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Another battlefield:
Telegram as a digital front in Russia's war against Ukraine

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The mission of the **Digital Forensic Research Lab** (**DFRLab**) is to identify, expose, and explain disinformation where and when it occurs using open-source research; to promote objective truth as a foundation of government for and by people; to protect democratic institutions and norms from those who would seek to undermine them in the digital engagement space; to create a new model of expertise adapted for impact and real-world results; and to forge digital resilience at a time when humans are more interconnected than at any point in history, by building the world's leading hub of digital forensic analysts tracking events in governance, technology, and security.

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Summary of findings

General themes:

- In the more than two years since Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, no platform has expanded its role in helping the outside world to understand the Russian perspective on the war more than Telegram.

- Its influence was solidified in the first months of the war, as the Kremlin cracked down on Western social media platforms while continuing to tolerate Telegram and utilize it for its own purposes.

- This propelled Telegram into one of the last remaining windows for observing and understanding Russian thinking about the war—from the general public to the Kremlin itself.

Trends among top Russian Telegram channels:

- Analysis of the fifteen largest Russian Telegram channels showed the greatest spike in activity at the very start of the February 2022 invasion, followed by a spike during Yevgeny Prigozhin's failed June 2023 mutiny against the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).

- Additional spikes were consistent with local military developments ranging from the Ukrainian counteroffensive in northeast Ukraine in the spring and fall of 2022, as well as Russia's military advances in the cities of Soledar and Bakhmut in March of 2023.

- Russia's fifteen most influential channels routinely reposted content from other influential Telegram channels, effectively creating an echo chamber for reinforcing overall Kremlin narratives.

- Top channels experienced significant subscriber growth following the February 2022 invasion, but some of the most influential pro-war channels, such as Karaulny, Z SILOVIKI, and WarGonzo, later experienced declines that have continued into the spring of 2024, perhaps due to war weariness.

- Top channels also experienced a vast jump in viewership, growing from nearly sixteen billion views in 2021 to 95.5 billion over the course of 2022. In 2023 viewership grew modestly to 109 billion views.

- Some of this growth can be accounted for by a handful of dominant channels. Between 2021 and 2023,

state-owned news agency RIA Novosti nearly tripled its annual views, eventually garnering almost thirty billion views during 2023. Vladimir Solovyov's audience on the Russia 1 channel increased twentyfold, achieving twenty billion views in 2023, while Readovka, a pro-Kremlin news site, achieved a *ninety-onefold* increase, reaching 17.85 billion views in 2023.

Military blogger channels:

- A Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) analysis of more than 500,000 Telegram posts published by thirty-eight leading military blogger channels surfaced recurring topical themes, including frontline updates, such as activities by the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) and its battlefield losses; narratives discussing the West's dependence on Russian natural resources; Russian attacks on Ukrainian cities; and discussions denigrating Ukrainians as "Nazis."

- During Ukraine's successful September 2022 counteroffensive in Kharkiv, and pro-Ukraine forces infiltration of Russia's Belgorod region in May 2023, military bloggers' posts fell into three categories: on-the-ground frontline updates and analysis; mapping of losses/gains; and criticism of the Russian MoD and its management of the war. Posts related to these categories received more views and reposts than posts on other topics.

Private military company (PMC) channels:

- DFRLab analysis of channels affiliated with Russian private military companies (PMCs) identified three key areas of engagement: fundraising, recruiting, and information sharing.

- Channels collect money to buy tactical gear, medical supplies, firearms, and other equipment, relying on donations via Russian banks and cryptocurrencies.

- Russian PMC channels used the platform to recruit additional fighters to their battalions, often employing patriotic and emotional messaging.

- Wagner maintained at least thirty separate channels dedicated to regional recruitment offices. These, however, disappeared after Russian telecommunications regulator Roskomnadzor cracked down on Wagner channels during the mutiny.

- Russian PMC channels engage in widespread information sharing on a variety of topics, such official Kremlin statements, current war footage, service awards, and disinformation narratives, including rumors about US biological weapons.

Russian hacktivist channels:

- The DFRLab identified four peaks in posting activity on Russian hacktivist channels, each of which preceded a notable hacking incident. Mentions of specific countries often spiked prior to these hacking incidents. Ukraine, the United States, and Poland received the most mentions.

Russian media use of Telegram:

- Telegram's increasing popularity in Russia was reflected in how Kremlin-controlled, pro-Kremlin, and independent Russian media outlets increasingly cite Telegram content as sources in their news articles.

- An analysis of Telegram URLs showed a 481 percent increase in Telegram citations appearing in the articles of pro-Kremlin media outlets, jumping to 33,300 citations by 2023.

- Facebook and Instagram, both of which were banned by the Kremlin, experienced precipitous drops in news citations, while citations of X (formerly Twitter) dropped in 2022 and then increased in 2023, suggesting the impact of the Kremlin ban was only temporary. VKontakte (VK), a Russian social media app, experienced modest citation increases from 1,192 in 2021 to 1,848 in 2023, but its numbers were no match for the Telegram citations, suggesting that VK is not seen as an important information source.

Russian crackdown on anonymous channels:

- According to data from TGStat, a Telegram analytics platform, approximately half of the top one hundred Russian Telegram channels are anonymous.

- Some channels have embraced their anonymity as a branding tactic, presenting themselves as sources of insider information, adding to their appeal to readers.

- Anonymous channels targeted by the Kremlin are often accused of extortion by profiting off of "negative blocks," in which a channel agrees to not mention a specific person or a company in a negative light in exchange for money.

- Crackdowns on anonymous Telegram channels have been successful due to the development of data-collection methods that allow investigators to deanonymize channels. In the words of Russian MP Alexander Khinshtein, "Anonymity on TG is a myth."

Channels critical of the Kremlin:

- Despite efforts to identify channel administrators, Telegram maintains a robust community of actors exposing Kremlin wrongdoings and criticizing Russia's political and military elite on the messaging app.

- One of the most popular Russian independent news outlets, *Meduza*, ranked seventeenth in subscribers among the top one hundred Russian news and media channels in Russia.

- Outside of Russia, reputable Western daily newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have circumvented website bans by launching Telegram channels.

- Channels affiliated with the late Prigozhin and the Wagner Group became a significant threat to Kremlin messaging, climaxing with the June 2023 Wagner mutiny.

- Wagner channels garnered more than 107 million views and 1.3 million shares over the two-day period, while Prigozhin's primary channel, Prigozhin Press Service, grew by more than 872,000 subscribers.

Additional case studies:

- Russian Telegram groups engage in fundraising to encourage civilians to donate money for equipment purchasing. Among the most successful fundraisers were campaigns promoted by propagandist and Telegram influencer Solovyov.

- Russian government ministries employ Telegram to recruit new soldiers, particularly in autonomous ethnic regions, while competing channels like Get Lost encourage Russian conscripts to avoid military service.

Introduction

In the more than two years since Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, no platform has expanded its role in helping the outside world to understand the Russian perspective on the war more than Telegram. Launched by Russian entrepreneur Pavel Durov in 2013, the messaging platform rapidly grew in popularity, eventually gaining primacy in Russian social media discourse. Its influence was solidified in the first months of the war, as the Kremlin cracked down on Western social media platforms while continuing to tolerate Telegram and utilize it for its own purposes. **This has propelled Telegram into one of the last remaining windows for observing and understanding Russian thinking about the war, from the general public to the Kremlin itself.**

This growth was partially instigated as Telegram became more than a messaging app for Russian audiences. After multiple Western governments blocked access to Russian government-controlled and pro-government media websites following the February 2022 invasion, many Russian media outlets started to actively use Telegram as a work-around to disseminate and promote their content.[1] The blocking of Western social media platforms by Russian authorities in 2022 also contributed to the growth of Telegram in Russia.[2]

According to a 2023 report by the advertising division of Telegram analytics platform TGStat,[3] the Russian segment of Telegram comprises more than seventy-five million users and hosts over 700,000 channels. The report highlighted that 85 percent of respondents rely on Telegram for news, while approximately half of Russian Telegram users subscribed to a channel about politics, and one in three users subscribed to channels covering the war in Ukraine. Additionally, a study by the Russian media holding company Rambler&Co found that the number of people in Russia using Telegram for news consumption is almost the same as the number of Russians visiting news websites for the same purpose.[4]

Other pro-Kremlin actors have also expanded their presence on Telegram, contributing to the growth of the platform's pro-Kremlin disinformation ecosystem. In May 2022, the DFRLab found that pro-Kremlin content had become more prevalent on Telegram in Russia than content from independent and critical channels since the start of the war.[5] Pro-Kremlin Telegram channels also registered faster subscriber growth and engagement on Telegram than channels critical or neutral toward the Kremlin.

Shortly after the invasion, Russian authorities started to explicitly promote Telegram to domestic audiences. In March 2022, the Russian Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media advised government agencies to create accounts on Telegram and the Russian social network VKontakte (VK).[6] Pro-Kremlin actors have leveraged Telegram to bring their messages to millions of Russians and serve as a primary vector to spread their messaging beyond Russia's borders.[7]

Russia's weaponization of Telegram against Ukraine began prior to the invasion. In February 2021, the Security Services of Ukraine exposed a network of Telegram channels overseen by Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), arresting individuals who allegedly created and administered a number of political Telegram channels to incite social tensions and protests in Ukraine.[8] During the first weeks of the invasion, Russian authorities blocked access to hundreds of Ukrainian websites in occupied Ukrainian territory; in parallel, more than one hundred pro-Kremlin Telegram channels appeared, operating as local media in occupied territories as well as broadcasting

1   Hans W. A. Hanley and Zakir Durumeric, "Partial Mobilization: Tracking Multilingual Information Flows amongst Russian Media Outlets and Telegram," Cornell University, May 16, 2023, https://arxiv.org/abs/2301.10856.

2   Irina Yuzbekova, "Как иностранные соцсети теряют популярность в России после 'спецоперации' (How Foreign Social Networks Are Losing Popularity in Russia After a 'Special Operation')," *Forbes*, August 7, 2022, https://www.forbes.ru/tekhnologii/473713-kak-inostrannye-socseti-teraut-popularnost-v-rossii-posle-specoperacii.

3   TGStat Agency, "Исследование аудитории Telegram 2023," May 2023, https://tgstat.ru/en/research-2023.

4   Lenta.ru, "Россияне рассказали о перепроверке новостей из Telegram на сайтах СМИ (Russians Talked About Double-checking News from Telegram on Media Sites)," September 21, 2023, https://lenta.ru/news/2023/09/21/news/.

5   Givi Gigitashvili, "Pro-Kremlin Telegram Channels in Russia Outperforming Channels Critical of Kremlin," Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) (blog), May 13, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-kremlin-telegram-channels-in-russia-outperforming-channels-critical-of-russia-f2076ebef3ea.

6   Lenta.ru, "Российским госорганам предложили завести аккаунты в Telegram и 'Вконтакте,' (Russian Government Agencies Were Asked to Create Accounts on Telegram and VKontakte)," March 6, 2022, https://lenta.ru/news/2022/03/06/telegram/.

7   Darren Loucaides, "The Kremlin Has Entered the Chat," *Wired*, February 2, 2023, https://www.wired.com/story/the-kremlin-has-entered-the-chat/.

8   MediaSapiens, "СБУ заявила, що викрила мережу Telegram-каналів, які курують у ГРУ РФ. Серед них-'Легітимний' та 'Резидент' (The SBU Announced that It Had Exposed a Network of Telegram Channels Overseen by the GRU of the Russian Federation. Among Them are 'Legitimny' and 'Resident')," *Detector Media*, February 1, 2021, https://ms.detector.media/kiberbezpeka/post/26536/2021-02-01-sbu-zayavyla-shcho-vykryla-merezhu-telegram-kanaliv-yaki-kuruyut-u-gru-rf-sered-nykh-legytymnyy-ta-rezydent/.

messages coming from local Russia-backed separatist administrations.

Moscow also has cracked down on Russian Telegram channels critical of the Kremlin. Russian authorities have increasingly surveilled and prosecuted administrators of anonymous Telegram channels as well as journalists and dissidents, silencing or imprisoning those targeted.[9]

Overall, though, with the expansion of pro-Kremlin communities on Telegram, the messaging platform has allowed for greater understanding of current Russian political dynamics regarding the war.[10] For example, Russian military bloggers use Telegram to regularly report about the situation on the frontlines; their messages are then amplified by Russian media outlets.[11] Russian mercenary groups also use Telegram to recruit fighters, raise money for their units, and provide regular updates about their activities in Ukraine. Meanwhile, Russian hacker groups that target Ukraine and its allies routinely employ Telegram to coordinate their attacks and publicize them.

9   "Теперь всех можно грести под себя," *Meduza*, March 22, 2023, https://meduza.io/feature/2023/03/22/teper-vseh-mozhno-gresti-pod-sebya.

10   Masha Borak, "Telegram Has Become a Window into War," *Verge*, Vox Media, July 7, 2023, https://www.theverge.com/2023/7/7/23786422/telegram-russia-war-news-blogging-censorship-disinformation.

11   Donald N. Jensen and Angela Howard, "How Russia's Military Bloggers Shape the Course of Putin's War," United States Institute of Peace, August 10, 2023, https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/how-russias-military-bloggers-shape-course-putins-war.

Telegram within Russia's information ecosystem

Understanding Telegram's prominence in Russia requires a brief overview of the country's information ecosystem over the last three decades. In 1990s Russia, the primary mass communications medium was television.[12] Russia had a number of TV channels and media outlets, often backed by oligarchs, leading to a certain amount of competition and alternative points of view on current events.[13] The situation started to change as Vladimir Putin consolidated power, tightening the leash on journalists and oligarchs, forcing them to express support for the "state's cause" or end up either jailed, dead, or exiled.[14] This change in the media landscape solidified the predominance of state-supported messaging across mainstream Russian media, pushing alternative points of view to outsider status.[15]

The internet remained largely uncontrolled by the Kremlin during this period, but received increased attention after the 2011 protests in Moscow's Bolotnaya Square, which was partially coordinated via the web and social media.[16] At the time, the predominant social media in Russia were the blogging service LiveJournal and VK, a Russian copycat of Facebook created by Durov, who subsequently launched Telegram in 2013. During the 2014 Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, Russian authorities pressed Durov to provide VK data regarding users participating in the protests in Ukraine. Pavel refused, which ultimately forced him to depart the company and sell his equity stake, leaving VK less resistant to Kremlin pressure. Subsequently, Russian tech firms like Yandex and Mail.ru, as well as media companies operating the largest news aggregators, became allied to or forced to coexist with the Kremlin and its interests.[17]

With the Kremlin influencing media narratives and the information space more broadly, alternative viewpoints were forced to the sidelines. This created an information vacuum that would ultimately be filled by Telegram channels. According to the outlet Proekt Media, government officials tolerated the platform, as they could use it to selectively leak "insider information," whether factual or otherwise, as well as track leaks by other officials.[18]

By 2018, Telegram was believed to have around 200,000 active users in Russia.[19] The popularity of Telegram in Russia increased after the failed attempt of the Russian Duma to block Telegram in Russia in 2017-18.[20] Authorities tried to extract encryption keys from Durov; when he refused, the Russian state started blocking access to the platform. While attempting to do so, Russian authorities wreaked havoc on domestic internet services: people could not receive verification messages to confirm banking operations; bank tellers couldn't access internal systems to conduct operations; and some websites became unreachable.[21] This made Telegram even more popular among users, who found work-arounds to access the platform, increasing its reach by 40 percent.[22]

While Kremlin spokesperson Dmitri Peskov acknowledged that Telegram had been "blocked, but not banned," it continued to function and thrive, even providing a platform for

12   Stephen White and Sarah Oates, "Politics and the Media in Postcommunist Russia," *Politics* 23, no. 1 (February 2003): 31–37, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.00177.

13   Ellen Mickiewicz, "Russian Television News: Owners and the Public," *Nieman Reports*, Fall 1999, https://niemanreports.org/articles/russian-television-news-owners-and-the-public/.

14   Yevgenia Albats, "1999: Reporting Stories in Russia that No One Will Publish," *Nieman Reports*, Fall 1999, https://niemanreports.org/articles/1999-reporting-stories-in-russia-that-no-one-will-publish/; and Reporters Without Borders, "Press Freedom in Russia," European Parliament, 2007, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/fd/droi20071001_russia_004/droi20071001_russia_004en.pdf.

15   Anna Kachkaeva, Ilya Kiriya, and Grigory Libergal, "Television in the Russian Federation: Organisational Structure, Programme Production and Audience," Internews Russia, March 2006, https://rm.coe.int/0900001680783545.

16   Ellen Barry, "Rally Defying Putin's Party Draws Tens of Thousands," *New York Times*, December 10, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/world/europe/thousands-protest-in-moscow-russia-in-defiance-of-putin.html; and Barry, "Rousing Russia with a Phrase," *New York Times*, December 9, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/10/world/europe/the-saturday-profile-blogger-aleksei-navalny-rouses-russia.html.

17   "The Right Stuff: How the Russian Authorities Forced the Country's Top News Aggregator to Purge Unwanted Stories," *Meduza*, August 16, 2019, https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/08/16/the-right-stuff; and Evan Gershkovich, "The Uneasy Coexistence of Yandex and the Kremlin," *MIT Technology Review*, August 19, 2020, https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/08/19/1006438/yandex-putin-arkady-volozh-kremlin/.

18   Михаил Рубин, "Телега Из Кремля. Рассказ о Том, Как Власти Превратили Telegram в Телевизор," Proekt Media, November 28, 2018, https://www.proekt.media/narrative/telegram-kanaly/; and Roman Osadchuk, "Ukrainian Media Jump the Gun on Russia-Ukraine Prisoner Swap," DFRLab (blog), December 2, 2019, https://medium.com/dfrlab/ukrainian-media-jump-the-gun-on-russia-ukraine-prisoner-swap-3216f860bc04.

19   Рубин, "Телега Из Кремля. Рассказ о Том, Как Власти Превратили Telegram в Телевизор."

20   Yuri Smirnov, "From Russia with Love. Anonymous Empire of Pavel Durov," February 3, 2020, https://project.liga.net/projects/durov_telegram_eng/.

21   Mediazona, "Роскомнадзор Против Интернета," April 16, 2018. https://zona.media/online/2018/04/16/telegram-blocked.

22   Lenta.ru, "«Наша Компания, На Которую Обратил Внимание Весь Мир» Telegram Два Года Блокировали в России. Почему Ограничениям Пришел Конец?," June 20, 2020, https://lenta.ru/articles/2020/06/20/durov_victory/.

Russian officials. Telegram bypassed government restrictions on the popular cloud platform Amazon Web Services, used by thousands of websites. This created issues for other sites after Russian telecommunications regulator Roskomnadzor banned millions of Amazon internet protocol (IP) addresses. Roskomnadzor also had to contend with how parts of Telegram's infrastructure used Apple, Google, and Microsoft services, the blocking of which would have compromised domestic internet services even further.[23] In 2020, Roskomnadzor finally ceded its attempts to block the platform.[24] Its reasons remain open to interpretation. One government source alleged to Russian media group RBK[25] that Durov still cooperated with the Kremlin; in a 2024 interview, however, Durov pointed to Western competitors as likely spreading rumors of Kremlin control of Telegram.[26]

Meanwhile, the platform allowed political figures to publish *kompromat* (compromising materials) on their opponents, thus using it for political skirmishing. Some channels reportedly took up the practice of blocking negative information about specific companies or people for a monthly fee.[27] In one experiment, journalists were unable to publish negative Telegram posts about RosNeft, the Russian state gas and oil company. Conversely, the Kremlin assigned funds to pay channels for positive publications about the government and negative ones about its opponents, such as targeting Alexei Navalny in 2018.[28] Moreover, a growing number of channels were connected to Russian authorities and oligarchs, publishing content in step with the central government.

Russian propagandists also joined the network, launching their own channels to share Kremlin-aligned narratives alongside their own thoughts. The platform currently hosts the personal channels of RT Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan,[29] TV propagandist Solovyov,[30] and multiple journalists from pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-owned outlets. Notably, these channels cultivated broader networks of like-minded channels, creating lists of channels they read and nudging readers to subscribe.

23 CNews, "Правительство России Открыло Официальный Канал в Telegram," August 31, 2021, https://www.cnews.ru/news/top/2021-08-31_pravitelstvo_zavelo_svoj.

24 Reuters, "Russia Lifts Ban on Telegram Messaging App After Failing to Block It," June 18, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-telegram-ban-idUSKBN23P2FT; Tass, "История Блокировки Telegram в России," June 18, 2020, https://tass.ru/info/8761201; and Рубин, "Телега Из Кремля."

25 РБС, "Почему Власти Решили Разблокировать Telegram. Главное," June 18, 2020, https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/18/06/2020/5ee211609a79473d9eccbc4c.

26 "Telegram's Durov Tells Tucker Carlson That Kremlin Pressure Forced Him Out of Russia," *Moscow Times*, April 17, 2024, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/04/17/telegrams-durov-tells-tucker-carlson-that-kremlin-pressure-forced-him-out-of-russia-a84863.

27 Рубин, "Телега Из Кремля."

28 Рубин, "Телега Из Кремля."

29 Global Engagement Center, "Faces of Kremlin Propaganda: Margarita Simonyan," US State Department, August 31, 2022, https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/faces-of-kremlin-propaganda-margarita-simonyan/.

30 Global Engagement Center, "Faces of Kremlin Propaganda: Vladimir Solovyov," US State Department, March 31, 2022. https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/faces-of-kremlin-propaganda/vladimir-solovyov/.

Research methodology

To better understand Russian Telegram and how pro-war Russian influencers operate on the platform, the DFRLab analyzed the fifteen most influential Russian Telegram channels, conducted a deeper examination of three influential communities on Russian Telegram—including Russian military bloggers, private military companies (PMCs), and pro-Russian hackers—and examined the platform's influence on Russian media outlets. Using a combination of qualitative open-source research and quantitative data analysis, we examined how these communities operate on Telegram, the key topics discussed, and how they are amplified by pro-Kremlin actors to the wider Telegram ecosystem.

The primary challenge faced during our research was contending with the fact that no monitoring tool exists for retrieving and analyzing content published across the *entire* Telegram ecosystem. Unlike many other social media platforms which have corresponding monitoring tools for analyzing their entire public archives, Telegram monitoring products require some form of curation to supply them with lists of Telegram channels, which they then archive and analyze. For example, as of March 6, 2024, TGStat tracked approximately 853,000 Russian channels. While this dataset is quite expansive, it represents what is effectively the *known universe* of Russian Telegram channels, leaving the true size of the *entire universe* of Russian Telegram an open question.

