

Debunk EU

PORTRAYING NATO: DEFENDER 2020

September 2019 - June 2020

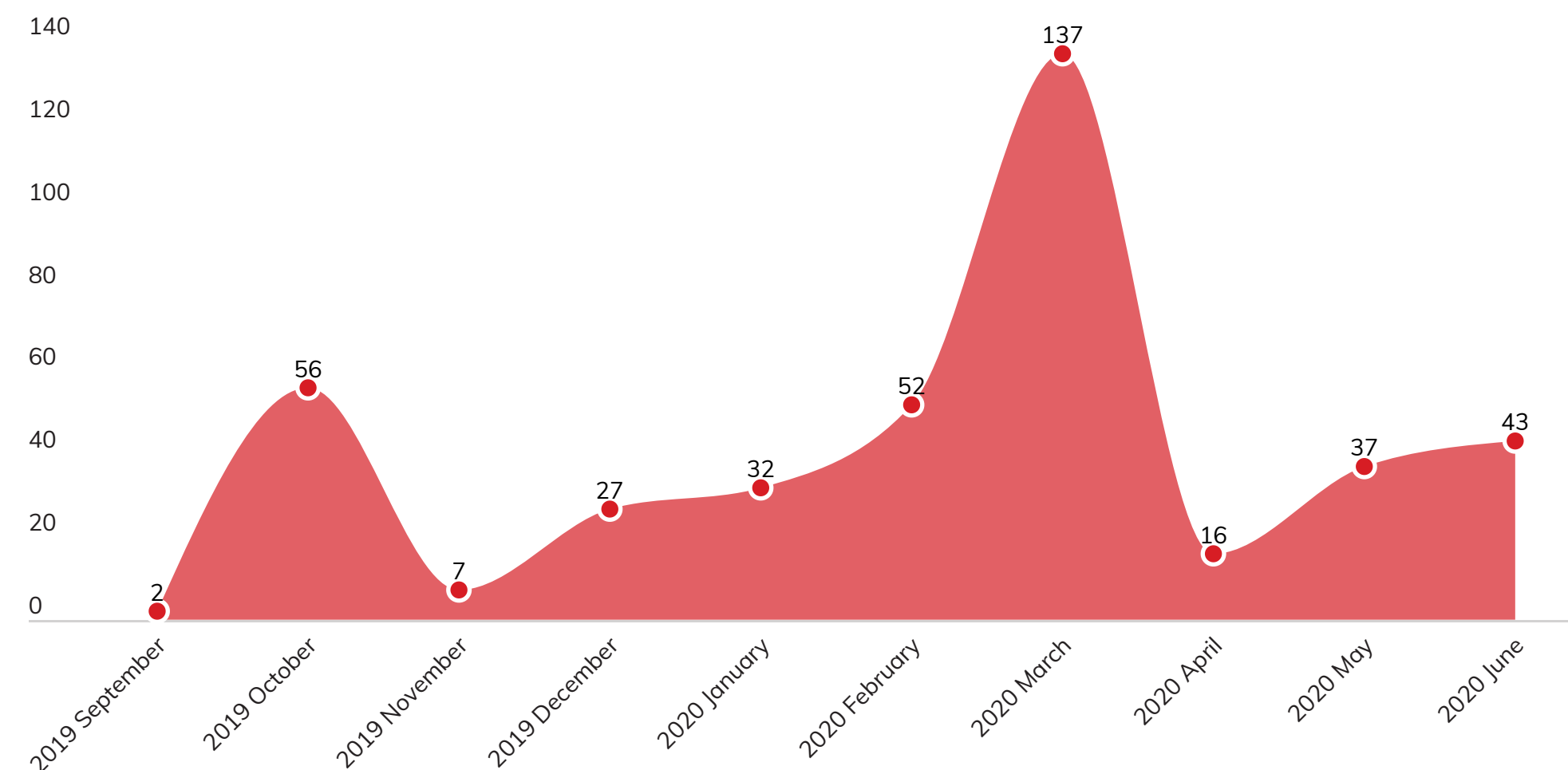
INTRODUCTION

September 2019 - June 2020

Scope

On September 2019 - June 2020, Debunk.eu spotted and analysed **409 mentions** of **Defender 2020** military drills.

Dynamics of articles on Defender 2020



Insights

- **Eadaily.com** and **rubaltic.ru** published the largest number of articles mentioning Defender Europe 2020 exercises (64 and 33 articles respectively), both having the biggest impact on the image of the exercises in terms of negative publicity.
- In terms of total reach, the first three websites that wrote about the exercises – **rambler.ru**, **ria.ru** and **rt.com** – need to be mentioned.
- **the peak** of Defender Europe 2020 mentions was spotted on March 7th in relation to the comments of the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Maria Zacharova about the "NATO's fist on Russian border".
- The most articles written on Defender Europe 2020 exercises were noticed in **March 2020** (137), October 2019 (56), February 2020 (52). In October the main message was the increase of US troops in Europe and in February and March – the impact of the pandemic for the exercises.
- The widest number of **social interactions** (1077) was achieved by the article on **rubaltic.ru** (NATO exercises in the Baltic have become a laughing stock), which portrayed Defender Europe 2020 negatively. Among the neutral articles, the largest attention was attracted by **obzor.lt** (American tanks leave Lithuania) – 976 social interactions.

Overview



DEFENDER 2020 IMAGE

September 2019 - June 2020

DEFENDER 2020 - OVERVIEW (I)

