

# WARTOK – TikTok and the war in Ukraine

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**The author shows how, in 2022, the video platform TikTok became a focal point for images and interpretations from the warzone. As well as multiperspectival documentation and eye witness accounts, however, there is also disinformation and propaganda, and this challenges the media competence of young users.**

The video<sup>1</sup> is only 12 seconds long. It shows a Ukrainian soldier, whose TikTok username is @alexhook2302. He is standing in a scorched field against a dark grey sky. And dancing (Ill. 1). We hear the 1987 song “Smooth Criminal” by Michael Jackson. “Annie, are you okay? Are you okay? You’ve been hit by a smooth criminal.” Alex turns, kicks his leg forwards, sending black soil flying through the air. He looks down, holds onto his helmet, and skilfully performs a Moonwalk – the dance step where the legs look like they are walking forwards but are actually moving backwards. It looks light-footed and elegant, even though Alex is wearing battle gear with a camouflage pattern rather than a lightweight white suit like Michael Jackson often did. Alex’s video has been viewed more than 88 million times on TikTok. With almost 14 million likes, it now has double as many likes as the official music video “Smooth Criminal” on YouTube.

Many people were surprised when the TikTok video platform – operated by the Chi-

nese company ByteDance – became one of the focal points for images and reports from the Ukrainian warzone in 2022. TikTok is where people can find the first signs of Russian troops mobilising, multiperspectival documentation of the invasion, eye witness reports, reports of fighting, commentary, avowals of solidarity, and propaganda. Videos with the hashtag #Ukraine were viewed 56.8 billion times (as of September 12, 2022, when this article was written). Before the war, there were 6.4 billion views.

The app now plays such an influential role in the conflict that, according to a report by the news agency Reuters,<sup>2</sup> the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky explicitly addressed TikTok users in a speech to Russian citizens at the beginning of March, telling them that they could help to end the war. This is because on the one hand Tik-

Tok conveys images and reports with a topicality, a proximity to the action, and an aesthetic that do not feature in traditional media. At the same time, the transitions between all kinds of politically motivated contributions are very fluid. It is a double-edged sword, for the intentions behind the highly attractive imagery – which has not existed until now – are often difficult to decipher.

## WHY TIKTOK IN PARTICULAR?

The app – which for many people is synonymous with short, mostly trivial video clips of dancing teenagers lip-synching to songs – has, since 2018, slowly but surely worked its way up to the top of the most successful online platforms. According to *GQ magazine* in August 2021,<sup>3</sup> TikTok has overtaken

Facebook and is now the most downloaded app in the world. One month later, TikTok announced it had more than one billion active users. For the first time ever, a global platform that has not come out of America is setting the tone. And suddenly, the US competition wants to be like TikTok. Instagram and YouTube are copying the fundamental elements of its design, because TikTok’s success continues unabated. In the meantime, it is no longer predominantly young users on the platform. Journalists and politicians are experi-



Screenshot from TikTok © alexhook2302

Ill. 1: The video of a Ukrainian soldier doing the Moonwalk in a scorched field was viewed 88 million times on TikTok

menting with it, recognising that they need to reach young, very young, and future target groups. In the run-up to the German election in 2021, 5 in 7 parliamentary groups represented in the Bundestag had their own account and, along with international politicians such as Emmanuel Macron and Matteo Salvini, they experimented with political communication in the form of short videos.

TikTok is very simple to use, and usage can begin as soon as the app is installed. While other apps are asking new users to state their interests and follow other people, TikTok is already presenting its first video. The videos are vertical and full-screen, often less than one minute long, set to music, and usually intensively edited. The action happens immediately. There is no time for any kind of introduction, opening credits, introductory remarks or tracking shots. There are usually presenters looking directly into the camera. And if users do not like the video, they swipe up on the screen and another video appears. Algorithms in the background analyse the minutiae of user behaviour. Was the video swiped away? If so, when? Or was the video viewed more than once, maybe even “liked” by clicking on a heart, or actually commented on? This is how the selected videos are adapted to users’ behaviour and interests, and before they know it, users are spending more time on the app than they had ever planned. Time flies by, because the things creative people all across the planet are posting here are usually much more interesting than what one’s own friendship group has been sharing, day in day out, on other platforms.

