities—cannot by definition become good patriots (Gayles, Rockenbach, and Davis 2012). Indeed, throughout the posts from both feeds, "good patriots" are portrayed as fighting in wars and engaging in combat and self-sacrifice. They participate in state-aligned youth projects digitally and in person. Yet they are those that are fit, strong, and able-bodied: those that take part are "heroes" and can *become* strong; those that remain on the sidelines are not and cannot. These insights build on earlier work on discourses of gender and heroism around the *Iunarmiia* (Alava 2021).

Within the Telegram group, there is no space for rupture, debate, or bodies that do not fit into or choose to participate in these narratives. Nonetheless, within that space, especially in Nagornyy's feed, discourses are presented as emerging spontaneously from the collective; as if divisions are a product of young people's own decision-making rather than a narrative imposed by a state-sponsored youth leader and gymnast. Thus the land of "opportunities" and "self-realization" portrayed within both Zanko's and Nagornyy's feeds is highly limited and exclusionary. "Good patriots" appear to struggle patriotically, dedicating themselves to their community in state-sponsored projects and readying themselves for war: in return, they, like their country, will be rebirthed in what the state presents as a war of sacrifice and renewal.

Our research provides insights for the scholarly study of Russian youth militarization programs, linking them to the growing body of research on the political activities of social media influencers. While Nikita Nagornyy's explicit SMI techniques are not yet widespread, they suggest what could prove—with further study—to be an effective means, through the militarization of everyday experience, of encouraging active participation with the political projects of a state that is not widely trusted by its own population. We recognize the limitations of our work. Nagornyy's and Zanko's feeds have not reached a mass audience, so it is impossible to say that they have exerted any great influence. We did not attempt to determine the extent to which participation in the groups was organic, so we cannot conclude that young people really did participate in the Telegram communities willingly (or at all). Future research projects therefore might explore whether the young people who follow Nikita Nagornyy and Olga Zanko, or engage in other online communities where the same discourse "laundering" techniques are used by Russian state proxies, actually take discourses about patriotism to heart by incorporating them into their subjectivity, increasing their participation in online projects or communities, or signing up to state-sponsored memory, sporting, or youth campaigns.

Moreover, we studied only two feeds for a period of six months, without follow-up work to determine how and why discourses may have been altered in response to new sociopolitical events. Indeed, an anecdotal scan of the feeds in late 2024 suggests that some of the SMI activity has receded from Nagornyy's feeds: there are fewer posts inviting participation and more images of a besuited Nagornyy attending state functions. Perhaps this results from changes in the geopolitical situation since fall 2022, or perhaps Telegram has proven to be a less effective tool than the Kremlin hoped for. Nonetheless, there is no reason that the techniques we have outlined should not be used on other feeds or platforms. Given the difficulties the Russian state encountered in trying to engage young people with its militarization, historical, and memory politics, we have outlined just one more approach the state has taken to engagement. While there is no certainty it will prove to be a panacea for the Kremlin, the militarizing use of SMI techniques by state proxies on social media is a trend worth further attention. ■

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