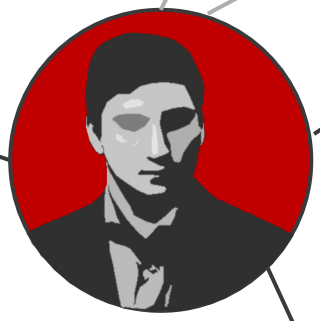
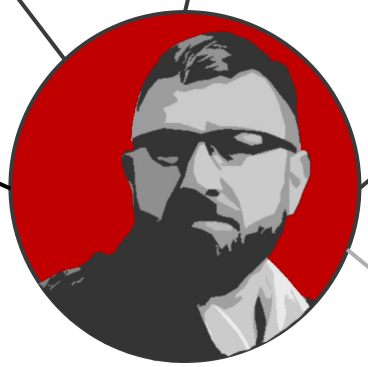


MEDIA LANDSCAPE ON THE TEMPORARY OCCUPIED TERRITORIES OF UKRAINE

May 2024



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Introduction

Russia's occupation of Donbas, Crimea, and other territories of Ukraine, which started in 2014 and expanded in 2022, has had a devastating impact on media freedoms among other areas of life. Ukraine had a vibrant and diverse media in these areas prior to 2014, especially at a local level. Russian occupation forces, both in 2014 and in 2022, were intent on quickly capturing not just land, but also the information space, understanding its importance in their attempts to manipulate and control societies.

A key part of the Russian strategy has been to extinguish the dynamism in Ukrainian local media, and to replace this with a tightly-controlled media system that is loyal to Moscow and its proxies. The occupation forces have tried to replicate the vibrancy of Ukrainian media and replace this with a distinct information ecosystem that, while appearing diverse, is largely highly centralised. This detailed analysis of pro-Russian media outlets targeting the TOTs reveals a tightly controlled network of sources that serves the interests of Moscow and the Russian occupation authorities, and which excludes any dissent or plurality of expression.

Some of these sources masquerade as local news platforms. Others include Telegram channels run by occupational officials or administrative bodies. This at times hyperlocal approach has been able to cater specifically for local audiences, employing a communication style that can appeal directly to local concerns and resonate with people. These outlets, however, operate within a multilayered ecosystem that is also intertwined with the Russian sources to promote Moscow's agenda. Crucially, the Russian federal authorities have been the driving force, funders, and implementors of this centralisation.

The approach, and operations of various sources within this ecosystem, have evolved. Some sources appear to have built significant local audiences. It is unclear as to the level of planning that Russian occupation forces had when they tried to capture segments of the Ukrainian information space. However, the divergence in approaches across the pro-Russian ecosystem suggest a level of adaptability and sophistication that means that we cannot afford complacency regarding their potential impact, or in our design of mitigations.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that the Russian authorities and their proxies have encountered brave resistance. They have seized media companies and technical equipment, and reissued local newspapers with their own content, where compliance was lacking. The fact that pro-Russian sources have struggled to recruit local staff and have had to import journalists and other media assets from Russia further testifies to the lack of overwhelming fundamental support among the local population.

Nevertheless, this report demonstrates the complexity, depth and breadth of this pro-Russian ecosystem that stretches across all the TOTs. It shows the interconnectedness of this system with the Russian information space, and details how the Kremlin carefully oversees the messaging pointed at the TOTs. It also underlines the complex work required to dismantle this system when these territories are liberated.

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Executive Summary

- The centralisation of the media landscape in the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” (“DNR”) and “Luhansk People’s Republic” (“LNR”) was conducted through the creation of two media holdings: the Republican Media Holding and Luganmedia. The two organisations coordinate the media agenda and, crucially, channel the funding from the Kremlin. In Occupied Crimea, however, given its swift annexation into Russia, the local media outlets were directly subordinated to the Kremlin.
- Media outlet employees can be broadly divided into two categories: 1) previous media experience, and 2) employees new to the industry. The latter likely secured their posts thanks to good relations with the occupation authorities that were on the lookout for employees given a massive outflow of media professionals starting from 2014.
- The ministries dealing with the information policy were formed shortly after the occupation of Crimea, LNR and DNR. While the digital ministry of occupied Kherson oblast is rather active, the information ministry of occupied Zaporizhzhia oblast seems to only exist “on paper” and does not appear to be active or particularly influential. The oversight over the information policy in TOTs is reportedly conducted by the Presidential Administration and, in particular, its first deputy chief of staff Sergei Kiriyenko.
- While the structural integrity of Prigozhin’s military and media assets fell apart following his failed coup and subsequent death, the Kremlin still likely managed to overtake and maintain at least some parts of his former media empire, including in TOTs via the work of Russian propagandist Aleksandr Malkevich.
- An overview of the main media outlets in the occupied regions of Ukraine, with a focus on both the newly occupied after February 2022 and the parts of Ukraine occupied by Russia after 2014, is a necessary condition before a detailed quantitative analysis of online digital media and propaganda channels in social networks.
- A quantitative analysis suggests that the pro-Russian Telegram channels and media outlets targeting the TOTs are highly interconnected and operate as a distinct ecosystem, intertwined with other Russian and pro-Russian media outlets and Telegram channels. Additionally, the key Telegram channels most connected to other channels are run by the local occupational officials. While Russian Telegram channels play a secondary role as a connecting element, this should not raise doubts about the pro-Russian loyalty ingrained in the content of the local channels, with references to the notorious propagandist Telegram channels and Russian media present in deeper layers of connections among the Telegram channels researched.

I. Media Landscape in TOTs Occupied Since 2014

A. Control over local media outlets

1. Centralisation under the Republican Media Holding in Donetsk oblast

The media outlets in the occupied Donbas region were centralised long before the Russian full-scale invasion in 2022.

In the so-called DNR, the Republican Media Holding *(Республиканский Медиа Холдинг, RMKh)* was created in March 2017[1] by the directive of the Council of Ministers and registered[2] in Russia a year later. The RMkh was put under the supervision of the Ministry of information. It was later registered at the same address as the latter - 1, Sovetskaya square, Donetsk city.[3] The RMKh's main goal was to centralise all the state-owned printed media in DNR and so promote a unified information agenda. Roman Besedin, a Donetsk-born individual, who was reportedly close to Denis Pushilin and had previously worked at the DNR information ministry (see below), was appointed as its director.[4]

According to Besedin, as of 2018 the RMKh was encompassing 19 newspapers, of which 15 were published at a raion-level, with a single editorial and publishing centre supervising their work. This helped deal with the staff shortage experienced by the above media outlets and thus avoid crisis at the print media market.[5] Crucially, the holding, highly likely financed by the Kremlin via the DNR information ministry, would bear all the costs related to the work of the above newspapers, which was likely the main goal of such centralisation.[6] In an interview to Oplot TV, Besedin also suggested that the holding company makes a healthy profit from advertising.[7] This has likely been done in cooperation with the 'Prodvizheniye' Agency, a state-owned advertising agency registered at the same address.[8]

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[1] Decree of the Council of Ministers of Donetsk People's Republic (10.03.2017) "On the creation of the Respublikanskiy Media Kholding state enterprise". Available at: https://gisnpa-dnr.ru/npa/0003-4-20170310/

[2] Audit-it.ru "ГУП ДНР "РМХ"" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300166963_gup-dnr-rmkh

[3] Audit-it.ru "ГУП ДНР "РМХ"" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300166963_gup-dnr-rmkh

[4] Telegram Служба безпеки України (21.09.2023). Available at: https://t.me/SBUkr/9724

[5] Vse o DNR (Всё о ДНР) (29.03.2023) "RMKh's first anniversary". Available at: https://vsednr.ru/pervyy-yubiley-rmkh/

[6] YouTube Телеканал "Оплот ТВ" (08.07.2019) "Programme "By the way": Director of the Republican Media Holding Roman Besedin". Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH_xTxXZxEc

[7] YouTube Телеканал "Оплот ТВ" (08.07.2019) "Programme "By the way": Director of the Republican Media Holding Roman Besedin". Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH_xTxXZxEc

[8] Audit-it.ru "ГУП "АГЕНСТВО "ПРОДВИЖЕНИЕ"" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300088753_gup-dnr-agentstvo-prodvizhenie

The RMKh, however, did not include broadcast media, such as Shakhtersk TV,[9] Torez TV,[10] TK TV-Sphera,[11] Radio Kometa,[12] Oplot TV,[13] Avesta,[14] TRK Union TV,[15] as those were put under direct control of the information ministry. At the same time, other TV channels and radio stations (Novorossiya TV,[16] Mariupol 24,[17] Novorossiya Rocks,[18] 6TV[19]) were centralised under the umbrella of the Perviy Respublikanskiy TV channel,[20] in turn subordinated to the information ministry.

Currently the RMKh includes 27 newspapers of the regional and raion level.[21] Some of them like Selskaya Nov (Mangush), Nashe Slovo (Volnovakha), Zarya Priazovya (Nikolske), Priazovskiy Rabochiy (Mariupol) had long been issued in Ukraine before being 'hijacked' by the Russian occupation authorities. Lyman-based Zarya newspaper was also initially under RMKh's supervision,[22] but was then likely removed from the Russian registry after the city's liberation by Ukrainian forces in autumn 2022.[23] Notably, Nashe Slovo[24] and Priazovskiy Rabochiy[25] are registered at the same address as RMKh, information ministry and the 'Prodvizheniye' Agency.

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[9] Audit-it.ru "ГУП ДНР "ШАХТЕРСК ТВ" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300092812_gup-dnr-shakhtersk-tv

[10] Audit-it.ru "ГУП ДНР "ТОРЕЗСКОЕ ТЕЛЕВИДЕНИЕ"" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300106419_gup-dnr-torezskoe-televidenie

[11] Audit-it.ru "ГУП ДНР "ТК ТВ-СФЕРА" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300089270_gup-dnr-tk-tv-sfera

[12] Audit-it.ru "ГУП ДНР "РАДИО КОМЕТА" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300159153_gup-dnr-radio-kometa

[13] Audit-it.ru "ГУП ДНР "ТРК "ОПЛОТ ТВ" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300158988_gup-dnr-trk-oplot-tv

[14] Audit-it.ru "ГУП ДНР "ТК "АВЕСТА" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300104835_gup-dnr-tk-avesta

[15] Audit-it.ru "ГУП ДНР "ТК "ЮНИОН" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300085893_gup-dnr-tk-yunion

[16] Audit-it.ru "ГП "ТРК "НОВОРОССИЯ" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300120422_gp-trk-novorossiya

[17] The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media "Мариуполь 24" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://rkn.gov.ru/mass-communications/reestr/media/p83480/?id=980591&page=83480

[18] Audit-it.ru "ГУП ДНР "ПЕРВЫЙ РЕСПУБЛИКАНСКИЙ КАНАЛ ДНР" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300146965_gup-dnr-pervyy-respublikanskiy-kanal-dnr

[19] The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media "6ТВ" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://rkn.gov.ru/mass-communications/reestr/media/?id=980671

[20] Audit-it.ru "ГУП ДНР "ПЕРВЫЙ РЕСПУБЛИКАНСКИЙ КАНАЛ ДНР" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300146965_gup-dnr-pervyy-respublikanskiy-kanal-dnr

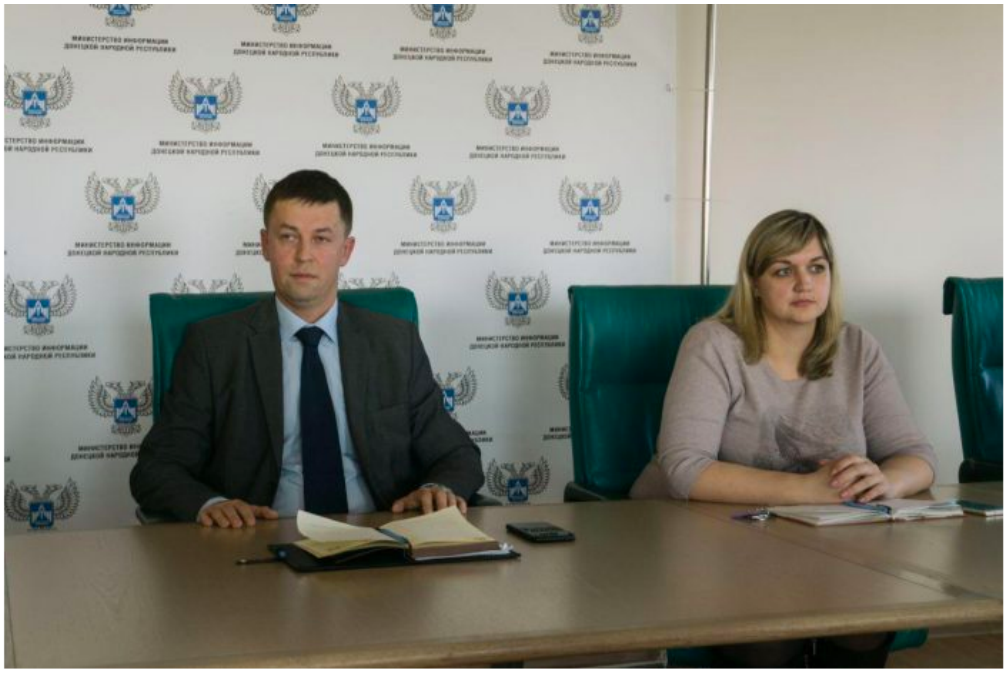
[21] Audit-it.ru "ГУП ДНР "РМХ"" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300166963_gup-dnr-rmkh

[22] Ministry of Information of DNR "ЗАРЯ" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://mininfodnr.ru/cases/zarya/

[23] Audit-it.ru "ГУП ДНР "РМХ"" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1229300166963_gup-dnr-rmkh

[24] Ministry of Information of DNR "НАШЕ СЛОВО" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://mininfodnr.ru/cases/zarya/

[25] Ministry of Information of DNR "ПРИАЗОВСКИЙ РАБОЧИЙ" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://mininfodnr.ru/cases/priazovskij-rabochij/



Roman Besedin at the final meeting with the editors of newspapers forming part of the RMKh in 2019. Source: Ministry of Information of DNR.