## “TANKTOK”

For example, there is a smartphone video, filmed from a car, of an endless freight train. It is clearly carrying military equipment. We see tanks and olive-green trucks, a snow-covered street against a steel-blue sky. It is



Ill. 2: The user Marta Vasyuta publishes scenes of the first Russian attacks on TikTok on February 24, 2022

the end of January 2022, and Russian TikTok users are documenting Russian troops moving west. While official Russian departments and the president are publicly denying that Russia is planning to invade Ukraine, hundreds of videos show the exact opposite. As the *Washington Post*, among others, reports in mid-February, journalists and experts from OSINT (Open Source Intelligence) are matching the videos with, among other things, satellite images, and tracing the movement of troops.<sup>4</sup>

Why are Russian users turning to TikTok in particular to produce these videos and upload them to the internet? The answer is, it is very simple to use. To publish a short video on TikTok, all it takes is to click on a recording button and, if required, pause and add in other footage. It is very easy to add in background music, and then the video is ready to go. If a user already has a video clip on their phone, it is even quicker. In addition to this simple production method, there are 2 other reasons for TikTok’s success. TikTok is not, strictly speaking, a social network. Unlike with other platforms, users do not actually need people to follow their

account. Instead, the algorithm plays new videos to a small circle of selected and unknown users. When these people view the video and interact with it, it is played to a larger circle of further unknown users. This process repeats itself until there are no longer enough users viewing the video. The result is that even a single video has the potential to go viral and amass thousands, if not millions, of views and likes. This makes TikTok attractive – especially for new users.

As Russian tanks move west in mid-February, numerous experts – including a long-serving ARD correspondent in Moscow – are convinced the Russian president “ultimately won’t attack”.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, videos are accumulating on TikTok in which mostly young users express their fear of war coming closer, exchange tips on what to pack in case of an emergency, and try to stop President Putin (here often referred to as “Vladdy Daddy”) attacking Ukraine by sharing comments hastily translated by Google. These actionist, humorous, short video interjections and audio-visual handicrafts – often laced with allusions to popular culture – may seem naïve, but they can be understood as a collective coping strategy. Furthermore, they anticipate concrete events (e.g. the start of the war, people fleeing, the tracking of smartphones for attacks, etc.). Here, on an intimate smartphone screen in one’s own hand, TikTok provides a direct discursive space in which users from very different national, cultural and socio-economic contexts can interact via textual commentary or video reply, outside the boundaries of traditional media.

The attack and invasion by Russian troops on February 24, 2022 is also documented on the app. Unlike in previous wars and conflicts, TikTok provides a whole new level of multi-dimensional and, at least at first, fairly unfiltered audio-visual insight into the chaos of war. While international journalists such as Matthew Cassel,

reporter for *Vice World News*, reports via TikTok from the Ukrainian capital, Ukrainian TikTok users like Marta Vasyuta (@martavasyuta) film air attacks<sup>6</sup> in western Ukraine (Ill. 2). These are later confirmed as authentic by the Correctiv research centre.<sup>7</sup>

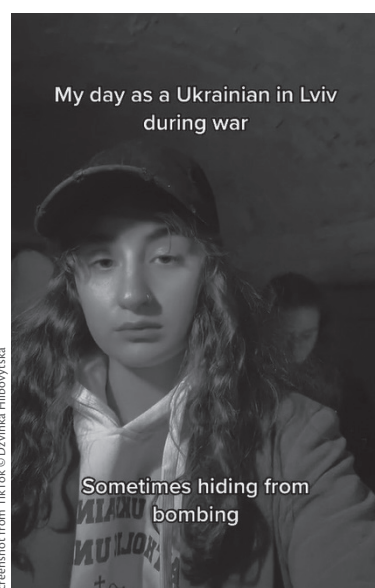
### “BOMB SHELTER VIBES”

Videos by young Ukrainian TikTok users documenting their lives in the new state of emergency leave the most lasting impression. 18-year-old Alina Volik (@alina\_\_volik) from Zaporizhzhia, for example, published holiday videos on the platform before the war. Now she films her emergency rucksack with documents, money and medicine, shows taped-up windows and screenshots by friends who send her pictures of their improvised air-raid shelters via messenger service. 18-year-old Dzvinka Hlibovytska, too, films her daily life (Ill. 3) and later her flight from the city of Lviv.

It is one thing to be someone on the outside watching a short news clip on the war from the safety of their home. It is quite another thing to be shown – pretty much face-to-face – by people who otherwise only appear as the passive object of news, for example, that they are watching the animated film *Minions* on their tablet PCs while they are holding out in the air-raid bunker. The videos and short, laconic reports by Valeria Shashenok (@valerisssh), for example, are reaching viewers worldwide and far beyond TikTok itself. She uses the app’s typical entertaining narrative modes, e.g. the video format “What’s in your bag?” Whereas teenagers and people in their twenties normally use this format to present cool designer bags with only enough storage capacity for a smartphone and a few cosmetics, Shashenok presents a bin liner full of noodles and packets of rice. The toilet in her cellar has become a library, a metal tub with water in it has become a “jacuzzi”, and the coffee, thanks to the

power cut, is heated with a gas burner. Users all over the world are sharing in this life on a daily basis, as well as in her later flight.

