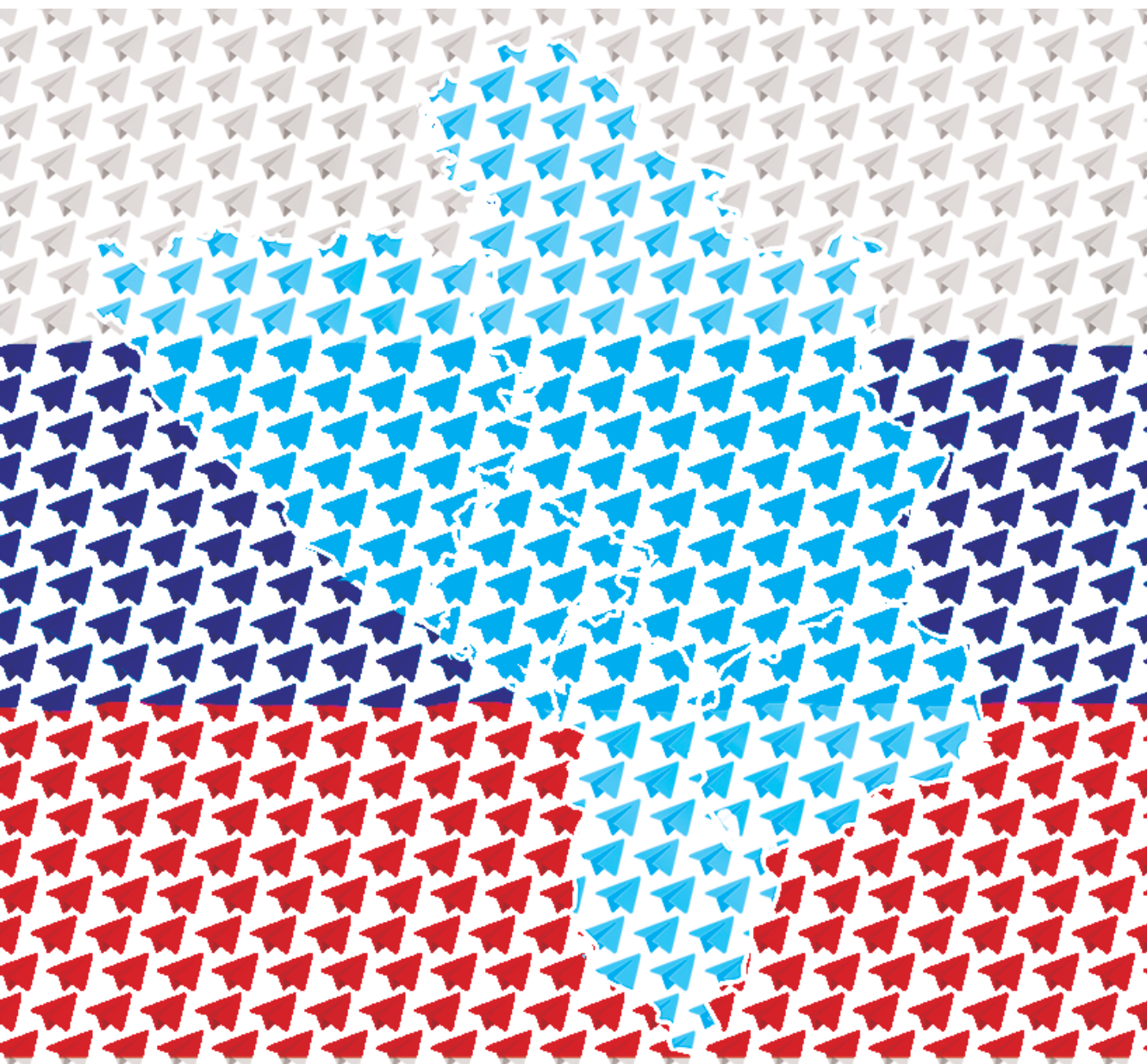


RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN SERBIA AND THE WESTERN BALKANS: The Case of Telegram Channels

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BCSP Belgrade Centre
for Security Policy

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Introduction

In recent years, Russia has repeatedly interfered in other states' internal affairs, such as e.g. in the United States' elections¹ of 2016 and the elections in the United Kingdom² of 2019. There are countless examples of its interference and propaganda on the Internet.

The Russian propaganda arsenal includes tools such as state media that broadcast internationally (Russia Today, Sputnik and others), official state accounts on social networks, and entire armies of fake accounts which have been repeatedly noticed in disinformation and interference campaigns in the politics of other countries. On many occasions, this was one of the reasons for imposing sanctions against individuals close to the Russian government and President Vladimir Putin personally.

A striking example of a person who organised this sort of interference and was consequently targeted by sanctions is Yevgeny Prigozhin, who had been called "Putin's personal chef". He was associated with the Internet Research Agency, also known as the "Troll Factory" and "Prigozhin's trolls." Although Prigozhin died in a plane crash, his "troll factory" is still in operation.

Serbia is no exception to the list of countries whose internal affairs found themselves on the receiving end of Russian government interference. However, due to the friendly relations between Russia and Serbia, these facts are rarely made public. Also, not all of them are obvious, at first glance, as propaganda and interference. That is why we will look at this issue in this study, and, using the example of Serbia, find out what methods of propaganda and intervention Russia is using in a country that can be described as "friendly".

Viewed from the historical standpoint and compared with other countries in the Balkans, the relationship between Russia and Serbia is probably one of the deepest and most interesting. These relationships cannot be called purely political or economic, as friendship between the countries rests on the foundation of history, religion and ethno-linguistic community. However, despite these seemingly strong relations, in the past 20 years Russia has been using Serbia as a platform for its propaganda, employing fairly typical methods.³ Besides these, Russia also exercises soft power in Serbia and the region.⁴

Russians appeared in the Balkans during the Byzantine era, in 970-971,⁵ when Svyatoslav and the Bulgarians fought with Byzantium. Later, during the Ottoman Empire, the Balkans - due to its geographical location - served as a sort of corridor between Europe and the Ottoman Empire, and was therefore historically the area of vital interest to large states. Today's situation is the same.