Nonetheless, TGStat's database of 853,000 Russian Telegram channels serves as an extremely useful starting point for researchers, including identifying the fifteen most influential channels, which is defined by the number of citations and reposts per Telegram channel. The DFRLab then collected nearly one million messages from the fifteen channels over a period spanning from December 1, 2021, until February 19, 2024. The DFRLab aggregated posts by week to visualize the number of messages each channel posted over the course of the observed period.

Separately, the DFRLab also collected Russian Telegram data focusing on three communities: Russian military bloggers, or milbloggers, who serve as primary sources of reporting and analysis regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine; private military companies (PMCs) that maintain a presence on the platform; and Russian hacker groups that use Telegram to coordinate and promote their activities. Channels belonging to military bloggers were initially curated from the Alliance for Securing Democracy's Russian Military Bloggers Dashboard, while channels owned by mercenary groups and pro-Kremlin hackers were identified by the DFRLab via TGStat queries and ongoing DFRLab monitoring and analysis of the platform over a period of more than two years.[31] This resulted in the analysis of eighty-four channels, including thirty-eight military blogger channels, fifteen PMC channels, and twenty-nine hacker channels.

Once the DFRLab identified these channels, we scraped 737,699 Telegram posts published by these communities published between February 24, 2022, and October 29, 2023, using the statistical modeling technique known as Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERTopic) to identify representative topics by analyzing clusters of similar words.[32] Given that this methodology focuses on analyzing written text, the Telegram messages were then sorted to remove posts lacking text or interpretable language, resulting in 502,575 messages that could be parsed for topic modeling.

To render the messages, the DFRLab utilized *distiluse-base-multilingual-cased-v2,* a pretrained sentence transformer tool developed by the company Hugging Face, which was selected after a thorough testing of several other tools compatible with Russian-language text.[33] We then used BERTopic to fine-tune keyword word representations for each topic, allowing us to identify the most common topics discussed across each Telegram community during the analyzed timeframe.

We also prepared social network maps to examine how channels within the three communities amplify each other, and how they are amplified by outside channels. This was accomplished by creating an internal network visualization based on the backbone approach, a methodology for analyzing the relative intensity of connections, or edges, within a network.[34] Network graph data was generated in the programming language R, using the R library igraph and its

31   Alliance for Securing Democracy, "War in Ukraine, Military Bloggers," n.d., https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/war-in-ukraine-military-bloggers/.

32   Nick T., "Topic Modeling with BERTopic: A Cookbook with an End-to-end Example (Part 1)," Medium (blog), February 11, 2023, https://medium.com/@nick-tan/topic-modeling-with-bertopic-a-cookbook-with-an-end-to-end-example-part-1-3ef739b8d9f8.

33   Nils Reimers and Iryna Gurevych, "Sentence-BERT: Sentence Embeddings using Siamese BERT-Networks," Association for Computational Linguistics (2019).

34   Z. P. Neal, "Backbone: An R package to Extract Network Backbones," PLOS ONE, May 31, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0269137.

implementation of the PageRank algorithm to compute the relative importance, or *centrality*, of the Telegram channels in each network.[35] The results were then visualized using the network mapping tool Gephi and its ForceAtlas2 algorithm.[36]

Lastly, we conducted additional analysis to examine how the Russian media ecosystem utilizes Telegram as a primary source in its reporting and vice versa. We selected ten media outlets prominent on the platform, including seven pro-Kremlin outlets and three independent outlets, using the media monitoring platform Event Registry to scrape 655,165 articles published during the periods of June 1 to August 31 for the years 2021, 2022, and 2023.

We then employed Event Registry metadata to extract 60,070 Telegram URLs from the scraped articles to calculate the frequency of Telegram citations, and compared this to the frequency of URLs originating from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X and YouTube. In instances when the metadata field was blank, we employed a custom scraper to identify Telegram URLs in the article text. Finally, we scraped more than three million posts from 429 Russian Telegram channels to determine the frequency of URLs linking to Russian media outlets.

35   R/igraph, igraph 1.6.0.9025, https://r.igraph.org/; R igraph manual pages, https://igraph.org/r/doc/page_rank.html; and R. Domagalski, Z. P. Neal, and B. Sagan, "Backbone: An R Package for Extracting the Backbone of Bipartite Projections," PLOS ONE, January 6, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0244363.

36   M. Jacomy et al., "ForceAtlas2, a Continuous Graph Layout Algorithm for Handy Network Visualization Designed for the Gephi Software, *PLOS ONE*, June 10, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0098679; and Sergey Brin and Larry Page, "The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine," *Proceedings of the Seventh World-Wide Web Conference*, Brisbane, Australia, 1998, http://infolab.stanford.edu/~backrub/google.html.

Overview of mainstream Russian Telegram

The DFRLab compiled a list of the fifteen most influential Telegram channels according to TGStat, as determined by the total amount of citations and reposts per Telegram channel. These included channels ranging from bloggers like Russian propagandist Solovyov to the Russian Defense Ministry and Russian state media like TASS, RIA Novosti, and Russia Today. In total, the top fifteen channels garnered more than sixteen million subscribers.

To better understand the messaging and posting patterns of the selected channels as related to the war in Ukraine, we analyzed a total of 978,220 posts published between December 1, 2021—approximately ten weeks prior to the February 2022 invasion—and February 19, 2024. Unsurprisingly, the largest surge of messages across the channels occurred on February 24, 2022, the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion. Subsequent spikes were consistent with local military developments ranging from the Ukrainian counteroffensive in northeast Ukraine in the spring and fall of 2022, as well as Russia's military advances in the cities of Soledar and Bakhmut in March of 2023.

Notably, the DFRLab also observed that the second biggest surge in messages stemmed from Prigozhin's failed mutiny against the MoD on June 23, 2023. These findings were consistent with prior DFRLab research documenting the role of Telegram channels in the mutiny.

To explore how the top fifteen channels promoted the Russian Telegram ecosystem more broadly, the DFRLab aggregated all of their posts originating from other channels. In total, the fifteen channels reposted content from approximately 4,000 channels, including each other, allowing us to document significant narrative overlap across Russian Telegram, in particular the exceptional outreach of state media and key Russian propagandists.

Table 1: The fifteen most influential channels as of February 2024

Rank	Username	Name	Subscribers	Category
#1	rian_ru	РИА Новости	2,955,659	News and mass media
#2	rt_russian	RT на русском	844,043	News and mass media
#3	Dvachannel	Двач	809,090	Humor and entertainment
#4	Bbbreaking	Раньше всех. Ну почти.	1,581,722	News and mass media
#5	breakingmash	Mash	2,234,697	News and mass media
#6	tass_agency	ТАСС	367,468	News and mass media
#7	readovkanews	Readovka	2,350,491	News and mass media
#8	Rusbrief	BRIEF	504,358	Politics
#9	Bazabazon	Baza	1,122,987	News and mass media
#10	dimsmirnov175	Пул N3	328,778	Politics
#11	shot_shot	SHOT	878,016	News and mass media
#12	yandex	Яндекс	148,849	Technology
#13	SolovievLive	СОЛОВЬЁВ	1,291,762	Politics
#14	mod_russia	Минобороны России	535,931	Politics
#15	Sashakots	Kotsnews	573,436	News and mass media

(Source: TGStat/Flourish)

Figure 1

Russia's top fifteen Telegram channels
TGStat data shows various categories of popular Telegram channels as of February 2024

■ Subscribers

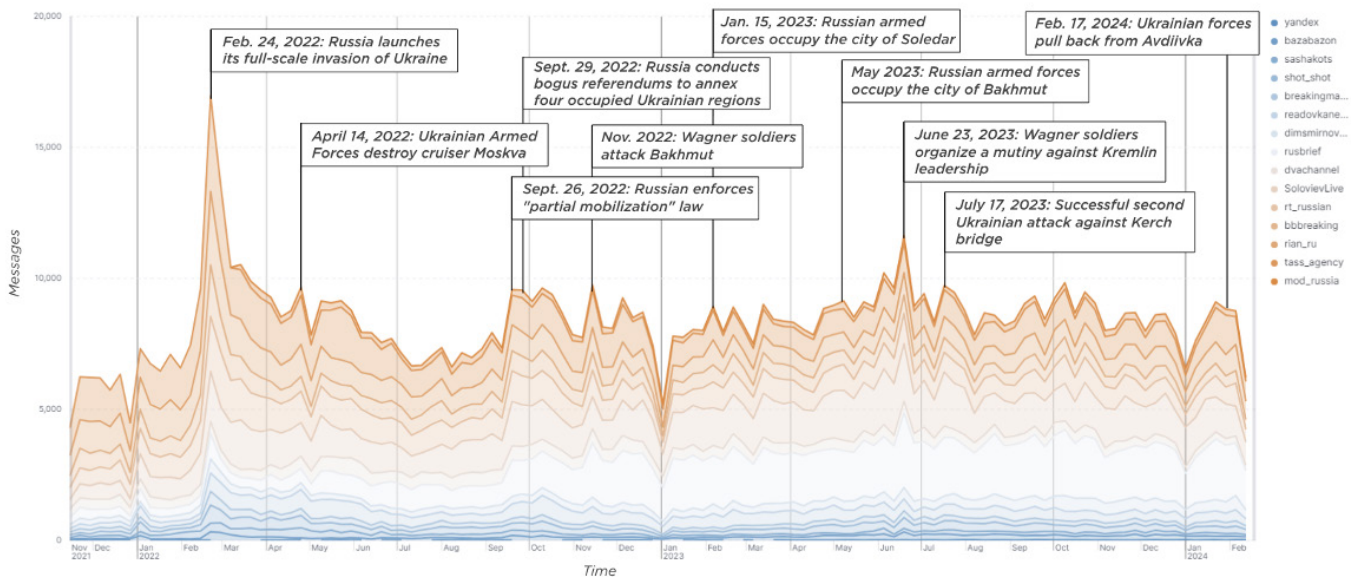*Source:* https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/17069994/
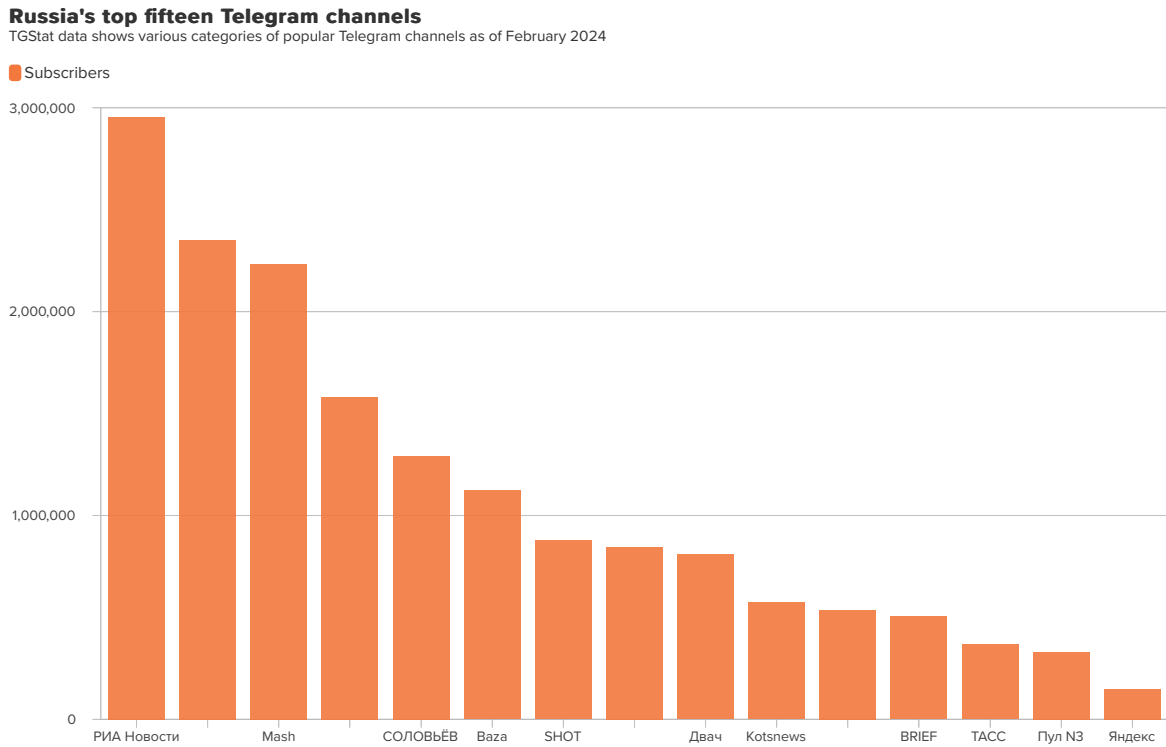
Figure 2

Number of messages posted by Russia's top fifteen Telegram channels from November 2021 to February 2024
Posting trends related to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine emerge upon analyzing nearly one million messages

Stacked area graph shows surges in messages posted by Russia's top fifteen Telegram channels in relation to military developments.
(Source: @gyron_bydton/DFRLab via Telegram)

Figure 3

Top fifteen Telegram channels show intricate connections with Russian politics channels on the platform
Channels dealing with politics are key amplifiers ofTGStat's top fifteen Russian Telegram channels

Category ● News and mass media ● Politics ● Blogs ○ Marketing, PR, advertisement ● Transport ● Economics ● Humor and entertainment
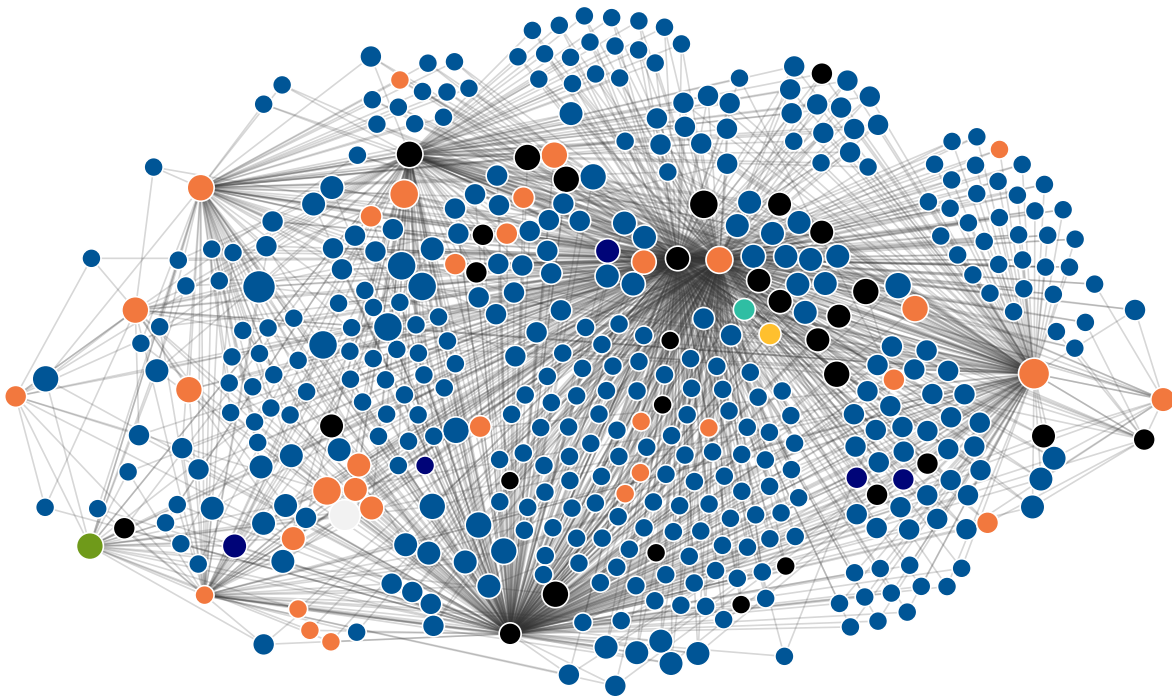
(Source: TGStat/Flourish)

The top fifteen channels routinely reposted the content of Russia's one hundred most popular Telegram channels, effectively creating an echo chamber for reinforcing popular Russian narratives. Overall, the top fifteen channels' reposting pattern showed the strongest connections with those categorized by TGStat as "blogs" or "politics," significantly impacting the flow of information within the network. The six most-cited channels were Karaulny Z, a pro-war news channel; Besposchadny Piarschik ("Ruthless PR Man"), a channel about media and PR; RT in Russia; RT's editor-in-chief, Simonyan; SIL0VIKI, a news channel that discusses Russian politics; and WarGonzo, a popular milblogger channel run by Semyon Pegov.

All six of these channels experienced significant subscriber growth following the February 2022 invasion, according to data from TGStat. However, three of the six—Karaulny, SIL0VIKI, and WarGonzo—eventually experienced declines that have continued into the spring of 2024, which the technology outlet Fast Company speculated was due to increased Russian weariness about the war. WarGonzo, for example, quintupled its pre-invasion audience in the

first three months of the war, reaching a plateau of more than 1.3 million subscribers in November 2022 before beginning a decline that would shed one-quarter million followers by late March 2024.

Similar to their post-invasion jump in subscribers was a vast jump in viewership, which accounts for the total number of times their content has been seen by Telegram users, whether they subscribe to the channel or not. The

Table 2: Total views for top 15 channels

| Year	Total views for top 15 channels
2020	10,831,014,548
2021	15,956,182,150
2022	99,585,327,407
2023	109,822,875,209

Figure 4

Screenshot: A comparison of the six channels most frequently reposting messages from the top fifteen most cited Russian Telegram channels showing growth in subscribers since their creation. Most channels display a twofold to threefold increase since the beginning of the war, though three of the channels reached a plateau before declining. *(Source: DFRLab via TGStat)*

Figure 5

Cumulated number of views of Russia's top fifteen Telegram channels show exponential growth

Russia's top fifteen Telegram channels saw an exponential increase in views since the beginning of the war benefiting Russian state media and propagandists
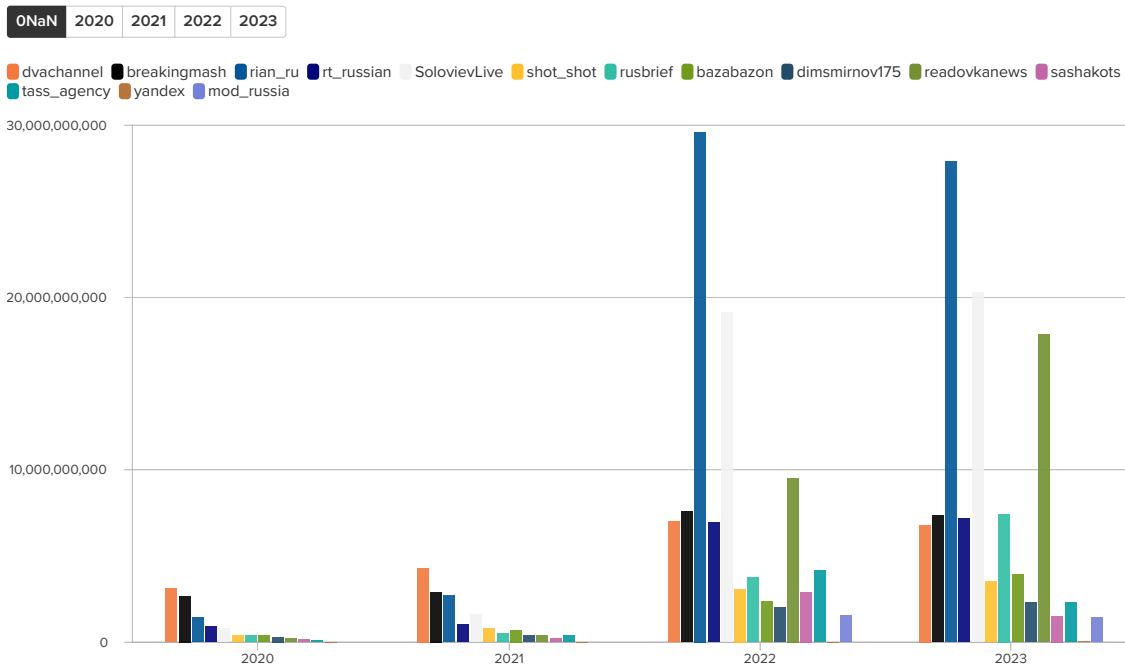
(Source: TGStat/Flourish)

DFRLab aggregated the number of views per channel for each year, starting in 2020. In 2021, for example, the channels garnered nearly sixteen billion views, up from more than ten billion in 2020. Total views then began to skyrocket after the February 2022 invasion, reaching 95.5 billion views by the end of the year. Viewership rose by approximately 10 percent in 2023 to just under 109 billion views—a sizeable, but much less dramatic increase than the post-invasion period in 2022

Some of this growth can be accounted for by some of the most popular channels, including the news outlet RIA Novosti, propagandist Solovyov, and the outlet Readovka News. RIA Novosti nearly tripled its annual views, eventually garnering almost thirty billion views during 2023. Solovyov's audience experienced a twentyfold increase, surpassing twenty billion views in 2023. Readovka achieved the most impressive viewership growth: a *ninety-onefold* increase to 17.85 billion views in 2023.

Russian military bloggers on Telegram

Since the start of the war in February 2022, perhaps no community of influencers has benefited more from Telegram than Russian military bloggers, also known as milbloggers or *voenkory*, a portmanteau of the Russian words for "war correspondents." Their reach across the Telegram ecosystem is far and wide: according to data from the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund, military bloggers amassed more than seventeen billion views in the three-month period from May to July 2023.