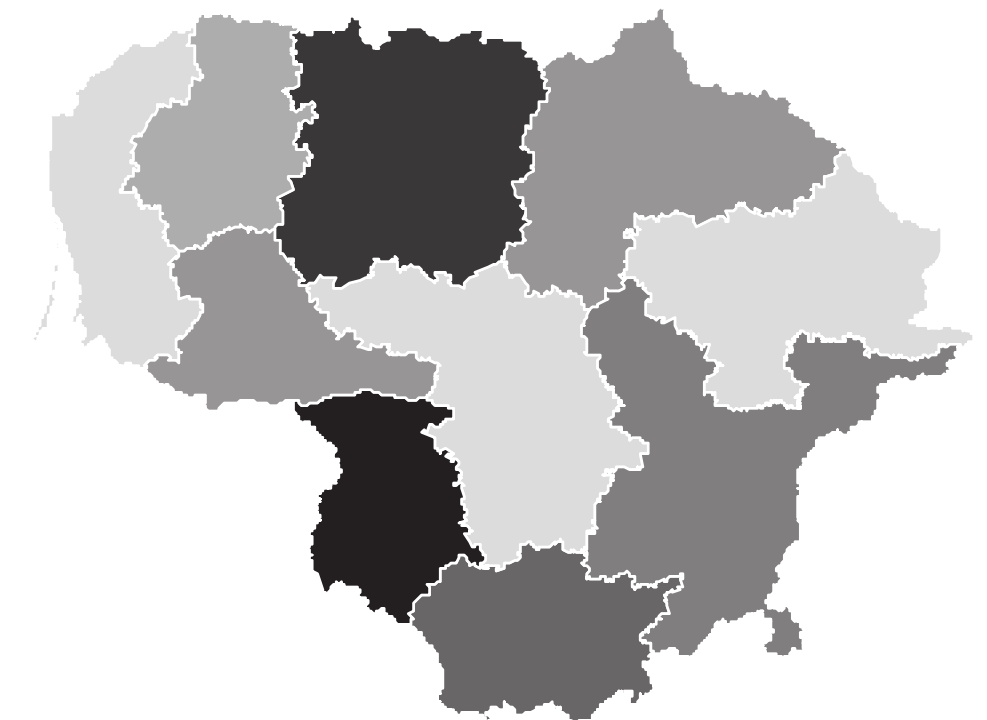
September 2019 - June 2020

There were a number of significant disinformation attacks on NATO leaders and partners in 2020. In April, a spoofed email letter was sent to the Minister of National Defense of the Republic of Lithuania Raimundas Karoblis on behalf of NATO President Jens Stoltenberg about the decision to withdraw NATO troops from Lithuania, as it allegedly failed to deal with the coronavirus outbreak at that time.

A month before when the pandemic broke out, a spoofed email letter about Minister Karoblis' alleged request not to cancel the Defender Europe 2020 exercise and the permission for the US military to move freely on Lithuanian territory without noticing the society in order to avoid public outrage, was sent to the media on behalf of the Lithuanian Armed Forces' Strategic Communications Officer.

As experts unanimously agree, the main goal of the increase of these and other similar attacks is Russia's desire to undermine public image of NATO troops and the organisation itself.

This trend is confirmed by a study conducted by Demaskuok on how the NATO exercise Defender Europe 2020 is portrayed in the analysed Russian media outlets. 70 percent of all the mentions of these exercises the information was misleading, nearly 30 percent - neutral and only two articles can be classified as positive content.



DEFENDER 2020 - OVERVIEW (II)

September 2019 - June 2020

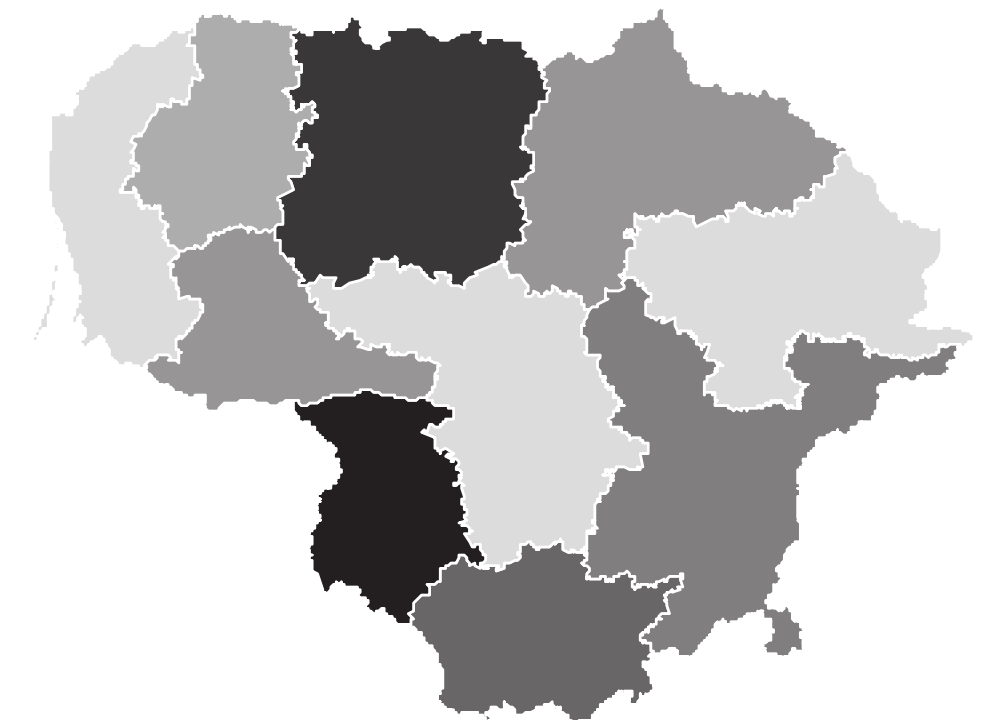
Defender Europe 2020 was to become the largest NATO exercise in Europe since the Cold War. The fact that the United States intended to deploy over 20K troops in the eastern wing of NATO, severely stormed the analysed Russian media.

Given that Russia has been carrying out military maneuvers by hundreds of thousands of troops, both at NATO borders and in the depth of the country for decades, Defender Europe 2020 has become one of the most serious responses to all this.

Unfortunately, for the first time in NATO history, the plans of this magnitude were halted. Although it was initially considered that if the pandemic did not subside, the military exercises will be cancelled altogether. Subsequently, as coronavirus contagion decreased in Europe, it was decided to extend some training activities to all required safety standards and with a significantly reduced contingent of troops.

As the stages of Defender Europe 2020 exercise plans were carrying out, each of the step received a great deal of attention from the Kremlin's disinformation channels. As might be expected, the main misleading messages were adapted to the socio-political situation at the time.

Initially, Kremlin disinformers highlighted the largest increase in the number of U.S. troops in Europe since the Cold War. Later, the criticism to the "aggressive" NATO, which broke its alleged promise "not to expand to the East" by the openly pro-Russian German parliamentarians' were widely publicised. Then came the message by the rulers of Russia and Belarus how they are going to respond to these exercises of the Alliance.