Since its creation, the RMKh has been actively facilitating the Kremlin's activities in the Donbas by encouraging passportisation, as well as encouraging the residents to participate in the illegal annexation referendum in September 2022 and the local elections a year later.[26] In September 2023, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) served notice of suspicion to Besedin, citing the above mentioned activities as well as his public calls for the physical extermination of the Ukrainian people.[27]

It is worth noting that Besedin, while heading the RMKh from 2018 to 2023, maintained a relatively high public profile, appearing in meetings[28] with Denis Pushilin and giving interviews[29] to local media. Yet he appears to have a controversial reputation due to his past work experience at the information ministry where he worked as deputy head of the state media department. According to an anonymous website the Donbass Watch (Дозор Донбасса),[30] Besedin, alongside other ministry employees, allegedly kept in touch with "the SBU and Praviy Sector" and regularly shared relevant information with them via email from a burner account in exchange for financial remuneration. Yet, given the unclear intentions and

[26] Vse o DNR (Всё о ДНР) (29.03.2023) "RMKh's first anniversary". Available at: https://vsednr.ru/pervyy-yubiley-rmkh/

[27] Telegram Служба безпеки України (21.09.2023). Available at: https://t.me/SBUkr/9724

[28] OK post "Телеканал "6ТВ" (28.12.2019). Available at: https://ok.ru/gorlovka6tv/topic/150863303858389

[29] YouTube Телеканал "Оплот ТВ" (08.07.2019) "Programme "By the way": Director of the Republican Media Holding Roman Besedin". Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH_xTxXZxEc

[30] Donbasswatch (19.10.2018) "Ministry of Information employees who "leak" data to the SBU". Available at: https://donbasswatch.wordpress.com/2018/10/19/%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%82%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8/

interests pursued by the Donbass Watch (the authors frequently complained[31] about the DNR government's focus on propaganda and its overall inefficiency), this information has yet to be verified. Furthermore, the authors' reference to Praviy Sector also undermines their credibility, as Praviy Sector has frequently been used in Russian propaganda narratives, and is unlikely to have been in touch with collaborators in the Donbas.

Besedin was replaced by Nikolay Cherkashin[32] in July 2023 following the RMKh's reorganization and "integration into the Russian legal system", which was stipulated by the pertinent Russian law adopted shortly after the regions' annexation in autumn 2022.[33] Before joining the RMKh, Cherkashin seemingly maintained a low public profile, with the Russian state registry records only indicating Rostov region as his place of registration, thus suggesting his Russian origin. Following his appointment, Cherkashin became more active - he appeared[34] at an all-Russian forum in September 2023 and was mentioned[35] by a DNR media outlet. Interestingly, on 21 September Cherkashin announced the creation of the RMKh "to facilitate the work of regional media",[36] a rather confusing statement given that the holding had already existed for 5 years; this was likely aimed to gain popularity and some professional bonuses.

2. Centralisation of the media space in occupied Luhansk oblast LNR

A similar media holding was created in the LNR in 2020.[37] Luganmedia (Луганьмедиа) included 14 regional media outlets and was aimed to "accumulate financial, information and editorial resources within one centre."[38] Like the RMKh, Luganmedia was created to increase management efficiency and optimise the staffing of the media in the region.[39] Luganmedia, however, also included broadcast media (6 TV channels and 2 radio stations).

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[31] Donbasswatch (19.11.2018) "The United Donbass Foundation is just another tool of government propaganda! (Documents with confirmation)". Available at: https://donbasswatch.wordpress.com/2018/11/19/fund-united-donbass/

[32] Audit-it.ru "Черкашин Н. Н." (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/fl/617100640627_cherkashin-nikolai-nikolaevich

[33] State Duma of the Russian Federation (09.11.2022) "The law on transferring legal entities of new entities into the Russian legal system was adopted". Available at: http://duma.gov.ru/news/55704/

[34] DNR News (Лента новостей ДНР) (19.09.2023) "Alexander Malkevich spoke at the session "Media Development in Russia's New Regions: Problems and Solutions". Available at: https://dnr-news.ru/society/2023/09/19/479252.html

[35] Donetsk News Agency (Донецкое Агентство Новостей) (21.09.2023) "Media holding in the DNR will expand audience reach and give impetus to creativity". Available at: https://dan-news.ru/exclusive/mediaholding-v-dnr-pozvolit-rasshirit-ohvat-auditorii-i-dast-impuls-tvorchestvu/

[36] Donetsk News Agency (Донецкое Агентство Новостей) (21.09.2023) "Media holding in the DNR will expand audience reach and give impetus to creativity". Available at: https://dan-news.ru/exclusive/mediaholding-v-dnr-pozvolit-rasshirit-ohvat-auditorii-i-dast-impuls-tvorchestvu/

[37] Rusprofile "ГУП ЛНР "Луганьмедиа" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.rusprofile.ru/id/1229400058128

[38] Lugansk independent resource (Луганский независимый ресурс) (05.01.2021) "Luganmedia media holding company established in the LNR". Available at: https://lnr.media/news/9343-v-lnr-sozdali-mediaholding-luganmedia.html

[39] Lugansk Information Centre (Луганский информационный центр) (04.01.2021) "Luganmedia media holding started its work in the Republic - Ministry of Communications and Mass Media". Available at: https://lug-info.com/news/mediakholding-luganmedia-nachal-rabotu-v-respublike-minkomsvyazi-63459

Svetlana Mamontova, former director of the local “Luhansk Life” (“Жизнь Луганска”) newspaper and deputy mayor of Oleksandrivsk (before 2014),[40] was appointed as its acting director.[41] Per various (unconfirmed) reports, Mamontova was not well trusted by the central authorities given her connection to Mykola Hrekov, former mayor of Oleksandrivsk and a member of the Ukrainian Aidar Battalion.[42] In April 2023, Mamontova was replaced by Tatyana Kutya.[43] The latter was born in Luhansk and joined the occupational authorities as director of the LNR state resources agency.[44] In 2023, while already heading the Luganmedia, Kutya participated and was subsequently “elected” at the sham elections in 2023 from the United Russia party.[45]

There are few traces of the Luganmedia activities in open sources following the announcement of its creation. The Luganmedia website and social networks are regularly updated with propaganda content that poorly aligns with the current news agenda. There is minimal user activity on these social networks, and the IP address of the site is located in Moscow.[46]
With the start of the full-scale invasion, all print media in the part of the Luhansk region that was not occupied in 2014 stopped working. At the same time, having occupied the north of Luhansk region, the Russians were in no hurry to open newspapers there. The media infrastructure, formed in occupied Luhansk oblast since 2014, began to spread to the newly occupied territory only in summer 2022. In July 2022, during the information campaign in support of Luhansk region joining the “LNR”, the propaganda newspaper “Республика” was distributed. It is issued in Luhansk and transported to the newly occupied territories.[47] The occupation authorities began publishing raion "newspapers" in August 2022, for example, “Старобельский вестник”, “Сватовский вестник”, “Меловской вестник”, which were reportedly incorporated into Luganmedia as well.[48]

On the channels of “Зеонбуд” (a private company, a monopoly provider of the nationwide network of digital terrestrial television in Ukraine),[49] the occupiers in the newly occupied

[40] Real Newspaper (Реальная газета) (20.02.2021) "Granhunters", "sorosyata", "Maidanniki": who and how forms the image of the enemy in "LNR". Available at: https://realgazeta.com.ua/kto-i-kak-formiruyet-obraz-vraga-v-lnr-20-02/
[41] Lugansk online (Луганск онлайн) (05.01.2021) “Luganmedia media holding company established in the LNR”. Available at: http://lugansk-online.su/novosti/mediaholding-luganmedia-nachal-rabotu-v-.html
[42] Real Newspaper (Реальная газета) (20.02.2021) "Granhunters", "sorosyata", "Maidanniki": who and how forms the image of the enemy in "LNR". Available at: https://realgazeta.com.ua/kto-i-kak-formiruyet-obraz-vraga-v-lnr-20-02/
[43] Rusprofile “ГУП ЛНР “Луганьмедиа” (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.rusprofile.ru/id/1229400058128
[44] Myrotvorets (Миротворець) “Kutya Tatyana Yurevna” (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/kutya-tatyana-yurevna/
[45] Lugansk Information Centre (Луганский информационный центр) (19.09.2023) “Elected deputies of the Lugansk City Council received their certificates - LNR Election Commission”. Available at: https://lug-info.com/news/izbrannye-deputaty-gorodskogo-soveta-luganska-poluchili-udostovereniya-izbirkom-lnr
[46] Luganmedia (Луганьмедиа) (retrieved on 01.02.2024). Available at: https://luganmedia.ru/
[47] Hromadske radio (Громадське Радіо) (01.05.2023) “Information vacuum in Luhansk region: occupants block the work of Ukrainian media”. Available at: https://hromadske.radio/publications/medialandshaft-luhanshchyny-stvoryvshy-informatsiynyy-vakuum-okupanty-ta-ikhni-posipaky-vychavliuiut-svobodu-slova-ta-blokuiut-robotu-ukrainskykh-zmi
[48] Lugansk Information Centre (Луганский информационный центр) (12.08.2022) “Local newspapers appeared in all regions of the Republic - Ministry of Communications of the LNR”. Available at: https://lug-info.com/news/mestnye-gazety-poyavilis-vo-vseh-regionah-respubliki-minkomsvyazi-lnr
[49] Zeonbud (Зеонбуд) (retrieved on 01.02.2024). Available at: http://www.zeonbud.com.ua/index.html

territories broadcast the following Russian channels: Первый канал/Матч, НТВ, Пятый канал, россия-К, Карусель, ОТР, ТВЦ, россия-1, россия 24, Вести ФМ, Радио Маяк, Радио России; Спас, СТС, Домашний, ТВ-3, Пятница, Звезда, Мир, ТНТ, Муз-ТВ; МХ-3: Моя планета, Наука, Техно 24, Москва 24, Музыка первого, Луганск 24.

Луганск 24 is the main local TV channel, part of the State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company LNR[50] - a state unitary enterprise of the Ministry of Communications of the LNR.[51] While Luganmedia is focused mostly on coordinating regional media, the State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company was created back in 2014-2015 for centralised broadcasting of radio and television in Luhansk itself on the basis of the former Ukrainian facilities. The structure was assembled on the basis of four Ukrainian pre-war organisations “ЛОТ”, “ЛКТ”, “Ирта” and terrestrial cable TV after taking control of them in 2014. As a result of this succession, in addition to TV and radio broadcasting, the State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company of the LNR provides advertising services on radio and television, connections to cable and digital TV and Internet provisioning.[52]

3. Centralisation of the media space in Crimea

The main distinguishing feature that defines the Crimean media landscape from that of the so-called DNR and LNR is that no local media holdings were established to monitor and oversee the activities of media personnel on the peninsula. This distinction can be attributed to the swift annexation of Crimea, eliminating the necessity to create an intermediary organisation for content control and fund allocation.

Following the Russian occupation of Crimea, an initiative to restrain freedom of speech logically ensued. Russian authorities mandated the re-registration of all media entities on the peninsula in compliance with Russian law.[53] The re-registration process ended by March 31st, 2015.[54] Television channels were required to obtain broadcasting licences, radio stations needed new frequencies, and newspapers had to undergo registration as Russian print media.[55] Allegedly, the whole process was utilised by authorities to selectively filter out media entities that could not be easily controlled. Moreover, the Russian Presidential Administration maintained full control over media budgets and editorial content.[56]

As a result, nearly all independent media outlets in Crimea were either shut down or condemned to takeover by Russian entities. For example, Chernomorska TV faced complete

[50] GTRK LNR (ГТРК ЛНР) (retrieved on 01.02.2024). Available at: https://gtrklnr.ru/

[51] Rusprofile “ГСУП ГТРК ЛНР” (retrieved on 01.02.2024). Available at: https://www.rusprofile.ru/id/1229400050362

[52] Lugansk Information Centre (Луганский информационный центр) (09.07.2016)“Anastasia Shurkayeva, Director General of the LNR GTRK: “We will push the limits” Available at: https://lug-info.com/comments/gendirektor-gtrk-lnr-anastasiya-shurkaeva-my-razdvinem-ramki-428

[53] Army Inform (18.08.2020) "Information occupation of Crimea" Available at:: https://armyinform.com.ua/2020/08/18/informaczijna-okupacziya-krymu/

[54] The Crimean Human Rights Group (retrieved on 19.01.2024) “Krym: Svoboda slova v okkupatsii”. Available at: https://crimeahrg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/krimbookru.pdf

[55] The Crimean Human Rights Group (retrieved on 19.01.2024) “Krym: Svoboda slova v okkupatsii”. Available at: https://crimeahrg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/krimbookru.pdf

[56] NATO Centre of Excellence (retrieved on 19.01.2024) “Analysis of Russia's information campaign against Ukraine” Available at: https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russian_information_campaign_public_12012016fin.pdf

dissolution, with its facilities seized and the frequencies used for broadcasting the Russian state TV channel Rossiya 24.[57] [58] Later, the first Crimean Tatar television channel ATR ceased to broadcast due to the refusal by Roskomnadzor to register and broadcast on the territory of Crimea.[59]

The Crimean media landscape was therefore heavily dominated by the Russian federal channels[60] and local channels, fully controlled by the Kremlin. The most popular federal channels (at the early stage of the annexation) include Channel One, Russia1, NTV, TNT, Channel 5, CTC, and RenTV.[61] All of them are controlled by the Kremlin and owned by the Kremlin-linked media groups (Gazprom Media, National Media Group, CTC Media, etc.).[62]