The milblogger community on Telegram comprises an array of voices, all sharing a pro-Russia, pro-war perspective. Along with actual war correspondents, this includes

Figure 6: The milblogger community on Telegram depicted as a backbone graph
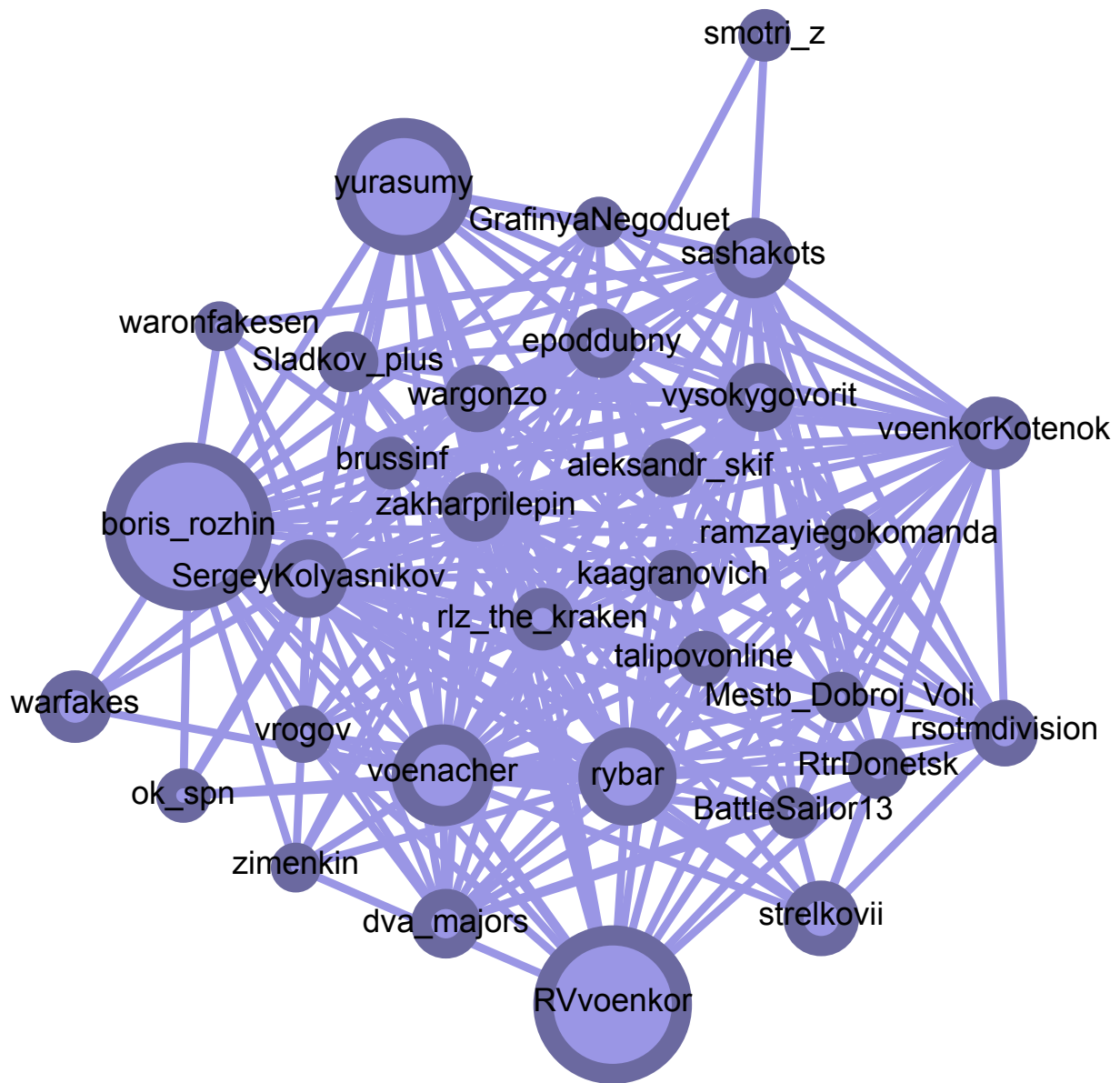
The figure visualizes the relative salience of links between individual channels based on how they shared and posted each other's content. *(Source: DFRLab via Gephi)*

a notable cadre of influential Kremlin-adjacent figures and military experts.[37] There are also anonymous channels promoting hawkish sentiments, many of which utilize the letter Z, which quickly emerged as a pro-war symbol after the start of the 2022 invasion, in their channel names and logos.[38]

Military bloggers typically present themselves as military experts and often claim to have direct access to Russian military forces. Some are embedded with these forces, while others seem to actively participate in combat, thus offering unique on-the-ground reporting. As previously noted, milbloggers are generally supportive of the war against Ukraine, but they occasionally venture into critiques of the war's management.[39] Direct criticism of Putin is rare, however; in one notable exception, milbloggers harshly criticized Putin's decision to announce a ceasefire over Orthodox Christmas in 2023.[40]

Some observers speculate that the Kremlin tolerates such criticism not only because certain military bloggers have powerful connections in Moscow, but also because their channels serve as useful venting mechanisms for nationalists to complain over the failures in Ukraine.[41] The extent of military bloggers' association with the government varies. However, since December 2022, some have participated in a task force established by Putin to advise on mobilization-related issues.[42] The task force features some of the most popular military bloggers, including the aforementioned War Gonzo, as well as Rybar and Poddubnyy ZOV.

The DFRLab analyzed the activity of thirty-eight of the largest milblogger channels to identify broad topical trends throughout the observation window of February 24, 2022, to October 29, 2023. Our analysis of 513,460 Telegram posts published by these milblogger channels showed that the most frequently discussed topic was related to the situation on the frontline, including documenting activities by the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) and its battlefield losses. Telegram channels also heavily featured narratives discussing the West's dependence on Russian natural resources, including oil and gas. Military bloggers routinely reported on Russian attacks on Ukrainian cities and the explosions resulting from it; they also often referred to Ukrainians as Nazis.

While Russia and Ukraine dominated discussions on milblogger channels, topic modeling also showed that posts in these channels covered countries in Russia's wider neighborhood, as well as in Africa. For example, posts about Armenia mainly contained criticism of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, including his response to Azerbaijan's September 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh military operation.[43] In contrast, posts about Iran highlighted Russia-Iran relations in a positive light, with a particular emphasis on the flow of Iranian weapons systems into Russia.

Meanwhile, milbloggers focused on West Africa and the Sahel region—in particular, Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso. More specifically, posts about these countries discussed their fight against terrorism and the presence of the Wagner Group in the region. These posts also portrayed France and its engagement with Sahel countries in a negative light.

Case study: Milblogger coverage on Kharkiv and Belgorod

To gain insight on how milbloggers sometimes use a platform to criticize Russian military operations, the DFRLab examined channel activity during two notable Russian military failures: Ukraine's successful September 2022 counteroffensive in Kharkiv, and pro-Ukraine forces infiltration of Russia's Belgorod region in May 2023.[44] For both

37 Eto Buziashvili and Iria Puyosa, "Why Wagner's 'Telegram Mutiny' Remains a Dilemma for the Kremlin," DFRLab, June 29, 2023, https://dfrlab.org/2023/06/29/why-wagners-telegram-mutiny-remains-a-dilemma-for-the-kremlin.

38 GIVI GIGITASHVILI, ANI MEJLUMYAN, AND ROMAN OSADCHUK, "HOW RUSSIAN PRO-WAR TELEGRAM CHANNELS ADDRESSED THE WAGNER MUTINY," DFRLAB, AUGUST 17, 2023, https://dfrlab.org/2023/08/17/how-russian-pro-war-telegram-channels-addressed-the-wagner-mutiny/.

39 Eto Buziashvili, "Russian Pro-war Military Bloggers Criticize the Handling of Belgorod Incursion," DFRLAB, May 25, 2023, https://dfrlab.org/2023/05/25/russian-war-report-trolls-belgorod/.

40 Eto Buziashvili, "Russian Military Bloggers Criticize Putin's Orthodox Christmas Ceasefire Announcement," in "Russian War Report," *New Atlanticist* blog, DFRLab, Atlantic Council, January 6, 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russian-military-bloggers-criticize-putins-orthodox-christmas-ceasefire-announcement/.

41 Pjotr Sauer, "'We Have Already Lost': Far-right Russian Bloggers Slam Military Failures," *Guardian*, September 8, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/08/we-have-already-lost-far-right-russian-bloggers-slam-kremlin-over-army-response.

42 Order of the President of the Russian Federation dated December 20, 2022, No. 420-rp, "On the working group to ensure interaction between public authorities and organizations on issues of mobilization preparation and mobilization, social and legal protection of citizens of the Russian Federation taking part in a special military operation, and members of their families," publication.pravo.gov.ru, December 22, 2022, http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202212200054?index=1.

43 Le Monde with Associated Press and Agence France-Presse, "Azerbaijan Launches Military Operation in Nagorno-Karabakh," *Le Monde*, September 19, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/09/19/azerbaijan-says-launching-anti-terror-operations-in-karabakh_6137732_4.html.

44 Ruslan Trad, "Ukraine Intensifies Offensive Attacks in Kharkiv Oblast, Recapturing Balakliia," *New Atlanticist*, DFRLab, Atlantic Council, September 9, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-ukraine-intensifies-offensive-attacks-in-kharkiv-oblast/; and "Russian War Report: Belgorod Incursion Brings Deluge of Online Mockery of Russia's Defenses," DFRLab, May 25, 2023, https://dfrlab.org/2023/05/25/russian-war-report-trolls-belgorod/#belgorod.

Figure 7: Mentions of identified topics by Telegram channels of Russian milbloggers
(February 24, 2022, to October 29, 2023)
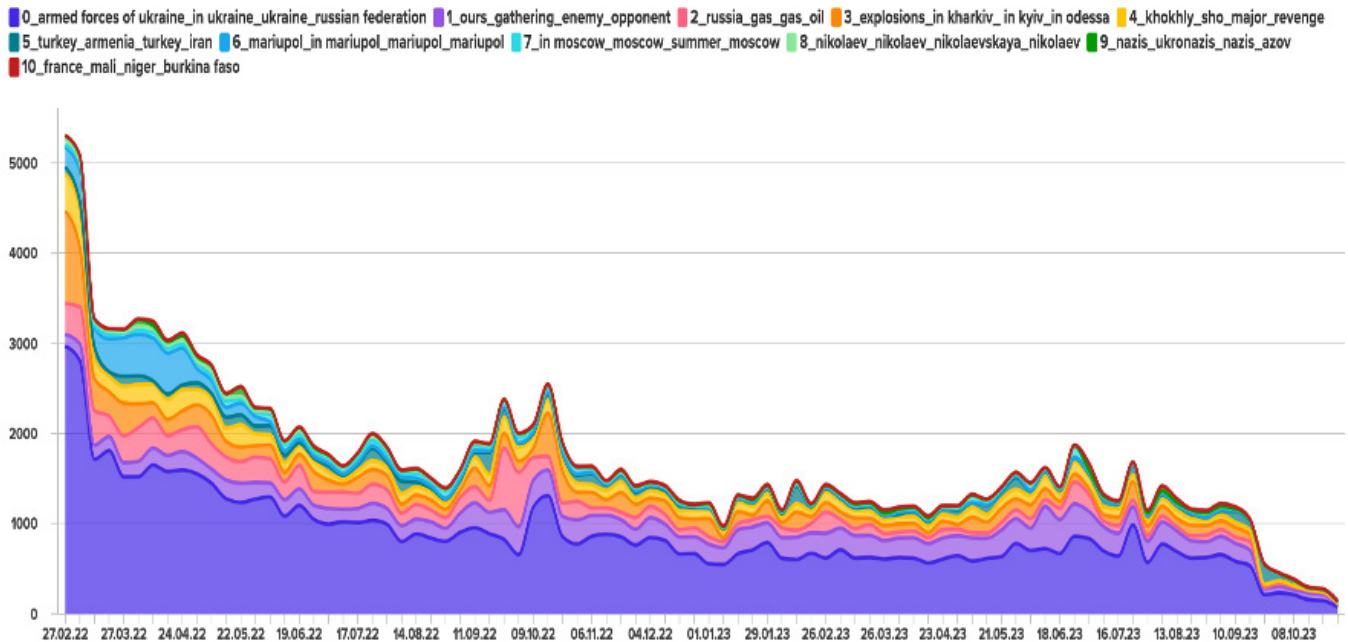
(Source: DFRLab via BERTopic, Flourish and Telegram Tracker)

events, we analyzed a three-day observation window to understand their initial reactions and how their comments evolved as more information became available. In total, the thirty-eight milbloggers published 6,423 posts over the two observation windows.

During both event windows, most of their posts could be divided into three categories: frontline updates based on their own reporting or information provided by those on-the-ground; analysis and mapping of losses/gains; and criticism of the Russian MoD and its management of the war. Posts falling into one of these three categories also resonated with Telegram users more than posts on other topics when measured by the number of views and reposts.

Regarding the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv, from September 6 to 9, 2022, the thirty-eight milbloggers published a total of 3,405 posts. The most active channel, Rybar is one of the most popular channels on Russian Telegram; with 1.2 million subscribers as of March 2024, Rybar's popularity is on par with the channels of some of Telegram's largest Kremlin-linked influencers, including Solovyov and former Russian President Dmitri Medvedev. Rybar's high level of activity can be attributed to its publishing of news updates, providing its audience with videos and maps explaining the evolving situation on the ground.

Elsewhere on Telegram, milbloggers showcased Ukrainian losses, in particular military equipment from Western sources. The channel Operatsiya Z: Voenkory Russkoy Vesny (Operation Z: Military Correspondents of the Russian Spring) posted videos of equipment losses while claiming Ukrainians had run out of their own military equipment and were now mostly using Western supplies. Elsewhere, the channel Dva Mayora (Two Majors) posted a long critique of Russian authorities that centered on "the underestimation of the opponent and flawed assessment of the situation." They accused the MoD of poor planning, highlighting logistics issues and the inability of its leaders to engage in strong decision-making. Regarding the latter, the channel also warned of the dangers of these decision-makers believing their "special military operation" in Ukraine was going according to plan. "Even going on a defensive?" the channel asked sarcastically.

Other milbloggers lambasted the Russian army, its leadership, and even the Kremlin for military failures. Igor Girkin, a far-right nationalist and former Russian intelligence colonel who previously commanded pro-Russian separatist forces in 2014, said on a Telegram video that the war in Ukraine will go on until Russia is ultimately defeated, claiming that the war was already lost. (Girkin was later arrested in July 2023.)[45] Meanwhile, milblogger and *Komsomolskaya*

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45   Andrew Roth, "Russia Arrests Pro-war Putin Critic Igor Girkin, According to Reports," *GUARDIAN*, July 21, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/21/russia-arrests-pro-war-putin-critic-igor-girkin-reports.
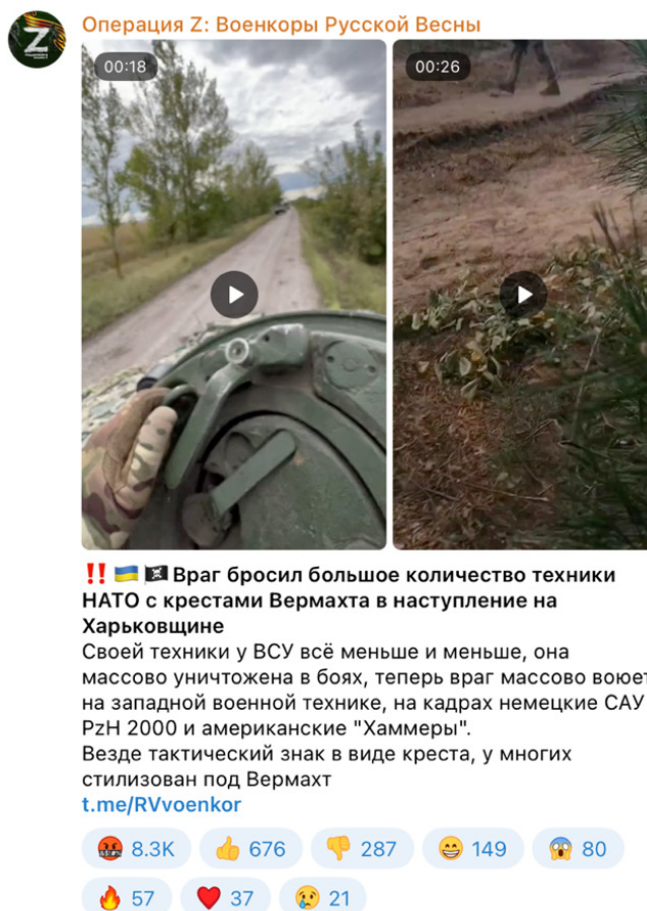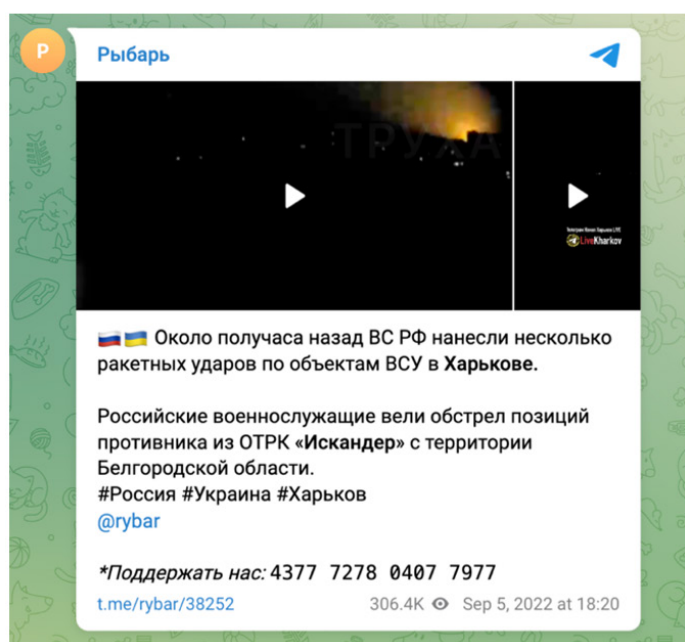
Screenshots of Telegram posts providing firsthand accounts and discussing Ukrainian military. *(Source: Rybar/archive, left; RVvoenkor/archive, right)*

Pravda reporter Aleksandr Kots accused Russian authorities of concealing negative developments concerning the deteriorating situation in Kharkiv. He emphasized the need to change the current system in which Russian leadership avoids discussing unfavorable news and their subordinates are reluctant to upset their superiors.

Milbloggers engaged in similar posting behavior in May 2023, when Russia's Belgorod region was attacked by anti-Kremlin Russian forces. Two Russian factions active in Ukraine, the Russian Volunteer Corps (RVC) and Freedom of Russia Legion, claimed accountability for the incursion. Kyiv framed the raid as a manifestation of domestic discord within Russia, noting that Russian citizens had carried out the attack.[46]

Milbloggers published 3,018 posts between May 22 to 25, 2023, which once again could be divided in the same three categories as during the Kharkiv counteroffensive:

news updates, analysis of gains/losses, and criticism of Russian officials.

On May 22, the channel ARKHANGEL SPETSNAZA Z (ARCHANGEL SWAT TEAM Z) posted a conversation allegedly held with Russian opposition fighters in Belgorod, describing how they were trying to reach a particular checkpoint and were under attack. Posts such as these often resonate among Telegram audiences, as they provide alleged firsthand information unavailable through other Russian news sources; in this particular instance, the post accumulated more than 1.3 million views. Meanwhile, on his channel Colonelcassad, Kremlin military commentator Boris Rozhin posted photos on the second day of the raid and alleged that attackers had utilized US military equipment.

Milbloggers also criticized the MoD's conducting of the war. The channel Povornutyye na Z voyne **(**Turned on Z

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46 Tom Balmforth and Anna Dabrowska, "Ukraine War: Belgorod Incursion May Stretch Russia's Defences," Reuters, May 24, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/cross-border-incursions-ukraine-may-stretch-russian-defences-2023-05-24/.
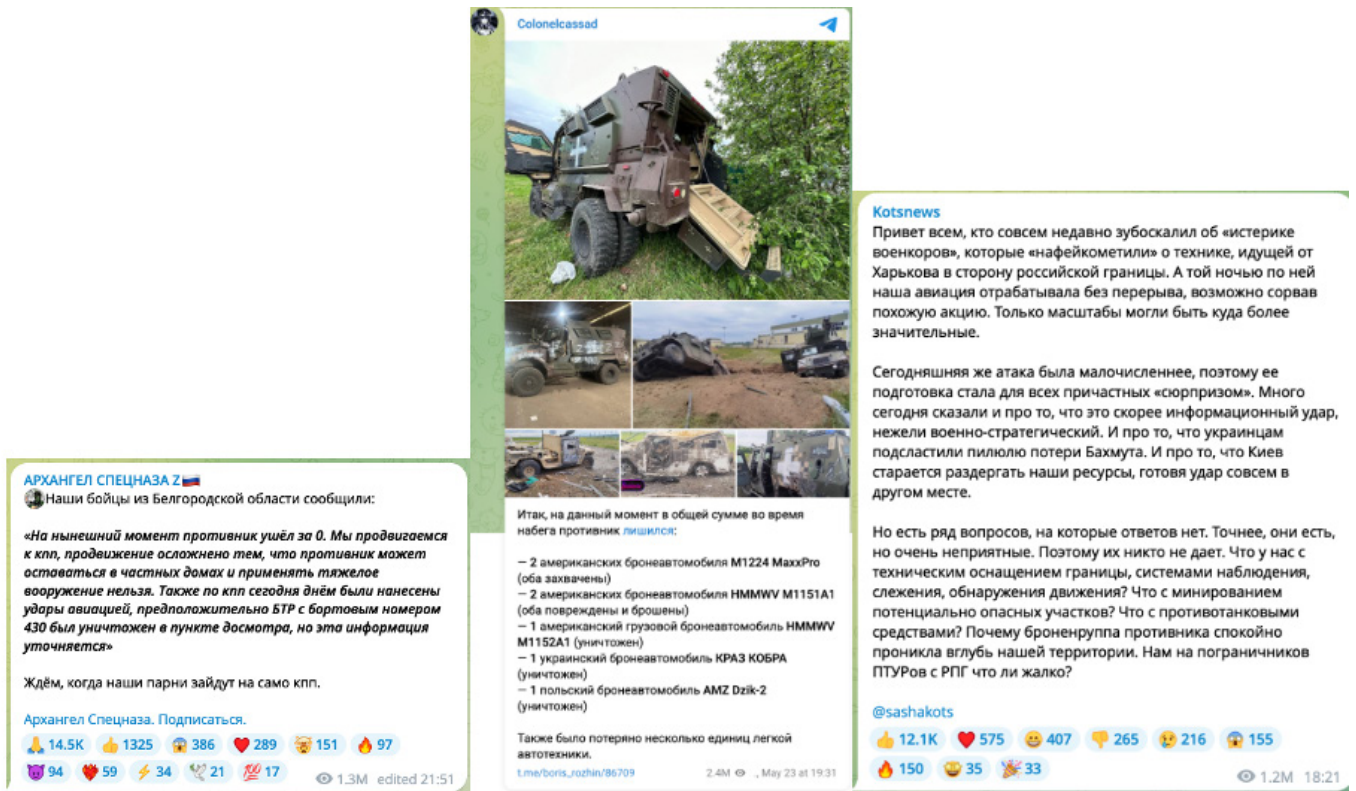
Screenshots of Telegram posts providing firsthand accounts, discussing military losses highlighting Western equipment, and criticizing the war management. *(Source: rusich_army/archive, left; Colonelcassad/archive, center; sashakots/archive; right)*

war) posted a lengthy text from an alleged eyewitness in Belgorod who described inadequate communication systems between units, ineffective leadership at higher levels, and outdated methods in planning and execution. Alexander Kots, meanwhile, called out pro-Kremlin pundits who had dismissed military bloggers' warnings of such incidents as "hysteria." He questioned Russia's defensive and surveillance capabilities, asking, "Why did the enemy armored group calmly penetrate deep into our territory?" The two posts received more than 2.4 million views combined.