In the 18th century, which is also associated with the Russian-Turkish wars, Russia tried to strengthen its influence in the Balkans. Alexander Mikhailovich Gorchakov, head of the Russian foreign policy department under Alexander II, wrote that the Balkans was a zone that was of vital interest to Russia.⁶ At the same time, Russia pursued a conservative policy in that region since 1897, opposing the policies of Austria-Hungary. In the 1900s, Vienna unsuccessfully tried to replace the centuries-old influence of Russia with its own.

In 1903, after a coup d'état, Peter I Karadjordjević became King of the Kingdom of Serbia. This significantly complicated relations with Russia as, according to the laws of the Russian Empire, regicide was one of the most serious crimes. At the same time, King Peter Karadjordjević was heavily dependent on Russia financially, while his sons and heirs were studying in St. Petersburg at the personal invitation of Emperor Nicholas II.⁷

The 20th century was a time of difficult relations between Russia and Serbia. King Aleksandar I Karadjordjević refused to accept Bolshevism and openly sympathised with the Whites who were fleeing Russia.⁸ He also supported the construction of the Russian House, named after Emperor Nicholas, in Belgrade. In 1948, after a slight improvement in relations between the USSR and Yugoslavia, Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito had a conflict with the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, which caused the relations between the two countries to deteriorate once again. During the Yugoslav crisis of 1991-2001, Serbs expected support from Russia, but never received it.⁹

Recent relations between Russia and Serbia could be safely described as friendly. Russian President Vladimir Putin often visited his colleague Aleksandar Vučić, taking part in the opening of churches and temples, while Russian state companies - in particular Gazprom and Russian Railways - invested enormous amounts in the Serbian economy.

This article shows the propaganda tools that Russia is using in the Balkans, particularly in Serbia and Montenegro. It also contains an analysis of propaganda narratives that appear in the Russian media operating in the Balkans, and their comparison with propaganda narratives in the media that operate in Russia.

The article is based on the analysis of open data obtained from the Internet, dealing with Telegram channels that are directly connected to official Russian media. Methods of influence through social networks are examined by use of examples of posts, while examples of the groups' cross-posting show the range of interests, as well as the number of partners and friendly organisations that also pursue an aggressive policy towards Western countries and openly fuel conflicts.

Research Methodology

As already mentioned in the introduction, the object of the study are Telegram channels associated with Russian media, as well as Russian actors who are politically aligned with the Kremlin's official policies.

Unlike the member states of the European Union and the United States of America, Russia actively uses the Telegram platform to disseminate information and propaganda. The reason for this is that, on this platform, the messenger is actually anonymous. One can create and actively use an account/channel by supplying a fake phone number, and without linking it to an email address or providing any other information. Only channel administrators can post information, and commenting may or may not be allowed. The accounts can also be completely anonymous, which allows the authors to avoid responsibility for spreading misinformation, slander and calls for violence. Platform rules include a ban on the dissemination of this type of information, as well as a ban on the use of fake accounts, but practice shows that Telegram channels or accounts are extremely rarely blocked.

The Telegram platform was created by brothers Pavel and Nikolai Durov. Telegram Messenger LLP is registered in the United Kingdom.¹⁰

Telegram was created by brothers Pavel Durov and Nikolai Durov. In the summer of 2023, it had more than 800 million active users, while in 2022 it was the most popular messaging application in Russia. Its headquarters are in the British Virgin Islands and the United Arab Emirates.

The choice of channels to be examined in this study was not made by chance; rather, investigative journalists connected all of them with the "Troll Factory"¹¹ of Yevgeny Prigozhin¹² and other Russian media. Although Prigozhin died in a plane crash in August 2023, his organisation still exists and continues its work.¹³

In the Balkans, there are a total of 38 Telegram channels in Serbian and Russian languages that are connected with Prigozhin's "Troll Factories", his media outlet RIA FAN, and other Russian media. RIA FAN (Russian Information Service Federal News Agency) is a Russian news agency that provides news and information in Russian and several other languages. Founded in 2014, it has been actively covering events in Russia and beyond.

It is important to note that RIA FAN is associated with a pro-Kremlin political perspective, and that it is occasionally criticised by independent media organisations for perceived bias and disinformation.

Name of the channel	Link	Language	Country
Telegram channels associated with RIA FAN:			
Balkan Gossip Girl	https://t.me/balkanossiper	RUS	SRB
About Serbia in Russian	https://t.me/ruserbia	RUS	SRB
Serbian Gazette	https://t.me/vestniksrb	RUS	SRB
Serbian divergent	https://t.me/panteri_panteri	RUS	SRB
Russian Balkanist	https://t.me/RuBalkans	RUS	BLKN
Croatia-News	https://t.me/newscroatia	RUS	HR
Balkan spy	https://t.me/balkan_spy	RUS	BLKN
Balkan sentinel	https://t.me/dozorbalkan	RUS	BLKN
Riot-channels associated with channels from the list of those that are associated with RIA FAN, which previously called for the overthrowing of the Montenegrin government:			
REVOLT is the soul of the spirit	https://t.me/buntcg	SRB	MNE
Riot of History	https://t.me/buntistorijaa	SRB	MNE
Riot Cosmet	https://t.me/buntkim	SRB	MNE
REVOLT is our way	https://t.me/buntrus	SRB	MNE
Riot channel for donation	https://t.me/buntdonacije	SRB	MNE
Other channels with a bias towards Z-propaganda*, about the Balkans:			
RT in the Balkans	https://t.me/rtbalkan_ru	RUS	BLKN
News from Serbia	https://t.me/Serbia	RUS	SRB
Channel of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation in Serbian	https://t.me/ruskoMODsrbija	SRB	SRB
Russia and Serbia	https://t.me/ruskosrpski	RUS	SRB
Antiglobalizam	https://t.me/antiglobalizam	SRB	SRB
Guardian	https://t.me/rusmonstr	RUS	SRB
Guardian reserve	https://t.me/rusmonstrZ	RUS	SRB
The power of the Source	https://t.me/silasaistoka	SRB	SRB
Sputnik Srbija	https://t.me/sputniksrbija	SRB	SRB
Crna Gora Srpska Sparta	https://t.me/crnagorasrpskasparta	SRB	MNE
Good morning, country of mine	https://t.me/s/dobrojutrozemlja-moja	SRB	SRB
Dejan Berić	https://t.me/srbijarusija	SRB	SRB
Geopolitics, Arms and News	https://t.me/geopolitikanaoruzanje	SRB	SRB
Serbian Chetniks	https://t.me/serbianchetniks1903	SRB	SRB
Serbia Russia NEW NEWS FROM THE FRONT:	https://t.me/SrbijaRusijaa	SRB	SRB
Balkan_tramp	https://t.me/vinkolozic	RUS	SRB
Balkanist	https://t.me/balkanist2019	RUS	SRB
Russia at the heart	https://t.me/rusijausruc	SRB	SRB