The local TV channels include Pervyy Krymskiy, Krym 24, Kerch 24, Yalta 24, Vostochny Krym 24, Severny Krym 24, Legendarny 24, Simferopol 24.[63] All of them are part of the 'Krym' TV and radio company (TRK Krym). The latter also incorporates the following radio stations: More, Radio Krym, Krym Tochka, and the Krym 24 information portal.[64] The company was founded and is controlled by the Ministry of internal policy, information and communication of Crimea.[65]

From the start of the Russian occupation the TRK Krym was run by Ekaterina Kozyr.[66] At that time, she claimed that "she treats Ukraine as a relative who is seriously ill."[67] Now the company is run by Vadim Pervykh.[68] According to the Security Service of Ukraine, under his leadership, the media entity became the Kremlin's main mouthpieces in the region and "media tribune" for local gauleiters like Aksenov and Saldo.[69]

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[57] The Crimean Human Rights Group (2019) "Krym: Svoboda slova v okkupatsii". Available at: https://crimeahrg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/krimbookru.pdf

[58] Krym.Realii (Крым. Реалии) (22.07.2019) "On the other side of the screen: the owners of Crimean television" Available at: https://ru.krymr.com/a/27874074.html

[59] Krym.Realii (Крым. Реалии) (22.07.2019) "On the other side of the screen: the owners of Crimean television" Available at: https://ru.krymr.com/a/27874074.html

[60] Channels in Crimea: description, types, features (retrieved on 19.01.2024) Available at: Крым: перечень доступных каналов телевидения (silverkomp.ru)

[61] NATO Centre of Excellence (retrieved on 19.01.2024) "Analysis of Russia's information campaign against Ukraine" Available at: https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russian_information_campaign_public_12012016fin.pdf

[62]NATO Centre of Excellence (retrieved on 19.01.2024) "Analysis of Russia's information campaign against Ukraine" Available at: https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russian_information_campaign_public_12012016fin.pdf

[63] Audit-it.ru "TRK Krym" (retrieved on 7.02.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1149102032507_ano-trk-krym

[64] Audit-it.ru "TRK Krym" (retrieved on 7.02.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1149102032507_ano-trk-krym

[65] List-org.com, "TRK Krym" (retrieved on 7.02.2024). Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20191007025034/http://www.list-org.com/company/8196065

[66] War and sanctions. (undated) "KOZIR Kateryna Oleksandrivna". Available at: https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/sanction-person/21873

[67] MediaProfi (МедиаПрофи) (28.08.2015) "Ekaterina Kozyr: We treat Ukrainians like relatives who resiously ill" Avaialable at: https://mediaprofi.org/community/interview/item/2751-ekaterina_kozyr_trk_crimea_interview

[68] Krym 24 (Крым 24) (retrieved on 7.02.2024). "Vadim Pervykh, General Director of the Krym TV and Radio Company, elected Chairman of the Crimean branch of the Union of Journalists of Russia" Available at: https://crimea24tv.ru/content/gendirektor-trk-krim-vadim-pervikh-i/

[69] Telegram post Security Service of Ukraine (retrieved on 7.02.2024) Available at: https://t.me/SBUkr/9730

4. Composition of local personnel

Interesting trends can be observed regarding the personnel composition of the media outlets in the occupied Donbas.
The local employees can be divided into 2 sub-categories: 1) the ones that previously worked in media and 2) the ones unrelated to the industry. The latter likely secured their posts thanks to good relations with the occupation authorities that were on the lookout for employees given a massive outflow of media professionals starting from 2014. For instance, Roman Besedin himself admitted that many RMKh's employees had not had prior professional experience in media.[70]

At the same time, the local people who had previously worked in media either remained in their posts or saw significant career opportunities, being promoted to editorial positions (like Tatyana Mikhaylova, editor-in-chief of Oplot TV, who worked in a wedding magazine before 2014)[71] or managerial/government positions (like Svetlana Mamontova mentioned above or Maya Pirogova, who had been a little-known regional journalist before and joined the information ministry[72] and the delegation of the so-called DNR at the Minsk talks afterward).[73]

Due to a shortage of media specialists, the occupation authorities also launched training and recruiting campaigns in local universities. Before Alexander Malkevich launched his "media schools" across the occupied regions to train young, frequently underage students to become reporters,[74] local media outlets would attempt to attract young cadres - philology, journalism, or international relations students, primarily from Donetsk National University, as stated by Besedin.[75] In Lugansk, the M. L. Matusovsky Lugansk State Academy of Culture and Arts became a similar source of personnel.[76] At the end of 2023, the "Unified Student Media Centre" was established in Luhansk. The centre, located in the Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University,[77] was aimed to unite the propaganda media of Luhansk universities and is subordinate to the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation.

The number of media professionals of Russian origin was quite limited over the first few years of occupation but increased later, particularly after the annexation of four Ukrainian regions in

[70] YouTube Телеканал "Оплот ТВ" (08.07.2019) "Programme "By the way": Director of the Republican Media Holding Roman Besedin". Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH_xTxXZxEc
[71] IRK.ru (03.03.2023) "No rose-coloured glasses": how Donbass media work under SVO conditions". Available at: https://www.irk.ru/news/articles/20230303/journalists/
[72] Donbass-war.net (September 2017) "Maya Yurievna Pirogova - interview for Bulgarian media". Available at: https://www.donbass-war.net/ru/mat/pirogova.htm
[73] Donetsk News Agency (Донецкое Агентство Новостей) (20.01.2021) "The former deputy head of the Ukrainian Emergencies Ministry became a public representative of the DNR at the Minsk talks". Available at: https://dan-news.ru/politics/byvshij-zamglavy-mchs-ukrainy-stal-predstavitelem-obshhestvennosti-dnr-na-minskix-peregovorax/
[74] BBC NEWS Russian service (03.06.2023) "Malkevich's media projects: Prigozhin's associate hired teenagers for propaganda in Kherson". Available at: https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-65790415
[75] Vse o DNR (Всё о ДНР) (29.03.2023) "RMKh's first anniversary". Available at: https://vsednr.ru/pervyy-yubiley-rmkh/
[76] Troian (1 May 2023) Hromadske radio. Available at: https://hromadske.radio/publications/medialandshaft-luhanshchyny-stvoryvshy-informatsiynyy-vakuum-okupanty-ta-ikhni-posipaky-vychavliuiut-svobodu-slova-ta-blokuiut-robotu-ukrainskykh-zmi
[77] Melnik (23 November 2023) Detector media. Available at: https://detector.media/infospace/article/219691/2023-11-23-okupanty-vidkryly-v-lugansku-iedynyy-studentskyy-mediatsentr/

September 2022. This was likely due to the Kremlin's weakened trust toward the local personnel and its desire to tighten the grip on the occupied territories. For instance, Denis Kurashov, the acting minister of communication of the DNR, is a Russian citizen who previously worked in an IT centre and then the energy, industry and communication ministry in Stavropol.[78] It is worth noting that Kurashov was likely appointed by the then-chairman of the DNR government, Russian citizen Vitaliy Hotsenko,[79] with whom he had collaborated in Stavropol.[80] Hotsenko held the position of the head of the energy, industry and communication ministry in Stavropol from 2013 to 2022.[81] Interestingly enough, Hotsenko was then replaced by yet another Russian citizen Yevgeny Solntsev who was appointed as head of the DNR government in March 2023.[82]

The Donetsk News Agency, the official media source used by the occupation authorities established in 2014, alongside similar media outlets in other occupied regions (Luhansk Information Centre, Kherson News Agency, and Zaporizhzhia News Agency), was incorporated by Regnum LLC,[83] as part of the so-called "unification" of the information space on the occupied territories initiated by the Kremlin following their annexation in September 2022.[84] Regnum LLC was founded and is controlled by Sergey Rudnov, who reportedly has close connections with the Kremlin and Putin himself[85] (particularly through his father, Oleg Rudnov, who worked[86] with Putin in the late 90s and owned the Baltic Media Group),[87] Tamuyraz Bolloyev, Russian businessman and president of the Baltika Group (Rudnov is a co-founder and shareholder of his NSK LLC (Новая Сервисная Компания),[88] and the Kovalchuk brothers.[89] Sergey Pelyanitsyn, who headed the Perviy Respublikanskiy TV

[78] Proekt (Проект) "Курашов Денис Сергеевич" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://war-proekt.media/chinovniki-iz-rossii-v-ukraine/person/kurashov-denis-sergeevich/

[79] Donetsk News Agency (Донецкое Агентство Новостей) (08.06.2022) "MPs of the DNR supported the candidacy of Vitaly Khotsenko for the post of Chairman of the Government". Available at: https://dan-news.ru/politics/deputaty-dnr-podderzhali-kandidaturu-vitalija-hocenko-na-dolzhnost-predsedatelja/

[80] Proekt (Проект) "Курашов Денис Сергеевич" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://war-proekt.media/chinovniki-iz-rossii-v-ukraine/person/kurashov-denis-sergeevich/

[81] Neftegaz.ru "Хоценко Виталий Павлович" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://neftegaz.ru/persons/333605-khotsenko-vitaliy/

[82] TASS (30.03.2023) "What is known about the head of the DNR government, Yevgeny Solntsev". Available at: https://tass.ru/info/17408973

[83] Audit-it.ru "ООО "РЕГНУМ" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/1027710012879_ooo-regnum

[84] Vedomosti (Ведомости) (09.07.2023) "The work of the mainstream media in the DNR, LNR, Kherson and Zaporizhzhya regions will be systematised". Available at: https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2023/06/09/979430-rabota-osnovnih-smi-dnr-lnr-hersonskoi-i-zaporozhskoi-oblastei-budet-sistematizirovana

[85] The New Times (29.01.2018) "Four "nominees" from the president's entourage: what is known about their assets, common projects with Putin's oligarchs, and the risks of inclusion in the sanctions list". Available at: https://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/143767/

[86] Kommersant (Коммерсантъ) (03.07.2007) "Руднов Олег Константинович". Available at: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/779591

[87] TV Rain (24.08.2017) "Putin's friends turned out to be the owners of the villa from "Sherlock Holmes". Available at: https://tvrain.tv/teleshow/notes/druzja_putina_okazalis_vladeltsami_villy_nemetskogo_shpiona_iz_sherloka_holmsa-442825/

[88] Audit-it.ru "Руднов Сергей Олегович" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://www.audit-it.ru/contragent/fl/780245503097_rudnov-sergei-olegovich

[89] TV Rain (24.08.2017) "Putin's friends turned out to be the owners of the villa from "Sherlock Holmes". Available at:

Channel from 2020 to 2024 is a Russian journalist from Ural,[90] who moved to Donetsk city in 2016 to work at the Ministry of information of the so-called DNR.[91]

B. Case study: Mariupol 24

1. Background

Per various reports, a Mariupol-based TV channel was conceived shortly after the city's occupation, with the local pro-Russian media 'experts', including Andrey Kior, tasked to lay the groundwork for its creation in May 2022. Kior, a local journalist and former president of the MTV channel in Mariupol, sourced the necessary equipment, set up a studio in his summer house, and came up with the channel's name "Novyi Mariupol" ("Новый Мариуполь").[92] Yet very soon Kior and other local media 'experts' were reportedly replaced by individuals from Donetsk and Saint Petersburg.[93]

On 4 August, Sergey Pelyanitsyn, the head of the Perviy Respublikanskyi TV Channel, and Aleksandr Malkevich, the director of the Saint Petersburg TV channel (see Section V below), signed a cooperation agreement, which led to the creation of the "Mariupol 24" channel as a branch of the Perviy Respublikanskyi TV Channel, which, in turn, is controlled by the Ministry of information of the so-called DNR.[94] Andrey Kior was subsequently sidelined and appointed as the head of the press office of the Mariupol occupation administration.[95] Official broadcasting for Mariupol 24 commenced a few months later, in early November 2022.[96]

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https://tvrain.tv/teleshow/notes/druzja_putina_okazalis_vladeltsami_villy_nemetskogo_shpiona_iz_sherloka_holmsa-442825/

[90] Ukraina.ru (Украина.ру) (27.01.2023) "Sergey Pelyanitsyn: Journalists grow up fast in Donbas". Available at: https://ukraina.ru/20230127/1043005043.html

[91] Sverdlovsk Creative Union of Journalists (Свердловский творческий союз журналистов) (01.02.2023) ""Wherever you go, he's been there before you". Available at: https://www.stsjural.ru/kuda-vy-ne-pridete-do-vas-on-byl-uje.html

[92] 0629.com.ua (06.09.2022) "The occupiers have launched a new TV channel in Mariupol. What is known about it and who are the traitors who will work there - PHOTOS, VIDEO". Available at: https://www.0629.com.ua/news/3457144/v-mariupoli-okupanti-zapustili-novij-telekanal-so-pro-nogo-vidomo-i-hto-ti-zradniki-so-budut-tam-pracuvati-foto-video?fbclid=IwAR3FMfE9u_Arbt_3xKVd6913ZPUaRBXsyRiFIm3JsRcyKmKB1wpgWjZ_IrM

[93] 0629.com.ua (06.09.2022) "The occupiers have launched a new TV channel in Mariupol. What is known about it and who are the traitors who will work there - PHOTOS, VIDEO". Available at: https://www.0629.com.ua/news/3457144/v-mariupoli-okupanti-zapustili-novij-telekanal-so-pro-nogo-vidomo-i-hto-ti-zradniki-so-budut-tam-pracuvati-foto-video?fbclid=IwAR3FMfE9u_Arbt_3xKVd6913ZPUaRBXsyRiFIm3JsRcyKmKB1wpgWjZ_IrM

[94] 0629.com.ua (06.09.2022) "The occupiers have launched a new TV channel in Mariupol. What is known about it and who are the traitors who will work there - PHOTOS, VIDEO". Available at: https://www.0629.com.ua/news/3457144/v-mariupoli-okupanti-zapustili-novij-telekanal-so-pro-nogo-vidomo-i-hto-ti-zradniki-so-budut-tam-pracuvati-foto-video?fbclid=IwAR3FMfE9u_Arbt_3xKVd6913ZPUaRBXsyRiFIm3JsRcyKmKB1wpgWjZ_IrM