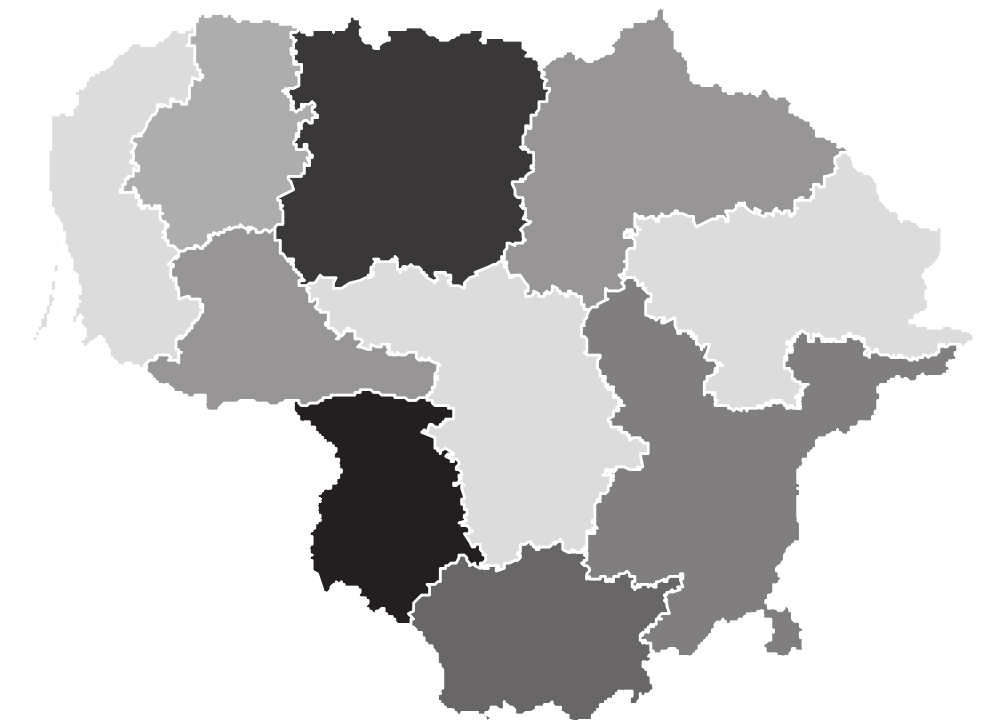
DEFENDER 2020 - OVERVIEW (III)

September 2019 - June 2020

In the wake of the serious threat of a pandemic in February, the Russian media began to iterate the lack of responsibility of the Americans and other NATO allies, because they do not suspend the maneuvers. And as the Alliance reduced the size of the military drills, firstly the ridiculed the failure of the plans, then started to criticise NATO's allegedly relentless militarism and heartlessness in maneuvering during the pandemic.

In addition, around the date of the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe, the narrative that NATO exercises are intended to obscure the celebration of Victory Day, a major memorable historical date for the Kremlin regime living in nostalgia for the Soviet empire, was activated.

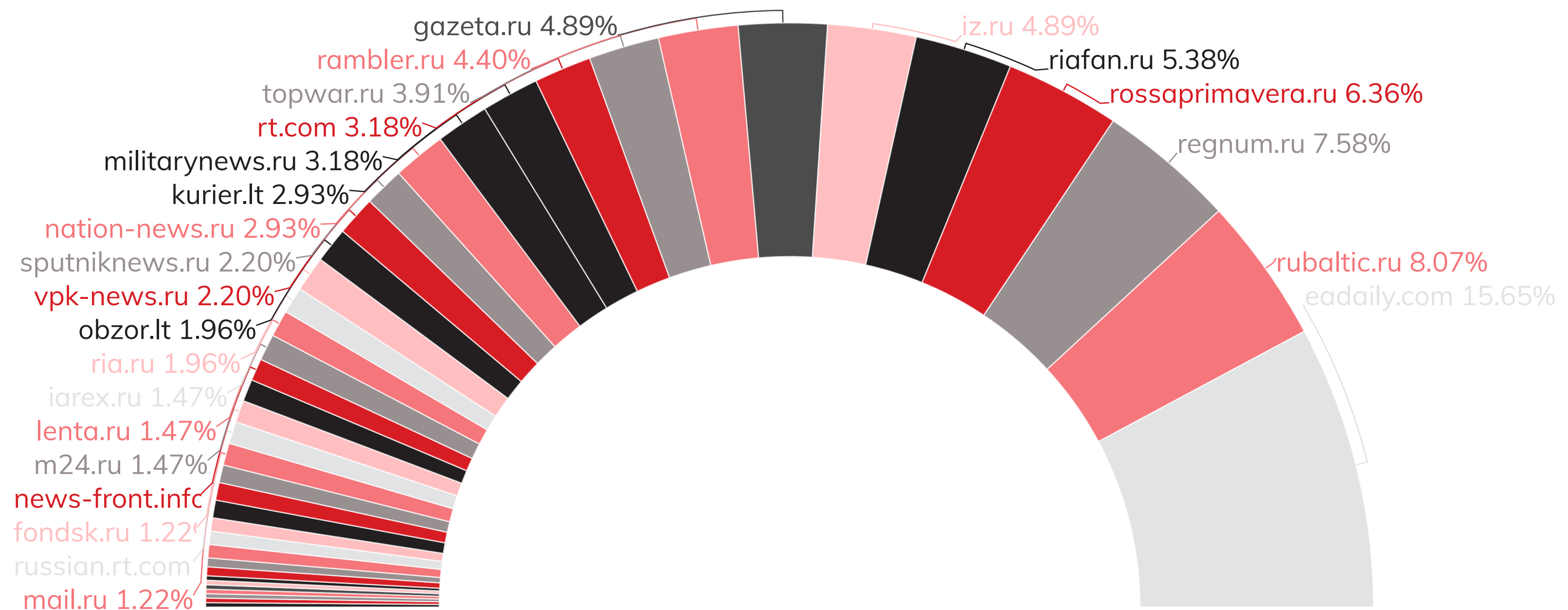
Looking at the overall scale of the negative messages, their diversity and widespread discussion in the Kremlin's disinformation channels, it can be concluded that the Defender Europe 2020 exercise was one of the most painful of the recent NATO actions, despite the consequences of the COVID19 pandemic interruption.