Channels of Serbian, Balkan ultra-nationalists associated with the Russian Federation:

Srbska Akcija	https://t.me/srbska_akcija	SRB	SRB
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Channels related to Russian ultranationalists, about Serbia and the Balkans. In fact, all the channels are connected with Andrey Rodionov and the movement of Russian ultra-nationalists RUSOV (<https://rusov.org/>):**

Russian Imperial Movement	https://t.me/rus_imperia	RUS	SRB
Andrey Rodionov	https://t.me/AndreyRodionov86	RUS	SRB
Traditionalist	https://t.me/tradirsonalist	RUS	SRB
SERBIA_DIRECT LINE Z	https://t.me/SerbiaLine	RUS	SRB
MONTENEGRO_DIRECT LINE Z	https://t.me/crnagoraline	RUS	MNE

* At the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, many Internet users noticed that Russian army tanks were marked with letters Z and V. One of the most popular theories was that these letters indicated that the equipment belonged to one of the Russian military districts: Z – Western, or V - Eastern. In the first days of the war, the Russian Ministry of Defence proposed its own version - that letter Z stood for “Victory”. That is when the Russian government agencies began to actively use this symbol for propaganda purposes. Experts explained their choice by the fact that letter Z was very easy to write.¹⁴ At the same time, it is a symbol of support for the Russian invasion and is actively involved in propaganda. Z-channels are channels that openly broadcast a pro-Kremlin position and support Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine. Most of them are run by bloggers and journalists close to state media.

** Andrey Rodionov - Russian nationalist, Pan-Slavist, politician, founder and leader of the International movement “RUSOV”. Rodionov is known for his ultra-national position and radical statements.¹⁵ On its official website, the movement describes itself as the international socio-political movement “Russian-Slavic Unification and Revival”, a supra-party that adheres to the political position of the “third way” and acts in the interests of Russian and other Slavic peoples, as well as the entire Russian-Slavic world, speaking out against Westernised globalism, materialism and multiculturalism.¹⁶

Based on the size of membership and political relevance, a total of 15 Telegram channels from the above table were selected for the study:

Name of the channel	Link
Balkan Gossip Girl	https://t.me/balkanossiper
About Serbia in Russian	https://t.me/ruserbia
Serbian Gazette	https://t.me/vestniksrb
Serbian Divergent	https://t.me/panteri_panteri
Russian Balkanist	https://t.me/RuBalkans
Z-Orlovi	https://t.me/orly_rs
REVOLT is our way	https://t.me/buntrus
RT in the Balkans	https://t.me/rtbalkan_ru
News from Serbia	https://t.me/Serbia
Channel of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation in Serbian	https://t.me/ruskoMODsrbija
Crna Gora Srpska Sparta	https://t.me/crnagorasrpskasparta
Balkan_tramp	https://t.me/vinkolozic
Srbska Aktsiya	https://t.me/srbska_akcija
Russian Imperial Movement	https://t.me/rus_imperia
MONTENEGRO_DIRECT LINE Z	https://crnagoraline

In collaboration with colleagues from the Oplot project,¹⁷ which used artificial intelligence to identify propaganda narratives, toxicity and hate speech, we have analysed all the messages and posts that appeared on the selected Telegram channels, determining the level of toxicity and the main topics the authors of these channels write about and the narratives they use (Oplot is an independent group of volunteers who use machine learning and natural language processing to research and counter Russian government propaganda. Both technical and humanitarian experts are involved in the project).

The criteria for evaluating the texts were the following:

- Availability of reliable and verifiable sources;
- Manipulation techniques: generalisation, emotionally charged vocabulary, demonising the enemy;
- Errors in logic;
- One-sidedness and distortion of facts;
- Lack of context: quotes and events that were fragmented or out of context;
- Oversimplification and presentation of the problem in black and white;
- Use of stereotypes and symbols; and
- Use of specific target audience, with formed beliefs and prejudices.

As part of the study, we also determined the number of fake subscribers of these channels and the reason for using Internet trolls in propaganda.

Statistics and Verification of Subscribers of Telegram Channels to Establish Which Are Fake and Which Are Real

The questions that arise are: what is the reason for the existence of Telegram propaganda channels and how much influence do they have?