[95] 0629.com.ua (09.06.2022) "Who influences the minds of Mariupol residents and shapes their consciousness. Mariupol's journalistic collaborators". Available at: https://www.0629.com.ua/news/3404358/hto-vplivae-na-mizki-mariupolciv-ta-formue-svidomist-kolaboranti-zurnalisti-mariupola

[96] Telepedia (Телепедия) "Mariupol 24" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://telepedia.fandom.com/ru/wiki/%D0%9C%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%83%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D1%8C_24

It is worth noting that a similar pattern could be observed in other occupied territories - Malkevich and his team took over the media space in occupied Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions and created the ZaTV (ЗаТВ) and Tavriya TV (Таврия ТВ) channels, respectively, in contrast to the local channels previously used by the newly installed occupation authorities.[97]

2. Funding, personnel and training

Within a limited timeframe, Malkevich and his team renovated a studio and recruited the staff. Although Malkevich himself would consistently claim his efforts to be voluntary and deny any official involvement in the channel's creation, reports suggest that he relied on the funds from the local administration, the New Media Development Fund, which he established in 2017, and the Saint Petersburg TV channel.[98]

Facing a shortage of qualified local media specialists willing to collaborate with the occupation administration, Malkevich offered generous financial remuneration to the local people with no prior experience in media and sought to recruit journalists from Russia. According to the RSF (Reporters Sans Frontiers),[99] a St. Petersburg-based recruiter made a job offer "on behalf of Aleksandr Malkevich" and "under the auspices of the presidential apparatus and Prigozhin people" to a Russian journalist, encouraging him to determine his own salary and bring along his colleagues who would receive a monthly salary of at least RUB 200,000 (EUR 2,300) plus living expenses. At the same time, beginners were offered RUB 150,000 (EUR 1,700) monthly for an intern position. While it is unclear whether this offer applied specifically to Mariupol 24 or other TV channels such as ZaTV (ЗаТВ) and Tavriya TV (Таврия ТВ), created by the Malkevich network simultaneously, the figures mentioned above serve as a reasonable estimate of the remuneration, which was highly likely relatively high across all the newly established channels.

The channel's team currently primarily consists of local individuals, either from the city itself or from the broader occupied Donetsk region. The general producer, Aleksandr Bernatovich, previously worked[100] at the Ministry of information of the so-called DNR and headed[101] one of the departments of the Perviy Respublikanskyi TV channel. Viktoriya Tereschenko, the channel's director, had limited media experience but reportedly secured the position through her friend and business partner Petr Ivanov, a notorious Mariupol businessman.[102] The channel's hosts and correspondents are predominantly young women, either university students or recent graduates with limited work experience. For instance, Ksenia

[97] Reporters Sans Frontiers (21.04.2023) "The Malkevich Propaganda Machine: The Wagner-Allied Network". Available at: https://rsf.org/en/investigation-mysterious-alexander-malkevich-kremlin-propagandist-ukraine
[98] Reporters Sans Frontiers (21.04.2023) "The Malkevich Propaganda Machine: The Wagner-Allied Network". Available at: https://rsf.org/en/investigation-mysterious-alexander-malkevich-kremlin-propagandist-ukraine
[99] Reporters Sans Frontiers (21.04.2023) "The Malkevich Propaganda Machine: The Wagner-Allied Network". Available at: https://rsf.org/en/investigation-mysterious-alexander-malkevich-kremlin-propagandist-ukraine
[100] Municipal formation of Gorlovka city district (31.08.2018) "Film by journalist Alexander Bernatovich of the Ministry of Information of the DNR "Gorlovka - Territory of Feats". Available at: https://admin-gorlovka.ru/film-zhurnalista-ministerstva-informatsii-dnr-aleksandra-bernatovicha-gorlovka-territoriya-podviga/
[101] Detector Media (27.09.2023) "Media collaborators in Donetsk region: who, how and why collaborated with the enemy". Available at: https://ms.detector.media/media-i-vlada/post/33057/2023-09-27-mediyni-kolaboranty-donechchyny-khto-yak-i-chomu-spivpratsyuvav-iz-vorogom/
[102] 0629.com.ua (22.11.2023) "Petrukha's henchwoman to head Mariupol 24 TV channel - PHOTO". Available at: https://www.0629.com.ua/ru/news/3693877/prispesnica-petruhi-vozglavila-telekanal-mariupol-24-foto

Misyurevich,[103] Tatyana Ozerova[104] and Sofia Teterina[105] are still students of the so-called "Mariupol State University," established by the occupation administration, while Irina Yefremova[106] graduated relatively recently from the Dnipro State University. Notably, Misyurevich received training in Saint Petersburg, funded by the New Media Development Fund and the Saint Petersburg TV channel.[107] Two female hosts with distinct backgrounds are Nataliya Mnatsakanian, a Russian citizen who worked for Mariupol mass media outlets (MTV and Donbass) before 2022,[108] and Anzhelika Novak, who moved to Russia in 2012 and returned to Mariupol afterward to work for Mariupol 24.[109] The channel appears to be actively seeking more young journalists through its cooperation agreement with the journalism department of the "Mariupol State University."[110]

The technical and managerial section of the team primarily comprises individuals with previous work experience at the national and local TV channels. For instance, the editor Aleksandr Buzuluk,[111] technical director Artur Volf[112] and reporter Aleksandr Kapustian, previously worked for the MTV channel,[113] while Artem Drobot, the channel's camera director, seems to have had a successful career on national TV, working for STB and shooting films.[114]

3. Content analysis

While Mariupol 24 actively promotes all the Russian propaganda narratives, it is primarily focused on the local and regional agenda.

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[103] ZOV Mariupol (Лента новостей Мариуполя) (25.11.2022) "Aleksandr Malkevich: I told you about Ksenia Misyurevich, a star of Mariupol 24 TV channel, a student of the journalism faculty of Mariupol State University". Available at: https://mariupol-news.ru/society/2022/11/25/24979.html

[104] Detector Media (27.09.2023) "Media collaborators in Donetsk region: who, how and why collaborated with the enemy". Available at: https://ms.detector.media/media-i-vlada/post/33057/2023-09-27-mediyni-kolaboranty-donechchyny-khto-yak-i-chomu-spivpratsyuvav-iz-vorogom/

[105] 0629.com.ua (07.11.2023) "Former MSU student became a propagandist of the occupation TV channel "Mariupol 24" - PHOTO". Available at: https://www.0629.com.ua/ru/news/3686696/byvsaa-studentka-mgu-stala-propagandistkoj-okkupacionnogo-telekanala-mariupol-24-foto

[106] Evocation.info "Irina Yefremova" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://evocation.info/efremova-irina/

[107] Telegram post Media Малькевич (25.11.2022). Available at: https://t.me/alexandr_malkevich/11202

[108] Zradomir Mariupol "Mnatsakanian Nataliya" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://zradomir.com.ua/offenders/mnatsakanian-natalia

[109] Zradomir Mariupol "Novak Anzhelika" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://zradomir.com.ua/offenders/novak-anzhelika

[110] Telegram post Media Малькевич (05.09.2022). Available at: https://t.me/alexandr_malkevich/9718

[111] Evocation.info "Aleksandr Buzuluk" (retrieved on 19.01.2024). Available at: https://evocation.info/buzuluk-aleksandr/

[112] Detector Media (27.09.2023) "Media collaborators in Donetsk region: who, how and why collaborated with the enemy". Available at: https://ms.detector.media/media-i-vlada/post/33057/2023-09-27-mediyni-kolaboranty-donechchyny-khto-yak-i-chomu-spivpratsyuvav-iz-vorogom/
Myrotvorets (09.10.2022) "Volf Artur Evaldovich". Available at: https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/volf-artur-evaldovich/

[113] 0629.com.ua (06.09.2022) "The occupiers have launched a new TV channel in Mariupol. What is known about it and who are the traitors who will work there - PHOTOS, VIDEO". Available at: https://www.0629.com.ua/news/3457144/v-mariupoli-okupanti-zapustili-novij-telekanal-so-pro-nogo-vidomo-i-hto-ti-zradniki-so-budut-tam-pracuvati-foto-video?fbclid=IwAR3FMfE9u_Arbt_3xKVd6913ZPUaRBXsyRiFIm3JsRcyKmKB1wpgWjZ_IrM

[114] 0629.com.ua (25.09.2023) "Betrayed. Another famous journalist-operator in Mariupol became a collaborator - PHOTO, VIDEO". Available at: https://www.0629.com.ua/ru/news/3665563/taki-predal-ese-odin-izvestnyj-zurnalist-operator-v-mariupole-stal-kollaborantom-foto-video

For regional news, the channel largely relies on Oplot TV and Perviy Respublikanskiy TV channel.[115] At the same time, the local agenda appears to be aimed at promoting a positive image of the occupation authorities and the Kremlin by highlighting their achievements and humanitarian efforts in the city. For instance, a brief overview of the channel's daily newscast from 15 to 18 January shows that the reconstruction efforts by Saint Petersburg and Moscow companies and humanitarian aid provided to the locals appear to be the most discussed local news, followed by communal (water supply, repairs) and education issues (achievements of Mariupol pupils and contribution to the promotion of the Russian language).[116] There are also some special programmes on the history of the city, with particular focus on the "Great Patriotic War" events and particularly the city's liberation from the Nazis and the feats of "courageous ancestors".[117] These are likely intended to "show the local population how big and great their country is", as explained by Malkevich himself in December 2022.[118]

C. Case study: Oleg Kryuchkov's role in Crimea

Russian occupation authorities were quick to deploy human and technical expertise from Oleg Kryuchkov, a citizen of Ukraine, currently serving as the spokesperson for the Russian occupation authority in Crimea and as an advisor to Aksyonov. He has publicly acknowledged and endorsed actions threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of Ukraine. In his statements, he affirmed the russification of Ukrainian schools in the occupied regions and expressed intentions of Russia to annex the territories in the south of Ukraine.[119]

After the occupation of Crimea, Oleg Kryuchkov transitioned to becoming a correspondent for NTV and was later appointed as the General Producer of the television and radio company Krym. Prior to the full-scale invasion, he assisted the occupiers in establishing an information centre within the seized Ukrainian state-owned TRK Krym television company.[120] Before the occupation of Crimea, he predominantly expressed pro-Russian views, despite

[115] Detector Media (27.09.2023) "Media collaborators in Donetsk region: who, how and why collaborated with the enemy". Available at: https://ms.detector.media/media-i-vlada/post/33057/2023-09-27-mediyni-kolaboranty-donechchyny-khto-yak-i-chomu-spivpratsyuvav-iz-vorogom/

[116] RUTUBE МАРИУПОЛЬ 24 (17.01.2024) "THEME OF THE DAY: AMI in Mariupol is being restored by specialists from the Moscow Region." Available at: https://rutube.ru/video/f7e018fedaa1f12558b20278b2b8b73f/
RUTUBE МАРИУПОЛЬ 24 (16.01.2024) "THEME OF THE DAY: A single day of collecting signatures in support of Putin was held in Mariupol." Available at: https://rutube.ru/video/8fb4aa0cee083e4d070bec7ffcde987b/
RUTUBE МАРИУПОЛЬ 24 (16.01.2024) "THEME OF THE DAY: Tap water in Mariupol meets sanitary norms." Available at: https://rutube.ru/video/af9cd7ec9f4d75396fad6e43e7fb9930/
RUTUBE МАРИУПОЛЬ 24 (18.01.2024) ""Narodnaya Druzhina" provided assistance to a Mariupol family." Available at: https://rutube.ru/video/8ce1a5ffa75c58b8562da62da932a030/

[117] RUTUBE МАРИУПОЛЬ 24 (18.01.2024) "The city where I live. Liberation of Mariupol." Available at: https://rutube.ru/video/e1e632786f4c3c46e609497300ff02ca/
RUTUBE МАРИУПОЛЬ 24 (16.01.2024) "The city where I live. Monument "T-34 TANK". Available at: https://rutube.ru/video/6eb8c2cc70c0683cd8c6ddb48ad0540e/

[118] RAPSI (27.12.2022) "Malkevich: this year required society to define itself and showed who is worth what". Available at: https://www.rapsinews.ru/human_rights_protection_news/20221227/308583949.html

[119] War and sanctions. "Oleg Antalyevich KRYUCHKOV" (retrieved on 19.01.2024) Available at: https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/ru/sanction-person/21732/

[120] Center for Investigative Journalism (retrieved on 19.01.2024) "Crimean prosecutor's office opens proceedings against war propagandists from Krym 24 TV channel" Available at: https://investigator.org.ua/ua/news-2/249547/

simultaneously working at the Ukrainian channel, namely the Novyi channel.[121] In December 2022, the Prosecutor's Office of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol launched a criminal investigation into the employees of the Russian TV channel Krym 24, including Kryuchkov.[122]

Following the full-scale invasion, the Russian occupation authorities expeditiously mobilised both human and technical assets originating from Crimea, thereby extending their influence to other temporarily occupied territories. Oleg Kryuchkov, who self-identifies as an expert in 'information policy', implied that the Russians strategically applied his insights gained from Crimea (including, among other things, assuming control over mobile phone networks) to assert dominance over the media landscape in other TOTs.[123] Given his experience in running seized media entities in Crimea, Kryuchkov may have also contributed to the development of media outlets in these territories by providing pertinent guidance and promoting a specific information agenda.