DEFENDER 2020

September 2019 - June 2020

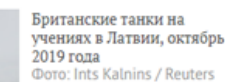
Mentions by sources





 57
  13
  107
 

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«Разумеется, агрессивные намерения США и НАТО учтем в собственном военном строительстве. Рекомендуем натовцам задуматься о последствиях их агрессивных действий, лишь усиливающих международную напряженность», — подчеркнула Захарова.

13 апреля 2020, 07:01 Ирина Таран, Елизавета Комарова

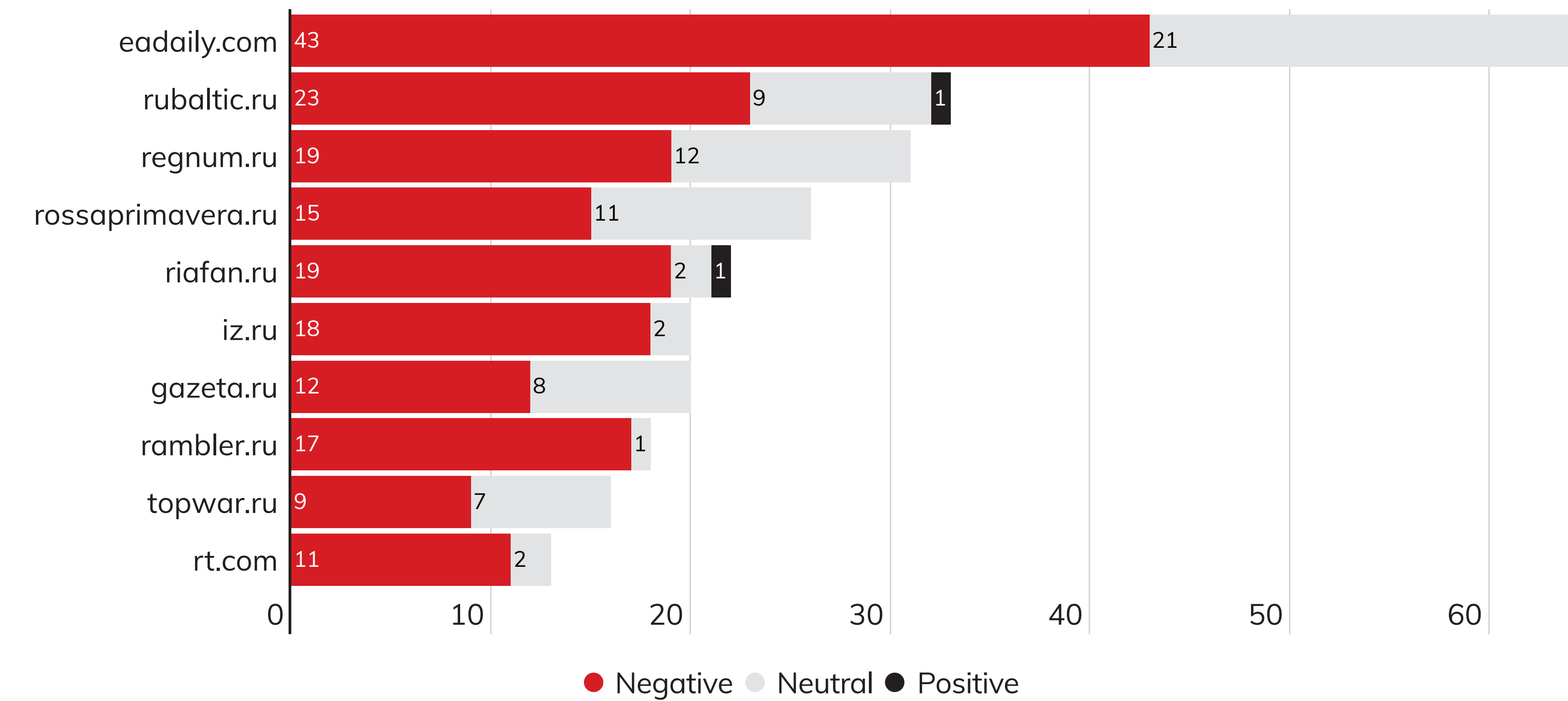
конце марта сообщалось, что у нескольких военнослужащих