Videos like these come under the catchphrase “Bomb Shelter Vibes”. The vibe – i.e. an emotional reaction to the aura of a person, place or thing – is central to TikTok. As well as purely conveying information, videos containing non-verbal, audio-visual codes also work well, as users develop a connection with them. Ukrainian TikTok users employ well-known and popular sounds, trends and challenges on the app, and imbue these with another layer of meaning. Whoever uses the app on a daily basis immediately thinks of images of Ukraine when they hear songs like “Another Love” by Tom Odell, or the Sicilian folk song “Luna mezz’o mare”. Instead of being the passive object of this reportage, these young people have become active subjects, determining their own – direct and intimate – narrative. Or, as the meme expert Irdil Galip puts it in the magazine *The Face*: these noticeably light-hearted videos are a “F\*\*\* y\*\*\*” finger up to the genocidal Putin and his cronies who are wreaking havoc in Ukraine.<sup>8</sup>



Ill. 3: Dzvinka Hlibovytska shows her daily life in the Ukrainian city of Lviv on TikTok

### MIS- AND DISINFORMATION

It is of course not only journalists, eyewitnesses and people who have been affected themselves who publish content on TikTok under the hashtag #Ukraine. In only the first few hours of the invasion, the platform was flooded with a bewildering assortment of propaganda videos, false eyewitness reports and misinformation. The algorithm sends interested users more and more war content on the “For You” page. Here, among other things, users can find video material that actually comes from computer games<sup>9</sup> or very different contexts<sup>10</sup>, such as a troop exercise from 2016<sup>11</sup> (see also Msughter in this issue).

Users’ motivations for sharing demonstrably false information are many and various. Fraudsters try to capitalise on the plight of people living under war with fake livestreams<sup>12</sup> and the potential to capture what are known as micro-donations, i.e. payment authorisations, via the app. Others use another popular function on the app to attach new video material to the audios of other users so as to pretend that they themselves are in the warzone.<sup>13</sup> We can only speculate on the precise reasons for this: the quest for validation through likes and sympathy, an over-identification with the people directly affected by the war, or simply a wilfully naïve approach to using the platform’s familiar features? In the course of the conflict, TikTok has proven to be just about “the most reliable source we have”<sup>14</sup> and the epicentre of mis- and disinformation.<sup>15</sup> As well as, to some extent, unwittingly sharing false information, the warring parties also used the app to knowingly spread disinformation. Since the start of the war, the Ukrainian president and his team have had a very good understanding of how to place information on social media channels, content platforms such as TikTok, and messenger services.

The war is an information war too. This has involved, for example, the creation of a legend: the so-called “Ghost of Kyiv”. The ghost is supposedly the Ukrainian pilot of a MiG-29 that shot down 10 Russian military planes. Videos on this have gone viral. Even the Security Service of Ukraine propagated the claim<sup>16</sup> until the Ukrainian air force confirmed at the beginning of May that there had never been any such ghost.<sup>17</sup> The Institute for Strategic Dialogue reports that Russian-controlled media are flooding TikTok with disinformation.<sup>18</sup> Even after TikTok prohibited the uploading of new videos from Russia, a few accounts – such as RIA Novosti and the editor-in-chief of RT, Margarita Simonya – continued posting, until most of the accounts were blocked at the beginning of May. As well as control of the Russian media, the Kremlin’s information war encompasses other forms of disinformation. For example, there are coordinated actions involving Russian creatives, as reported by, among others, *Vice*.<sup>19</sup> Over 180 Russian influencers on TikTok are involved in a concerted propaganda campaign called “Russian Lives Matter”, according to the American non-governmental organisation Media Matters.<sup>20</sup> The influencers use popular songs on the app to perform, for example, a choreographed piece that culminates in 2 hands forming the letter “Z”. This stands for the Russian invasion, and the intention is quite clearly to use TikTok to channel this letter into popular culture and the daily reality of a younger target group who will pick up on and imitate it.<sup>21</sup> In addition, there are videos in which Russian influencers proclaim messages that are largely identical word for word with government propaganda and have obviously been disseminated beforehand via telegram channels.<sup>22</sup> At this point in time, we can only speculate about the success of these campaigns. But the very fact that so much time and effort are expended on

TikTok recordings shows how relevant the platform now is, including in the political context.