Though Russian military bloggers occasionally criticize the conduct of the war, they remain supportive of the war's aims. Their mix of criticism and firsthand reporting have made them extremely popular among Russian Telegram users, who see their efforts as trustworthy and balanced, especially in comparison to state media sources.

Russian private military companies (PMCs)

Private military companies, or PMCs, currently operate in more than one hundred countries.[47] Russia maintains dozens of PMCs, which have been involved in numerous armed conflicts around the world.[48] They have also been accused of potential war crimes in Ukraine.[49]

The DFRLab analyzed fifteen Telegram channels affiliated with various PMCs, including Wagner Group, Task Force Rusich, the Union of Donbas Volunteers, and Rodyna. Wagner, co-founded in 2014 by Prigozhin, eventually fell from grace after Prigozhin led his forces in his failed June 2023 mutiny; he was killed in a plane crash two months

Figure 8: Links among PMCs on Telegram
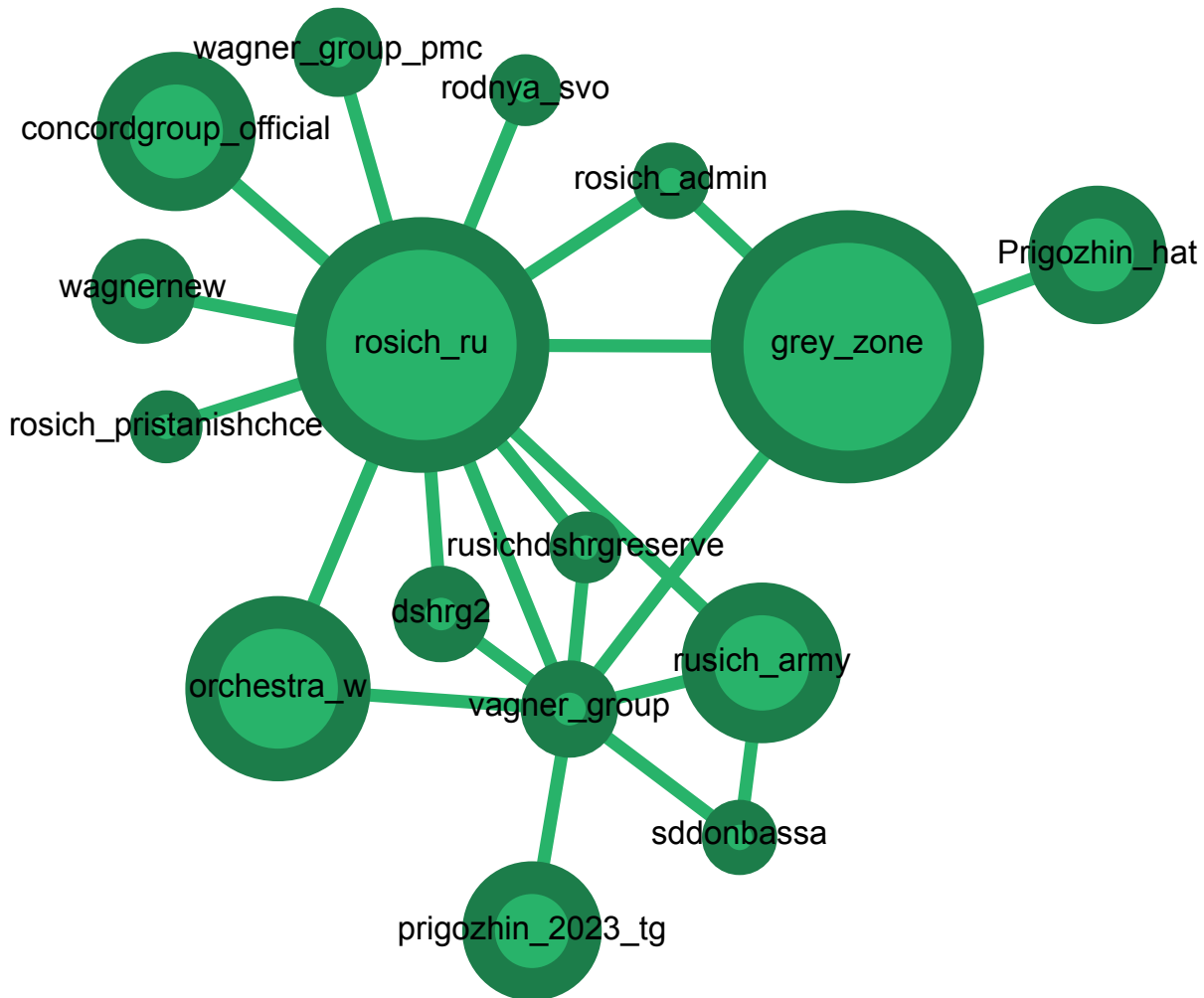
This backbone graph visualizes the relative salience of links between individual channels based on how they shared and posted each other's content. *(Source: DFRLab via Gephi)*

47   Anna Maria Dyner, "The Role of Private Military Contractors in Russian Foreign Policy," Polish Institute of International Affairs, May 4, 2018, https://pism.pl/publications/The_Role_of_Private_Military_Contractors_in_Russian_Foreign_Policy.

48   Filip Bryjka, "Russian 'Contractors' in the Service of the Kremlin," Warsaw Institute, August 14, 2019, https://warsawinstitute.org/russian-contractors-in-the-service-of-the-kremlin/; and "Catalog of Russian PMCs: 37 private military companies of the Russian Federation," Molfar, October 30, 2023, https://molfar.com/en/blog/catalog-of-russian-pmcs.

49   Sean McFate, "The Mercenaries behind the Bucha Massacre," *Wall Street Journal*, April 12, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/mercenaries-behind-bucha-massacre-russia-ukraine-putin-attack-terror-brutality-wagner-group-moscow-geneva-convention-war-crimes-atrocities-11649797041.

Figure 9: Timeline of mentions of specific cryptocurrencies within dataset
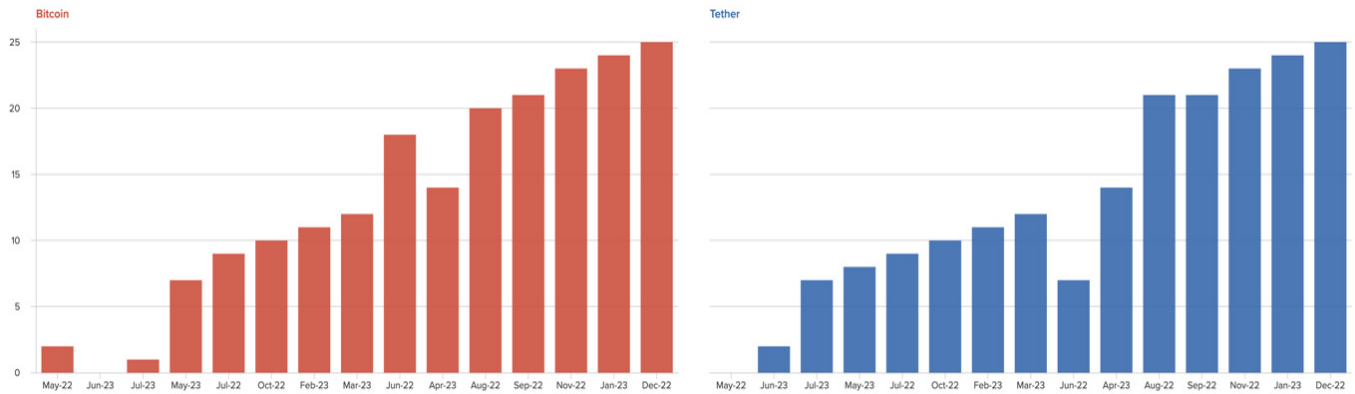
(Source: DFRLab via Telegram Tracker/OpenSearch dashboard)

later. Task Force Rusich, also known as the Sabotage Assault Reconnaissance Group, DSHRG Rusich, or simply Rusich, was founded in 2014 by Alexey Yurevich Milchakov and Yan Igorevich Petrovskiy.[50] Rusich mercenaries, which include a contingent of neo-Nazis,[51] have a reputation of brutality.[52] Rusich also maintains links[53] with Wagner and another PMC, the Interregional Social Organization Union of Donbas Volunteers[54] (UDV). Rodyna, meanwhile, is a relatively new group established by Zakhar Prilepin,[55] a pro-war[56] writer and politician who is sanctioned[57] by several states.

Russian PMCs use Telegram for several purposes. The DFRLab utilized algorithm-backed topic modeling to identify three key areas of engagement: **fundraising**, **recruiting**, and **information sharing**.

Fundraising

Russian PMCs actively use Telegram to collect money from supporters. This includes basic methods such as providing bank account numbers, as well as digital methods

to bypass sanctions, including cryptocurrency wallet addresses.

A review of fundraising-related posts suggests channels collect money to buy tactical gear, medical supplies, firearms, and other equipment. They rely on Russian banks, using the[58] of Alfa-Bank, Sberbank,[59] VTB Bank, and Russian National Commercial Bank. Purchase lists[60] and traditional donation requests dominate the channels linked to Wagner and Task Force Rusich.

To raise money via cryptocurrencies, PMCs share their wallet addresses with donors. DFRLab found groups requesting cryptocurrency in Bitcoin (BTC), Ethereum (ETH), Litecoin (LTC), Monero (XRM), and Tether (USDT). Channel members were generally more likely to share posts about cryptocurrency fundraisers than posts with traditional bank accounts, though Rodyna channels proved to be an exception.

The analyzed channels posted at least fourteen different cryptocurrency addresses, with Bitcoin and Tether receiving the most mentions.

50   "Alexey Yurevich Milchakov," Open Sanctions, October 30, 2023, https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/Q114267696/; and "Yan Igorevich Petrovskiy," Open Sanctions, October 30, 2023, https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/Q107586452/.

51   Dmitry Kozhurin, "Who Are the Neo-Nazis Fighting for Russia in Ukraine?," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), May 7, 2022, https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-neo-nazis-fighting-ukraine/31871760.html.

52   "Russian Neo-Nazi Who Tortured Ukrainian Prisoners Shows Off His Holiday in Belarus," Belsat TV, October 11, 2018, https://naviny.belsat.eu/en/news/russian-neo-nazi-who-tortured-ukrainian-prisoners-shows-off-his-holiday-in-belarus/.

53   "Treasury Targets Additional Facilitators of Russia's Aggression in Ukraine," US Department of the Treasury, September 15, 2022, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0954.

54   "U.S. Treasury Sanctions Nearly 100 Targets in Putin's War Machine, Prohibits Russian Gold Imports," US Department of the Treasury, June 28, 2022, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0838.

55   "Who is Zakhar Prilepin, Target of Car Bomb in Russia?," *Al Jazeera*, May 7, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/7/who-is-zakhar-prilepin-target-of-car-bomb-in-russia.

56   Emmanuel Grynszpan, "Russian Nationalist Writer Zakhar Prilepin Calls for 'Cultural Purge,' " *Le Monde*, August 20, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/08/20/russian-nationalist-writer-zakhar-prilepin-calls-for-cultural-purge_5994095_5.html.

57   "Yevgeniy Nikolaevich Prilepin," Open Sanctions, October 30, 2023, https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/Q1530559/.

58   "Telegram post regarding fundraising," rosich_admin, August 31, 2022, https://t.me/rosich_admin/139.

59   "Telegram post regarding fundraising," rosich_ru, December 18, 2022, https://t.me/rosich_ru/31182.

60   "Telegram post regarding fundraising," rosich_ru, July 3, 2022, https://t.me/rosich_ru/14186.
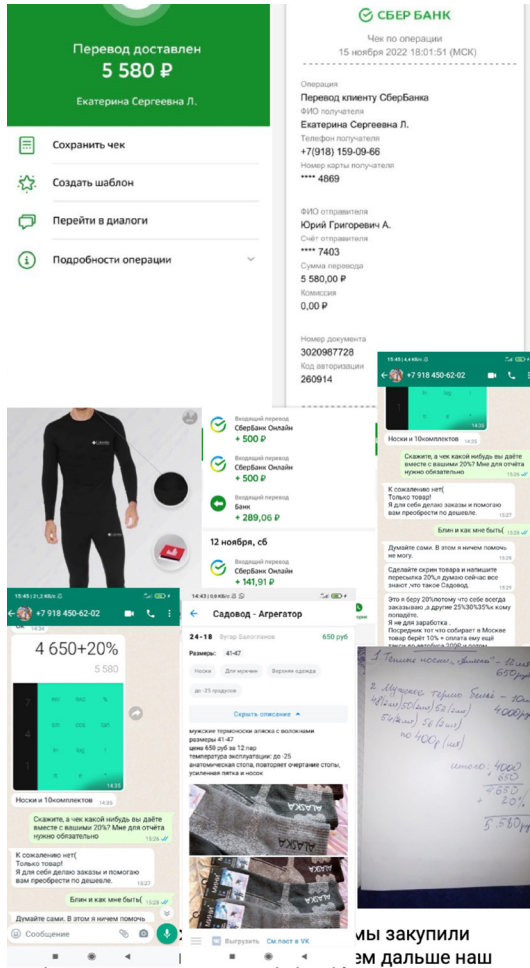
Камрады! Именно Вы покупаете термобелье,перчатки,плащи ни админ а Вы!Поэтому хочу ещё раз благодарим всех, кто откликнулся на наш призыв! Огромное вам всем спасибо!
От лица парней и от лица администрации канал. Дальше плотно работаем по сбору всего необходимого.

Публикуем приход и расход!!!

Каждый рубль идет непосредственно в поддержку наших бойцов🪖

Благодарим всех вас! 🤝

Движемся в нужном направлении!!!
Сразу по завершению сбора и закупок мы передадим это в подразделение, которое и обязательно постарается нам маякнуть, мы сами постараемся максимально донести до вас фото о приемке.Вы также можете собрать посылки и отправить намнам по адресу: г. Горячий Ключ краснодарский край. ул. Свердлова 16. Гришин Е.И.и/с 353290(Подробнее адрес при отправлении уточнить в @ValciriyaZ_bot)

t.me/wagner_group_pmc/19542   5.1K 👁   Nov 16, 2022 at 10:46

Адмэн | «Росич»

"ПОБЕДА"

Для более успешных проведений специальных мероприятий.

Список вещей, которые необходим закупить для моего отряда:
1. Бинокль цифровой ночного видения Discovery Night BL20 - 3 шт.
2. Тепловизор "ЛЕГАТ 335R" - 3 шт.
3. Монукуляр ночного видения Dedal-370-DK3 - 3 шт.
4. ПБС на 5.45 от ГЕКСАГОН - 10 шт.
5. Ботинки военные SALOMON - 6 шт.
6. Аналог Mystery Ranch от Ars Arma или же Стич Профи - 3 шт.
7. Ремни на автоматическое оружие от Стич Профи - 4 шт
8. Трекинговые носки от СПЛАВ - 10-15 пар
9. Шоколадок
10. Влажных салфеток

Реквизиты для помощи:
• 4276 3802 7985 1757 (Сбербанк - Роман Н.)

Криптовалюта:
• BTC:
bc1qhvhxrxadd7s2fsc4y5s40tedz95vqdugy0ey8z
• USDT (TRC20):
TFPdLofuvAiUoJHRDKQYTXaTpRyvzvo4cH

Чтобы скопировать номер карт или адрес крипты, то просто нажмите на номер карты или адрес криптой.

При закрытии одного из пункта вещей - зачёркиваем.

t.me/rosich_admin/139   7.9K 👁   Aug 31, 2022 at 21:39

Composite of two screenshots shows Telegram posts ask subscribers for financial support. (Source: @wagner_group_pmc/archive, left; @rosich_admin/archive, right)

Адмэн | «Росич»
Forwarded from **Росич | Rosich**

❗ СБОР ❗

Продолжаем данный сбор. Военнослужащим спецназа требуется приобрести:
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• Salomon Quest 4D GTX Forces 2 2шт.: 59.800₽
• Баллистические очки 1шт.: 18.700₽
И того: 203.500₽

❗ Для тех, кто желает помочь, реквизиты:
2202 2023 1283 4736 (Сбербанк - Лев И.)

Вся отчетность будет здесь: t.me/rosich_admin

Криптовалюта:
• BTC:
bc1qhvhxrxadd7s2fsc4y5s40tedz95vqdugy0ey8z
• USDT (TRC20):
TFPdLofuvAiUoJHRDKQYTXaTpRyvzvo4cH

ЕСЛИ ЖЕ КТО-ТО МОЖЕТ ОТДАТЬ ВЕЩЬ (ВЕЩИ) В БЕЗВОЗМЕЗДНОЕ ПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ ПАРНЯМ НА ВИДЕО, ТО ПИШИТЕ НАМ В БОТ: @ROSICH_BOT_RUS

Мы не отвечаем за стоимость изделий, но мы отвечаем за их качество

Чтобы скопировать номер карт или адрес крипты, то просто нажмите на номер карты или адрес криптой.

t.me/rosich_admin/785   1.4K 👁   Mar 27 at 06:21

GREY ZONE
Forwarded from **МОО Вече**

Помните наш майский груз? Он до сих пор успешно расходится по передку. 5-я отдельная мотострелковая Донецкая бригада имени первого главы ДНР А. В. Захарченко получила по линии МОО Вече рации, метеостанции и полезные расходники для ведения боевых действий. Желаем парням удачи!

Благодарим нашего товарища Даниила Безсонова (Неофициальный Безсонов), его подписчиков и команду за неоценимый вклад в информационное сопровождение нашей работы! Спасибо, ребята!

Помочь подразделениям на передовой:

Карта СберБанка 4276380166806872 или по номеру телефона +79037001243 (Владимир О).
По этому же номеру принимаются платежи через СБП.

Криптовалюта:
BTC: 3AEveVjfjHQjzXL5GnNm7T8eYStP4HD1As
USDT (TRC20):
TMpVSxYEc5WGNiJTEbqsWv9FnDSaXJUfBo
USDT (ERC20):
0x3303bac8eb87ddf25004be0581c085d7cead7fcc
ETH: 0x3303bac8eb87ddf25004be0581c085d7cead7fcc

Полные реквизиты (в т.ч. для юридических лиц) - по ссылке: https://t.me/MOOVeche/1726

Напоминаем, что в Москве работает склад, принимающий любую помощь фронту - от военного обмундирования, экипировки и средств специального оснащения до продуктов длительного хранения. Подробности по ссылке: https://t.me/MOOVeche/1735

По всем вопросам: пишите post@veche-info.ru или по телефону +79037001243 (вотсап и телеграм)

@MOOVeche

t.me/grey_zone/19191   183.1K 👁   Jun 18, 2023 at 08:30

Composite of screenshots shows posts that display cryptocurrency addresses. *(Source: @rosich_admin/archive, left; @grey_zone/archive, right)*
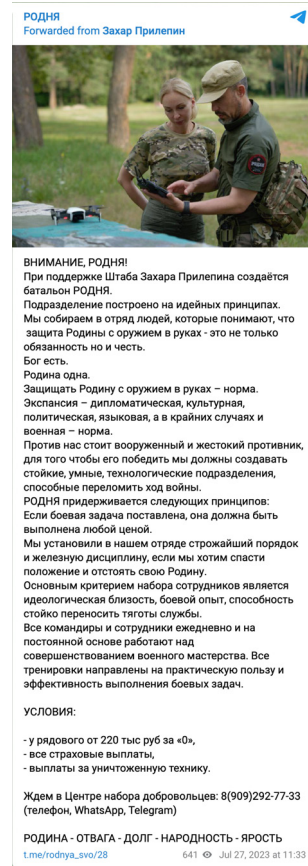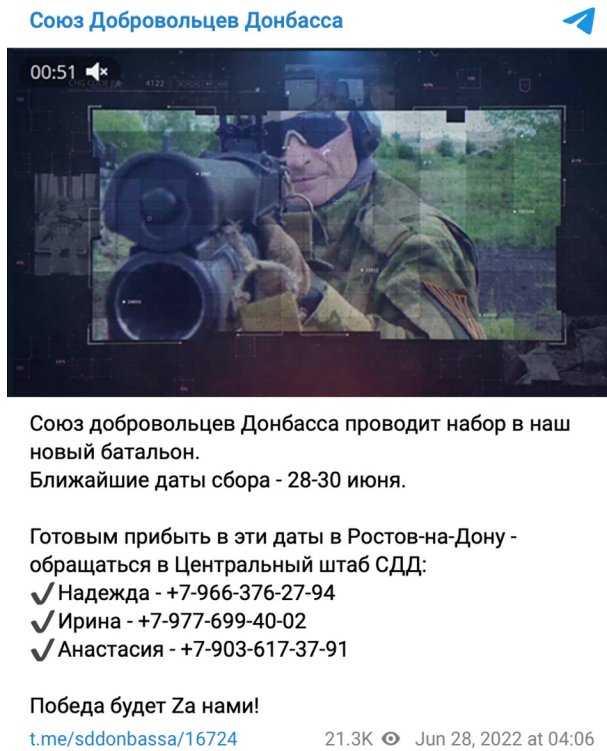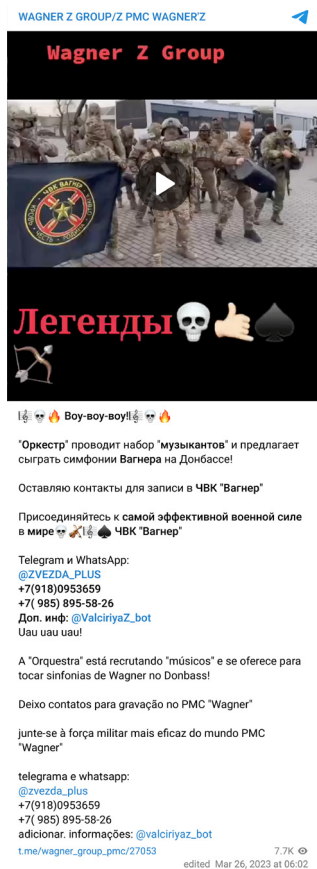
Composite of screenshots shows recruitment posts on Telegram. *(Source: @wagner_group_pmc/archive, left; @sddonbassa/archive, center; @rodnya_svo/archive, right)*

Channels affiliated with Wagner,[61] Task Force Rusich,[62] and the Union of Donbas Volunteers[63] also forwarded Telegram crypto fundraising posts from the military blogger channel Rybar. They often posted thank-you messages and details[64] of purchased[65] supplies. In 2022, the US Treasury Department sanctioned[66] five cryptocurrency addresses connected to Task Force Rusich.