DEFENDER 2020

September 2019 - June 2020

TOP10 sources by sentiment

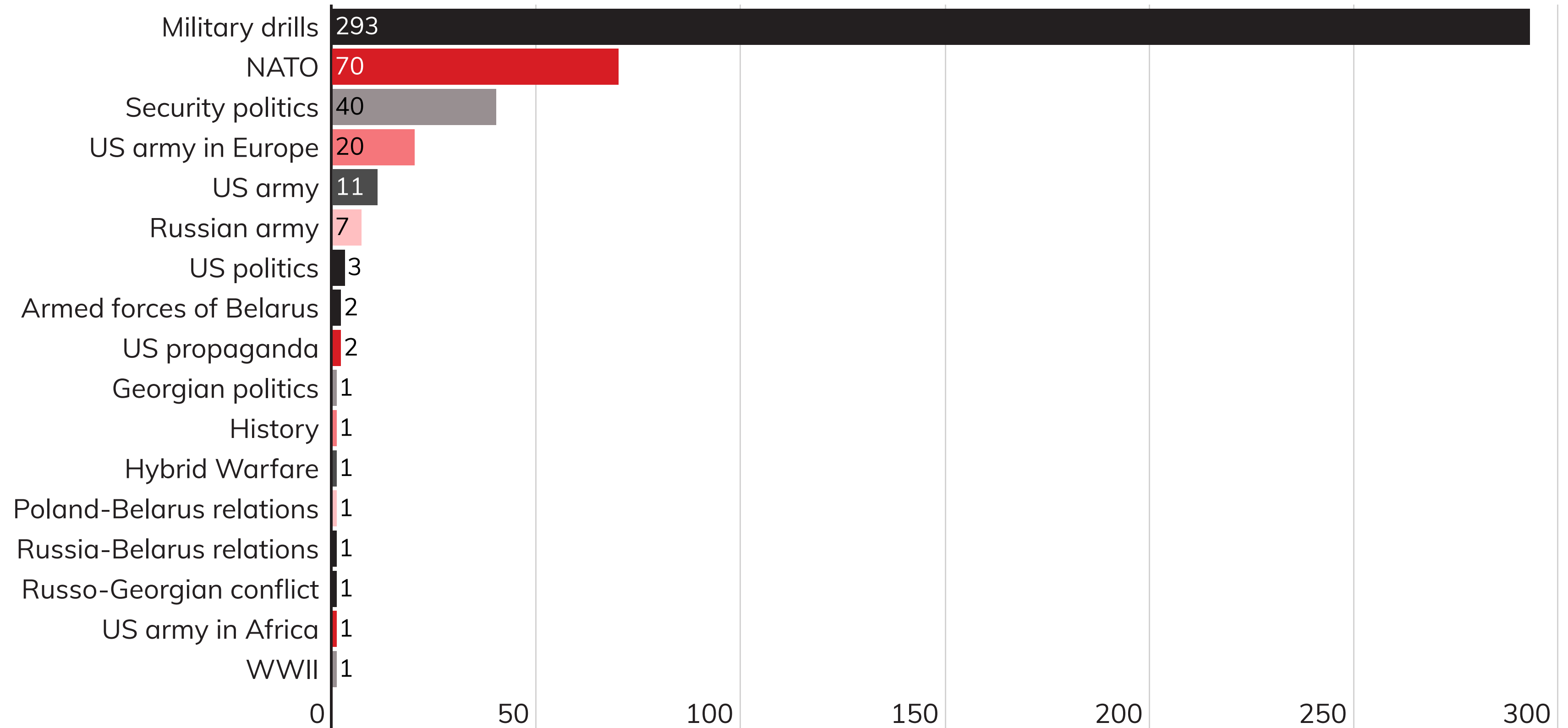
Total number of articles: 409



DEFENDER

September 2020 - June 2020

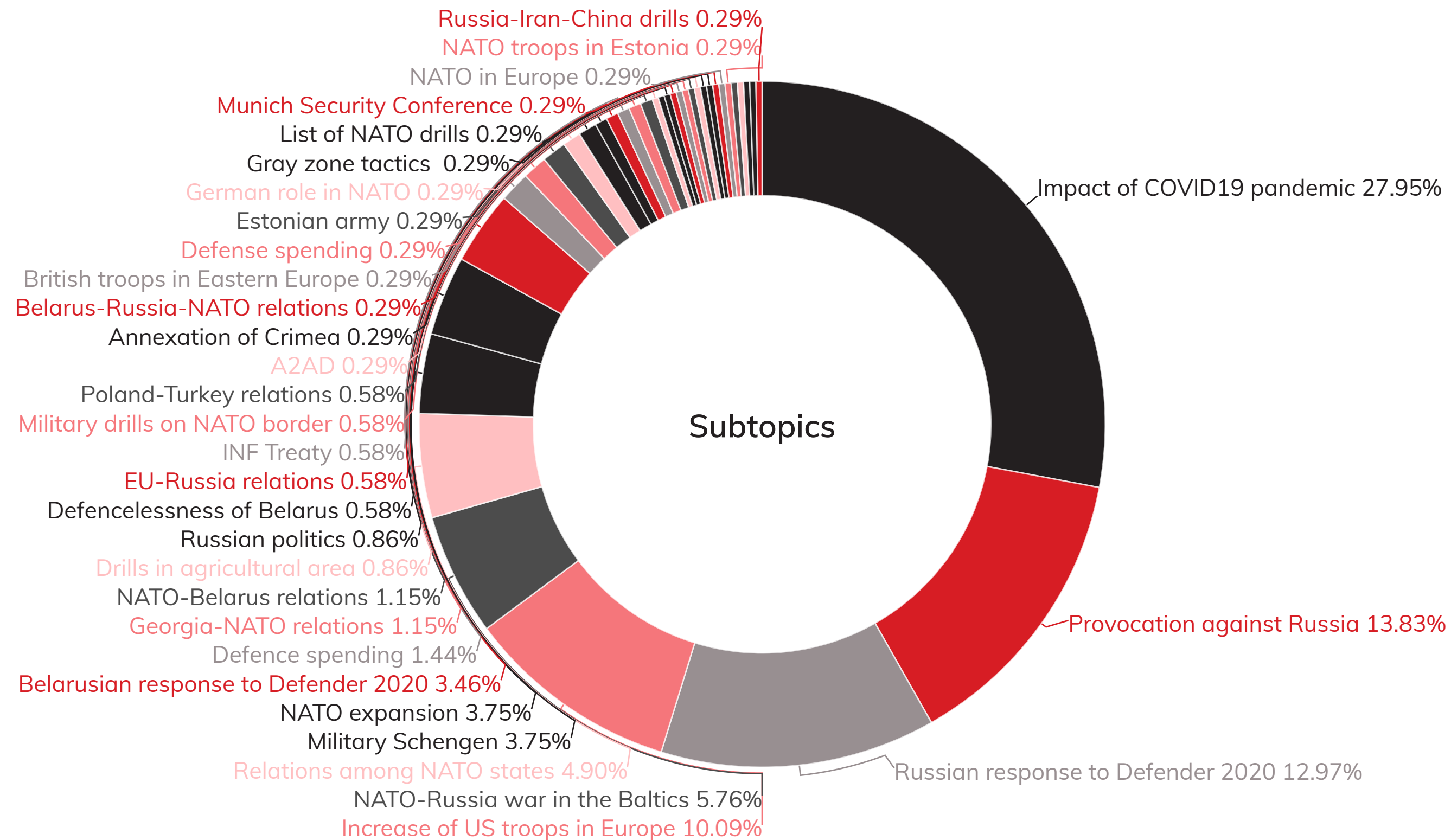
