

KREMLIN'S PROPAGANDA IN OUR POCKETS. HOW DISINFORMATION THRIVES ON TELEGRAM

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By banning Kremlin's TV and online propaganda in the Baltics, the access to such resources has become more challenging only for those whose primary source used to be television. Now social media platforms have taken up that space, among which "Telegram" stands out because it does not share data with governments and does not moderate disinformation and lies.

In the Baltics, the most popular channels directed towards local Russian speakers are not having the big following in numbers, but that is not the point: their main role is to amplify each other's content and create the impression that many people think alike. "Telegram" played a particularly significant role during the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

MAIN PRO-RUSSIAN CHANNELS ABOUT THE BALTICS

Various activists, both well-known and new, have joined forces on "Telegram" to popularise pro-Kremlin messages. This overview focuses on the most popular/active groups reporting about the Baltics in Russian.

VOICE OF MORDOR

The largest pro-Kremlin channel, which also pays reasonable attention to the Baltic states, is "Golos Mordora" (Voice of Mordor), with around 170,000 subscribers. This channel presents itself as sharing real news, but those news pieces are emotionally and ideologically charged, clearly identifying the "good" and the "bad." An interview with one-popular singer among Russian speakers, Laima Vaikule, is used to highlight Russia's/USSR's role in improving the well-being of many people. A call from the State Language Center to refer to Kaliningrad by its historic name Karaļauči, is used on the channel to evoke memories of specific Latvian place names during the Soviet occupation, seemingly hinting at the potential repetition of history. Although information about the operators of "Golos Mordora" is minimal, the channel is widely quoted on various Russian news websites.

BALTNEWS

This "Telegram" channel frequently shares content from a website of the same name (formerly a Russian-sponsored news site, which is now blocked in Latvian territory).

“Baltnews” is also one of the “Telegram” channels that follows court cases against former journalists of Latvian Russian-language media and activists of the Latvian Russian Union, who are accused of violating EU sanctions by accepting money from the sanctioned Russian propaganda outlet “Rossiya Segodnya.” (It is referred to as the “14 Journalists Case” in Russian propaganda).

TIME, FORWARD! (KIND OF)

“Бремя, в перёт!” channel is run by Degi Karayev, an activist and regular participant in Russian-speaking protests. The channel, with 2.1 thousand subscribers, now focuses on the fate of Latvian Russian-speaking activists involved in criminal proceedings.

IMHOCLUB.LV

The operator of the banned Latvian website IMHOclub.lv, Yuri Alekseyev, manages a “Telegram” channel with the same name (the website itself is accessible with the .org domain; only the LV domain is blocked). It is presented as an independent public and political analytical resource. On their account, IMHOclub shares links to websites that cannot be reached in Latvia without using a VPN. Some of the channel’s posts match word for word with those of pro-Kremlin activist Vladimir Linderman on “Facebook”. Linderman himself has his own “Telegram” channel with nearly 1.5 thousand subscribers.

BALTIC “ANTIFASCISTS”

The so-called Baltic antifa channel, created in November 2022, has gathered nearly 9,000 followers. Its creators justify their activities by describing Baltic Russians as “completely disoriented” and encouraging as many people as possible to join, claiming that “together we will be an information force.” The channel was initially created to facilitate the coordination of “antifascists” in the Baltic region, assisting “OUR PEOPLE [emphasis retained] under the fascist occupation.”

The most active participants in the channel’s chat are mainly anonymous. This practice is encouraged, with followers being asked to buy new SIM cards if they want to join the group. This is recommended if a person wants to travel to the EU or USA, indicating that the group’s

creators are aware of the presence of security services in the chat, but at the same time exaggerating it to give the group more significance than it naturally has.

Although initially positioned as a coordination platform, the channel has become more of a chat room. It occasionally includes calls to actions related to dismantling of Soviet monuments. One of the administrators had also posted vacancies for the Russian private military company “Wagner,” and in one of the latest videos, activists encourage moving to Russia and promise to assist in enlisting in the army. The channel has also published information about Latvians fighting on the Ukrainian side, as well as collected information about “de-Russification” activists and individuals blamed for the removal of Soviet monuments.