Recruiting

Telegram channels affiliated with Russian PMCs used the platform to recruit additional fighters to their battalions, often employing patriotic and emotional messaging. Along with focusing on the war in Ukraine, some posts referenced[67] the Russian military presence in Georgia's Abkhazia region and Moldova's Transnistria, calling for volunteers to fight for the "motherland."

At least one Wagner channel is dedicated[68] to cross-posting recruitment advertisements, but the channel is not very active. But other Wagner channels[69] published[70] recruitment posts, as did channels connected with the Union of Donbas Volunteers,[71] Rodyna, and Task Force Rusich.

61   "Telegram post regarding fundraising," grey_zone, September 22. 2022, https://t.me/grey_zone/15123.

62   "Telegram post regarding fundraising," rosich_ru, September 13, 2022, https://t.me/rosich_ru/21023.

63   "Telegram post regarding fundraising," sddonbassa, June 11, 2022, https://t.me/sddonbassa/16339.

64   "Telegram post regarding fundraising," wagner_group_pmc, May 18, 2022, https://t.me/wagner_group_pmc/8297.

65   "Telegram post regarding fundraising," wagner_group_pmc, July 7, 2022, https://t.me/wagner_group_pmc/11331.

66   "Russia-related Designations; Issuance of Russia-related General License and Frequently Asked Questions; Zimbabwe-related Designation, Removals and Update; Libya-related Designation Update," US Department of the Treasury, September 15, 2022, https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20220915.

67   "Telegram post regarding recruiting," sddonbassa, October 7, 2022, https://t.me/sddonbassa/18730.

68   "Telegram channel regarding recruiting," wagner_employment, December 5, 2023, https://t.me/wagner_employment.

69   "Telegram post regarding recruiting," wagner_group_pmc, March 26, 2023, https://t.me/wagner_group_pmc/27053.

70   "Telegram post regarding recruiting," rodnya_svo, July 27, 2023, https://t.me/rodnya_svo/28.

71   "Telegram post regarding recruiting," sddonbassa, June 28, 2022, https://t.me/sddonbassa/16724.
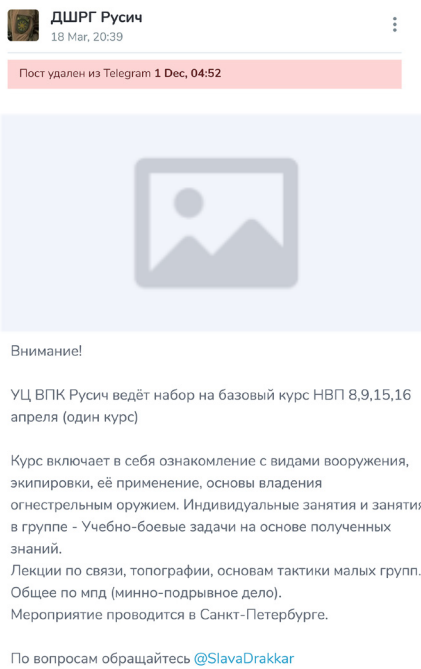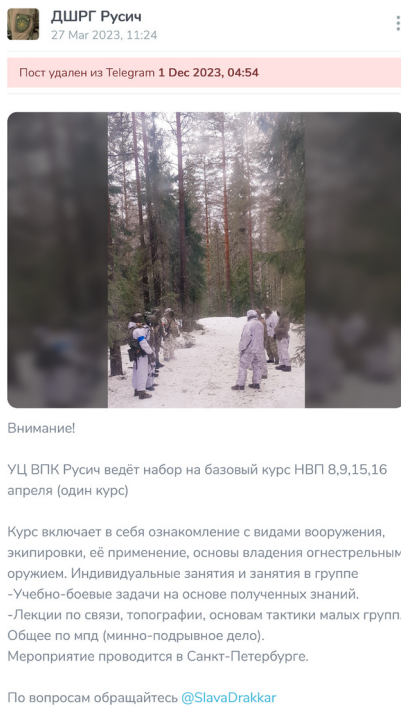
Composite of screenshots shows deleted posts promoting basic military training classes. *(Source: @dshrg2/archive, left; @dshrg2/archive, center; @dshrg2/archive, right)*
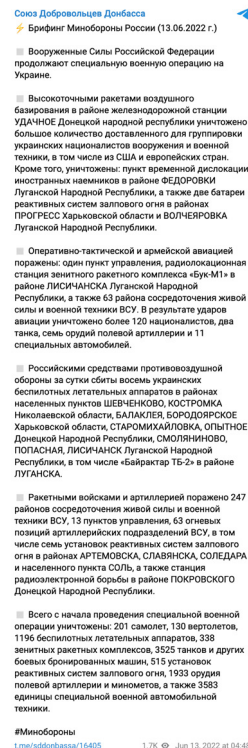
Screenshots: A sampling of posts from Telegram channels connected to Russian mercenaries. *(Source: @vagner_group/archive, left; @sddonbassa/archive, center; @wagnernew/archive, right)*

Prior to the June 2023 mutiny, Wagner maintained at least thirty separate channels dedicated to regional recruitment offices. These, however, disappeared after Russian tele-communications regulator Roskomnadzor cracked down on Wagner channels during the mutiny. Other Wagner channels promoted[72] recruitment announcements of hacker groups, including Killnet and Legion.[73]

Compared with other PMCs, Task Force Rusich[74] did not publish many recruitment posts,[75] more often promoting basic military training classes instead; these would then be deleted.

In addition to their own recruitment efforts,[76] the Union of Donbass Volunteers also shared[77] recruitment posts[78] and training[79] footage[80] for the Special Combat Army Reserve (BARS) battalion, launched[81] by the Russian MoD in 2021. BARS contains multiple units, including some directly attached to the Union of Donbas Volunteers. Channel posts advertised six-month service contracts paying up to 205,000 rubles ($2,225) per month.

Information sharing

Russian PMC channels engage in widespread informa-tion-sharing on a variety of topics,[82] such as official Kremlin statements,[83] stories about wives of captured Russian sol-diers, war footage,[84] awards[85] given to Russian soldiers, news updates,[86] and disinformation narratives, including rumors about US biological weapons.[87]

As was the case among the milblogger channels, chan-nels routinely referred[88] to Ukrainians as "neo-Nazis" or *khokhol*, an anti-Ukrainian slur. Regarding the latter, the DFRLab found more than 1,700 instances of the slur used by the PMC channels.

72   "Telegram post regarding recruiting," wagner_group_pmc, March 4, 2022, https://t.me/wagner_group_pmc/470.
73   "Telegram post regarding recruiting," wagner_group_pmc, April 30, 2022, https://t.me/wagner_group_pmc/6478.
74   "Telegram post regarding recruiting," rosich_ru, August 31, 2023, https://t.me/rosich_ru/47877.
75   "Telegram post regarding recruiting," rosich_ru, July 19, 2023, https://t.me/rosich_ru/45716.
76   "Telegram post regarding recruiting," sddonbassa, June 28, 2022, https://t.me/sddonbassa/16724.
77   "Telegram post regarding recruiting," sddonbassa, October 12, 2023, https://t.me/sddonbassa/26762.
78   "Telegram post regarding recruiting," sddonbassa, November 12, 2023, https://t.me/sddonbassa/27322.
79   "Telegram post regarding recruiting," sddonbassa, June 13, 2023, https://t.me/sddonbassa/23992.
80   "Telegram post regarding recruiting," sddonbassa, July 1, 2023, https://t.me/sddonbassa/24359
81   "Russia's Project BARS–How State Employees Were 'Conned' into Volunteering for Putin's War," Kyiv Post, November 7, 2023, https://www.kyivpost.com/post/23753.
82   "Telegram post regarding information sharing," sddonbassa, December 8, 2022, https://t.me/sddonbassa/20078.
83   "Telegram post regarding information sharing," rusich_army, March 3, 2022, https://t.me/rusich_army/678.
84   "Telegram post regarding information sharing," wagnernew, July 5, 2022, https://t.me/wagnernew/867.
85   "Telegram post regarding information sharing," vagner_group, April 3, 2022, https://t.me/vagner_group/15591.
86   "Telegram post regarding information sharing," sddonbassa, September 15, 2023, https://t.me/sddonbassa/26223.
87   "Telegram post regarding information sharing," sddonbassa, April 14, 2022, https://t.me/sddonbassa/14024.
88   "Telegram post regarding information sharing," rosich_ru, September 7, 2022, https://t.me/rosich_ru/20190.

Pro-Russian hacker communities

Pro-Russian hacktivist groups became more active after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. Although such attacks were by no means new, their use of Telegram has provided additional insight and context regarding these attacks.

According to Intel471, a cyber threat intelligence company, pro-Russian hacktivists commonly target[89] Ukraine and the West through distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks. They also engage in other acts, including phishing, website defacement, network breaches, data exfiltration, and doxing government and military officials by publicly revealing their personally identifiable information.

The DFRLab analyzed 60,868 Telegram posts by twenty-nine pro-Russian hacktivists published between February 24, 2022, and October 1, 2023. We identified four peaks in posting activity, during which channels posted more than one thousand messages for each peak. These peaks occurred between July 4-11, 2022; October 17-22, 2022; November 7-14, 2022; and September 4-11, 2023.

Overall, channel activity generally focused on frontline updates, political developments in Western countries, and plans for DDoS attacks. Our analysis of the posts demonstrated that hacking attacks often took place in retaliation for Western governments engaging in embargoes or supplying weaponry. For example, in June 2022, Killnet, one of the largest pro-Russia hacker groups, conducted DDoS attacks against the Lithuanian government after Lithuania blocked the transit of goods and supplies to the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad.[90] The following month, another hacktivist group, NoName057(16), took responsibility for attacks against Lithuania's strategic assets, including airports, ports, and private logistics companies, as Lithuania had not lifted the transit ban.

An October 2022 spike in Telegram activity aligned with a series of DDoS attacks directed at Ukrainian infrastructure. The DFRLab identified at least ten targets of pro-Russia hacktivists in Ukraine between October 17 and October 23. Hackers claimed responsibility for online attacks on

Figure 10: The pro-Russian hacktivist community on Telegram
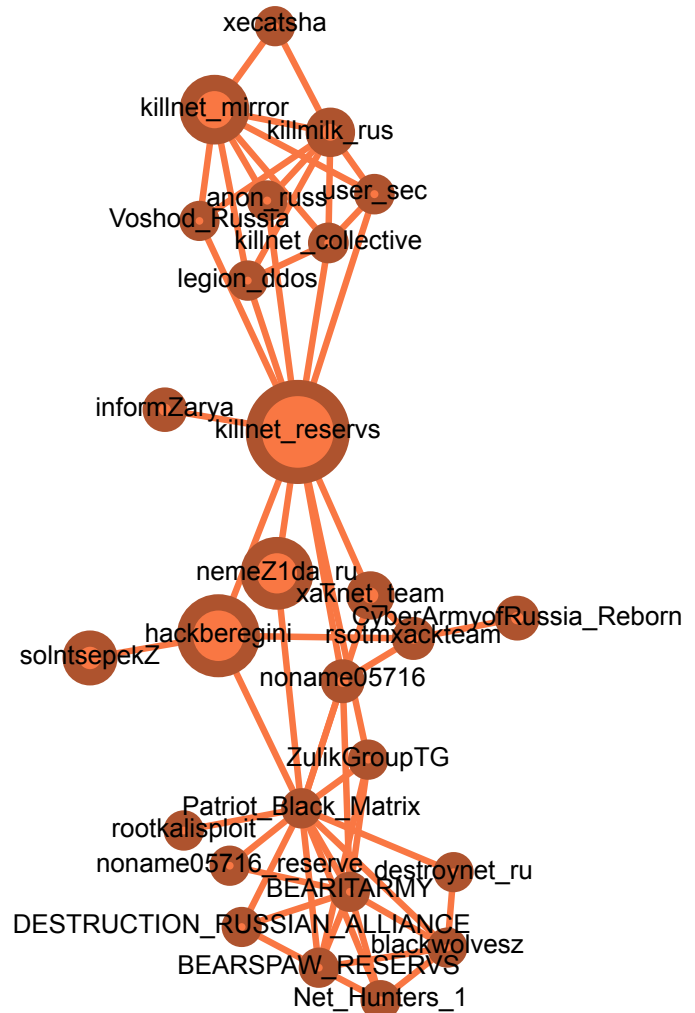
This backbone graph visualizes the relative salience of links between individual channels based on how they shared and posted each other's content. *(Source: DFRLab via Gephi)*

various entities, including the Kyiv military lyceum,[91] the Ministry of Internal Affairs,[92] the Parkovyi data center,[93]

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89 "Pro-Russian Hacktivism and Its Role in the War in Ukraine," Intel47, October 19, 2022, https://intel471.com/blog/pro-russian-hacktivism-and-its-role-in-the-war-in-ukraine.

90 "Russia's Killnet Hacker Group Says It Attacked Lithuania," Reuters, June 27, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/technology/russias-killnet-hacker-group-says-it-attacked-lithuania-2022-06-27/.

91 Народная CyberАрмия, "Атакуем киевский военный лицей имени ивана богуна🐷 URL: https://kvl.mil.gov.ua/," Telegram post, October 22, 2022, https://t.me/CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn/1449 / https://archive.is/wip/10i2k.

92 Народная CyberАрмия, "Доброе утро, Киберармия! Очередная цель◎ URL: https://vytiah.mvs.gov.ua/app/landing," Telegram post, October 22, 2022, https://t.me/CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn/1442 / https://archive.is/wip/dUM1W.

93 Народная CyberАрмия, "Внимание, Киберармия. Сегодня мы проводим операцию по атаке на объекты критической инфраструктуры Украины," Telegram post, October 17, 2022, https://t.me/CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn/1396 / https://archive.is/wip/A94ly.
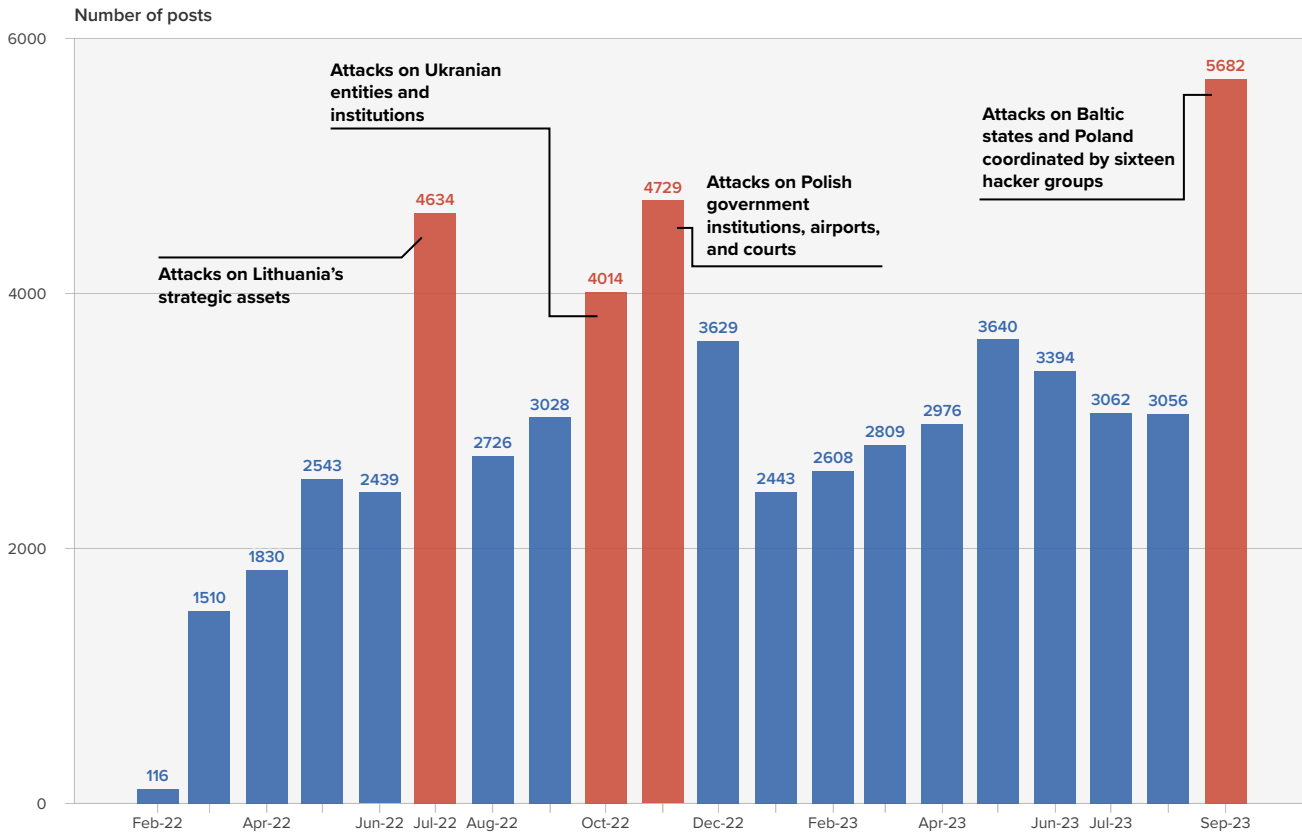
Number of posts

Screenshot: This timeline highlights the highest number of posts in July 2022, October 2022, November 2022, and September 2023. The count of posts in February 2022 only includes posts published after February 24. *(Source: DFRLab via OpenSearch)*

and the website of a volunteer headquarters in Kharkiv,[94] among others.

Hacker discussions by target country

The DFRLab identified thirty-five Western countries, including Ukraine, the United States, and Canada, referenced by the hacktivist channels. Country-specific discussions were often linked to specific hacking efforts, with channels disseminating information-targeted websites and institutions. Notably, mentions of specific countries often spiked prior to these hacking incidents.

Between February 24, 2022, and October 1, 2023, Ukraine and the United States were the most frequently mentioned

countries. Both countries' mentions peaked in July 2022, coinciding with the transfer of high-mobility artillery rocket systems (HIMARS) to Ukraine. The first round of transfers occurred in late June 2022[95] and the second round in July 2022,[96] contributing to increased discussions about HIMARS in the identified channels. Subsequently, in August 2022, Killnet claimed responsibility for a DDoS attack targeting US defense firm Lockheed Martin in response to the US supplying of HIMARS to Ukraine.[97]

The third most discussed country was Poland, which experienced peaks in July 2022, November 2022, and September 2023. The November 2022 peak coincided with a November 15 missile explosion on Polish territory near the border with Ukraine, killing two people.[98] In a November 16

94 Народная CyberАрмия, "Доброе утро, Киберармия! Сегодня на очереди волонтерский штаб в Харькове," Telegram post, October 20, 2022, https://t.me/CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn/1424 / https://archive.is/wip/i6kCj.

95 "U.S. Long-range Rocket Systems Arrive in Ukraine: Minister," Reuters, June 23, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-long-range-rocket-systems-arrive-ukraine-minister-2022-06-23/.

96 "HIMARS: U.S. Sends More Advanced Rocket Systems to Ukraine to Further Slow Russian Advance in East," RFE/RL, July 8, 2022, https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-united-states-himars-new-arms-package/31935257.html.

97 "HIMARS-maker Lockheed Martin 'Confident' against Russian Hackers," *Newsweek*, August 10, 2022, https://www.newsweek.com/himars-maker-lockheed-martin-cyberattack-russian-hackers-1732504.