The use of fake subscribers in Telegram channels can have several purposes:

1. Psychological effect of trust: When a channel has a large number of subscribers, it can create the impression of popularity and authority. People often tend to subscribe to channels that already have a large number of subscribers, believing that they are more interesting or worthy of attention.
2. Marketing purposes: Some channel owners may use fake subscribers to quickly gain a starting audience and attract real users. This can be a part of the marketing strategy to quickly increase the channel's visibility.
3. Attracting advertisers: Advertisers prefer channels with a large and engaged audience, as this is expected to increase advertising reach.
4. Creating a false impression of popularity: Channel owners can use fake subscribers to create the illusion of popularity and attract the attention of new subscribers.

Based on the above reasons, the use of fake audiences in Telegram channels has only one goal: to inspire trust among real readers.

Many Telegram propaganda channels also use Internet trolls to increase the credibility of their content. Trolling¹⁸ (from the English term that means "fishing with a lure") is a form of virtual communication that violates the ethics of network interaction and is expressed in various forms of aggressive, bullying and offensive behaviour. It is used both by personalised participants interested in greater recognition, publicity or shock-value, and in the process of anonymous interaction between the users, carried out without the possibility of identifying the real subject of virtual communication.

In Internet terminology, a "troll"¹⁹ is a person who posts rude or provocative messages on the Internet, for example in discussion forums, disrupting the debate or insulting other participants. The word "trolling" can refer to a specific message directly, or the placement of such messages in general. Usually, *the concept of "trolling"* is used to describe the activities of trolls.

What Are Internet Trolls Used For?

1. Impact on public opinion: Russia uses “Troll Factories” to form a certain public opinion within the country, or to influence public opinion outside its borders. The creation and dissemination of certain messages is used to manipulate public opinion.
2. Undermining other countries: Troll factories can be used to undermine stability and influence political processes in other countries. This could include spreading disinformation, posting inflammatory material, or even manipulating elections.
3. Increase political discussions: Troll factories can actively participate in political discussions to increase divisions in society and create tension between different groups.
4. Protecting state interests: States can use trolls to protect their interests, control the information space and suppress dissidents.

Detecting that subscribers of a certain Telegram channel have been duped can be a difficult task as there are many ways to hide this. However, there are several signs that can indicate a possible scam:

- A sharp increase in subscribers: If the number of subscribers increases dramatically in a short period of time without obvious reasons (such as viral content or strong media attention), this may be a sign of a hoax.
- Low level of interaction: If a channel has a large number of subscribers but is experiencing low levels of engagement such as few views, likes, comments, or clicks, this too should raise suspicion.

The table below presents data from the Oplot project, i.e. the analysis of all the posts that appeared on the channels that were the subject of the study from May 2023 to November 2023. The first column shows the name of the channel, the second the number of posts that appeared over a period of six months containing toxic speech, the third is the total number of posts during the studied period, while the fourth is the percentage of messages that contained toxic speech (out of the total number of posts). In this case, 1 represents 100%.

Name of the channel	Number of toxic messages	Total number of messages	% of toxic messages
balkanossiper	28	400	0.07
Ruserbia	176	2525	0.07
Vestniksrbs	264	2747	0.1
panteri_panteri	1670	5035	0.33
RuBalkans	2	10	0.2
orly_rs	338	673	0.5
rtbalkan_ru	48	1045	0.05
Serbia	86	2153	0.04
Crna Gora srpska Sparta	73	187	0.39
Vinkolozic	133	791	0.17
srbska_akcija	170	383	0.44
rus_imperia	243	799	0.3
Crnagoraline	3	25	0.12

Using the website [TGstat](#), we checked some of the selected channels for the number of bots and the audience engagement, also identifying the main propaganda narratives used in these channels.

Channel “Balkan Gossip Girl”

The main language of texts posted on this channel is Russian. At the time of drafting the study report, the number of subscribers was 36,061.

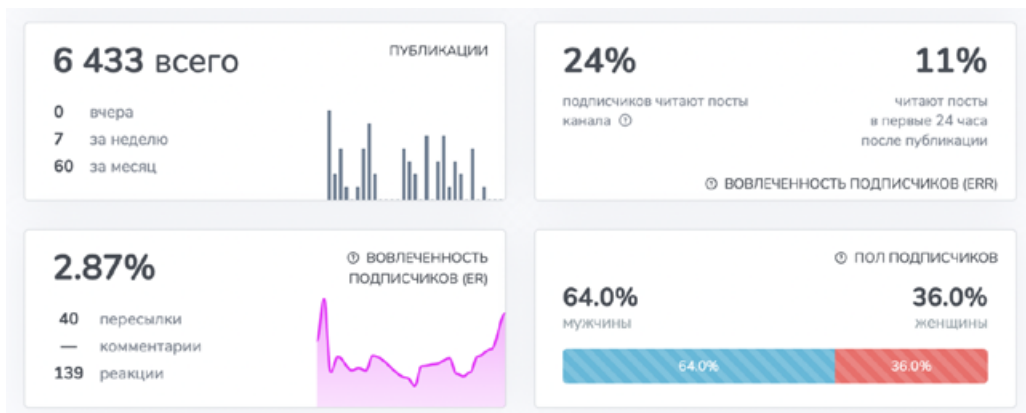


In the annual chart showing the number of subscribers, we can observe a permanent decline, with rare but sharp jumps in the number of subscribers.

The chart showing the number of subscribers over the entire period of the channel's existence shows that the main increase and uneven growth in the number of subscribers began exactly at the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Along with military operations, Russia also began to pursue an aggressive information policy abroad. At the same time, the main Russian propaganda channels (such as Sputnik and Russia Today) were blocked in Europe, so propagandists began to invest in the development of Telegram channels.



Using the Telegram platform could be a part of the strategy of pro-Russian media to bypass being blocked in certain countries, as it allows them to reach audiences in regions where official Russian media may be banned. However, pro-Russian channels are not prohibited in Serbia. So why develop them here? The answer seems to be simple. After the war in Ukraine began, many Russians who do not support military action moved to Serbia, so this could be the reason for the sharp increase of pro-Russian channels: to put emotional pressure on the relocants, showing them that their anti-war position is not welcome in Serbia since a large number of subscribers to Telegram channels suggests mass local support for the military invasion.