In terms of engaging young target groups, TikTok has left the former mass medium of television way behind. The *Financial Times* reported in August 2022 that, according to a study by Ofcom, users between 15 and 24 years of age in Great Britain spend, on average, 57 minutes on the app every day, which is more time than they spend watching television (53 minutes).<sup>23</sup> Current figures indicate that TikTok is about to overtake Instagram in the same way. As reported by the *Wall Street Journal*,<sup>24</sup> TikTok users spend 10 times longer consuming content on TikTok than they do viewing Instagram reels videos. Germany’s – according to Statista<sup>25</sup> – 19.51 million TikTok users are now watching, alongside challenges and music and cookery videos, war videos and propaganda on the app, too. There is an urgent need to promote digital literacy here, for people need to be able to interpret and evaluate content in a more information literate way. “What am I actually watching here? Can I check this information? Who has posted this, and what are their motivations?” These are all questions that should go hand in hand with daily TikTok consumption. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.tiktok.com/@alexhook2303/deo/7063830345262648581?is\\_copy\\_url=1&is\\_from\\_webapp=v1&lang=en](https://www.tiktok.com/@alexhook2303/deo/7063830345262648581?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1&lang=en) [19.9.22]

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/technology/tiktok-war-how-russias-invasion-ukraine-played-social-medias-youngest-audience-2022-03-01/> [19.9.22]

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gq-magazin.de/technik/artikel/tiktok-app-ueberholt-facebook-downloads> [19.9.22]

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/11/russia-ukraine-military-videos-tiktok/> [19.9.22]

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.n-tv.de/mediathek/videos/politik/Schmidt-Denker-Putin-wird-am-Ende-nicht-angreifen-article23068743.html> [19.9.22]

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.tiktok.com/@martavasyuta/video/7068169525350386950?\\_r=1&t=8SC4aRPIMKT&is\\_from\\_webapp=v1&item\\_id=7068169525350386950](https://www.tiktok.com/@martavasyuta/video/7068169525350386950?_r=1&t=8SC4aRPIMKT&is_from_webapp=v1&item_id=7068169525350386950) [19.9.22]

<sup>7</sup> <https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/2022/02/25/videos-von-luftangriffen-auf-den-militaerflughafen-iwano-frankiwsk-sind-authentisch/> [19.9.22]

<sup>8</sup> <https://theface.com/society/why-are-ukrainians-posting-on-tik-tok-russian-invasion-putin-social-media-viral-politics-young-people> [19.9.22]

<sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/Shayan86/status/1500650778318540802> [19.9.22]

<sup>10</sup> [https://twitter.com/mk\\_boehm/status/1502186620518379526](https://twitter.com/mk_boehm/status/1502186620518379526) [19.9.22]

<sup>11</sup> [https://twitter.com/oneunderscore\\_/status/1496897223237554177](https://twitter.com/oneunderscore_/status/1496897223237554177) [19.9.22]

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/abbieasr/status/1497381583984074755> [19.9.22]

<sup>13</sup> <https://twitter.com/tiktaktactics/status/1497148096802926616> [19.9.22]

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/watching-the-worlds-first-tiktok-war> [19.9.22]

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.newsguardtech.com/de/special-reports/russland-ukraine-tracking-center/> [19.9.22]

<sup>16</sup> [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geist\\_von\\_Kiew#cite\\_note-5](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geist_von_Kiew#cite_note-5) [19.9.22]

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/ukraine-admits-ghost-kyiv-isnt-real-wartime-myth-russiarcna26867> [19.9.22]

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.isdglobal.org/digital\\_dispatches/propaganda-russia-state-controlled-media-flood-tiktok-with-ukraine-disinformation/](https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/propaganda-russia-state-controlled-media-flood-tiktok-with-ukraine-disinformation/) [19.9.22]

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.marcus-boesch.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/masquerade.mp4> [19.9.22]

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.vice.com/en/article/epxken/russiantiktok-influencers-paid-propaganda> [19.9.22]

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/4a2f2ad8-7633-4bd7-9300-988f699dfbc9> [19.9.22]

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.wsj.com/articles/instagram-reels-tiktok-meta-facebook-documents-11662991777?mod=hp\\_lead\\_pos10](https://www.wsj.com/articles/instagram-reels-tiktok-meta-facebook-documents-11662991777?mod=hp_lead_pos10) [19.9.22]

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1299807/number-of-monthly-unique-tiktok-users/> [19.9.22]

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