98 DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Russia Defends 'Traditional Values,' Criminalizes LGBTQ 'Propaganda,' " November 18, 2022, https://dfrlab.org/2022/11/18/russian-war-report-russia-defends-traditional-values-criminalizes-lgbtq-propaganda/#poland.
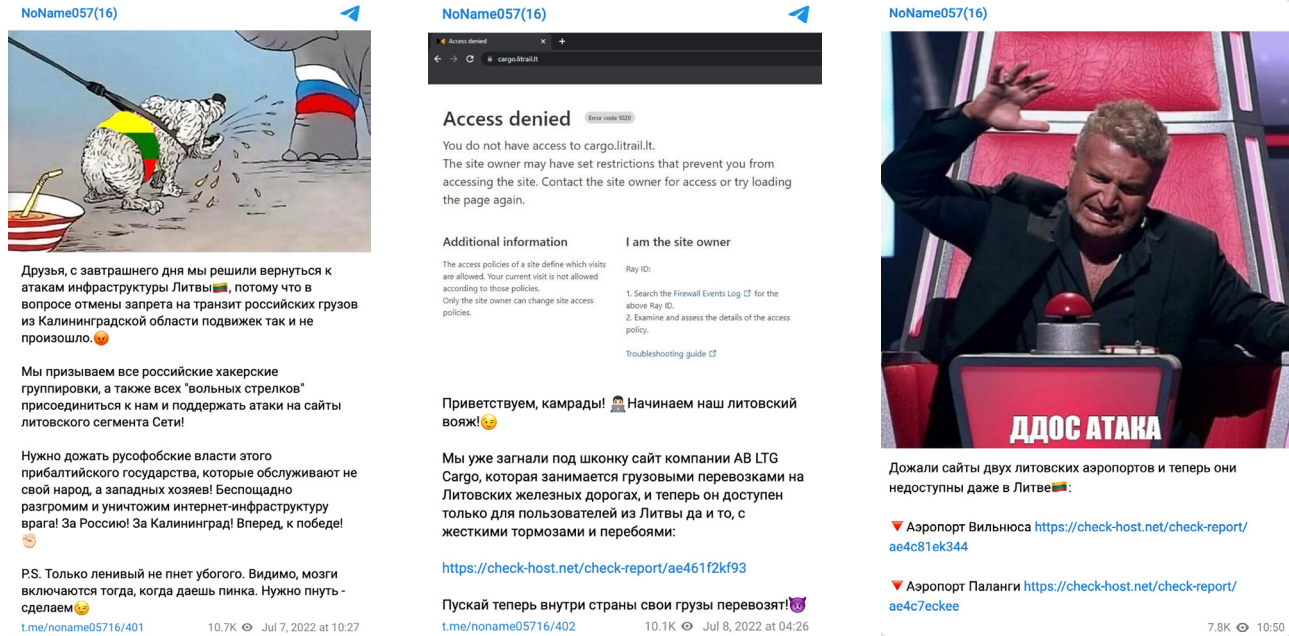
Screenshots from the Telegram channel of hacker group NoName057(16) coordinating DDoS attacks against Lithuania's infrastructure in response to the Kaliningrad ban. *(Source: noname05716/archive, left; noname05716/archive, center/ noname05716/archive, right)*
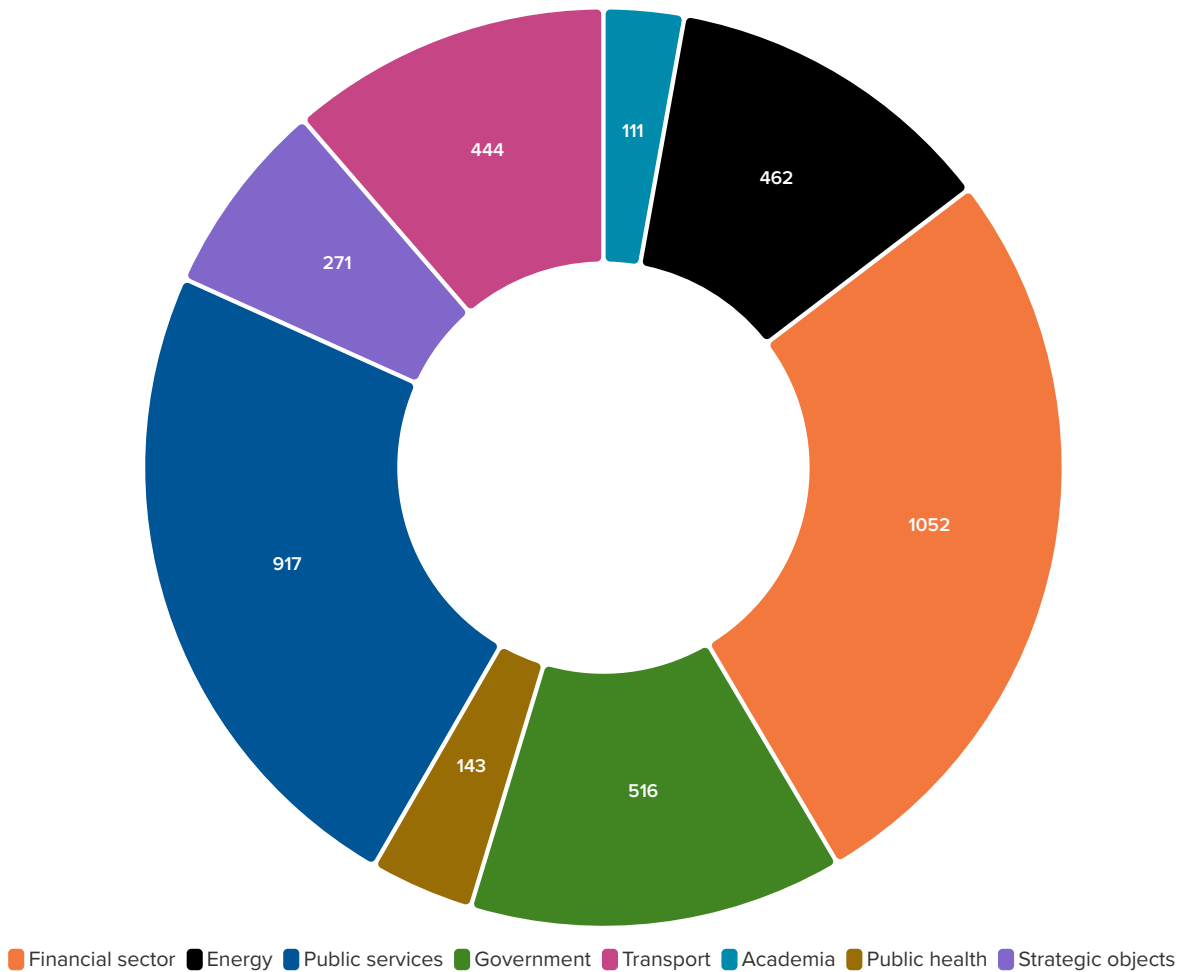
Figure 101: A timeline of Telegram hacktivist channel references to top ten most mentioned countries
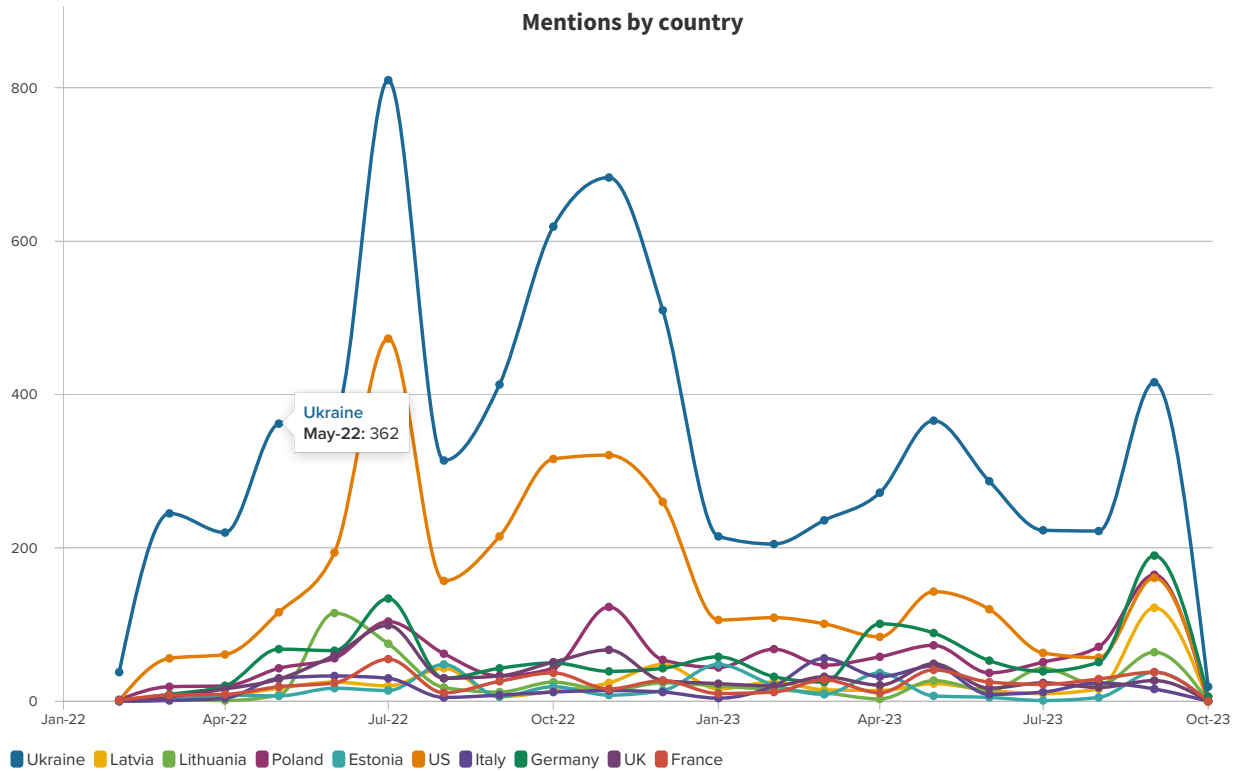
Channel references to specific countries spiked prior to cyberattacks. References to the United States, Ukraine, and Poland topped the list of the top ten most mentioned countries. *(Source: DFRLab via Telegram and Flourish)*

Figure 12: Primary targets of Pro-Russia hacktivist channels (by mentions)

Financial sector ● Energy ● Public services ● Government ● Transport ● Academia ● Public health ● Strategic objects

The numbers in the chart correspond to cumulative mentions of keywords in each category. The top three most affected sectors were the financial industry, public services, and government institutions. *(DFRLab via Telegram and Flourish)* https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/15600771/

Telegram post,[99] KillMIlk, the founder of KillNet, suggested that the West was attempting to activate NATO's Article 5 regarding collective defense, and indicated that it was time for KillNet to target Poland, which he referred to as "the most Nazi state on the planet." In subsequent days, Killnet, NoName057(16), and CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn organized DDoS attacks on the websites of Polish government institutions, airports, and courts.

Mentions of Poland and the Baltic states also experienced spikes in September 2023, coinciding with massive DDoS

attacks against these countries. Sixteen pro-Russia hacker groups on Telegram coordinated the attacks, including Beregini, RaHDlt, Killnet, Заря, Джокер ДНР, Вагнер, XakNet Team, NoName057(16), Black Wolfs, BEAR. IT.ARMY, Восход, Народная CyberАрмия, Patriot Black Matrix, DEADFOUD, Восход, Xecatsha, and BEARSPAW. The channels posted manifestos claiming that they were joining other groups in these attacks in response to Ukraine's bombing of an ammunition depot in Crimea[100] and a drone attack on Russia's Pskov airbase.[101] In one post discussing the targeting of Poland, NoName057(16)

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99   Killmilk, "Ну чего Вы как не родные? Не понимаете что они хотят развивать? Статья НАТО о коллективной безопасности вступит в силу," Telegram post, November 16, 2022, https://t.me/killmilk_rus/241/ / https://archive.is/wip/7KLXf.

100   "Russian Ammunition Depot Hit during Ukrainian Drone Attack in Crimea, Official Says," Reuters, July 24, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ammunition-depot-hit-crimea-moscow-installed-official-2023-07-24/.

101   "Ukraine War: Kyiv Confirms Drone Attack on Russia's Pskov Airbase," BBC, August 31, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66675108.

linked[102] the attack to Polish parliamentary elections. The channel claimed that the Kaczyński government, as well as Donald Tusk (the centrist candidate who is now prime minister), were "soaked" with Russophobia and that "Anglo-Saxons" were instrumentalizing Polish Russophobia. This post was followed by DDoS attacks targeting the Polish Supreme Court, ports, and transportation infrastructure.

Types of infrastructure targeted

The DFRLab also analyzed targeted infrastructure by keyword, which were in turn categorized by sector. We determined that hacktivist Telegram channels primarily focused on civilian infrastructure rather than military targets. The most commonly referenced sector was the financial industry, which the channels discussed in the context of

cyberattacks on commercial banks, private logistics companies, and insurance firms.

Additionally, hackers aimed at disrupting public services, which included various electronic services such as tax payment websites,[103] postal services,[104] and other online platforms. Government institutions, encompassing ministries, websites of local administration and self-government bodies,[105] and courts,[106] were also subject to DDoS attacks.

Furthermore, pro-Russia hacker groups also targeted public transport systems,[107] including metros, buses, online ticket offices, and trains. Strategic points[108] such as airports, ports, and customs were also on the list of targeted infrastructure. In some cases, academic institutions[109] such as universities and research facilities, as well as medical and public health institutions, were also subjected to attacks.[110]

102 NoName057(16), "В Польше скоро выборы...Выбор у бедных поляков так себе, конечно: Идеология действующего правительства престарелого Качиньского «насквозь пропитана» обидами и русофобией,» Telegram post, September 4, 2023. https://t.me/noname05716/4771 / https://archive.is/NSaZB.

103 WE ARE KILLNET–РЕЗЕРВНЫЙ, "Налоговая США-IRS.GOV закрыла авторизацию 😄👍 Теперь что бы оплатить налоги правительству США, амер должен зарегистрироваться в ID.ME," Telegram post, January 17, 2023. https://t.me/killnet_reservs/4815 / https://archive.is/wip/vouOT.

104 WE ARE KILLNET–РЕЗЕРВНЫЙ, "Внимание - взлом почты Айя Беркольд "Латвия," Telegram post, November 30, 2022, https://t.me/killnet_reservs/4013 / https://archive.is/wip/QIHnQ.

105 NoName057(16), "Грохнули официальный сайт муниципалитета Палермо: ❌https://check-host.net/check-report/10e172bbk815," Telegram post, August 2, 2023, https://t.me/noname05716/4418 / https://archive.is/wip/QZEY6.

106 NoName057(16), "⚡Продолжаем наказывать польскую судебную систему-роняем сайт окружного суда в Илаве," Telegram post, November 8, 2022, https://t.me/noname05716/1022 / https://archive.is/wip/e7I2G.

107 NoName057(16), "От наших DDoS-ракет «заболел» официальный сайт общественного транспорта Таллина," Telegram post, April 26, 2023, https://t.me/noname05716/2988 / https://archive.is/wip/pOVKS.

108 NoName057(16), "Уронили сайт литовского международного аэропорта Шяуляй, в нескольких странах он еще доступен на минималках, но это лишь вопрос времени," Telegram post, July 8, 2022, https://t.me/noname05716/411 / https://archive.is/wip/vtrGk.

109 Народная CyberАрмия, "Сегодня хакеры из 'Народной CyberАрмии' выложили в открытый доступ БД 'Национального Университета Пищевых Технологий,' г. Киев," Telegram post, March 14, 2023, https://t.me/CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn/3031 / https://archive.is/wip/JawCY.

110 Народная CyberАрмия, "Добрый вечер, КиберАрмия!⚡🤬U Атакуем сайт государственного учреждения «Днепропетровский областной центр контроля и профилактики болезней Министерства здравоохранения Усраины," Telegram post, June 8, 2023. https://t.me/CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn/3967 / https://archive.is/wip/K5BnD.

Use of Telegram content by Russian media outlets in their news reporting

Beyond its use as a platform for Russian influencers and like-minded communities, Telegram has solidified its role in Russia as a daily news source. According to an April 2023 study conducted by the media research company Media Scope, 41 percent of Russians use Telegram daily, while 60 percent use it at least once a month.

Furthermore, a September 2023 survey carried out by the media holding group Rambler&Co revealed that the proportion of surveyed Russian internet users who read news exclusively on Telegram is nearly equal to those who exclusively frequent news websites—25 percent versus 27 percent, respectively—while an additional 48 percent of respondents rely on both mediums depending on the specific news topic. Consequently, the survey results suggest that Telegram and media outlets garner nearly equal interest among the Russian audience when it comes to accessing news.

This chapter explores how Telegram's increasing popularity in Russia is reflected in how Kremlin-controlled, pro-Kremlin, and independent Russian media outlets increasingly cite Telegram content as sources in their news articles. The DFRLab identified seven Kremlin-controlled and pro-Kremlin Russian language media outlets that ranked among

Figure 13: Number of Telegram URLs extracted from Russian media outlets' articles
(Summer 2021, 2022, and 2023)
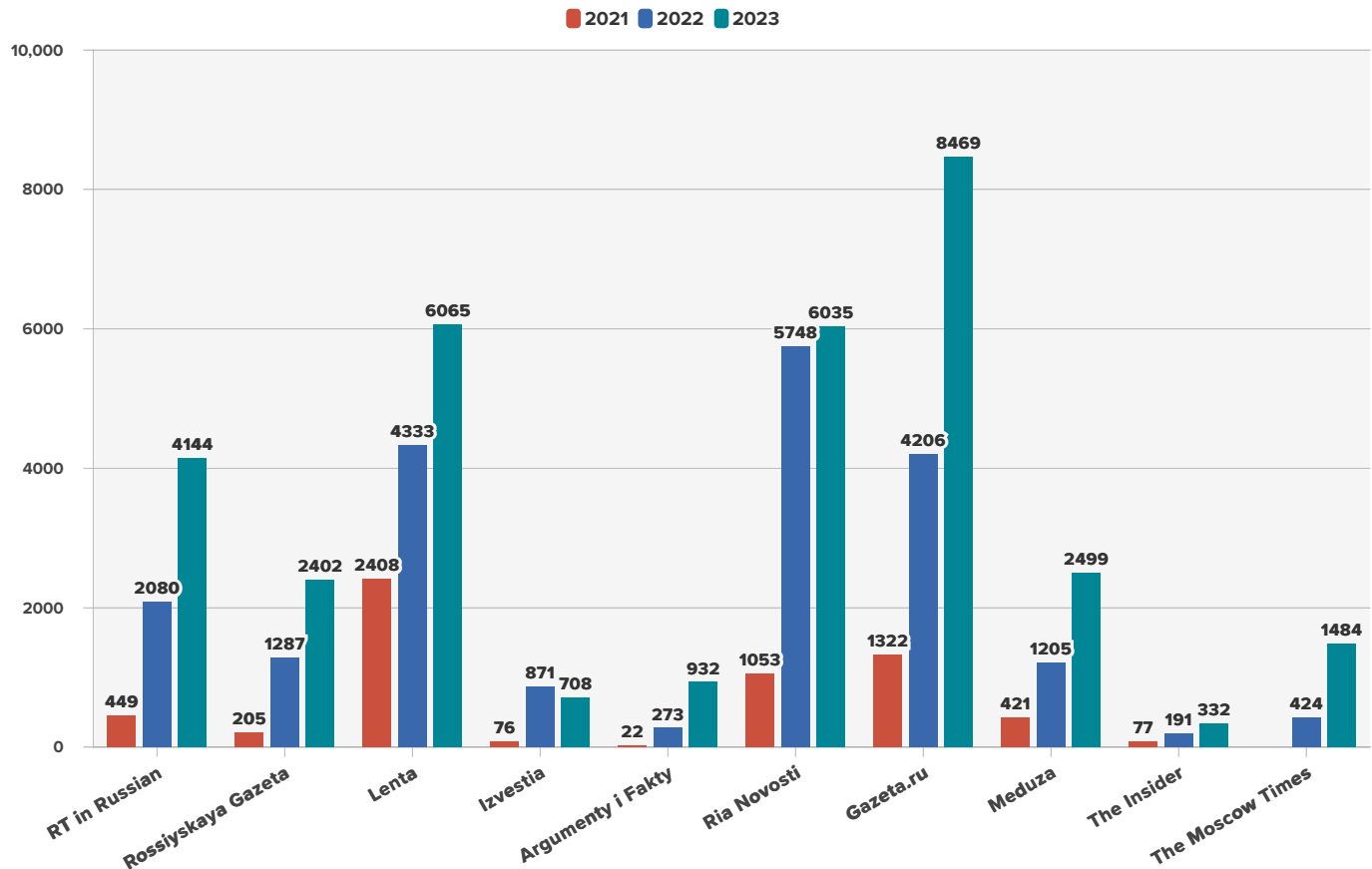
Note: Event Registry did not collect articles published by Izvestia during the last two weeks of August 2023 and the DFRLab was not able to include them in calculation. *(Source: the DFRLab via Flourish and Event Registry)*

Figure 14: Instances of selected media outlets citing URLs from the twenty-five most frequently cited Telegram channels (by categories)
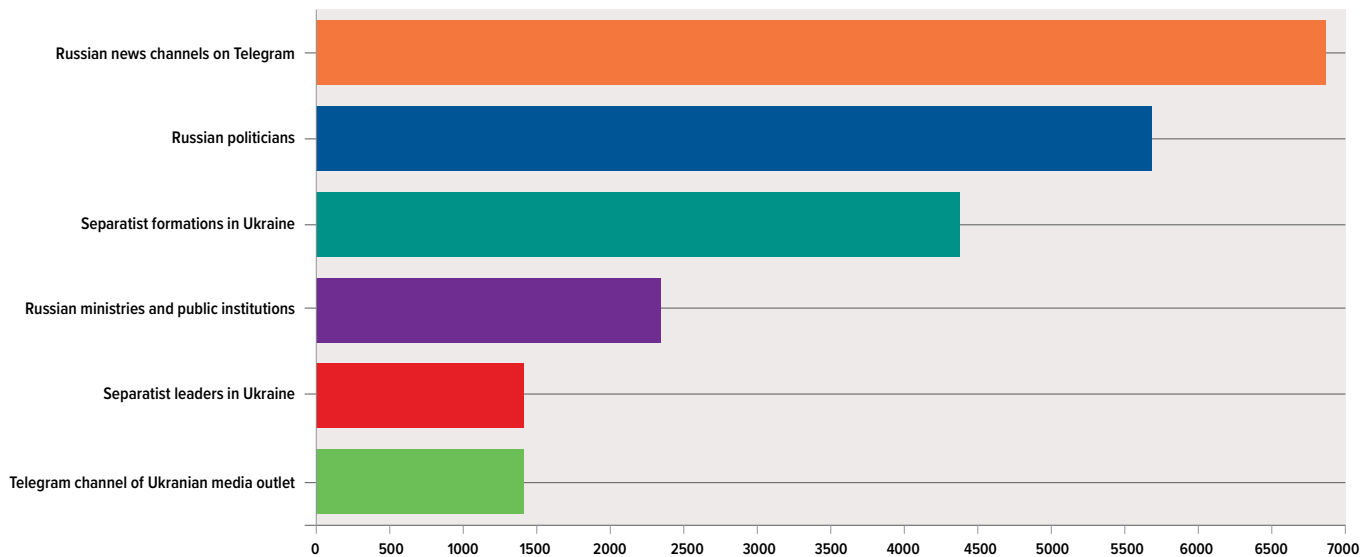
(Source: the DFRLab via Flourish, Event Registry, and Telegram)

the top ten Russian outlets regarding website visits[111] and citations in Brand Analytics[112] and Medialogia[113] rankings: Ria Novosti, RT in Russian, Lenta, Gazeta.ru, Izvestia, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, and Argumenti i Fakty. As a comparison, we also collected Telegram source citations by three popular independent media outlets: *Meduza*, *The Insider*, and *The Moscow Times*.

After selecting the ten media outlets, the DFRLab employed media-monitoring tool Event Registry to scrape 655,165 articles published by these outlets over a three-month window from June 1 to August 31 for the years 2021, 2022, and 2023. This resulted in 192,330 articles for the summer of 2021, 224,195 articles for the summer of 2022, and 238,640 for the summer of 2023. Once collected, we then identified which articles included links to Telegram content, resulting in a total of 60,070 hyperlinks pointing back to the platform.