As we can see from the statistics below, only 24% of the subscribers actually read channel posts, of which 11% do so in the first 24 hours, which suggests that the majority of them are not real. We can also see the statistics concerning reader engagement: 2.87% of subscribers interact with the content, that is, leave comments, share the posts on their own social networks or with friends, or offer reactions.

The above shows that the number of real subscribers of the channel is in fact 8,754.

The Oplot project analysed the Balkan Gossip Girl channel and identified three most popular Russian propaganda narratives presented thereon:

"In Ukraine, Russians and the Russian language are oppressed, Russian genocide",

"Russia was left with no choice but to launch a military operation",

"If the United States can organise wars on foreign territories, then Russia can do it too".

These same narratives can easily be found in the Russian media controlled by the Kremlin.

For example, the information agency Russian Business Consulting Publication²⁰ quoted the following words of Vladimir Putin: *"The goal, as I have said many times, is first to protect people, but above all, to protect Russia from the threats they are trying to create in our own historical adjacent territories"*. He said this during a conversation with students, adding that *"we cannot allow this to happen"*.

RIA Novosti²¹ quoted one of the most famous propagandists in Russia, Margarita Simonyan: *"... Russian soldiers are not animals and they came not to commit genocide, but to protect other Russians who chose to remain Russian"*.

Information agency Tatar Inform,²² founded by the Republic of Tatarstan, wrote the following: *"An inevitable special operation: Russia was left with no choice but to pre-empt aggression"*.

Channel “Serbian Divergent”

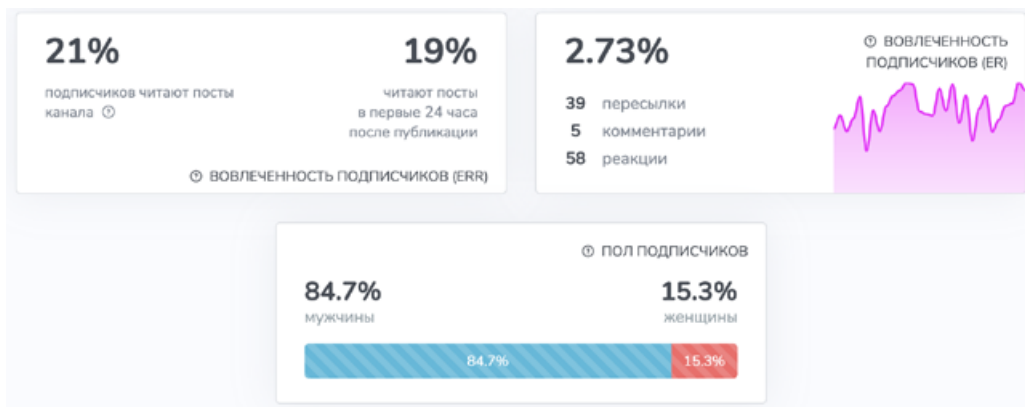
The main language of the channel is Russian, while the number of subscribers at the time of drafting the study report was 15,765.

The situation is the same as above: the chart shows a permanent decline of the number of subscribers.



In the chart that covers the entire period of the channel's existence, one can see that a sharp increase in the number of subscribers began in February-March 2022, exactly when Russian propaganda media started being blocked in Europe, and when the first large wave of emigration from Russia began.





The number of subscribers who read the posts and react to them is the same as above. Of the total number of subscribers, only 3,310 read the channel’s posts, while no more than 430 interact with them in some way.

According to Oplot, the main propaganda narratives on the Serbian Divergent channel are:

“In Ukraine, Russians and the Russian language are oppressed, Russian genocide”,

“Russia was left with no choice but to launch a military operation”,

“Ukraine is ruled by Nazis/fascists/Banderaites”.

The latter thesis is widely used in Russian propaganda, serving also as “justification” for the military invasion of Ukraine.

For example, Mr. Lavrov explained what was meant by the term ‘denazification of Ukraine’. His words were quoted by TASS:²³ *“And of course, denazification is an absolute must. And it includes not only cancelling the laws encouraging Nazi ideology and practices, but it also includes withdrawing any legislation which discriminates the Russian language and other national minority languages and in general national minority rights in Ukraine, which have been hugely discriminated and offended”.*

It is also worth noting that “Serbian Divergent” used toxic speech in 33% of its posts. Only the channels “Crna Gora Srpska Sparta” and “Srbska Aktsiya” had a higher percentage of such speech.

“Crna Gora Srpska Sparta”

This is a Serbian language channel which, at the time of drafting the study report, had 3,411 subscribers.

The channel was created on 3 February 2022 and its first post was published on 9 April 2022. No less than 1,783 people subscribed to the channel on 28 February 2022. This was an incredible success for a completely empty channel dedicated to a country with a population of just over 600,000. On 28 March, just a month and a half after it was opened, it had 3,760 subscribers. The first post, dedicated to the war in Ukraine, appeared on the channel only a week and a half later.



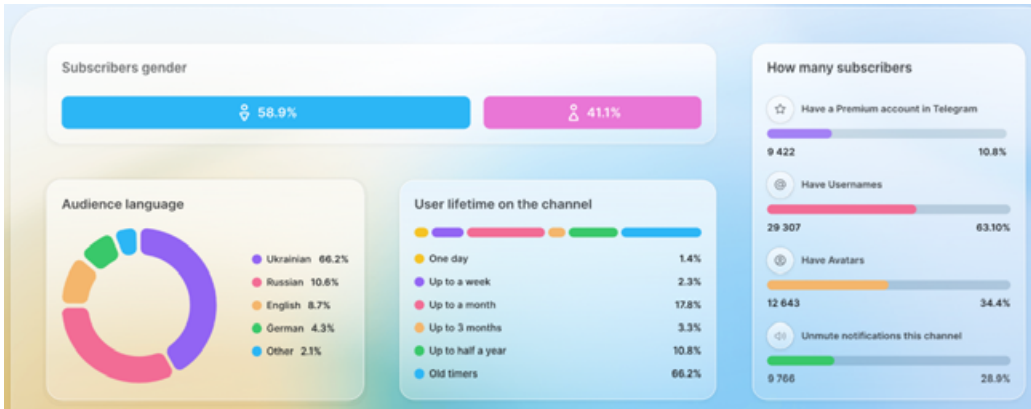
According to Oplot, the percentage of hate speech on this channel reaches 39%, which is more than every third.