[121] Rukh Chesno (Рух Чесно) (retrieved on 19.01.2024) Oleg Kryuchkov Available at: https://www.chesno.org/traitor/1474/

[122] Krym.Realii (Крым.Реалии) (retrieved on 19.01.2024) "The Prosecutor's Office of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea has initiated criminal proceedings against employees of the Russian TV channel 'Krym 24', including Oleg Kryuchkov" Available at: https://ua.krymr.com/a/news-krym-prokuratura-ark-kryminalne-provadzhennia-krym-24-oleh-kriuchkov/32173032.html

[123] RIA Novosti (РИА Новости) (retrieved on 19.01.2024) "Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions switched to Russian telecommunications and the Internet". Available at: https://ria.ru/20220531/internet-1791912881.html

II. Comparing and Contrasting Digital and Information Agencies in TOTs

A. Ministries in Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, LNR, DNR, and Crimea and their relationship with each other and with Russia

Information and digital agencies were formed by the Russian occupation authorities in Crimea and occupied part of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (which became unrecognised proxy-"states" DNR and LNR) back in 2014.

The Crimea Ministry of Internal Policy, Information, and Communication was established in June 2014.[124] Albert Kurshutov currently serves as acting minister.[125] Before the Russian occupation of Crimea, Kurshutov had a restaurant and hotel business on the peninsula. After 2014 he went to politics and became a deputy of Yalta city council (2014-2022), where in 2016 he was elected head of the United Russia party faction.[126] Following the announcement of his new post, experts were very sceptical of his figure, according to the Crimea Realities report pointing to the failure of the Russian propaganda management on the peninsula.[127]

On 11 January 2015, the Ministry of Information was formed in DNR by the separation from the Ministry of Information and Communications, which existed since 2014. The law on mass media was adopted by the People's Council of DNR on 29 June 2015.[128]

The acting head of the Ministry of Information of the so-called DNR is Natalia Pershina.[129] According to the Mirotvorets database, as of April 2016, Pershina was a deputy head of the Department of State Information Policy of the Ministry of Information.[130] She has been working as the head of the information and analysis department of the Ministry of Information since May 2020, having a staff of 4 people.[131] On 5 July 2023, she was appointed the acting head of the Ministry, replacing Igor Antipov.[132] On 14 November 2023, the Security Service of

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[124] Republic of Crimea (Республика Крым) (retrieved on 01.02.2024) "Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Crimea dated June 27, 2014 No. 154 "On approval of the Regulations on the Ministry of Internal Policy, Information and Communications of the Republic of Crimea". Available at: https://minfo.rk.gov.ru/documents/5d2f7c55-207a-4ba9-9bf9-02077d5c6ad0

[125] Republic of Crimea. (Республика Крым) (retrieved on 01.02.2024) Kurshutov Albert Abdurashitovich Available at: https://minfo.rk.gov.ru/heads/870324db-039b-43c0-8d72-ff2c81a8445b

[126] Yalta news (Ялтинские вести) (retrieved on 01.02.2024) Kurshutov Albert Abdurashitovich Available at: https://yalta-official.ru/deputaty/deputaty-yaltinskogo-gorodskogo-soveta-respubliki-krym-vtorogo-sozyva/422/

[127] Crimea Realities (Крымские реалии) (28.06.2023) "They feel that Russia is already on the brink." Who was appointed "in charge" of Russian propaganda in Crimea?" Available at: https://ru.krymr.com/a/albert-kurshutov-krym-ministerstvo-vnutrenney-politiki-informatssii-svyazi-naznacheniye/32480755.html

[128] Ministry of information of DNR (Министерство информации ДНР) (retrieved on 01.02.2024) "Law of the Donetsk people's Republic "On mass media" Available at: https://mininfodnr.ru/zakon-donetskoj-narodnoj-respubliki-o-sredstvah-massovoj-informatsii/

[129] Donetsk People's Republic (Донецкая народная республика) (retrieved on 01.02.2024) "Ministry of Information" Available at: https://днронлайн.рф/ministerstvo-informatsii/

[130] Myrotvorets (Миротворец) (07.04.2016) Pershina (Seraya) Natalya Dmitrievna Available at: https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/pershina-seraya-natalya-dmitrievna/

[131] Inforpost (Інфорпост) (12.07.2023). Inforpost. "The sister of a famous Ukrainian composer became the "Minister of the DPR" Available at: https://inforpost.com/news/2023-07-12-83317

[132] Donetsk People's Republic (Донецкая народная республика) (retrieved on 01.02.2024) "There have been personnel changes in the Ministry of Information" Available at: https://днронлайн.рф/v-mininfo-proizoshli-kadrovye-perestanovki/

Ukraine served a notice of suspicion to Natalia Pershina on encroachment on the territorial integrity of Ukraine, as well as on voluntarily holding a position in illegal authorities.[133] Pershina plays the role of a coordinator for spreading Russian propaganda in DNR through the Kremlin's information policy and Moscow's agenda.[134] Pershina's eldest son Oleksandr also works in the Ministry as an IT specialist thanks to his mother.[135]

In the so-called LNR, the Ministry of Digital Development, communication, and Mass Communications was established. The current digital minister of LNR is Andrey Yershov.[136] Yershov's main professional background is in TV management in Russia. He was Commercial Director of the Siberia macroregion of Mobile TeleSystems (MTS) in 2007-2009.[137]

On 6 October, 2022 the Ministry of Digital Development and Mass Communications of Kherson oblast was formed by the Russian occupation forces.[138] Its channel is active, having 1,019 subscribers.[139] Nikita Borodin, who had served as deputy minister of communications of the so-called DNR in 2015-2019, was appointed as its acting minister.[140]

The Ministry of Digital Development, Mass Communications and Communications of Zaporizhzhia oblast was formed in 2022.[141] However, there is a lack of information about the activities of the Ministry in the public domain - even its head remains unknown. According to the report published by ZOV media and outlining the ministry's work in 2023, 716 social facilities were connected to the Internet, 320 new mobile communication base stations were built and put into operation.[142]

The occupied part of Zaporizhzhia oblast (as well as other TOTs) was connected to Russian state services (госуслуги).[143] Russian citizens could vote there (sham Russian presidential

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[133] Telegram post Press service of the State Security Service of Ukraine in Donetsk and Luhansk regions (14.11.2023) Available at: https://t.me/GUSSUDonetskLugansk/3255

[134] Institute of Mass Information (Інститут масової інформації) "SBU notified about the suspicion of acting "Minister of information of the DNR" Natalia Pershina" (14.11.2023) Available at: https://imi.org.ua/news/sbu-povidomyla-pro-pidozru-v-o-ministra-informatsiyi-dnr-natali-pershynij-i56938

[135] Fascist from Donetsk (Фашик Донецкий) "Trojan mare. About the life of moronic spies" (25.01.2019) Available at: https://fashikdonetsk.com/troyanskaya-kobyla-o-zhizni-shpionov-debilov/

[136] Ministry of digital development, communications and mass communications Luhansk People's Republic "Ershov Andrey Nikolaevich" (retrieved on 01.02.2024) Available at: https://digital.lpr-reg.ru/2011-ershov-andrey-nikolaevich.html

[137] Lugansk Information Center (Луганск Информ Центр) Top manager of TransTeleCom headed the Ministry of Digital Development of the LPR (21.08.2023) Available at: https://lug-info.com/news/direktor-makroregiona-sibir-kompanii-trans-tele-kom-vozglavil-mincifry-ln

[138] D-Russia (Д-Россия) "The Ministry of Digital Development of the Kherson region was established" (07.10.2022) Available at: https://d-russia.ru/uchrezhdeno-ministerstvo-cifrovogo-razvitija-hersonskoj-oblasti.html

[139] Telegram channel Ministry of Digital Development of the Kherson region (retrieved on 01.02.2024) Available at: https://t.me/Digital_ks

[140] Bridge (Мост) "The occupiers in the Kherson region made a person from the gang of a notorious thief from the"DPR " the "digital minister" (06.10.2022). Available at: https://most.ks.ua/news/url/okupanti-na-hersonschini-zrobili-tsifrovim-ministrom-ljudinu-z-bandi-skandalno-vidomogo-kradija-z-dnr/

[141] Official website of the Zaporizhzhia region government (Официальный сайт правительства Запорожской области) "Ministries" (retrieved on 01.02.2024) Available at: https://zo.gov.ru/externals/show_group/ministerstva

[142] ZOV Melitopol (ZOV Мелитополь) "Results of the year of the Ministry of Digital Development, Mass Communications and Communications of the Zaporozhye region - the President's team provides the region with stable communications and the Internet" (01.01.2024) Available at: https://melitopol-news.ru/society/2024/01/01/64665.html

[143] Public services (Госуслуги) (retrieved on 01.02.2024) Available at: https://www.gosuslugi.ru

elections will be held on 15-17 March 2024), get the documents on bank credits, and even sign the contract to join the army. A separate resource (Новороссия госуслуги) was devoted to the digital services for the people in the occupied territories of Ukraine (without Crimea).[144]

According to the Institute for the Study of War, the current curator of information policy in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine from Russian high officials is Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Sergey Kirienko.[145] He was a former PM of the Russian Federation (1998), and head of the Rosatom agency (2005-2016), later on, he was involved in youth policy, especially in propaganda via paramilitary organisations (YouthArmy).

After the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Sergey Kirienko became the key figure in the Kremlin's control of DNR, LNR, and newly occupied territories of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. This became possible because Denis Kozak, the previous Kremlin curator of the Donbas, fell into disfavour in April 2022.[146]

The investigation of Meduza showed the connection of Kirienko with the head of DNR Denis Pushilin and LNR Leonid Pasechnik. Kirienko was the first Kremlin curator to visit the occupied Donbas.[147] On 5 May 2022, he opened an office of #мывместе (We are together) movement in Donetsk.[148]

The digital policies in TOT are controlled by the Ministry of Digital Development, communications, and Mass Communications of the Russian Federation along with general coordination by Sergey Kirienko.[149] On 22 August 2023, Kirienko inspected the quality of communications in TOT, chairing the meeting of the occupation governments of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts in Melitopol.[150]

B. Digital development and information policy strategies and collaborations

The key elements of Russian digital policies in TOT of Ukraine were as follows: taking control of TV, radio, and Internet networks with further integration into Russian digital space; blocking

[144] Public services "I am in Russia" (Государственные сервисы «Я в России») (retrieved on 01.02.2024) Available at: https://novorossiya.gosuslugi.ru/

[145] Institute for the Study of War. Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 31, 2023 (31.12.2023). Available at: https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-31-2023

[146] Radio Svoboda (Радио Свобода) "Ruler of Omsk. Moscow has carried out a managerial coup in "LDNR" (14.06.2022) Available at: https://www.svoboda.org/a/pravitelj-omskiy-moskva-sovershila-upravlencheskiy-perevorot-v-ldnr-/31896283.html

[147] Meduza (Медуза) "Viceroy of Donbass "Medusa" tells how Sergey Kirienko got into Vladimir Putin's "inner circle" during the war, and is now preparing the annexation of Donbass and the "image of the future Russia" (08.06.2022). Available at: https://meduza.io/feature/2022/06/08/vitse-korol-donbassa

[148]Global Investigative Journalism Network (Центр журналистских исследований) "Under the hood. What's wrong with Russian "volunteers" in Donbass" (31.08.2022). Available at: https://investigator.org.ua/investigations/246307/

[149] Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Communications of the Russian Federation (Министерство цифрового развития, связи и массовых коммуникаций Российской Федерации) "General information" (retrieved on 01.02.2024) Available at: https://digital.gov.ru/ru/ministry/common/

[150] Federal Press (Федерал Пресс) "Kirienko checked the quality of communication in new regions of the Russian Federation" (22.08.2023). Available at: https://fedpress.ru/news/77/society/3262455

access to Ukrainian media and websites of Ukraine's state institutions; blocking of social media with more restrictions on Internet access in TOT.[151]

Digital ministers played the key role in blocking social media and messengers (Viber, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram). The decision was made in Moscow but the statement was provided by local collaborators. DNR and LNR followed the decision of Moscow about blocking Facebook and Instagram in May 2022.[152] On June 3, 2022, Minister of Communications and Mass Communications of LNR Oleg Fetisov stated that "Viber messenger was blocked as part of enemy's (Ukraine's) military infrastructure".[153]

In November 2023 the Deputy Minister of Internal Policy, Information and Communications of the Republic of Crimea Yulia Kilik told the Crimea 24 TV channel that she recommends Crimeans to "switch to other messengers, the same Telegram or Vkontakte, because their servers are located in Russia and this process is controlled."[154]

At the end of May 2022, the process of using a Russian phone code along with sim cards of Russian mobile operators started in the occupied parts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts.[155] Technically it was done through their transfer from the occupied Crimea. The Digital Ministry of Russia in December 2023 revealed its ambitious plans to provide DNR, LNR, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts with LTE mobile phone communications.[156] Currently 4 operators are working in TOT (Luhakom - LNR,[157] Republican operator of communications Phoenix - DNR,[158] Ktelecom, +7telecom and Miranda media - Crimea).[159]

The centralization of Internet access was completed by Moscow in the occupied territories of Ukraine in 2023. The only major Internet provider is Miranda-Media company group, which started its work in Crimea and then continued its work in other TOT.[160] According to the press release, Miranda-Media provides people in DNR, LNR, Crimea, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson oblasts with mobile communications, broadband Internet, and other digital services.[161]

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[151] Centre for national resilience (Центр національного спротиву) "The situation in the TOT of Ukraine in 2023" (08.01.2024) Available at: https://sprotyv.mod.gov.ua/en/the-situation-in-the-tot-of-ukraine-in-2023/

[152] AIN (AIH) "Self-proclaimed DPR and LPR block Facebook and Instagram" (12.05.2022) Available at: https://ain.ua/ru/2022/05/12/na-okupovanomu-donbassi-zablokuvaly-facebook-ta-instagram/

[153] Telegram channel Government of LNR (Правительство Луганской народной республики) (03.06.2022). Available at: https://t.me/government_lnr/103