An analysis of Telegram URLs showed a significant increase of Telegram content appearing in the articles of pro-Kremlin media outlets, jumping from 6,026 citations in 2021 to 33,300 citations in 2023—a 481 percent increase. Among the outlets with the highest-percentage increases in Telegram links were Argumenty i Fakty (4,000 percent), Rossiyskaya Gazeta (1,000 percent), RT in Russian (800 percent), Gazeta.ru (500 percent), and Ria Novosti (400 percent). Independent media outlets also increased their reliance on Telegram, though not as much as the leading pro-Kremlin outlets, with *Meduza* experiencing a 490 percent increase and *The Insider* by 330 percent. In contrast, the total publishing output of all of these outlets only increased by 24 percent.

The DFRLab analyzed the twenty-five Telegram channels[114] most frequently cited by Russian media outlets, organizing them by channel type. Six of the top twenty-five were fellow Russian news channels, which garnered the inclusion of nearly 7,000 URLs during the three collective time windows. An additional eight channels run by Russian politicians received more than 5,700 media citations. Also in the top twenty-five were four Telegram channels of Russian-backed separatist entities in Ukraine (e.g., the territorial defense headquarters of Donetsk People's Republic, the administration of occupied Novokakhovka urban district, etc.) and three channels of Russian-backed separatist influencers in Ukraine, which were cited more than 4,400

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111   Semrush, "Top Websites in Russia (Newspapers Industry)," July 2023, https://www.semrush.com/trending-websites/ru/newspapers.

112   Brand Analytics, "Рейтинг медиаресурсов (Rating of Media Resources)," July 2023, https://brandanalytics.ru/mediatrends/media/202307.

113   Медиалогия (Medialogia), "Федеральные СМИ: июль 2023 (Federal medial July 2023)," https://www.mlg.ru/ratings/media/federal/12422/.

114   The Telegram handles of the top twenty-five most frequently cited channels by Russian media outlets are: online_dnr_sckk; bazabazon; shot_shot; breakingmash; mod_russia; vvgladkov; MariaVladimirovnaZakharova; ENews112; RKadyrov_95; rian_ru; TRO_DPR; alexey_pushkov; DNR_SCKK; Hinshtein; stranaua; rt_russian; vrogov; medvedev_telegram; mos_sobyanin; sledcom_press; VGA_NovayaKahovka; gubernator_46; kulemzin_donetsk; mchs_official; and Aksenov82.

Figure 15: Number of URLS extracted from articles published by Russian media outlets
(by platform, summer 2021, 2022, and 2023
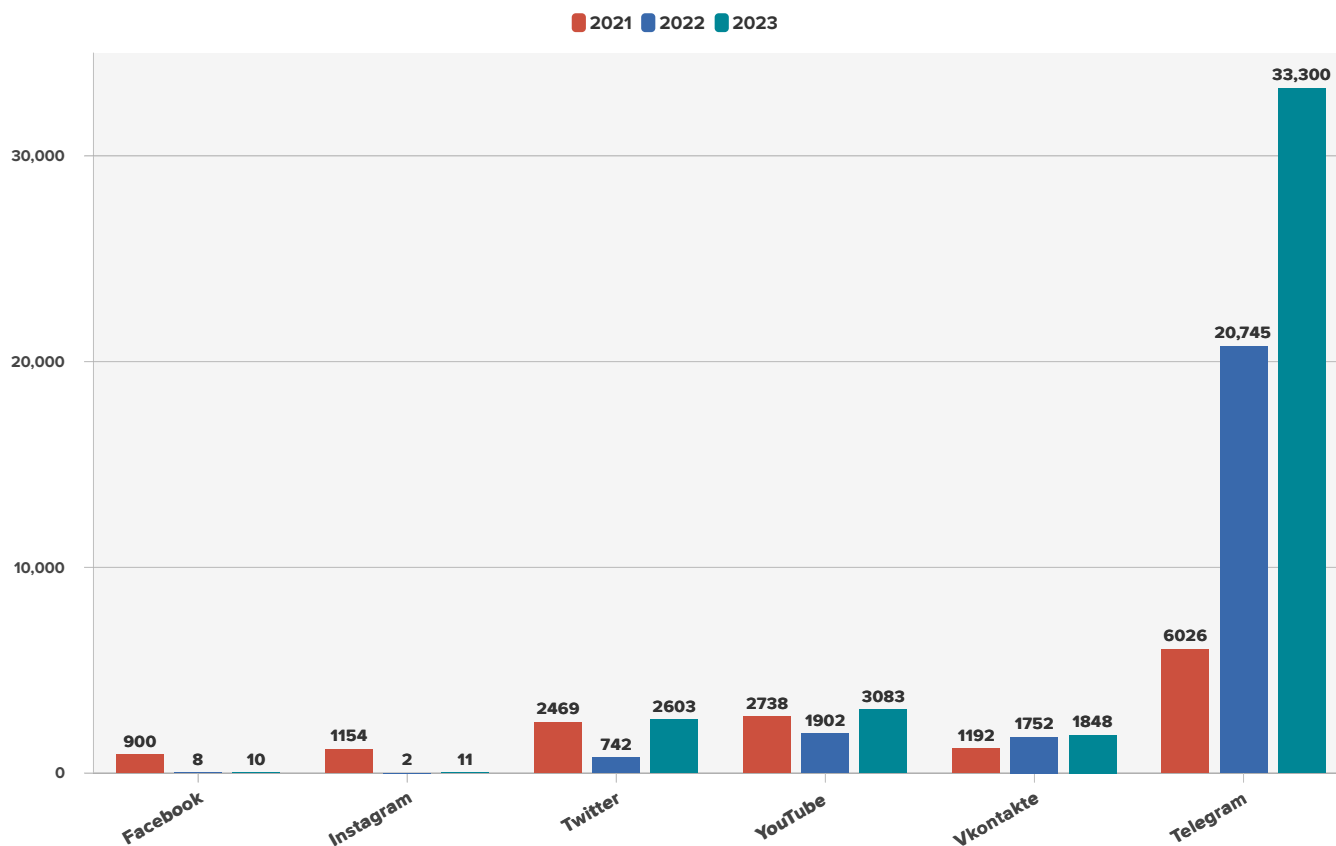
(Source: the DFRLab via Flourish and Event Registry)

and 1,400 times, respectively. The outlets also cited three Russian government Telegram channels 2,340 times. Lastly, a channel run by the Ukrainian media outlet Strana. ua was cited more than 550 times.

The DFRLab also analyzed the extent to which Russian media outlets cited content from social media platforms. To that end, we collected URLs linking to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, YouTube, and the Russian social network VK. As previously noted, Facebook, Instagram, and X were blocked by Russian authorities shortly after Russia's reinvasion of Ukraine in February 2022, while YouTube remains available in Russia.[115]

Facebook experienced a precipitous drop in news citations, from 900 in 2021 to 18 in 2022 and 2023 combined, while Instagram fell from 1,154 to 13 over the same period. X also dropped from 2,469 citations in 2021 to 742 in 2022, yet rose to 2,603 citations in 2023, suggesting the impact of the Kremlin ban was only temporary. YouTube, which has not been banned, trended similarly to X, dropping from 2,713 citations in 2021 to 1,902 in 2022, then rising to 3,083 in 2023. And while VK experienced modest citation increases from 1,192 in 2021 to 1,848 in 2023, its numbers were no match for the Telegram citations, suggesting the former is not seen as an important information source compared to the latter.

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115   Dan Milmo, "Russia Blocks Access to Facebook and Twitter," *Guardian,* March 4, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/04/russia-completely-blocks-access-to-facebook-and-twitter.

Russia's crackdown on anonymous channels

According to TGStat data, approximately half of the top one hundred Russian Telegram channels are anonymous.[116] A key factor likely contributing to the popularity of anonymous channels is the Kremlin's ongoing assault on free speech and independent media.[117] This has also allowed some channels to embrace their anonymity as a branding tactic, presenting themselves as sources of insider information, adding to their appeal for readers.[118]

As Telegram's popularity and trust in Russia have grown since the reinvasion, reports of surveillance and attempts by Russian law enforcement agencies to censor channel administrators have also increased, including reports of Russian citizens being fined or imprisoned for their activities on the platform.

In March 2023, a joint investigation by independent Russian outlets *Meduza*[119] and *The Bell*[120] revealed that Russian authorities had pursued authors of anonymous Telegram channels at the urging of Rostec, a Russian state corporation and defense contractor.[121] Starting in the summer of 2022, Russia began launching criminal cases against administrators of anonymous Telegram channels en masse, accusing them of extortion by profiting off of "negative blocks," in which a channel agrees to not mention a specific person or a company in a negative light in exchange for money. Negative blocks are believed to be a common practice among Russian Telegram channels, however.[122] In 2023, Simonyan admitted to making monthly payments to ensure that nothing unlikable about her or her family members is published. She claimed that this practice is "the usual business" in Russia, asserting that everyone does it and is aware of it.[123]

One notable incident was the hunt for anonymous administrators of celebrity news channel Tushite Svet (Turn out the Lights). Russian law enforcement agencies opened a case against them after they posted about a birthday celebration attended by a Rostec executive, despite having extorted the company for a negative block.

According to the investigation, Rostec employs software to deanonymize Telegram users, including administrators. The software, known as Hunter, reportedly examines open-source data on social media, forums, government services, and other platforms, cataloging dozens of personal identifiers, including nicknames, email addresses, phone numbers, registered internet domains, and crypto wallets. In some instances, Rostec reportedly took control of popular Telegram channels that were once critical of the corporation and the Russian government.

An additional investigation[124] by *The New York Times* found that the Kremlin doubled down on surveillance tools to hunt down opponents of Russia's war in Ukraine. It reported that Russia's Federal Security Service (widely known as the FSB) is equipped with technologies that allow it to watch specific types of activities on encrypted apps like Telegram and identify anonymous social media users, among other things.

Multiple Russian journalists and dissidents have discovered over the last year that their Telegram accounts were compromised or monitored, with their Telegram activity used against them in criminal cases. *WIRED* reported[125] several instances of Russian authorities appearing to have read the content of Telegram private chats, while Russian independent outlet *Novaya Gazeta* investigated[126] similar

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116   TGStat, Rating of Telegram Channels, Russia, last checked on November 7, 2023, https://tgstat.ru/en/ratings/channels; https://archive.ph/7N30K.

117   "How Russian Propaganda Uses Anonymous Telegram Channels to Achieve Its Own Goals," *Detector Media*, August 25, 2023, https://disinfo.detector.media/en/post/how-russian-propaganda-uses-anonymous-telegram-channels-to-achieve-its-own-goals.

118   Karena Phan, "How a Baseless Claim about Putin's Health Spread from an Unreliable Telegram Account to TV News," October 26, 2023, https://apnews.com/article/putin-russia-misinformation-heart-attack-telegram-3c25f229f994aaa87d837285412cb1be.

119   "Теперь всех можно грести под себя," *Meduza*, March 22, 2023, https://meduza.io/feature/2023/03/22/teper-vseh-mozhno-gresti-pod-sebya.

120   Svetlana Reiter and Irina Pankratova, "«Начали сажать, понравилось». Как Сергей Чемезов и его пиарщик наводят порядок в Telegram," *Bell*, March 22, 2023, https://thebell.global.ssl.fastly.net/nachali-sazhat-ponravilos-kak-sergey-chemezov-i-ego-piarshchik-navodyat-poryadok-v-telegram.

121   "В Ростехе заявили, что производят около 80% задействованной в СВО оборонной продукции," Tass, May 5, 2023, https://tass.ru/ekonomika/17683509.

122   DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Wagner Is Still in Business in Africa," *New Atlanticist* (blog), Atlantic Council, July 20, 2023, https://dfrlab.org/2023/07/20/russian-war-report-wagner-still-in-africa/.

123   Julia Davis, Twitter (@JuliaDavisNews), "Turns out, head of RT Margarita Simonyan has been making monthly payments to ensure that nothing negative gets published about her or her family members. She argues that this is normal in Russia, everyone is doing it and everyone knows about it," November 15, 2023, https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1724914548950327644?s=20.

124   Aaron Krolik, Paul Mozur, and Adam Satariano, "Cracking Down on Dissent, Russia Seeds a Surveillance Supply Chain," *New York Times*, July 3, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/03/technology/russia-ukraine-surveillance-tech.html.

125   Darren Loucaides, "The Kremlin Has Entered the Chat," *Wired*, February 2, 2023, https://www.wired.com/story/the-kremlin-has-entered-the-chat/.

126   Elena Romanova, "Заказной Telegram," *Novaya Gazeta Evropa*, August 14, 2023, https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/08/14/zakaznoi-telegram.
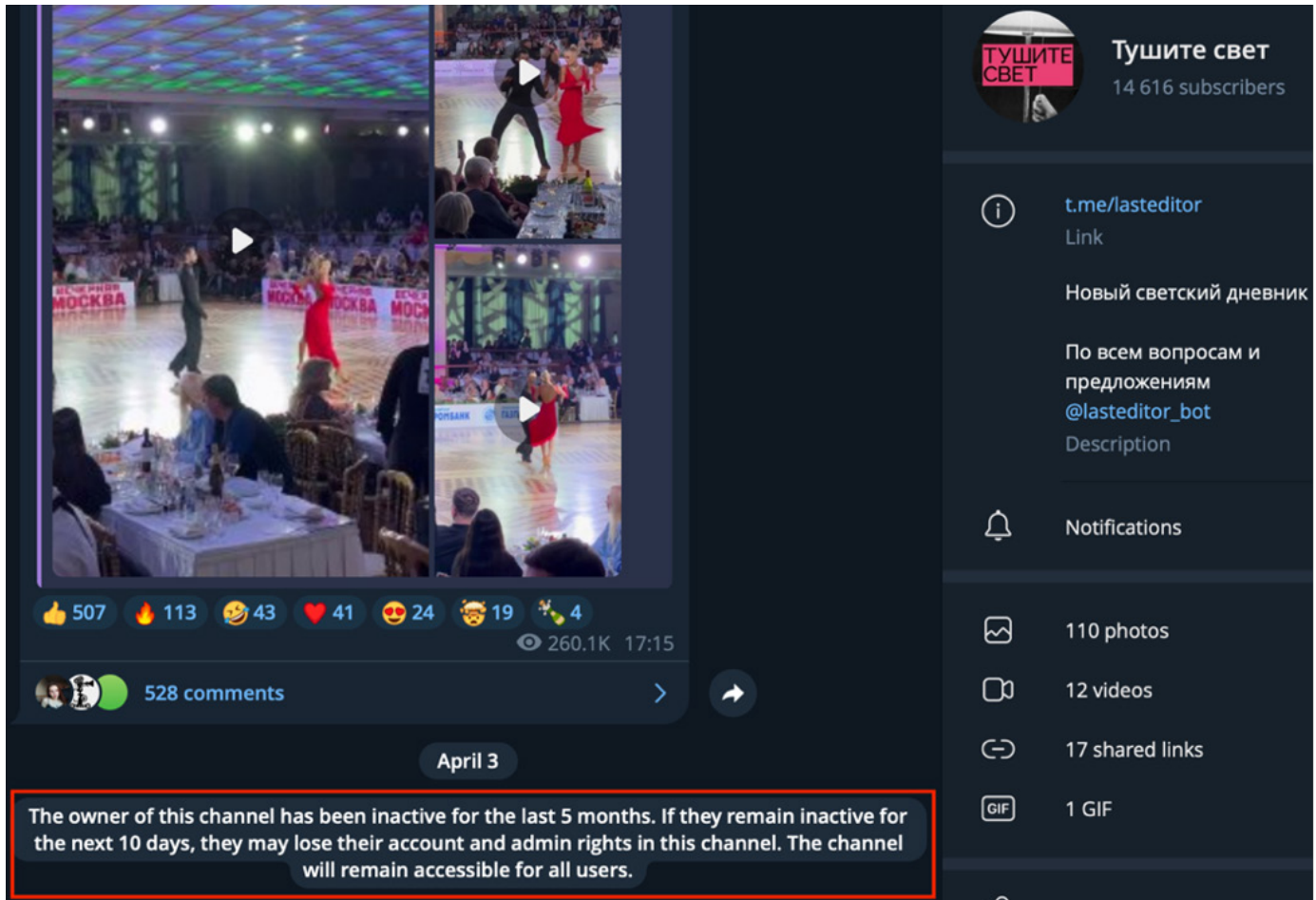
Screenshot shows the Telegram channel went silent after the arrest of the administrators by Russian law enforcement agencies for so-called extortion. *(Source: Tushite Svet via Telegram)*

cases of deanonymization of Telegram channels posting about wrongdoings of Russian authorities and targeting the administrators with criminal charges.

In another investigation into deanonymization, a Russian online outlet *Daily Storm* discussed[127] techniques used to expose user identities, including employing Telegram bots to reveal a channel's links to other platforms, purchasing consumer internet data, phishing, and social engineering.

In October 2022, against the backdrop of arrests[128] of administrators of Telegram channels based on a lead provided by Rostec leadership, Russian MP Alexander Khinshtein, who also is the chairman of the Committee on Information

Policy, Information Technologies, and Communications, posted[129] on his Telegram channel: "Anonymity on TG is a myth; and today's technical capabilities of the intelligence services make it possible to successfully de-anonymize the 'kings of kompromat.' " Khinshtein added that legal precedents existed for arresting other "blackmailers," with actions coordinated by top security services officials. In February 2023, Khinshtein wrote[130] that "the war on [Telegram] crime" continued, accusing some administrators of working for Ukraine. He also listed the names of channel administrators who would soon be targeted.

Telegram users have also been targeted with accusations of "discrediting" or spreading "fake news" about

127 Daniil Belovodev, "«От Родины не должно быть секретов. Их у вас, собственно, нет»: как силовики, детективы и пробивщики деанонимизируют пользователей Telegram," *Daily Storm*, July 7, 2020, https://dailystorm.ru/rassledovaniya/ot-rodiny-ne-dolzhno-byt-sekretov-ih-u-vas-sobstvenno-net-kak-siloviki-detektivy-i-probivshchiki-deanonimiziruyut-polzovateley-telegram.

128 МВД МЕДИА [MVD Media], Telegram channel, October 4, 2023, https://t.me/mediamvd/14032.

129 Александр Хинштейн, Alexander Hinshtein's Telegram channel, October 5, 2023, https://t.me/Hinshtein/2925.

130 Александр Хинштейн, Hinshtein's Telegram channel, February 8, 2023, https://t.me/Hinshtein/3467.

the Russian army, which could result in imprisonment for several years.[131] The Russian digital rights organization Roskomsvoboda has documented cases in which individuals receive civil or criminal punishment for online activities, including Andrei Kurshin, administrator for the channel Moscow Calling, journalist Boris Kagarlitsky, and Islam Musagadzhiev, administrator of the channel Dagestan Morning.[132]

131   "Russia Fights Back in Information War with Jail Warning," Reuters, March 4, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-introduce-jail-terms-spreading-fake-information-about-army-2022-03-04/.

132   Roskomsvoboda, "Кого в сентябре преследовали за слова: знаменитости и блогеры," October 4, 2023. https://roskomsvoboda.org/post/september-282-celebrities/.

Channels challenging the Kremlin

While the Kremlin and their allies have exploited Telegram for disseminating disinformation and propaganda, it's not only Kremlin-approved channels that are available to the Russian audience. Telegram also contains a robust community of actors exposing Kremlin wrongdoings and criticizing Russia's political and military elite on the messaging app.

Various Russian independent media and investigative outlets have a presence on Telegram. With Moscow designating a large number of media and organizations as "foreign agents"[133] and creating an unsafe environment for them to operate, Telegram became an important tool for them to disseminate their reporting without interference. At the time of writing in late March 2024, one of the famous Russian independent news outlets, *Meduza*, ranked seventeenth in subscribers among the top hundred news and media channels in Russia, according to TGStat data.[134] Moscow designated *Meduza* as a "foreign agent" in 2021.[135]

Soon after the reinvasion, reputable Western daily newspapers like *The New York Times*[136] and *Washington Post*[137] also launched Telegram channels with the purpose of delivering news on the war to Russian audiences. The decision to establish a presence on the messaging app was prompted by Russia's move to ban and block[138] some Western online platforms[139] and its ongoing efforts to silence[140] others.

Additionally, Telegram channels that are generally supportive of Kremlin foreign policy, including pro-war military bloggers,[141] have used the platform to challenge the official Kremlin narrative and criticize the Kremlin's handling of the war. These criticisms became more commonplace during the second half of 2022 and included topics such as military incompetence, tactical failures, Putin's Orthodox Christmas ceasefire,[142] and Russia's resumption of the grain deal with Ukraine, among other topics.[143]

Perhaps the most unfavorable Telegram development for the Kremlin unfolded in the lead-up to Prigozhin's June 2023 Wagner mutiny, as well as during the mutiny itself. An extremely active member of the platform, Prigozhin engaged in rhetorical warfare against his foes in the Kremlin, specifically Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Armed Forces Chief of Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov. The Wagner chief accused them of being incompetent and not providing Wagner soldiers enough ammunition to fight in Ukraine.

Immediately prior to launching the mutiny on June 23, Prigozhin released a series of Telegram posts accusing Russia's military leadership of deceiving Russians and Putin, effectively bypassing the state-controlled media ecosystem to promote his message.[144] He then used his Telegram channel, Prigozhin Press Service, to declare war against the Ministry of Defense in a Telegram audio clip.

133 Lucian Kim, "Russia's 'Foreign Agent' Law Targets Journalists, Activists, even Ordinary Citizens," NPR, July 31, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/07/31/1021804569/russias-foreign-agent-law-targets-journalists-activists-even-ordinary-citizens.

134 Rating of Telegram Channels in Russia, News and Media Category, TGStat, https://tgstat.ru/en/ratings/channels/news?sort=members; archived on March 27, 2024 at https://archive.is/Xzssc.

135 "Russia Designates 'Meduza' as a 'Foreign Agent,' " *Meduza*, April 23, 2021, https://meduza.io/en/news/2021/04/23/russia-designates-meduza-as-a-foreign-agent.

136 "The New York Times Launches a Telegram Channel to Deliver News about the War," *New York Times*, March 14, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/14/world/europe/telegram-nyt.html.

137 *Washington Post*, Telegram, https://t.me/washingtonpost.

138 DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Global Crackdown on Russian State-affiliated Media Continues as Russia Blocks Facebook," *New Atlanticist* (blog), Atlantic Council, March 4, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-global-crackdown-on-russian-state-affiliated-media-continues-as-russia-blocks-facebook/#bbc.

139 DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Meta Officially Declared "Extremist" Organization in Russia," *New Atlanticist* (blog), Atlantic Council, March 21, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-meta-officially-declared-extremist-organization-in-russia/#meta.