Channel “Srbska akcija”

The language used on this channel is Serbian. At the time of writing the study report, it had 1,929 subscribers.

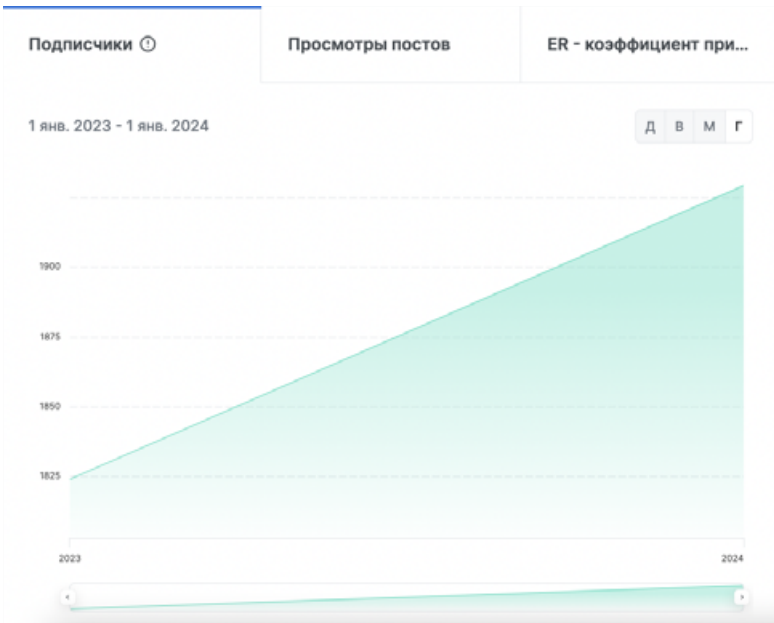
This channel was created in February 2020, and its first post stated that a similar page had been blocked on Facebook. This suggested that Telegram was a convenient platform to distribute absolutely any content, even that which was blocked on other social networks.

The promotion, however, is different from the examples presented above. This is a channel with a natural increase in the number of subscribers, and a much greater security. The TGStat service was unable to provide information for the analysis, but we were able to obtain some information with the help of [Telemetr service](#).

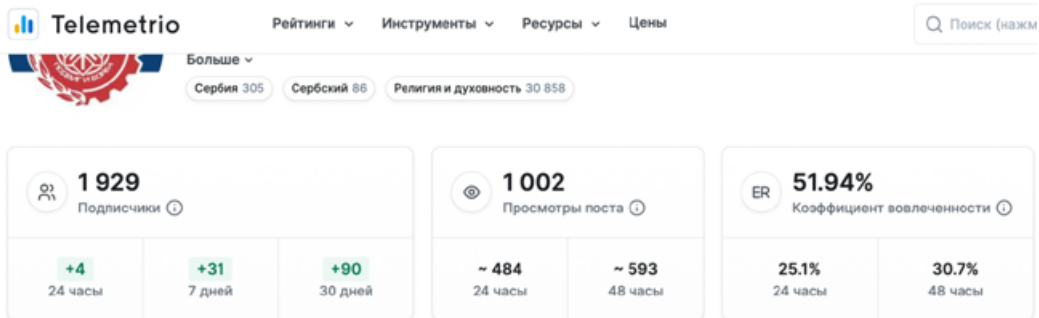


Most online translators and services automatically detect Serbian Cyrillic text as Ukrainian, which is most likely what happened in this case.

As can be seen from the chart, more than 66% of subscribers have been following the channel's posts for more than a year.



The chart on the left shows that the number of subscribers to the channel only increased in the course of the year, without any sharp rises and declines (which are usually the signs of a fake account). This means that the channel's audience is "real".



The statistics above show that the channel’s audience engagement is almost 52%. This is a very high figure.

Why was this channel included in the selection? Because Oplot established that the level of its hate and toxic speech is 44%.

The channel mainly covers topics related to the countries of the Balkan Peninsula. However, it also contains posts dedicated to the war in Ukraine.

The main narratives dedicated to the war in Ukraine that appear on this channel are:

“In Ukraine, Russians and the Russian language are oppressed, Russian genocide”,

“Russia was left with no choice but to launch a military operation”,

“We (Russia) are liberating Ukraine from the Nazis”.

Channels that openly call for violence are not uncommon, but as this is a red flag even for a “liberal” platform such as Telegram, their administrators try not to attract unnecessary attention to their content by artificially increasing the number of subscribers, advertising on other channels, and so on. Also, they prohibit third-party services from collecting statistics about their channels. Such actions allow them to use much a more aggressive rhetoric, and since it is extremely difficult to identify the authors of the content that appears on Telegram, they can avoid responsibility.

Main Topics of Russian Propaganda in Serbia

The Oplot project has identified the most popular propaganda narratives in channels that were studied during the research period. The table below shows the main topics, as well as the number of texts, containing these narratives, that were published over the past six months.