Main topics



DEFENDER 2020

September 2019 - June 2020

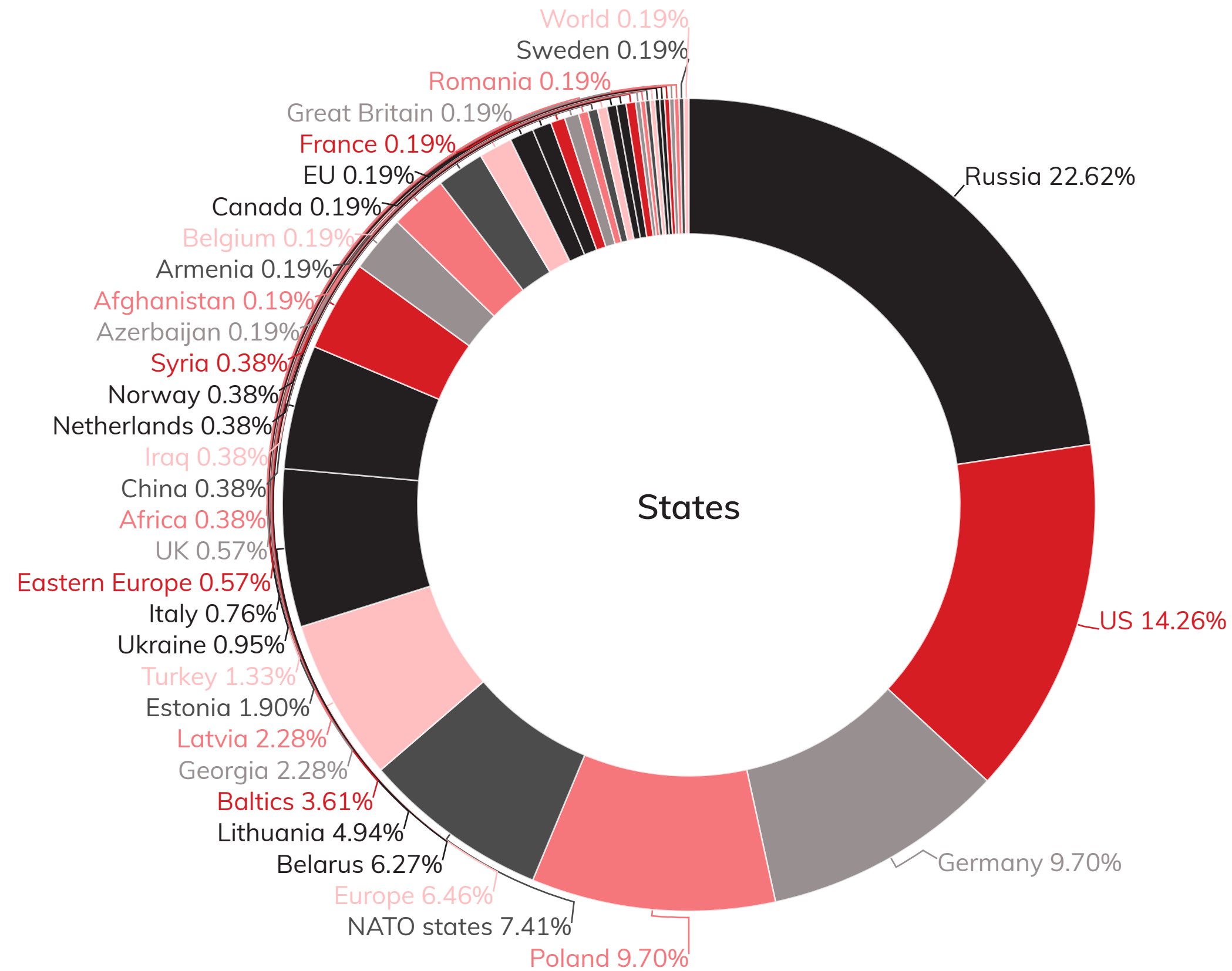
Subtopics



DEFENDER 2020

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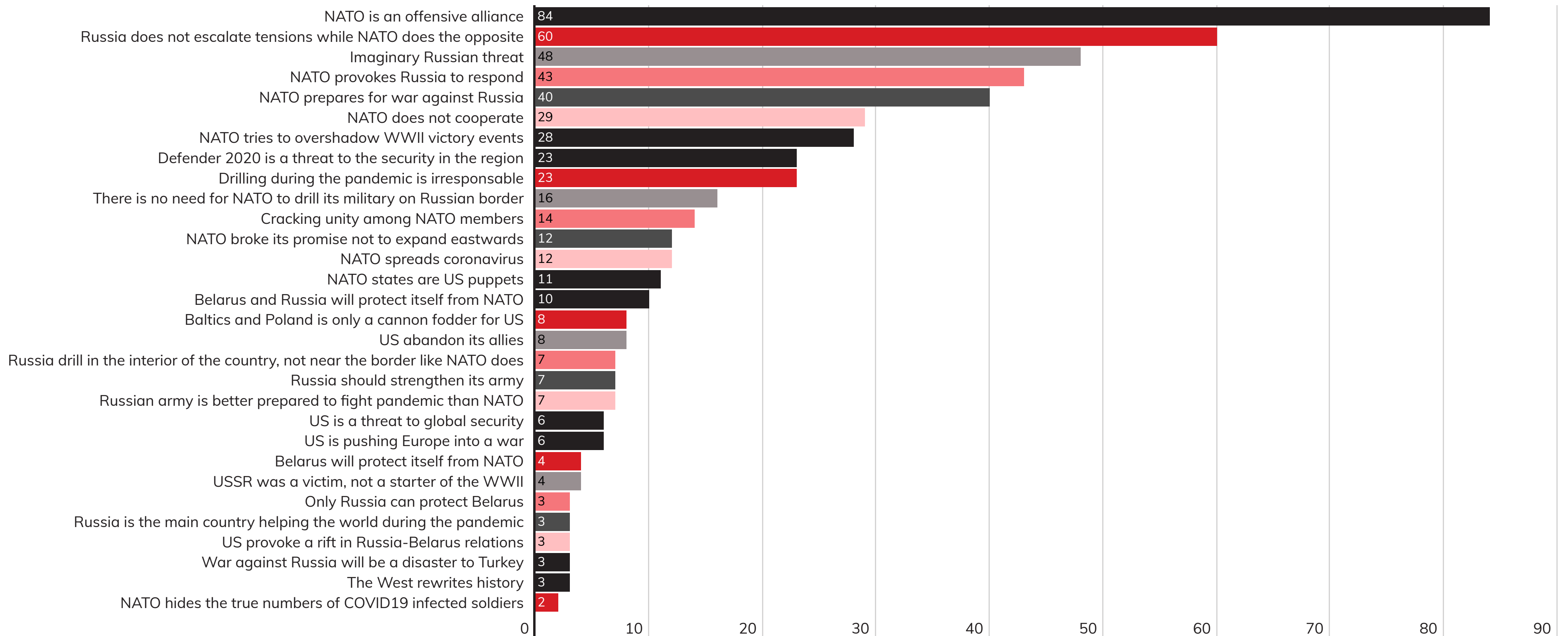
States