[154] Crimea 24 (Крым 24) "Deputy Minister of Internal Policy, Information and Communications of the Republic of Crimea Kilik believes that the same situation as with Viber can happen with other messengers" (18.11.2023) Available at: https://crimea24tv.ru/content/zamministra-vnutrenney-politiki-inf/

[155] New Gazette (Новая газета) "Advisor to the head of Crimea reported that the Kherson and Zaporozhye regions of Ukraine are switching to the Russian telephone code +7" (27.05.2022). Available at: https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2022/05/27/sovetnik-glavy-kryma-soobshchil-chto-khersonskaia-i-zaporozhskaia-oblasti-perekhodiat-na-telefonnyi-kod-rossii-7-news

[156] Vedomosti (Ведомости) "The media learned about the plans of the Ministry of Digital Development to launch LTE in new regions" (11.12.2023). Available at: https://www.vedomosti.ru/technology/news/2023/12/11/1010337-kommersant-uznal-planah-mintsifri

[157] Lugacom (Лугаком) (retrieved on 01.02.2024) Available at: https://lugacom.com

[158] Donetsk People's Republic (Донецкая Народная Республика) (retrieved on 01.02.2024) Available at: https://днронлайн.рф/tag/gup-dnr-respublikanskij-operator-svyazi/

[159] Win mobile (Вин мобайл) (retrieved on 01.02.2024) Available at: https://www.mobile-win.ru

[160] Miranda-media (Миранда-медиа) (retrieved on 01.02.2024) Available at: https://www.miranda-media.ru

[161] D-Russia (Д-Россия) (23.01.2024). Available at: https://d-russia.ru/miranda-media-soobshhila-o-rasshirenii-dejatelnosti-na-vse-novye-regiony-rossii.html

MirTelecom,[162] a part of the Miranda-Media company group, was laying new fibre-optic communication lines and modernization of mobile and fixed-line networks in the occupied parts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts.[163]

[162] Mir-Telecom (Мир-Телеком) (retrieved on 01.02.2024) Available at: https://mir-telecom.ru
[163] Kherson Tsargrad TV (27.09.2023). Available at: https://herson.tsargrad.tv/news/mirtelekom-uluchshil-pokrytie-v-hersonskoj-oblasti_875917

III. Influence of Prigozhin's Media Empire

A. Overview of Prigozhin's media network

Russian businessman, former criminal, and, for a long time, one of the closest Putin cronies, Yevgenii Prigozhin, played a key role in the aggression against Ukraine since 2014. Members of his mercenary "Wagner" group already took part in fighting in the battle for Luhansk airport in 2014, and in 2023, Prigozhin's private army of mercenaries and recruited convicts played a key role in the long and bloody battle for Bakhmut. But apart from the military force, Prigozhin created another tool for the promotion of the Kremlin's interests: his media empire, which included famous "troll factories", a number of media outlets, and a network of Telegram channels. After Prigozhin's failed coup and subsequent death, the structural integrity of both his military and media assets fell apart, but the Kremlin likely managed to overtake and maintain at least some chunks of his former media empire.

1. "Troll factory" and Prigozhin's media holding

The creation of Prigozhin's organised media network began in 2009 with the foundation of the Internet Research Agency (Agentstvo internet-issledovaniy).[164] This name was a cover for an organisation that maintained a network of "bots" who were leaving thousands of comments daily on social media, promoting their bosses' agenda. The bots were primarily working for Russian audiences, with the main goal of criticising Russian opposition (Alexey Navalny and others), promoting Russian authorities, and defaming the USA and EU.[165] The "Trolls from Olgino" (Olgino is a district of Saint-Petersburg, where their office is situated) became known globally after 2016, when they were actively interfering in the US presidential elections.[166] The "trolls" also actively participated in the propaganda campaign justifying Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2014.[167]

While "bots" and "trolls" were working secretly and information about them came mainly from journalist investigations, Prigozhin started to create his own public media outlets as early as 2014. The biggest such media outlet, Federal News Agency (Federalnoie Agentstvo Novostei, RIA FAN), was founded in May 2014.[168] Later, the local Saint-Petersburg media Nevskiie Novosti was created, alongside other outlets, such as Politika Segodnia, Narodnyie Novosti, and others, all in all - 16 outlets, according to the investigation by RBC journalists.[169] Initially, those media representatives denied their connection to the "Trolls factory" and Prigozhin, despite some of them having the same address as the "factory".[170] In 2019, however, the RIA

[164] Telegram РИА ФАН (30.06.2023). Available at: https://t.me/riafan/139454
[165] Novaya Gazeta (Новая газета) (09.09.2013) "Where trolls live. How Internet provocateurs work in St. Petersburg and who runs them". Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20150202092234/http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/59903.html
[166] ICA (01.06.2017) "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections". Available at: https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf
[167] Ibid.
[168] RBC (РБК) (24.03.2017) "RBC Investigation: How a "media factory" grew out of a "troll factory". Available at: https://www.rbc.ru/magazine/2017/04/58d106b09a794710fa8934ac
[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid.

FAN and ten other media outlets officially created the “Patriot” media holding, with Prigozhin as its head.[171]

Prigozhin’s media outlets inside Russia were aimed at the critics of the Russian opposition, pro-Kremlin propaganda and were also used as a tool in internal rivalries. Particularly, since 2021, they heavily criticised Aleksander Beglov, the governor of Saint-Petersburg, with whom Prigozhin had a conflict over business interests in the city.[172] Media networks were also used to promote Prigozhin and Wagner's activities abroad, in Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic, etc.[173] After Prigozhin and his organisations started their international activities, they also attempted to create a media for the USA audience, “USA Really”, led by Aleksandr Malkevich (see Part III.B). A lot of attention was also devoted to the war in Ukraine, where Prigozhin’s media had a number of so-called war correspondents. There were at least two outlets specifically devoted to Ukraine: Novostnoie Agentstvo Kharkova (not active since March 2022)[174] and KievSMI (not active since 2016).[175]

After Prigozhin’s failed coup, his official media empire disintegrated. Almost all media outlets were closed; some remained in the form of small Telegram channels. Journalists and media managers started searching for jobs in other Russian media, some of them joined Saint-Petersburg outlets, where their former colleagues were already employed.[176] Traces of “bots” and “trolls” are harder to investigate because, in 2023, Prigozhin‘s bots were already just a fraction of other similar organisations, managed and owned by other actors. There is also some information that Prigozhin had lost control over at least part of his bot network even before the coup.[177]

2. Wagner-related Telegram channels

Unlike traditional media, part of Prigozhin’s media empire, which showed much more resilience, was its network of Telegram channels. Most of them were directly related to the Wagner group, and before 2022, as well as RIA FAN, were devoted to the mercenaries' activities in Syria and on the African continent. The oldest and one of the most popular Telegram channels was GREY ZONE (formerly known as REVERSE SIDE OF THE MEDAL).[178] The community was formed initially on Instagram, but in 2019, their page was blocked, and they moved to Telegram. As of 2024, the channel has more than half a million subscribers. Other popular Wagner-related Telegram channels are Orkestr Vagnera (almost

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[171] Meduza (Медуза) (04.10.2019) “Businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin has become head of the Patriot media group. It includes media outlets from the "media factory", which he denied any connection with”. Available at: https://meduza.io/news/2019/10/04/biznesmen-evgeniy-prigozhin-vozglavil-mediagruppu-patriot-v-nee-voshli-smi-iz-fabriki-media-svyaz-s-kotorymi-on-otritsal

[172] Current Time (Настоящее время) (28.01.2022) “Snow and rubbish collapse and "criminal business". Who is behind the information attack on the Governor of St. Petersburg?” . Available at: https://www.currenttime.tv/a/snezhno-musornyy-kollaps-i-kriminalnyy-biznes-v-peterburge/31674655.html

[173] Proekt (Проект) (13.03.2019) “The chef and the cook. Part One. An investigation into how Yevgeny Prigozhin led the Russian offensive in Africa”. Available at: https://www.proekt.media/investigation/prigozhin-afrika/

[174] VK ХАРЬКОВ - Новостное Агентство. Available at: https://vk.com/harkovnews

[175] VK Киев СМИ. Available at: https://vk.com/kievsmi

[176] Paper (Бумага) (05.07.2023) ”How did the media work in the "troll factory" and what happened there during the uprising? Read the stories of employees who were released from their non-disclosure bonds”. Available at: https://paperpaper.ru/kak-rabotali-smi-fabriki-trollej-i-ch/

[177] Ibid.

[178] Telegram GREY ZONE. Available at: https://t.me/grey_zone

700,000 subscribers),[179] Razgruzka Vagnera (~266,000 subscribers),[180] and Kepka Prigozhina (almost 400,000 subscribers).[181] The latter was working as Prigozhin's personal "voice", publishing his responses to questions from various media, and after the beginning of the full-scale invasion and intensification of Prigozhin's public activity, his statements in recorded audio pieces.

After February 2022, those channels shifted to the war in Ukraine, publishing war footage and related news, which often came much faster than in official outlets. Those Telegram channels also had the freedom to openly criticise the Russian military command, something that other Russian media could not do. Because of that and also due to the generally growing popularity of Wagner's group, their audience grew significantly. During Prigozhin's coup, the Wagner related Telegram channels mostly openly supported the coup. After the coup's failure and Prigozhin's death, most of the channels, including the most popular ones, remained active, the frequency of posting and content diversity dropped significantly. Razgruzka Vagnera and Kepka Prigozhina channels are currently working mostly as memorials. The former posts photos of Wagner insignias in different places (occupied territories of Ukraine, Russia, Syria, African countries), the latter is posting mostly Prigozhin's quotations. GREY ZONE and Orkestr Vangera continue to post war footage from Ukraine, news about Russian activities in Africa, and generally are sources for researching the fate of former Wagner members.

B. Malkevich's role in media operations

A former employee of Prigozhin's network, media manager Aleksandr Malkevich (see Part III.B) is one of the key figures of Russian propaganda on the occupied Ukrainian territories. Since 2022, he has been actively working on establishing links between local collaborationists and Russian media, human and financial resources, creating a network of media on the occupied territories. More disturbingly, he actively recruits and trains Ukrainian local youth to participate in his media projects.

1. Malkevich's work before the full-scale invasion

Malkevich started his journalistic career in Saint Petersburg, where he developed connections with local authorities. In 2002, he became the vice head of the PR Committee of the city administration, and in 2004 – a city deputy.[182] After that, Malkevich was working in different Russian regions, creating and leading local media. In 2017, he was elected as a member of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation. Malkevich started working for Prigozhin in 2018 when he led the newly created media outlet USA Really. As a journalist, he visited the US, where he was questioned by the FBI.[183] The same year, the US introduced personal sanctions against him for meddling with American elections.[184]

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[179] Telegram Оркестр Вагнера | Wagner. Available at: https://t.me/orchestra_w
[180] Telegram Разгрузка Вагнера. Available at: https://t.me/razgruzka_vagnera
[181] Telegram Кепка Пригожина. Available at: https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat
[182] Reporters Sans Frontiers (21.04.2023) "The Malkevich Propaganda Machine: The Wagner-Allied Network". Available at: https://rsf.org/en/investigation-mysterious-alexander-malkevich-kremlin-propagandist-ukraine
[183] Current Time (Настоящее время) (16.11.2018) "Who is USA Really editor-in-chief Aleksandr Malkevich and why he was detained in the US". Available at: https://www.currenttime.tv/a/malkevich-usa-russia/29603961.html
[184] Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) Sanctions List Search. Available at: https://sanctionssearch.ofac.treas.gov/Details.aspx?id=26235

In 2019, Malkevich became the head of another Prigozhin-affiliated organisation, the Foundation for National Values Protection (Fond Zashity Natsionalnykh Tsennostei, FZNT).[185] The FZNT worked as a think tank specialising in international affairs. One of its main activities was the "unmasking" of the alleged violations of freedom of speech in Western countries, simultaneously with the promotion of "digital sovereignty" and government control over media in Russia.[186] Another sphere of FZNT activities was analytical consulting for the Wagner group and its clients in African and Asian countries. Member of FZNT (and its head after Malkevich) Maksim Shugalei was detained in Lybia for a year and a half. Shugalei later openly admitted working for Prigozhin.[187] According to journalist investigations, Malkevich and Shugalei were, among other things, responsible for helping African Prigozhin's clients organise elections.[188]

At the beginning of 2021, Aleksandr Malkevich was appointed as the head of the municipal TV channel "Saint Petersburg". After the appointment, Malkevich claimed that it was not connected with Prigozhin's influence and even that he never met Prigozhin himself.[189] Nevertheless, journalists and political observers suspected that the appointment of Malkevich as the head of the municipal TV channel was Prigozhin's attempt to gain more power amidst the beginning of the conflict between Prigozhin himself and Saint Petersburg governor Aleksander Beglov.[190] Later, Malkevich used the conflict as proof that he was not connected to Prigozhin while working at the "Saint Petersburg" TV channel, but his appointment, in fact, happened before the conflict went sharp and public.[191]

2. "Media-volunteering" and the creation of TV channels on the occupied territories

In June 2022, Aleksandr Malkevich ventured into Ukraine with the task of organising local propaganda media on the occupied territories. In three months, with his active participation, 3 TV channels were created: Tavriia TV in Kherson (moved to Henichesk after the liberation), Za!TV in Melitopol (here a new media holding ZaMedia was created, including a TV channel and a radio station), and Mariupol 24 (see Part III above).[192] It is worth noting that new Malkevich projects replaced previous attempts to organise new media by local occupational administrations. The new TV channels were organised very quickly thanks to the significant resources allocated by the Kremlin (see Part III.B) and the capture of the existing Ukrainian media infrastructure. In Kherson, occupants robbed the Suspilne studios.[193] In Melitopol, they used the "MTV+" TV channel, owned by Yevhen Balytskyi, a collaborator who became the

[185] Facebook Фонд защиты национальных ценностей. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/nationalvalue/
[186] Radio Sputnik (Радио Sputnik) (29.10.2020) "Malkevich: corporations have prepared a "digital concentration camp" for us". Available at: https://radiosputnik.ru/20201029/tsenzura-1582094820.html
[187] Telegram Максим Шугалей (08.09.2023). Available at: https://t.me/max_shugaley/793
[188] RTVI (08.09.2023) "Prigozhin's associate Sugaley admitted the involvement of "internal forces" in his death". Available at: https://rtvi.com/news/soratnik-prigozhina-shugalej-dopustil-prichastnost-vnutrennih-sil-k-ego-gibeli/
[189] Kommersant (Коммерсантъ) (25.12.2020) "St. Petersburg TV channel switches to new management". Available at: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4628234
[190] Ibid.
[191] Reporters Sans Frontiers (21.04.2023) "The Malkevich Propaganda Machine: The Wagner-Allied Network". Available at: https://rsf.org/en/investigation-mysterious-alexander-malkevich-kremlin-propagandist-ukraine
[192] BBC NEWS Russian service (03.06.2023) "Malkevich's media projects: Prigozhin's associate hired teenagers for propaganda in Kherson". Available at: https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-65790415
[193] Reporters Sans Frontiers (21.04.2023) "The Malkevich Propaganda Machine: The Wagner-Allied Network". Available at: https://rsf.org/en/investigation-mysterious-alexander-malkevich-kremlin-propagandist-ukraine

head of local occupational administration.[194] In Mariupol, occupants used infrastructure, equipment,[195] and, partially, the staff[196] from 3 Ukrainian local TV channels that remained in the city.