State Security Service (VDD) has opened a criminal proceedings against the channel’s administrators describing it as a criminal organisation. In total, six individuals are involved in VDD’s case, three of whom have been detained—Tatyana Andriječa, a young activist of the Latvian Russian Union, as well as Kremlin’s sympathisers Alexander Zhgun and Stanislav Bukains, as recently reported by LTV.

One of the channel’s administrators identifies herself as Viktorija Matule, who gained some recognition with her performance at the Victory Monument on May 10, 2023, standing next to a young man waving Russia’s flag. After that she fled to Belarus and later to Russia.

SPRATS IN EXILE (AND OTHERS)

Almost all of “Telegram” channels reviewed for this publication have shared content from Alexey Stefanov’s channel. Stefanovs used to live in Riga and worked in the local Russian press, but then moved to Russia and works in the Kremlin’s propaganda media outlet “Sputnik.” His channel, with 7.6 thousand subscribers, seeks out news and views that align with the Kremlin’s narrative.

ПОЛИТNEWS

The channel “ПОЛИТNews” is run by Riga’s resident Alexey Gulenko. Little is known about a man. A person with the same name is listed on LinkedIn as the owner of a yacht and boat

supply company. He is included in Ukraine’s “Mirotvorets” list for spreading Kremlin propaganda and supporting Russian aggression in Ukraine.

UNABLE TO COMPETE

Most of the pro-Kremlin news groups on “Telegram” disseminate information in Russian. Some are also available in Latvian, but the language and style suggest that the content is either fully translated or the creator is not a native Latvian speaker. However, no local channel dedicated to the Baltics can compete with pro-Kremlin propagandists in terms of popularity.



Vladimir Solovyov - 1.33 million subscribers



Margarita Simonyan - 485,195 subscribers



Olga Skabeeva - 184,773 subscribers

PROPAGANDA HUB

While authors on other social media platforms strive to create unique content to attract their audience, pro-Kremlin “Telegram” channels do not stand out in terms of diversity. On the contrary, these groups have become similar to aggregators, compiling related content and displaying it or providing links to it. They share each other’s content, creating the impression that a particular opinion is popular because, look, it is being discussed elsewhere too.

This is evidenced by the quotability statistics of these channels. Some posts from specific channels reach an audience that exceeds the number of their subscribers. This means that channel posts are seen by those who are not subscribers to that particular channel. This practice is more commonly observed in channels that not only mechanically replicate news aligned with the general sentiment, but also promote the exchange of user opinions through emotional remarks.

Out of approximately 20 “Telegram” channels examined in more detail, the engagement level (ERR) of two channels – “Трибалтийские Вымираты” and “Антифашисты Прибалтики” – exceeds 100% in terms of reach.

BELIEFS AND BENEFITS

Mārtiņš Hiršs, a disinformation researcher and doctor of social sciences, explains that not all pro-Kremlin propaganda messages come directly from the Kremlin itself. “Yes, the Kremlin – Putin, Lavrov, and others – sets the tone or the main messages that are repeated in Russia and resonate emotionally with the audiences through Kremlin-controlled media. At the same time, the Kremlin directly controls many influencers and trolls who repeat the necessary messages on social networks.” Hiršs emphasises that pro-Kremlin messages are also disseminated by ordinary people who believe in Kremlin narratives about the world or gain some personal benefit from them.

These people can be opposition figures and media outlets in the West who want to criticise the official position. They can also be local oligarchs who have economic interests in Russia, conspiracy theorists who do not believe in the “official story” of government institutions and are willing to believe in any alternative. They are also influencers who benefit from Kremlin propaganda stories by gaining more views.

Pavel Durov, a former IT entrepreneur who left Russia, created an app that is unique in its refusal to comply with government demands to disclose private user data and moderate or block content. As a result, “Telegram” serves as both a refuge for independent media in countries where they are censored and as the main propaganda channel for “Z bloggers” or supporters of the Russian army. “Telegram” allows for the exchange of messages between individuals and the joining of interest groups (channels). More than 700 million people worldwide use “Telegram” daily, with the majority in Asia. But the app is also popular in European countries, particularly in Russia and Southern Europe. In the annual report of the Latvian State Security Service (VDD), “Telegram” appeared for the first time in 2021 when the service acknowledged the increasing significance of the app in the dissemination of Russian disinformation.

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