140 Eto Buziashvili and Andy Carvin, "Pro-Kremlin Wikipedia Alternative Off to a Rough Start," DFRLab, September 1, 2022, https://dfrlab.org/2022/09/01/pro-kremlin-wikipedia-alternative-off-to-a-rough-start/.
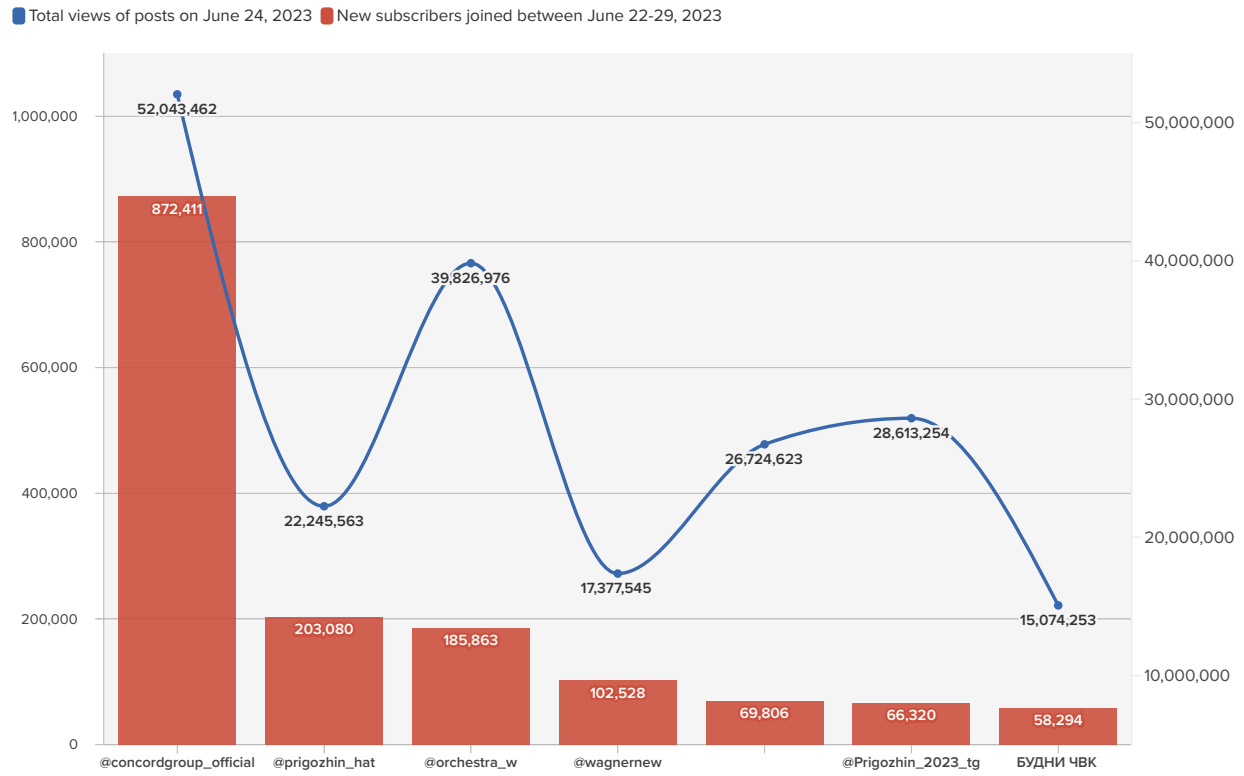
141 James Beardsworth, "Explainer: Who Are Russia's Pro-war Bloggers and Why Are They Important," *Moscow Times*, September 15, 2022, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/09/14/explainer-who-are-russias-pro-war-bloggers-and-why-are-they-important-a78793.

142 DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Russian Military Bloggers Criticize Putin's Orthodox Christmas Ceasefire Announcement."

143 DFRLab, "Russian War Report: Belgorod incursion."

144 DFRLab, "Russian War Report Special Edition: Prigozhin and Wagner Forces Mutiny against Moscow," *New Atlanticist* (blog), Atlantic Council, June 24, 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-wagner-mutiny/#telegram.

Figure 16: Subscribers and readership of leading pro-Wagner Telegram channels

● Total views of posts on June 24, 2023 ● New subscribers joined between June 22-29, 2023


The columns show the total number of new subscribers during the period of June 22-29, 2023, while the line represents each channel's number of post views in millions on June 24, 2023. *(Source: GGigitashvili_/DFRLab via Telegram Analytics and Flourish)*

Figure 17: Daily results of OONI's Telegram test (May 30 to June 29, 2023

Telegram Test

Russia

■ OK ■ Confirmed ■ Anomaly ■ Failure
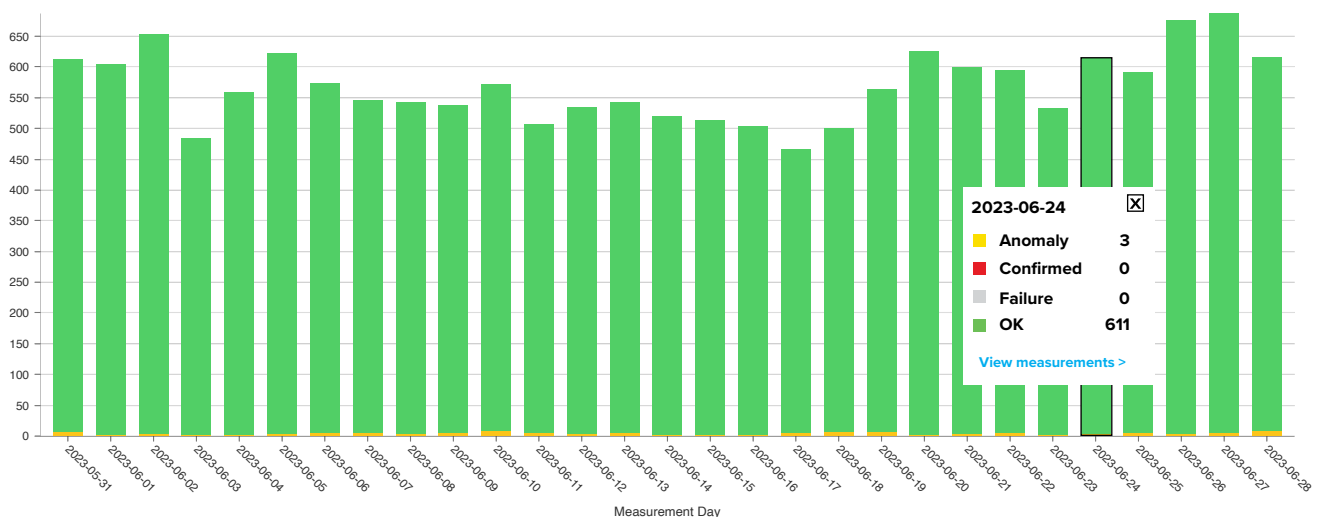
(Source: OONI Explorer)

Figure 18: Anomalies registered by OONI's Telegram test (June 23 and June 24, 2023)

RU	🇷🇺	AS 47618	2023-06-24 20:19 UTC	Telegram Test	Anomaly
RU	🇷🇺	AS 20632	2023-06-24 04:21 UTC	Telegram Test	Anomaly
RU	🇷🇺	AS 20632	2023-06-24 03:20 UTC	Telegram Test	Anomaly
RU	🇷🇺	AS 20632	2023-06-23 06:18 UTC	Telegram Test	Anomaly
RU	🇷🇺	AS 20632	2023-06-23 02:54 UTC	Telegram Test	Anomaly

(Source: OONI Explorer)

Over the course of June 23 and 24, Prigozhin Press Service published twenty-six posts, including audio, video, images, and text. Collectively, the posts garnered more than 107 million views and 1.3 million shares over the two-day period. The DFRLab also found that subscribership increased sharply for Telegram channels whose names included references to Prigozhin or Wagner Group during the period of June 22-29, with Prigozhin Press Service growing by more than 872,000 subscribers.[145]

As Prigozhin employed Telegram to promote his activities and goals throughout the mutiny, the Kremlin attempted to limit access to online information connected to him and the Wagner Group. This effort included content blocking on the Russian search engine Yandex and social network VK.[146] On June 24, Tass reported about an apparent Telegram disruption in some Russian cities, while Russian telecommunications regulator Roskomnadzor informed the public that it was authorized to apply internet restrictions in places where counter-terrorist operation might occur. Roskomnadzor also stated that Telegram was not subject to any limitations, however.

The DFRLab examined data[147] from the Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI)—a platform for measuring global internet censorship—to check for potential Telegram disruptions in Russia. According to OONI data, the platform worked most of the time between June 23 and June 25, but anomalies within the data hinted at possible attempts to disrupt Telegram's mobile app and web interface.

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145 Gigitashvili, Mejlumyan, and Osadchuk, "How Russian Pro-war Telegram Channels Addressed the Wagner Mutiny."

146 DFRLab, "Russian War Report Special Edition: Prigozhin and Wagner Forces Mutiny against Moscow," *New Atlanticist* (blog), Atlantic Council, June 24, 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-wagner-mutiny/#telegram.

147 Eto Buziashvili and Iria Puyosa, "Why Wagner's 'Telegram Mutiny' Remains a Dilemma for the Kremlin," DFRLab, June 29, 2023, https://dfrlab.org/2023/06/29/why-wagners-telegram-mutiny-remains-a-dilemma-for-the-kremlin/.

Case Study: How Russian communities raise funds on Telegram to support the war effort

Russian Telegram groups engage in fundraising to encourage civilians to donate money for the purchasing of equipment, including drones, anti-electronic warfare devices, vehicles, mechanical parts, and thermal cameras, as well as food and medicine. The DFRLab found[148] that Russian pro-Kremlin propagandist and Telegram influencer Solovyov promoted the fundraisers, notably Everything for Victory,[149] a charity fund that organizes fundraisers to support the Russian armed forces and the war effort. In one instance, the charity fund organized an emergency fundraiser to replenish Russia's drone supply during the battle of Avdiivka in October 2023.[150] The charity fund operates in partnership with Vladimir Putin's "People's Front" movement, launched in 2011.

The DFRLab also found that Russian military bloggers on Telegram propagated the charity fund's post, reaching an audience of over 800,000 users, and raising more than eighty million rubles in seven days.[151] Solovyov, meanwhile, organized live streams inviting people to donate,

Screenshot: A "Peoples' Front" and "Everything for Victory!" joint fundraiser, entitled "Emergency collection 'Avdiivka. Everything for Victory!,'" indicating that Russian fighters need "drones, means of anti-electronic warfare, thermal and red dot sights, and tactical medicine." *(Source: People's Front/archive)*

148   Valentin Châtelet, "Russian Armed Forces Face Difficulties in Replenishing Military and Paramilitary Supplies amid Failed Offensive in Avdiivka," in "Russian War Report: Desperate for Recruits, Russia Offers One Million Rubles to Join its Military," Atlantic Council's DFRLab, November 16, 2023, https://dfrlab.org/2023/11/16/russian-war-report-russian-army-recruitment-fundraising/#avdiivka.

149   Vladimir Solovyov, Telegram, July 6, 2022, https://t.me/SolovievLive/110921.

150   Solovyov, Telegram, October 13, 2023, https://t.me/SolovievLive/214951.

151   TGStat, October 31, 2023, https://tgstat.ru/en/channel/@onf_front/10003/stat; and People's Front, "82 474 962 рубля всего за 7 дней мы вместе с вами собрали на срочный сбор «Авдеевка. Всё для Победы!»" DNR News, October 20, 2023, https://dnr-news.ru/society/2023/10/20/511493.html.
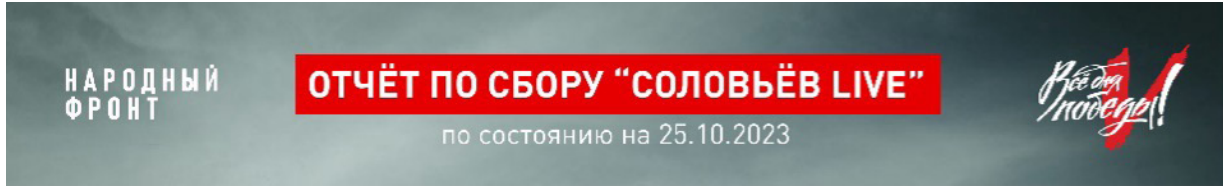
	Доставлено	Кол-во товара, шт.	Сумма, руб.
1	Autel 640T	38	22 690 600
2	Autel EVO 2	10	1 856 969
3	Autel EVO Nano Plus	1	71 500
4	Autel EVO Max 4T	5	3 600 000
5	DJI AIR 2S	75	10 216 397,12
6	DJI Avata pro view combo	5	872 000
7	DJI Matrice 300	19	33 412 680
8	DJI Matrice 30T	74	76 249 080
9	DJI Mavic 2	76	47 473 818
10	DJI Mavic 3	552	143 802 998,20
11	DJI Mavic 3T	192	103 644 558
12	DJI Mavic Air 2S Combo	10	1 090 000
13	DJI Mavic Mini 2	20	990 000
14	DJI Mavic Mini 3	303	28 875 660
15	FPV ▓▓▓▓	40	2 092 800
16	MD600 + 10x инфракрасная камера	1	1 505 885,55
17	Xiaomi Fimi X8SE 2022 V2 Combo	19	1 082 768

названия и торговые марки не указываются из соображений безопасности и из-за возможных ограничений в отношении поставщиков **итого: 479 527 713,87 руб.**

Сбор продолжается, отчёты будут размещаться по мере вручения.

Screenshot: Solovyov helped the campaign raise more than 470 million rubles. (Source: pobeda.onf.ru/archive)

exceeding the goal of 470 million rubles (about five million USD) to buy 1,440 drones, including Chinese-made DJI Mavic, FPV, Xiaomi Fimi, and Autel drones.[152]

Additionally, local initiatives also emerged on Telegram to conduct community fundraising to support specific battalions and divisions. The DFRLab observed that one initiative based out of Russia's Tatarstan region urgently raised funds to support Belgorod border police officers during a raid by the Free Russia Legion, a pro-Ukrainian armed group consisting of Russian citizens.[153]

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152   People's Front, "СБОР СОЛОВЬЕВ LIVE НА КВАДРОКОПТЕРЫ ДЛЯ РАЗВЕДЫВАТЕЛЬНЫХ ПОДРАЗДЕЛЕНИЙ," Everything for Victory, https://pobeda. onf.ru/requirements/soloviev2306.

153   Valentin Châtelet, "Russian Armed Forces Face Difficulties."

Case study: How Telegram channels recruit Russian soldiers as others dissuade them

Since February 2022, Russian MoD-affiliated security companies and state ministries have conducted recruitment campaigns via Telegram. These campaigns aim to replenish frontline forces by promoting contractual recruitment for soldiers. This included efforts to expand Wagner units prior to the June 2023 mutiny.

These campaigns have been part of Russia's broader effort to digitize MoD recruitment infrastructure, including the recruitment of contract soldiers and drone operators using its information portal Объясняем.РФ (WeExplain.rf).[154] The platform utilizes regional Telegram channels to repost its contract offers and reach audiences in Russian regions, including in local minority languages.[155] The DFRLab also identified Telegram recruitment ads encouraging men to enroll in Russia's national guard,[156] including former Wagner soldiers.[157]

Simultaneously, Telegram has increasingly served as a gateway for Russian citizens seeking to avoid conscription. One Telegram initiative known as Get Lost helps Russian men avoid the draft and emigrate from Russia. Between December 2022 and December 2023, the channel grew from around 19,000 subscribers to more than 82,000, experiencing a surge in April 2023, following the signing of a bill enabling conscription summonses to be sent electronically. At the time of writing in March 2024, the channel featured more than 92,000 subscribers.[158]

Figure 19: Subscriber growth, average post reach of the Get Lost channel on Telegram, October 2022 through December 2023
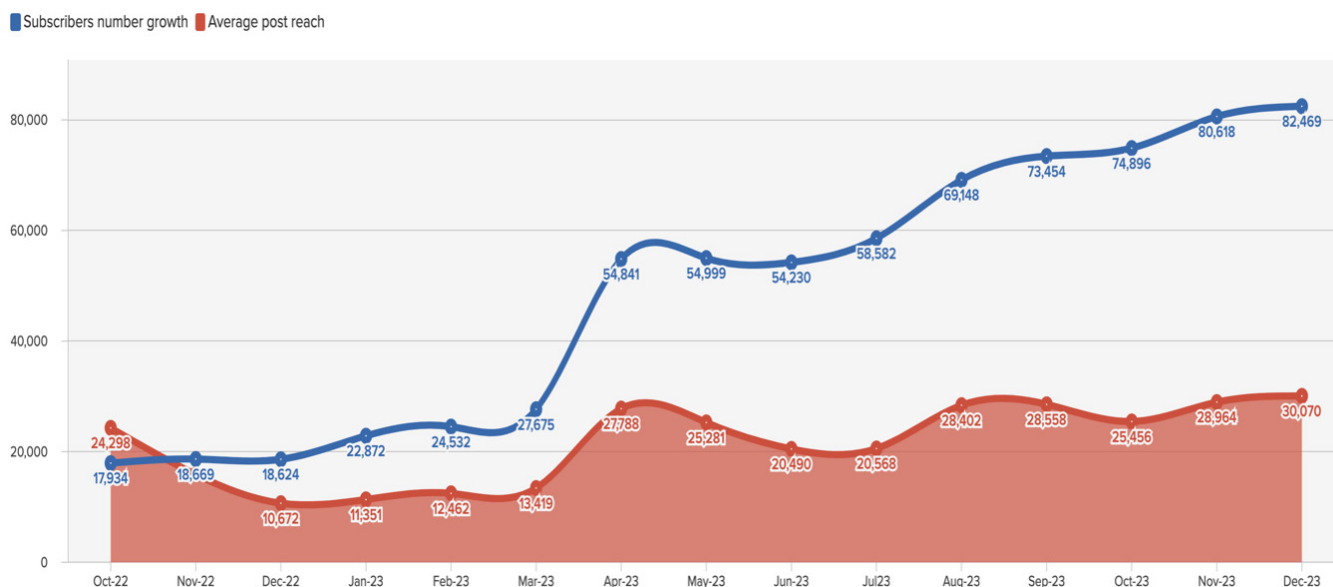
(Source: TGStat/archive)

154 Valentin Châtelet and Eto Buziashvili, "Russia Moves Conscription and Contract Soldier Recruitment Online," DFRLab, July 20, 2023, https://dfrlab.org/2023/07/20/russia-moves-conscription-and-contract-soldier-recruitment-online/.

155 Valentin Châtelet, "Advertising Campaign Recruits Contract Soldiers from across Russia to Fight in Ukraine," DFRLab, April 5, 2023, https://dfrlab.org/2023/04/05/advertising-campaign-recruits-contract-soldiers-from-across-russia-to-fight-in-ukraine/.

156 Valentin Châtelet, "Russia's Bashkir Battalions Form a New Motor Rifle Regiment as More Are Sent to Ukraine to Replenish Russian Forces," in "Russian War Report: Russia Cancels Victory Day Parades and Moves 'Immortal Regiment' Marches Online," DFRLab, April 21, 2023, https://dfrlab.org/2023/04/21/russian-war-report-russia-cancels-victory-day-parades-and-immortal-regiment-marches/#bashkir.

157 Pjotr Sauer, "How Russia Is Recruiting Wagner Fighters to Continue War in Ukraine," *Guardian*, November 9, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/09/how-russia-recruiting-wagner-fighters-continue-war-ukraine.

158 TGStat, Subscribers@iditelesom_help, https://tgstat.ru/channel/@iditelesom_help/stat/subscribers.

Some Telegram channels also track reports of Russian casualties. For example, the DFRLab analyzed reports of Russian soldiers allegedly killed in action via a channel called Don't wait for me FROM Ukraine. Out of 23,217 posts analyzed by DFRLab, we assessed that 19,377 of them reported on the death of Russian soldiers. Although we could not identify the administrators of the channel, the mere existence of such channels can be interpreted as an effort to dissuade Russian enlistment and demoralize Russian Telegram users.

Conclusion

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Telegram has become one of the most important sources of information about the war for audiences in Russia, Ukraine, and beyond. Even though Telegram had been a popular messaging app prior to February 2022, the remarkable rise of Telegram as a pivotal actor in Russia is closely linked to Russian war efforts. Following unsuccessful attempts of Russian authorities to effectively block Telegram in the country, pro-Kremlin actors in Russia started to actively embrace the messaging app to promote their narratives. The Kremlin's decision to block Western online platforms also contributed to growing utilization of the messaging app to share information, spread propaganda, and organize efforts in support of the war.

Telegram has evolved beyond a mere messaging app, serving as a primary source for news consumption for a significant portion of the Russian population. Pro-Kremlin actors have capitalized on this shift, contributing to the growth of a pro-Kremlin information ecosystem on Telegram. On top of this, pro-Kremlin communities have amassed large audiences on Telegram, reinforcing Russia's efforts to shape perceptions of millions of domestic Telegram users. Russian independent media outlets and other independent sources have also found Telegram to be a suitable environment to operate, reaching both domestic and foreign audiences.

Even though Telegram positions itself as a censorship-free platform, the available evidence demonstrates how the service is not a completely safe place for critics of the Russian government. Although Telegram says it offers a high level of anonymity to channel administrators, public reports have shown that Russian authorities can identify operators of anonymous channels and prosecute them. The Kremlin's use of surveillance systems to target administrators of anonymous Telegram channels, journalists, and dissidents has led to increased level of censorship, imprisonment, and suppression of voices critical of state policies. Nevertheless, various independent voices continue to expose Kremlin's wrongdoings on Telegram at the cost of their own personal safety.

The war in Ukraine has also sparked greater interest in Telegram as a source of eyewitness footage and reporting from the frontline. Available opinion polls show that Telegram is increasingly used by Russians as a news source. DFRLab research also revealed that Russian media outlets are increasingly relying on sourcing materials from Telegram. All of this suggests that the role of Telegram in the Russian media ecosystem will continue to grow.

The surge in the popularity of loosely moderated messaging apps like Telegram introduces a landscape fraught with both threats and opportunities, particularly during times of conflict. The threats are evident in the use of these platforms for the dissemination of propaganda and disinformation, recruitment and fundraising activities, and even the coordination of cyberattacks. The very nature of Telegram creates a natural environment for a wide range of malign activities, posing challenges to the integrity of the broader information ecosystem.

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