As mentioned in Part III.B above, Malkevich himself denies his role as an official curator of the new media on occupied territories and calls his activities "media-volunteering", claiming that he is just "helping the locals".[197] This statement does not align well with the fact that the "locals" were already creating their media when Malkevich came and replaced them with his projects. Also, according to his Telegram channel, since 2022, Malkevich has spent most of his time in the occupied territories, despite still being an official head of the "Saint Petersburg" TV channel until September 2023.[198]

Malkevich extensively used his contacts in Russia to find staff for new media on occupied territories. Particularly, the ZaMedia media holding was led by Vadim Kucher, a journalist and local politician from Saint Petersburg.[199] Kucher is also a member of Battle Brotherhood, the organisation that unites Russian veterans,[200] and, according to the RSF (Reporters Sans Frontiers), is a recruitment ground for the Wagner group.[201] Another member of the Brotherhood, Serafim Ivanov, was appointed as a director of the communications department of Tavriia TV.[202] A number of other Russian journalists from Saint Petersburg or acquainted with Malkevich via his previous projects also participated in the creation and development of new media on occupied territories.[203]

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[194] Center of Journalistic Investigations (Центр журналістських розслідувань) (25.08.2022) "ZaTV, radio, referendum". Who creates propaganda in the occupied Zaporizhzhia region". Available at: https://investigator.org.ua/ua/publication/246059/

[195] Verstka (Верстка) (26.04.2023) "To make the audience believe: everything will happen, but not immediately". Available at: https://verstka.media/kak-rossiya-postroila-novoe-televidenie-dlia-novih-regionov-pri-pomoschi-podrostkov-i-sotrudnikov-prigozhina

[196] 0629.com.ua (06.09.2022) "The occupiers have launched a new TV channel in Mariupol. What is known about it and who are the traitors who will work there - PHOTOS, VIDEO". Available at: https://www.0629.com.ua/news/3457144/v-mariupoli-okupanti-zapustili-novij-telekanal-so-pro-nogo-vidomo-i-hto-ti-zradniki-so-budut-tam-pracuvati-foto-video?fbclid=IwAR3FMfE9u_Arbt_3xKVd6913ZPUaRBXsyRiFIm3JsRcyKmKB1wpgWjZ_IrM

[197] Reporters Sans Frontiers (21.04.2023) "The Malkevich Propaganda Machine: The Wagner-Allied Network". Available at: https://rsf.org/en/investigation-mysterious-alexander-malkevich-kremlin-propagandist-ukraine

[198] Telegram Media Малькевич RU. Available at: https://t.me/alexandr_malkevich

[199] MK in Petersburg (МК в Питере) (10.11.2022) "We were blown up for the truth: Vadim Kucher, deputy of the Okkervil Municipal Council, on the front line of the fight against fascism". Available at: https://spb.mk.ru/social/2022/11/10/nas-vzorvali-za-pravdu-deputat-municipalnogo-soveta-mo-okkervil-vadim-kucher-na-peredovoy-borby-s-fashizmom.html

[200] Battle Brotherhood (Боевое братство) (24.11.2022) "Interview with Vadim Kucher". Available at: https://bbratstvo.com/2022/11/24/intervyu-s-chlenom-regionalnoy-organizacii-vadimom-kucherom-kotoryy-s-iyulya-2022-goda-ispolnyaet-svoy-grazhdanskiy-dolg-vozglavlyaya-v-melitopole-zaporozhskoy-oblasti-mediakholding-zamedia

[201] Reporters Sans Frontiers (21.04.2023) "The Malkevich Propaganda Machine: The Wagner-Allied Network". Available at: https://rsf.org/en/investigation-mysterious-alexander-malkevich-kremlin-propagandist-ukraine

[202] Ibid.

[203] MK in Petersburg (МК в Питере) (10.11.2022) "We were blown up for the truth: Vadim Kucher, deputy of the Okkervil Municipal Council, on the front line of the fight against fascism". Available at: https://spb.mk.ru/social/2022/11/10/nas-vzorvali-za-pravdu-deputat-municipalnogo-soveta-mo-okkervil-vadim-kucher-na-peredovoy-borby-s-fashizmom.html

Despite Malkevich's best efforts to recruit Russian media professionals, it seems that only a relatively small number of them are willing to work in Ukraine. Occupants managed to recruit some of the local collaborators, who used to work on Ukrainian channels, but most of the journalists left or refused to collaborate. Thus, the new media met the problem of a significant shortage of personnel. Apparently, Malkevich decided to solve this problem by recruiting local youth without any prior experience, as young as 15 years old.[204] On Za!TV channel, he employed 17-year-old Myroslava Butenko,[205] on Mariupol 24 - a freshman student at local university Sophia Teterina (see Part III.B above). In Kherson, Vlada Luhovskaia became an employee of Tavriia TV when she was not even 16, was injured in 2022 during the retreat from the city, and later received an official award from the hands of Malkevich.[206] At the same event, Malkevich also rewarded two 15-year-old members of the newly created Kherson department of the Russian youth paramilitary organisation Yunarmiia, who also engaged in the operation of local media created by occupants.[207] The Yunarmiia department in Kherson is also led by the abovementioned Serafim Ivanov.[208]

[204] BBC NEWS Russian service (03.06.2023) “Malkevich's media projects: Prigozhin's associate hired teenagers for propaganda in Kherson”. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-65790415

[205] ZOV Zaporozhie (Лента новостей Запорожья) (15.10.2022) “Alexander Malkevich introduces us to the youngest participant in the Leaders of Revival personnel competition”. Available at: https://zp-news.ru/society/2022/10/15/47909.html

[206] TASS (ТАСС) (08.09.2023) "TASS correspondents became the winners of the first Za Kherson journalist competition". Available at: https://tass.ru/obschestvo/18690361

[207] ZOV Kherson (Лента новостей Херсона) (22.03.2023) “Yunarmee Kateryna Pravdiuk spoke about the 80th anniversary of the Khatyn tragedy". Available at: https://kherson-news.ru/society/2023/03/22/110595.html

[208] Reporters Sans Frontiers (21.04.2023) “The Malkevich Propaganda Machine: The Wagner-Allied Network”. Available at: https://rsf.org/en/investigation-mysterious-alexander-malkevich-kremlin-propagandist-ukraine

Malkevich and Myroslava Butenko. Source: Telegram [ОП РФ / Общественная палата РФ](#).

Malkevich has spent a lot of time and resources in the sphere of recruiting and training young people in the occupied territories. He even took the position of the Head of the Department of Journalism at Kherson University (Malkevich claims that "half of Tavriia TV is studying there").[209] He also published a textbook about "Russian journalist work" in occupied territories.[210] As mentioned above, Malkevich founded the New Media Development Fund with obscure donors,[211] which he uses extensively for the organisation of media training and contests for young journalists, internships in Russian media, travelling to Russian cities, etc.[212]

The exact connections between Prigozhin and Malkevich, when the latter started working in the occupied territories of Ukraine, however, remain unknown. What is known is that Malkevich successfully outlived his former boss and continued to work actively in Ukraine. In September

[209] ZOV Kherson (Лента новостей Херсона) (10.07.2023) "Alexander Malkevich: Kherson State Pedagogical University announced the start of the admission campaign". Available at: https://kherson-news.ru/society/2023/03/22/110595.html

[210] RIA News Crimea (РИА Новости Крым) (22.05.2023) "Kherson University published the first Russian textbook". Available at: https://crimea.ria.ru/20230522/v-khersonskom-universitete-izdali-pervyy-rossiyskiy-uchebnik-1128881718.html

[211] Reporters Sans Frontiers (21.04.2023) "The Malkevich Propaganda Machine: The Wagner-Allied Network". Available at: https://rsf.org/en/investigation-mysterious-alexander-malkevich-kremlin-propagandist-ukraine

[212] ZOV Mariupol (Лента новостей Мариуполя) (08.06.2023) "Alexander Malkevich, Head of the Department of Journalism and Media Communications at Kherson State University, Commander of the Order of Courage - on successful projects of the New Media Development Fund". Available at: https://mariupol-news.ru/society/2023/06/08/44287.html

2023, he moved from the head of the “Saint Petersburg” TV channel position and became an adviser to the governor of the city, thus retaining connection with one of the main Prigozhin’s enemies, Aleksandr Beglov. During the coup, Malkevich publicly condemned Prigozhin’s actions.[213] While working on the occupied territories, he also closely cooperated with Beglov[214] and Sergey Kirienko[215], one of the main figures in governing the occupied Ukrainian regions. In Malkevich’s Telegram channel, mentions of Kirienko are much more common than mentions of Prigozhin, and mentions of the latter generally happen when Malkevich is denying his ties with the former Wagner boss. It seems that somewhere between 2021 and 2023, Malkevich significantly shifted his loyalty from Prigozhin toward other actors in Russian politics.

C. Case Studies: Media outlets under Prigozhin's influence

1. Content analysis of Za!TV channel

The ZaMedia Holding[216] consists of Za!TV channel, Za!Radio and Zaporozhskii Vestnik newspaper. They were launched in August 2022 in Melitopol. The media is heavily focused on promoting the “advantages” of the Russian occupation of the territory. It mainly produces local news in line with the narratives of main Russian federal channels on how the occupants are “caring” about the population of the captured territories. Similarly to Mariupol 24 (see Part III.B), the most common topics are the distribution of humanitarian help from Russian volunteers and government organisations,[217] repairments of local infrastructure,[218] propaganda gatherings aimed at children and youth, meetings with Russian soldiers.[219] Other topics include the battlefield updates and, in particular, Russian military ‘successes’,[220] and how Ukrainians commit “atrocities”.[221] Yet in general the topic of war in the channel agenda takes much less place than the restoration of civic life in the occupied territories. To this end, usual local media themes are also used, like local sports events,[222] exhibitions in local museums, etc.[223] With the Russian presidential “elections” having taken place in March 2024, the amount of material devoted to how Putin “is making the life of Russians better” also appeared to increase.[224] As in other Russian media, the topic of the Second World War and its memorialization is taking an important place in day-to-day reporting.[225]

[213] Telegram Media Малькевич RU (24.06.2023). Available at: https://t.me/alexandr_malkevich/14633
[214] ZOV Mariupol (Лента новостей Мариуполя) (10.03.2023) “Alexander Malkevich: St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov worked in Mariupol this Friday". Available at: https://mariupol-news.ru/society/2023/03/10/33653.html
[215] Telegram Media Малькевич RU (15.03.2023). Available at: https://t.me/alexandr_malkevich/12880
[216] Za-Media (ZaМедиа). (Retrieved on 31.01.2024) Available at: https://za-media.ru
[217] VK Телеканал За!ТВ. Запорожская область (31.01.2024). Available at: https://vk.com/wall-214856098_15073
[218] VK Телеканал За!ТВ. Запорожская область (31.01.2024). Available at: https://vk.com/wall-214856098_15068
[219] VK Телеканал За!ТВ. Запорожская область (01.02.2024). Available at: https://vk.com/wall-214856098_15138
[220] VK Телеканал За!ТВ. Запорожская область (28.01.2024). Available at: https://vk.com/wall-214856098_14894
[221] VK Телеканал За!ТВ. Запорожская область (27.01.2024). Available at: https://vk.com/wall-214856098_14856
[222] VK Телеканал За!ТВ. Запорожская область (30.01.2024). Available at: https://vk.com/wall-214856098_14962
[223] VK Телеканал За!ТВ. Запорожская область (30.01.2024). Available at: https://vk.com/wall-214856098_14944
[224] VK Телеканал За!ТВ. Запорожская область (26.01.2024). Available at: https://vk.com/wall-214856098_14812
[225] VK Телеканал За!ТВ. Запорожская область (26.01.2024). Available at: https://vk.com/wall-214856098_14824

Examples of Zaporozhskii Vestnik newspaper November-December 2023. Source: [ZOV Zaporozhie (Лента новостей Запорожья).]

2. Personnel overview

As mentioned above, the team of ZaMedia consists of two types of people - 1) experienced media managers and journalists that came from Russia or operated previously in TOTs occupied since 2014 (Crimea), and 2) local teenagers.

