



BCSP Belgrade Centre
for Security Policy

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Extremism and Telegram

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary information environment has redefined the ecosystem of extremist groups, shifting them significantly towards online engagement.¹ Unlike offline movements from previous decades, modern extremists are often radicalized via the internet through various forums, alternative tech platforms, and encrypted messaging applications. These digital spaces play a crucial role in overcoming traditional geographical boundaries, enabling effective networking, dissemination of extremist ideas, recruitment of new members, and resource collection for both online and offline activities.² However, since 2019 and the Christchurch massacre in New Zealand, the rise of the far-right conspiracy movement QAnon during 2020, and the Capitol attack in 2021, US-based platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have increasingly deplatformed users who violate their terms of service by spreading misinformation or hate speech.³ As a consequence of these tightened regulatory policies, Telegram has become a hub for extremism and conspiracy theories, experiencing rapid growth—from 300 million monthly active users in 2019 to 400 million in April 2020.⁴ Within this context, this backgrounder aims to provide an overview of key concepts and terms related to extremism on Telegram.

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WHAT IS TELEGRAM AND WHY DO EXTREMISTS CHOOSE IT?

Telegram is an encrypted instant messaging application founded in 2013 by brothers Nikolai and Pavel Durov, the same internet entrepreneurs who launched the popular Russian social network VKontakte. The founders claim that Telegram is “faster and more secure” than other applications, and more importantly, that “messages sent via Telegram cannot be intercepted by third parties.”⁵ Indeed, one of the core goals of the Durov brothers in developing the app was to facilitate communication resistant to secret surveillance by security services and police. Their commitment to protecting user privacy is underscored by their FAQ section, which states the following:

“If criticizing the government is illegal in some country, Telegram won’t be a part of such politically motivated censorship. This goes against our founders’ principles. While we do block terrorist bots and channels (e.g., ISIS-related), we will not block anyone peacefully expressing alternative opinions.”⁶

Key factors that make Telegram suitable for such activities include accessibility and ease of use, limited content moderation, end-to-end encryption (E2EE), and advanced functionality for sharing and storing data. The application’s ease of use is further exemplified by the fact that it does not require users to link a personal phone number—registration

can be completed using a temporary “burner” phone or an internet proxy number, with account verification performed via a one-time SMS message, thereby providing an additional level of anonymity. Furthermore, the platform supports the formation of large-scale communities and user networks. Groups on Telegram can accommodate up to 200,000 members (compared to 256 users on WhatsApp broadcast lists and 1024 in WhatsApp groups), while channels can host an unlimited number of subscribers.⁷ Additionally, Telegram allows for the development of extensive group clusters, as messages can be forwarded to an unlimited number of groups.⁸ Features such as sharing diverse content types (including stickers, polls, quizzes, and bots), along with tagging functionality, enable the creation of interactive communities and dynamic information streams, positioning Telegram between traditional messaging apps and mainstream social networks.

By offering enhanced privacy and anonymity alongside opportunities for publicity (through channels) and coordination and mobilization (through groups), Telegram provides a solution for the so-called “terrorist’s dilemma”—or the “online extremist’s dilemma”—which refers to balancing public reach and maintaining operational security when selecting digital tools for carrying out desired activities.

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EXTREMIST ACTORS ON TELEGRAM: WHO ARE THEY?

Telegram frequently gathers users who have been deplatformed, including jihadist organizations (such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda), far-right extremists (e.g., neo-Nazi and ethno-nationalist groups), as well as other actors like anti-establishment organizations or eco-extremists. Specifically, jihadists migrated to Telegram as early as 2015, coinciding with the introduction of its channel functionality. Relatedly, increased ISIS propaganda dissemination via Telegram has been linked to a rise in lone-actor attacks in Europe between 2015 and 2016.⁹ It is important to note that although ISIS may be the most prominent example of jihadist propaganda, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Taliban also use Telegram extensively to construct their narratives, attract followers, legitimize actions, and intimidate opponents.¹⁰

On the other hand, the presence of far-right channels, particularly white supremacists, significantly intensified after major mainstream platforms (Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, and YouTube) conducted account removals between 2019 and 2021, categorizing their content primarily as “organized hate.”¹¹ Analysis of white supremacist Telegram channels indicates that the platform is commonly used for glorifying terrorists and lone actors, inciting violence, and dehumanizing minority groups.¹² A particularly illustrative example of transnational extremism on Telegram is the neo-fascist acceleration-

ist “skull mask” network,¹³ whose most influential groups include Atomwaffen Division, The Base, and Feuerkrieg Division. Emerging from this environment was the “Green Brigade,” functioning as the eco-fascist wing of the neo-Nazi organization The Base, responsible for an arson attack on a mink farm in Sweden in 2020. Although this specific group was dismantled, eco-fascism remains a persistent subculture continuing to attract supporters of violent extremism.¹⁴

THE PURPOSES BEHIND EXTREMIST USE OF TELEGRAM

Depending on their specific objectives, various extremist groups use Telegram for:

- Dissemination of propaganda and ideological radicalization;
- Recruitment and mobilization of members;
- Networking and strengthening group cohesion;
- Operational planning and coordination of activities;
- Fundraising via cryptocurrencies, anonymous donations, or illegal markets.