Narrative	Number of texts with this narrative
Russia was left with no choice but to launch a military operation	169
In Ukraine, Russians and the Russian language are oppressed, Russian genocide	163
The US/West/NATO is to blame for the war, which is waged to destroy Russia	76
Russia is at war with NATO/America/the West	58
Our president (Putin) is the best, he knows what he is doing/ everything is going according to the plan	49
Ukraine is ruled by Nazis/fascists/Banderaites	49
Ukraine is an artificial country, not real	36
Those who criticise Russian troops are traitors	30
If the United States can organise wars on foreign territories, then Russia can do it too	26
Western sanctions against Russia show that they hate Russia	25
Ukraine falsifies photographs/certificates, creates fake news about Russia	19
We (Russia) are liberating Ukraine from the Nazis	19
There is no turning back, we cannot give up	16
Ukraine violated/failed to comply with the Minsk agreements	16
The goal of the West is to weaken, divide and destroy Russia	15

All the above narratives are well known to the Serbian audience. Slobodan Milošević and his regime actively used the exact same ones in the 1990s in relation to Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, and during the Yugoslav wars that ensued. It is known that the victimhood narrative dominated the Serbian discourse in the 1990s, often serving to justify aggressive political and military decisions in Serbia in the last decade of the 20th century²⁴. In addition, narratives that were the most prominent in the Milošević era portrayed Serbs and Serbia as victims (of the West, in many cases), while neighbouring countries and ethnic communities were presented as threats to the survival of Serbs in the region (i.e. in Bosnia and Croatia).²⁵

The era of Slobodan Milošević's rule in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) was a period when propaganda played a key role in the consolidation of not only his power, but also his policies. Milošević, who became the leader of Serbia in 1989, and then president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), was overthrown in 2000 and subsequently arrested and transferred to the ICTY to stand a war crimes trial. He actively used propaganda to achieve his goals.

Here are some of the most typical propaganda narratives of the Milošević's government:

1. Ethnic nationalism: Under the leadership of Milošević, propaganda actively supported the idea of Serbian ethnic nationalism. This meant emphasising and protecting the interests of the Serbian nation, including its superiority and the rights of Serbian people over other ethnic groups in the region. This narrative has been used to justify intervention and aggressive policies towards other regions of former Yugoslavia, such as Croatia and Bosnia.²⁶

2. Disinformation and manipulation: Milošević's propaganda often included disinformation and manipulation of facts to support his policies. This included portraying enemies (both domestic and foreign) in a negative light (i.e. fascists, Ustashas), as well as distorting events to justify military action and repression.²⁷ Many cases of manipulation included pure fabrication of information.²⁸

3. Personality cult: Like other authoritarian leaders, Milošević created a cult of personality, presenting himself as the sole defender of the Serbian nation and the main guarantor of stability and security. He was often portrayed in the media and at public events as a strong and decisive leader, ready to fight for the interests of his people.²⁹

The narratives of modern Russian propaganda on Serbian Telegram channels fit 100% into the templates that are already familiar in Serbia. Therefore, they found fertile soil, where they received a response.

For example, the most popular narrative in the studied Serbian-language Telegram channels is *"In Ukraine, Russians and the Russian language are oppressed, Russian genocide"*.

This emphasises ethnic nationalism. Putin, too, is trying to convince people in both Russia and Serbia that the ethnically Russian population in Ukraine was oppressed, and that it consequently needed protection. At the same time, not a single reliable fact of oppression of Russians in Ukraine has been provided, just like no facts of infringement on the rights of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine have ever been revealed. About 30% of the population of Ukraine communicates in Russian³⁰ and are ethnic Ukrainians. There is much evidence on the Internet that Russia also uses manipulation and disinformation, sometimes even outright lies. One of the most striking examples is that of the "crucified boy", the event that allegedly occurred in 2014. In an interview with Channel One, a woman said that she personally saw the Ukrainian military crucify a child in front of his mother. According to her, this happened in the city of Slavyansk.³¹

After the interview aired on the main Russian TV channel, viewers began leaving angry comments on social networks, literally demanding that “the killing of Russians in Ukraine be stopped.” However, journalists from independent Russian media conducted their own investigations and found out that the event that was described on Channel One was completely fictitious.³² Despite this, the story about the crucified boy can still be found on the channel’s website, and many Russians continue to believe in this fake news. This kind of disinformation serves to justify the invasion of Ukraine.

The narrative “*Our president (Putin) is the best, he knows what he is doing/everything is going according to the plan*” is a part of Putin’s personality cult. This narrative is popular in both Russia and Serbia. Through the narratives “*The USA/West/NATO is to blame for the war waged to destroy Russia*” and “*Russia is at war with NATO/America/the West*”, propaganda influences the image of Putin in the eyes of the Serbs. Some Serbs see him as a supporter of the anti-Western rhetoric, expressed as criticism of the policies of NATO and the European Union. For some Serbs, this creates sympathy for the Russian leader. These narratives falsely portray Putin as a leader who is on their side regarding international issues.

“Searching for the Internal Enemy” – Use of Propaganda Methods

The image of the enemy in propaganda is a conceptual idea of a specific group of people, organisation, country or another entity that acts as an “enemy” or threat to society. The creation of an enemy image is a key propaganda tool used to mobilise public opinion, strengthen support for a government or dominant political force, and justify military action or harsh measures aimed at suppressing opposition.³³

Russian propaganda is creating the image of an enemy both within the country and abroad, depending on specific political and geopolitical objectives. However, in Serbia, and specifically through Telegram channels, Russia is forming and strengthening the image of the enemy in Western countries, the European Union and NATO. Russian propaganda portrays the West and NATO as enemies who are seeking to weaken or destroy Russia. This usually involves criticising Western policies, sanctions and military actions, as well as emphasising Western aggressiveness and hostility.