DEFENDER 2020

September 2019 - June 2020

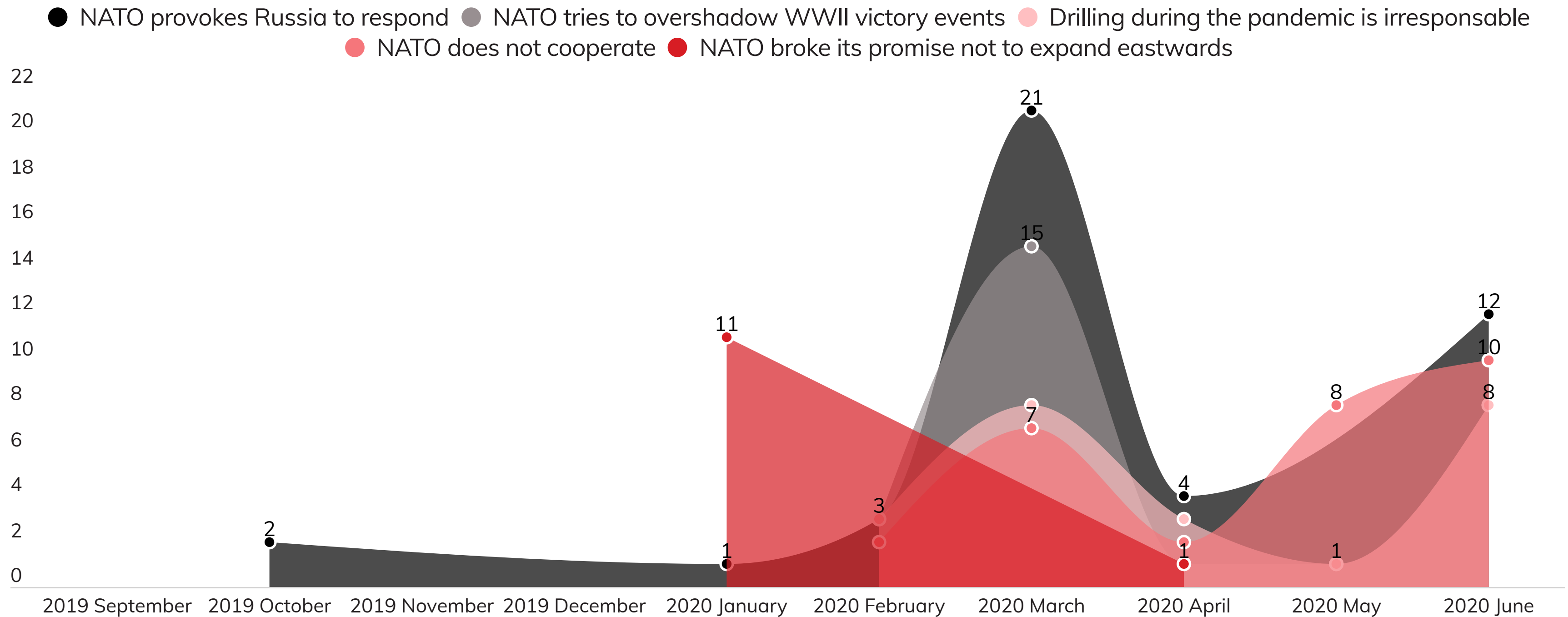
TOP 30 narratives



DEFENDER 2020

September 2019 - June 2020

Dynamics of particular narratives

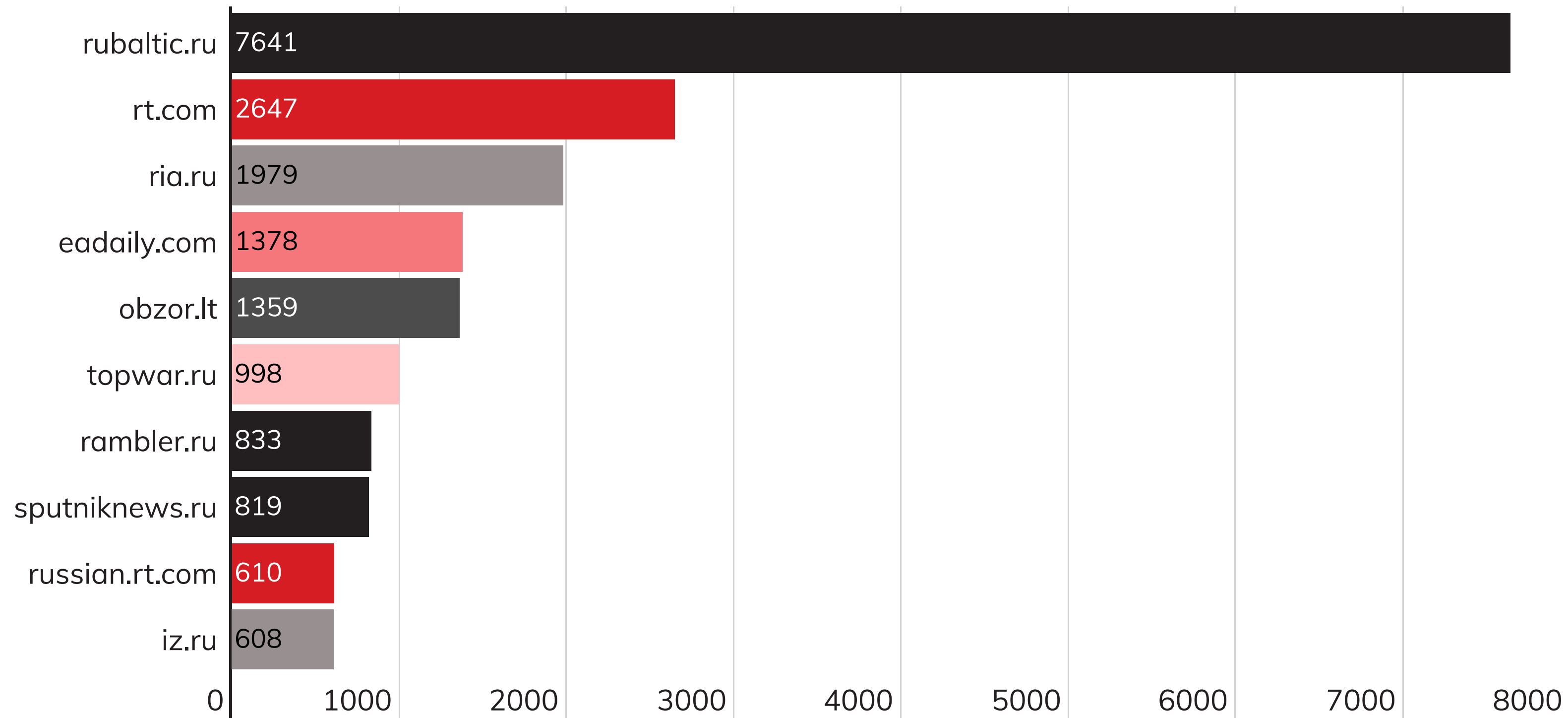


DEFENDER 2020

September 2020 - July 2020

Sources by social interactions to articles with Defender 2020

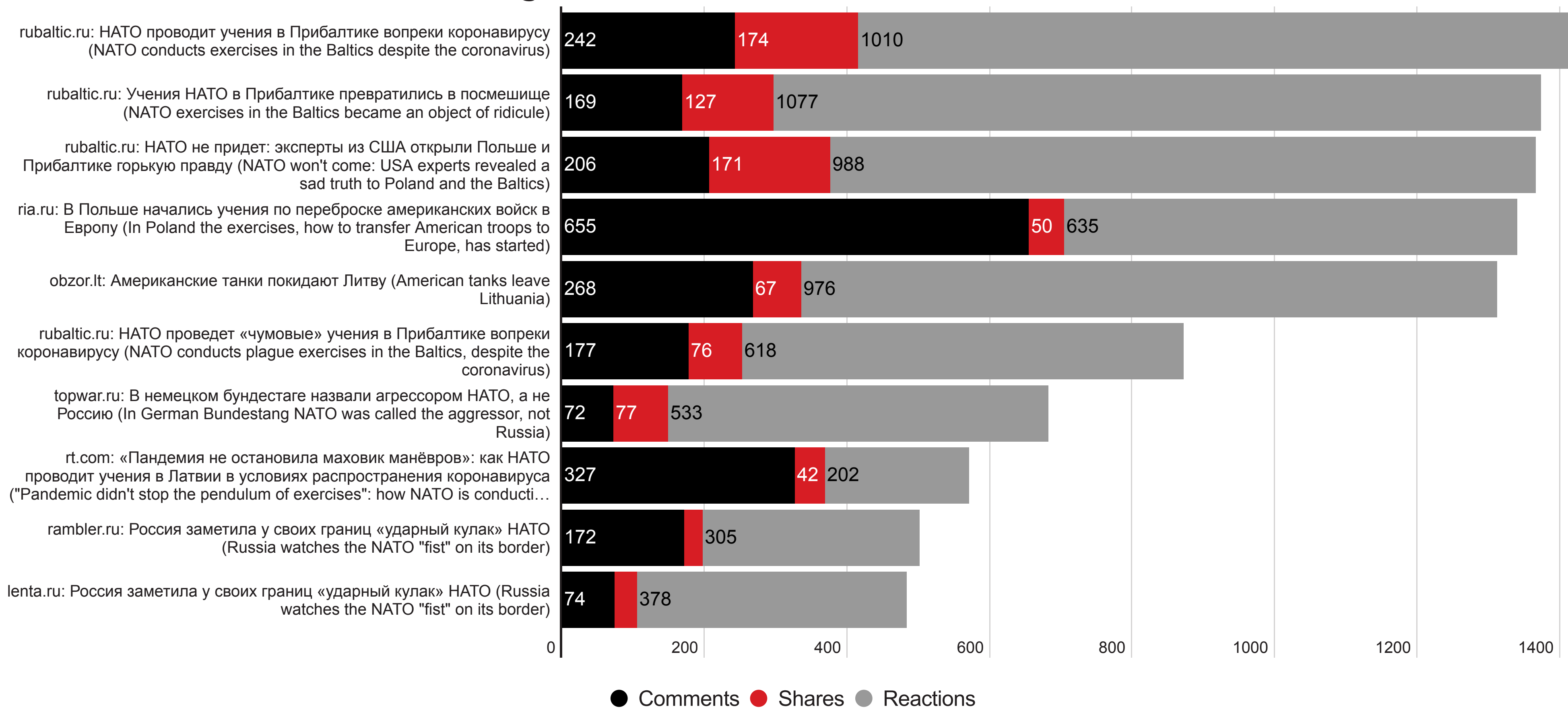
Total: 20 987



DEFENDER 2020

September 2019 - June 2020

TOP 10 articles with the highest number of social interactions



CONCLUSIONS

September 2019 - June 2020

- Most of the articles that mentioned the Defender Europe 2020 exercise were about military maneuvers. The second most popular topic was NATO – these articles focused not only on the Alliance's military plans, but also on internal political peripetias. The third key topic, security policy, is an even broader topic dominated by the relationship between the world's major political powerhouses.
- The vast majority of articles that mentioned the Defender Europe 2020 exercise expressed a negative view. It constituted for almost 70 percent of all the articles examined. Almost 30 percent of messages were neutral. And only two articles (0.49%) of the 409 examined could be classified as positive content.
- After analysing all the articles, it can be noticed that the main narratives were operatively adapted to the general flow of the information. The best example was a narrative that Defender Europe 2020 will serve to spread the coronavirus and must therefore be stopped which was started to escalate on the eve of the pandemic. After the announcement of the suspension of the drilling plans, various types of articles that mocked NATO's failed plans appeared. Some of them even forecasted the crisis of the Alliance. However, with the announcement of a smaller-scale extension of the exercise, there was a return to a narrative of the NATO as an aggressive force, which ignores even a global pandemic.
- Looking at the overall scale of the negative messages, their diversity and the wide discussion in the Kremlin's disinformation channels, it can be concluded that the Defender Europe 2020 exercise was one of NATO's most painful actions recently, despite interruption of the COVID19 pandemic.