Telegram is not the only digital tool used by extremists, nor does it operate in isolation; rather, it represents a central or complementary channel within the online communication ecosystem of extremist actors. Mainstream social networks are employed for promoting ideology in a broader discourse, recruiting new adherents, disseminating propaganda, and

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securing funding, whereas Telegram offers more discrete coordination and a higher level of operational security. This interdependency is particularly evident through numerous posts that link to mainstream platforms, as well as disproportionately toward alternative and highly biased websites. Additionally, Telegram serves as a hub for storing and distributing information from various networks and platforms, effectively increasing the reach of content.¹⁵ Furthermore, integration with social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram enables users (groups, channels, and bots) to achieve verified profiles, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and dissemination of their activities. At the same time, Telegram is not only linked to mainstream platforms but is also utilized within less regulated parts of the internet and can serve as an intermediary channel toward Dark Web forums.¹⁶

TELEGRAM IN THE *ONLIFE* SPHERE: CONSEQUENCES FOR THE REAL WORLD

In the *onlife*¹⁷ environment, where digital and physical worlds continuously intertwine, activities on platforms like Telegram have tangible impacts on social, political, and security processes. In recent years, Telegram has repeatedly come under scrutiny for its role in facilitating radicalization, extremist organization, and even terrorist activities. Specifically, the platform serves as a haven for an extensive network of neo-Nazi accelerationist channels and groups, often referred to as “Terrorgram.”¹⁸

The Terrorgram collective “regularly shares instructions and manuals on how to carry out racially motivated violence and terrorism against governments and authorities.” It also plays a significant role in canonizing mass murderers as saints and martyrs, creating and distributing propaganda images and videos portraying mass killers as heroes, and even sharing audio books of their manifestos. Recently, for example, the perpetrator of the Bratislava attack explicitly credited Terrorgram as a key source of inspiration, guidance, and radicalization in his manifesto prior to committing a terrorist act.¹⁹ Extremism on Telegram during the COVID-19 pandemic has fueled the spread of racial and religious hatred, as well as violent attacks on vulnerable communities, including plots to bomb a hospital in Missouri and a Jewish nursing home in Massachusetts.²⁰ In numerous cases worldwide—from Germany and the United Kingdom to Australia and Indonesia—Telegram has been used as a platform to spread conspiracy theories, plan terrorist activities, and coordinate attacks targeting critical infrastructure and human lives.²¹

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EXTREMISM ON TELEGRAM IN SERBIA

In Serbia, Telegram is experiencing a growing presence among extremist groups, most notably far-right movements, which often contain anti-system elements linked with ethno-nationalism. Predominant narratives include anti-government, anti-globalist, and anti-Western rhetoric, frequently coupled with a pronounced pro-Russian orientation. Key themes encompass insistence on Serbia's territorial sovereignty regarding Kosovo, glorification of controversial historical figures and war criminals, mythologization of Serbian-Russian relations, and support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Various forms of hate speech are also present, ranging from dehumanization to explicit incitement of violence, particularly targeting the LGBT+ community and migrants.²² Some of the more prominent far-right groups on Telegram include channels such as "Bunt je stanje duha," "Srbska Akcija," "Narodna patrola," "Zaštitimo Srbiju," "Kormilo," etc. Additionally, within Telegram's extremist ecosystem, another subculture of the far-right has emerged, encompassing neo-Nazi groups (e.g., "Zentropa," "Klub 451," and "Omladina 451"), which propagate authoritarianism, nativism, homophobia, and anti-Muslim sentiments.²³ Although these groups on Telegram lack a centralized structure, they are occasionally interconnected by prominent individuals, joint disinformation campaigns, and a certain degree of coordinated action, particularly evident within the network focused on the war in

Ukraine. This network integrates channels and groups that disseminate pro-Russian propaganda, biased reporting from the battlefields, and conduct recruitment of fighters, portraying the Russian invasion as a "just war" in which Serbs allegedly have an ideological and historical duty to participate.²⁴ While many Serbian extremist groups primarily rely on digital activism, combining Telegram with mainstream platforms, some also organize offline activities such as street actions, protests, or marches. However, monitoring extremist online activities on Telegram presents a significant challenge for relevant institutions, particularly the Department for High-Tech Crime, due to their limited resources and capacities to effectively address the issue.²⁵

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BETWEEN PRIVACY AND SECURITY: TELEGRAM AFTER THE ARREST OF PAVEL DUROV

Telegram underwent a significant change in its privacy policy following the arrest of Pavel Durov last year in France. Under the new rules, Telegram is now obliged to share users' IP addresses and phone numbers when there is a legal request, such as court orders or arrest warrants. Until recently, Telegram refused to share user data with authorities, except in exceptional cases such as counter-terrorism, where evidence was required before access to data was granted. This shift in terms of service comes as a result of increasing pressure from governments and state authorities, particularly France, which accused Durov of failing to take necessary and adequate

measures to prevent illegal activities on the platform. The allegations include human trafficking, drug and arms trade, as well as the spread of extremist ideologies and disinformation.²⁶

The change in Telegram's approach to cooperating with authorities is evident in the significant rise in the number of requests the platform processed after Pavel Durov's arrest. While in the first nine months of 2024 the company responded to only 14 requests from the U.S. government, by the end of the year that number had risen to 900, covering 2,253 users.²⁷ Additionally, following the announcement of stricter measures in September 2024, Telegram removed 15.4 million groups and channels linked to harmful content, including extremist material. [Telegram's new moderation dashboard](#) shows a marked increase in rule enforcement following Durov's arrest in August.²⁸

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