Russian propaganda in Serbia also often refers to the topic of NATO, especially in the context of the Kosovo issue and the Western influence in the Balkan region. Here are some of the main statements that appear in Russian propaganda materials about NATO in Serbia:

- Portraying NATO as a threat to Serbian sovereignty: Russian propaganda portrays NATO as an organisation that is seeking global domination and interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, including Serbia;³⁴
- Support for Serbia regarding the Kosovo issue: Russian propaganda often emphasises its support for Serbia concerning the Kosovo issue and criticises NATO’s and Western efforts to recognise Kosovo’s independence;³⁵
- Information warfare against NATO: Russian propaganda spreads disinformation and anti-Western rhetoric to discredit NATO and its actions, especially in the context of the Kosovo issue.³⁶

To create an “enemy image” regarding the European Union, Russian propaganda is resorting to the following tools:

The anti-Western rhetoric: Russian propaganda often uses anti-Western rhetoric to highlight differences between Russia and the EU, including criticism of Western values, policies and actions, emphasising the religious and cultural closeness of Russia and Serbia.

Criticism of sanctions: Propaganda criticises the sanctions that were imposed by the EU on Russia due to its actions in Ukraine and other issues, presenting them as unfair, useless and harmful to the economic development and security of both sides.

In addition to creating an enemy image of European countries and institutions, propaganda also actively demonises its political opponents in Serbia. These include anti-war Russians, who left Russia for Serbia after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the beginning of conscription, as well as Serbian politicians and activists who do not support the policies of Putin and Russia.

While, inside Russia, propaganda creates the image of an enemy to divert attention from its own internal problems and switch points of attention, abroad it is more likely to manipulate the public opinion regarding a certain political and ideological goal. When people feel that there is an external threat or a hostile force, they are more likely to support actions aimed at combating such a threat. Also, by creating the image of a common enemy of Russia and Serbia, propaganda creates the illusion of unity and cohesion between the states.

The Role of the Telegram Platform in Russia's Hybrid War

Telegram was not created as a tool for hybrid warfare, but it is a direct participant in Russia's hybrid war. The platform can be used as one of the means to influence public opinion and the situation regarding information. In the context of hybrid warfare, Russia uses this popular messenger application to spread disinformation and propaganda, as well as to organise influential communities that support its interests. After the Meta Corporation and its products (Facebook and Instagram)³⁷ were pronounced as extremist in Russia, Russian propaganda grouped its efforts around the Telegram messenger app. As there are virtually no foreign media news channels on Telegram that would counter Russian propaganda, this niche turned out to be unoccupied. Today (2024), Telegram's audience consists of 800 million active users. This means that, every month, it is used by 9.9% of the world's population, while a half million new users join the platform each day.³⁸

Here are the main ways in which Telegram participates in Russia's hybrid war:

- 1. Spreading disinformation:** False news, fake images and videos, as well as distorted interpretations of events are spread through Telegram for the purpose of influencing public opinion and creating a certain image of the enemy or events.³⁹
- 2. Establishing propaganda channels:** Russian agents create and maintain propaganda channels on Telegram that spread pro-Kremlin or anti-Western rhetoric and actively attack opposition groups or leaders.⁴⁰
- 3. Widespread use of bots and anonymous accounts:** Telegram actively uses bots and anonymous accounts to spread propaganda, manipulate public opinion and create the illusion of widespread support for certain ideas or movements.⁴¹
- 4. Support for destructive groups and organisations:** Telegram is also used to support extremist or destructive groups and organisations that may be involved in provocative actions or attacking the interests of other countries. Striking examples of such channels in the Balkans are those that generally bear the name BUNT.

The above actions can and do violate the rights of citizens of both Russia and other countries in which Russia conducts its propaganda activities. Manipulation of public opinion through Telegram leads to a loss of trust in information and deterioration of the quality of public discourse. Telegram also regularly harasses and persecutes certain groups of people, e.g. opposition politicians, activists and foreign politicians who do not support Russian policies. This practice has more than once led to arrests, charges of espionage, and extremism of entire groups of people.⁴²

At the moment, the main opponents of Russian propaganda on Telegram are independent Russian and Russian-language media, and the channels of activists, opposition politicians and initiatives. However, disparate resources play quite a role in this struggle. Pro-Kremlin state media have enormous budgets at their disposal, and the “troll factory” employs thousands of people who leave hundreds of thousands of comments every day.⁴³ Independent media, bloggers and politicians run their channels on their own, while the work of journalists and SMM managers is paid for through donations received from readers. It seems that Telegram has yet to meet a force that that would be capable of resisting it in a proper way. This is why it has become a convenient platform for waging hybrid warfare and spreading propaganda.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be said that Russian propaganda uses a wide range of tools - including Telegram channels, bots and Internet trolls - to form certain images and influence public opinion. It has become a popular medium for disseminating Russian propaganda because of its anonymity and the ability to create anonymous channels, which makes it possible to avoid liability for spreading disinformation.

Russian propaganda is used as part of hybrid warfare, which includes information influence, cyber attacks and other forms of non-military influence, to achieve political and strategic objectives. It is also actively creating the image of an external enemy in the form of NATO and the EU, presenting them as threats to the national security and sovereignty of both Russia and Serbia, which helps mobilise public support and legitimise the actions of the Russian authorities.

Developing effective strategies and measures to counter Russian propaganda includes several key aspects that can be implemented at various levels:

- 1. Monitoring and analysis of disinformation.** It is necessary to systematically monitor and analyse the spreading of disinformation and propaganda materials in the media, including on Telegram channels, social networks, Internet resources and other platforms.
- 2. Counter-measures at the information level.** Counter-propaganda campaigns and information projects should be developed to demonstrate true facts, expose false claims, and create alternative moral norms and values.
- 3. Increasing society's information literacy.** It is necessary to conduct educational programmes and campaigns to develop citizens' critical thinking and analytical skills so that they can independently recognise and filter disinformation and manipulation.

These measures can be implemented both at the state and public levels to create a sustainable system for protecting information security and ensuring free and objective access to information.

It is important that governments and companies, including messenger developers, comply with international human rights standards and protect fundamental rights and freedoms in the digital environment.

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