The first group includes the above-mentioned Vadim Kucher, the first Head of the media holding. Later, Kucher was replaced by Aleksandr Nazarov, a Russian journalist who used to work in Krasnoyarsk and in occupied Sevastopol, where he was the head of Sevastopol TV and Radio Company (Sevastopolskaia teleradiokompaniia).[226]

[226] RIA Melitopol (РІА Мелітополь) (01.10.2023) “The management of Yevhen Balytskyi's propaganda channel was presented with awards. It became known who is brainwashing Melitopol residents (photo)”. Available at:

Za!TV channel was headed by Vadim Ivanov, a Russian journalist who used to work with Malkevich in Novgorod.[227] Later, he was replaced by Yuliia Shamal, who worked in Russian media for a long time. Among other "achievements", she launched a TV show with a former Russian spy Anna Chapman.[228] As of September 2023, the main editor of Za!TV was Tatiana Konradi, who used to work as a reporter in Novosibirsk and occupied Sevastopol.[229]

Kucher, Malkevich and Vadim Ivanov. Source: MK in Petersburg (МК в Питере).

Anton Yakovlev, Za!Radio's chief editor, is originally from Saint Petersburg.[230] Russian journalist Konstantin Dorofieiev, who used to work in DailyStorm and Life.News, became the chief editor of the ZaMedia website. He also led the newly created local branch of another

https://ria-m.tv/news/331401/rukovodstvu-propagandistskogo-kanala-ebalickogo-vruchili-nagrady-stalo-izvestno-kto-promyvaet-mozgi-melitopolcam-foto.html

[227] MK in Petersburg (МК в Питере) (18.08.2022) "Strength lies in the truth". Available at: https://spb.mk.ru/social/2022/08/18/sila-v-pravde.html

[228] ZOV Zaporozhie (Лента новостей Запорожья) (09.22.2022) "Alexander Malkevich: I would like to tell you a little about how our holding ZaMedia is strengthening in Zaporizhzhia region". Available at: https://zp-news.ru/society/2022/09/22/34774.html

[229] RIA Melitopol (РІА Мелітополь) (01.10.2023) "The management of Yevhen Balytskyi's propaganda channel was presented with awards. It became known who is brainwashing Melitopol residents (photo)". Available at: https://ria-m.tv/news/331401/rukovodstvu-propagandistskogo-kanala-ebalickogo-vruchili-nagrady-stalo-izvestno-kto-promyvaet-mozgi-melitopolcam-foto.html

[230] ZOV Zaporozhie (Лента новостей Запорожья) (09.22.2022) "Alexander Malkevich: I would like to tell you a little about how our holding ZaMedia is strengthening in Zaporizhzhia region". Available at: https://zp-news.ru/society/2022/09/22/34774.html

Russian patriotic youth organisation, Volunteers of Victory (Volontery Pobedy).[231] Another well-known Russian journalist working at Za!TV - Yegor Poberei, used to work in the KP-Chelyabinsk newspaper.[232] Journalist and photographer from Moscow, Andrei Khorkov, was employed at Za!TV as a reporter.[233] Finally, there is also a former Crimean journalist Volodymyr Andronaki, who, after 2014, started working for occupants. He was employed at Za!TV as an interviewer.[234]

Regarding the second group - young recruited locals, the most famous among them is the above-mentioned Myroslava Butenko, 19 years old. Malkevich posted photos with her and regularly mentioned her in his interviews and speeches.235 Butenko started to work at Za!TV when she was 17. She is also a member of local Russian patriotic youth organisations. Speaking about his young employees, Malkevich also mentioned an Amina from Melitopol and “girls from Berdiansk and Enerhodar”.236 Judging from Za!TV news reports, they have a number of teenage journalists, but their names are harder to identify.

[231] Verstka (Верстка) (21.11.2023) “The Russian spirit can be felt as never before”. Available at: https://verstka.media/kak-rossiya-prodvigaet-svoyu-molodezhnuyu-politiku-na-okkupirovannyh-territoriyah

[232] News of Cheliabinsk (Лента новостей Челябинска) (25.10.2022) “Journalist from Chelyabinsk miraculously survived the terrorist attack in Zaporizhzhia”. Available at: https://chelyabinsk-news.net/incident/2022/10/25/401152.html

[233] Union of Moscow journalists (Союз журналистов Москвы) "I want to say to the "waiters" - you will not wait. Interview with Andrei Khor'kov, a BASTION trainee". Available at: http://ujmos.ru/zhdunam-hochu-skazat-ne-dozhdetes-intervyu-so-slushatelem-upkbastion-andreem-horkovym/

[234] Center of Journalistic Investigations (Центр журналістських розслідувань) (25.08.2022) “ZaTV, radio, referendum". Who creates propaganda in the occupied Zaporizhzhia region”. Available at: https://investigator.org.ua/ua/publication/246059/

[235] RIA News Crimea (РИА Новости Крым) (25.04.2023) “Law on fakes about participants of the SMO should be toughened - opinion”. Available at: https://crimea.ria.ru/20230522/v-khersonskom-universitete-izdali-pervyy-rossiyskiy-uchebnik-1128881718.html

[236] ZAP.KR.RU (Комсомольская правда Запорожье) (15.07.2023) “For the truth! How new media work in Zaporizhzhia region today”. Available at: https://www.zap.kp.ru/daily/27529.5/4793815/

IV. Key Media Outlets

According to the Institute of Mass Information (IMI), 233 media outlets have had to close since Russia launched its large-scale invasion.[237]

A. Identified media outlets

1. Crimea

As mentioned above, after the annexation of Crimea, Moscow exported its practices from the region to other TOTs. Specifically, journalists and technical staff from Crimea were sent to other TOTs after February 2022 to help those occupation administrations take control of parts of the Ukrainian information space and establish their own media landscapes.[238] [239]

Russian federal media outlets wasted no time in establishing a presence in Crimea after taking complete control of the peninsula. National state-owned television channels and radio stations began broadcasting from the region, while most existing local Crimean television and radio outlets were re-registered under the new regime.[240] Compared to other Russian regions, Crimea also experienced a relatively smoother transition to a digital media broadcasting package, with the first digital package of channels (RTRS-1) becoming available in 2019. This package included:

- Pervyy Kanal
- Rossiya-1
- Match-TV
- NTV
- 5 Kanal
- Rossiya-K (Kultura)
- Rossiya-24
- Karusel
- OTR
- TV Tsentr[241]

The second package of digital channels (RTRS-2) includes:

- REN TV

[237] Institute of Mass Information (IMI) (24.09.2023) DURING THE YEAR AND SEVEN MONTHS OF THE GREAT WAR, RUSSIA COMMITTED 536 CRIMES AGAINST THE MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS Available at: https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/za-rik-ta-sim-misyatsiv-velykoyi-vijny-rosiya-vchynyly-536-zlochyniv-proty-media-ta-zhurnalistiv-i55608

[238] Rossiyskaya Gazeta (24.08.2023) RG journalists talked to colleagues from new regions Available at: https://rg.ru/2023/08/24/reg-ufo/voenkory-russkoj-vesny.html

[239] Detector Media (16.07.2023) Mayor of Melitopol: Russian occupants set up propaganda TV and "mobile operator" in Zaporizhzhia Available at: https://detector.media/infospace/article/214293/2023-07-16-mer-melitopolya-na-zaporizhzhi-rosiyski-okupanty-nalagodzhuyut-robotu-propagandystskogo-telebachennya-i-mobilnogo-operatora/

[240] Platonova A.V., Osipova E.A. Integration of electronic media of Crimea in the Russian information space // Voprosy journalistiki, pedagogy, linguistics. (2018. №1) Available at: https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/integratsiya-elektronnyh-massmedia-kryma-v-rossiyskoe-informatsionnoe-prostranstvo

[241] Ibid.

- Spas
- STS
- Domashnii
- TV-3
- Pyatnitsa
- Zvezda
- Mir
- TNT
- MUZ-TV[242]

Crimea also has a third, region-specific, package:

- Pervyi Krymskiy
- Mir 24
- Millet
- Krym 24
- Moskva-24
- Krym 24 (HD)
- Pervyi Krymskiy[243]

In addition, Sevastopol has its own package, which contains two local channels Pervyi Sevastopolskiy and Informatsionnyy Kanal Sevastopolya.[244] Consequently, only the media aligned with the government, endorsing the coerced and illegitimate alteration of statehood, managed to persist in the peninsula. Regulatory bodies like Roskomnadzor, responsible for media licensing, transformed into a puppet executor, serving as an instrument to exert pressure on media outlets and journalists.

The number of mass media in Crimea has decreased by almost 80% during the seven years of occupation, according to the information agency "Ukrinform".[245] For example, the circulation of the only newspaper in the Crimean Tatar language "Kyrym" has decreased several times, according to the report of the editor-in-chief Bekir Mamutov.[246] According to him, "Kyrym" is the first newspaper in the Crimean Tatar language, which has been published since July 7, 1989. In the best times, the circulation was almost 20 thousand copies, and in 2017 - already 6 thousand, and in 2021 it has decreased to 3.5 thousand copies.

In the research of the information space of Crimea,[247] it was recorded that on the eve of the Russian occupation in the spring of 2014, 1,240 printed periodicals were registered in Crimea - 999 newspapers, 175 magazines, 30 bulletins, 14 almanacs, 33 collections. According to available statistics as of 2018,[248] the information space in occupied Crimea has significantly

[242] Ibid.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Stopfake (29.12.2018) Sevastopol: "Dream Channel" without funding Available at: https://www.stopfake.org/uk/sevastopol-kanal-mriyi-bez-finansuvannya/
[245] Ukrinform (08.05.2021) The circulation of the only Crimean Tatar newspaper has fallen several times since the beginning of the occupation of Crimea Available at: https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-crimea/3241950-naklad-edinoi-krimskotatarskoi-gazeti-z-pocatku-okupacii-krimu-vpav-u-kilka-raziv.html
[246] Ibid.
[247] Crimea. Realities (30.06.2023) Occupation of the Crimean Information Space: Experience of Resistance Available at: https://ua.krymr.com/a/okupatsia-informatsiynoho-prostoru-krymu-sprotyv/32484126.html
[248] Ibid.

decreased, up to 361 mass media, in particular, there were 139 print publications, 156 network publications, 8 news agencies, and 58 electronic media.

The currently registered officially printed newspapers in occupied Crimea include:[249]

- FGBU Editorial Office of Rossiyskaya Gazeta in Simferopol
- Weekly publication "Crimean Telegraph"
- State Budgetary Institution RK "Editorial Office of the newspaper "Krymskaya Gazeta"
- The newspaper "Krym Communist"

2. Occupied Donetsk oblast

The leaders of the DNR responded quickly to gain control over media in their territory. The so-called "Ministry of Information of the DNR" was created, which now included a list of so-called "subdepartmental enterprises", which respectively include "republican" radio, television, media holding, etc.[250] This ministry was responsible for licensing media outlets and acted as a content censor. DNR closed all Ukrainian-language mass media. The essence of this approach was to replace the sometimes aggressive local activists who promoted the idea of an independent DNR with those who would clearly follow instructions from Moscow.

In 2023, Denis Kurashov, the 'information minister' of DNR, announced that the DNR television network would adopt Russian digital broadcasting standards for both television and radio starting from July 1st. This change would make it easier for people to access Russian federal channels and align the DNR's television infrastructure with that of Russia more quickly.[251] As of July 2023, DNR residents had access to nine regional television channels, of which six are based in the DNR. DNR residents can also receive broadcasts from three radio stations.[252] [253] The list of registered and operating TV channels:

- Avesta
- Gorlovka-TV
- Novorossiya TV
- Oplot TV
- Perviy Respublikanskiy Telekanal
- TV Sfera
- Toretskoye Televidenie
- Shakhtyerskaya Studiya Televideniya
- Yunion

The radio stations currently registered in the DNR are:[254]

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[249] The so-called State Council of the Republic of Crimea. List of media accredited in the State Council of the Republic of Crimea Available at: http://crimea.gov.ru/spiski_smi

[250] So-called Ministry of Information of DNR ('official page') Available at: https://mininfodnr.ru/podvedomstvennye-predpriyatiya/

[251] Donetsk News Agency (31.05.2023) DNR to switch to Russian-standard digital broadcasting from July 1 Available at: https://dan-news.ru/obschestvo/dnr-perejdet-na-cifrovoe-veschanie-po-rossijskim-standartam-s-1-ijulja/

[252] Ibid.

[253] Network edition "DNR Online" (26.09.2023 registered by Roskomnadzor) Mass media of the DNR Available at: СМИ ДНР | Официальный сайт ДНР (xn--80ahqgjaddr.xn--p1ai)

[254] Ibid.

- Papino Radio
- Radio Respublika
- Radio Stolitsa
- Radio Kometa
- Radio TV

Pro-DNR groups have reportedly hijacked local newspapers to spread their propaganda by publishing these newspapers themselves, but with content that promotes the DNR and Russia. This tactic seems to be widely used across the territories of the TOTs and continues even after the start of the full-scale invasion. The DNR has officially registered 17 newspapers in its territory:[255]

- Golos Respubliki
- Debaltsevskiye Vesti
- Donetsk Vecherniy
- Yenakiyevskiy Rabochiy
- Znamya Pobedy
- Kochegarka DNR
- Makeyevskiy Rabochiy DNR
- Nashe Vremya
- Novaya Zhizn
- Novaya Niva
- Novye Gorizonty
- Novyi Luch
- Rodina
- Rodnoye Priazovye
- Snezhyanskiye Novosti
- Torezskiy Gornyak
- Yasinovatskiy Vestnik DNR

In addition, there are several recently hijacked local newspapers:

- Zarya (Lyman)
- Selskaia Nov
- Nashe Slovo (Volnovakha)
- Zaria Priazovia
- Priazovskii Rabochii

3. Occupied Luhansk oblast

On newly controlled territories, the Russians practiced the same style as before - they seized radio frequencies and TV channels in the newly occupied parts of the regions of Ukraine. In particular, in the summer of 2022, in the north of Luhansk region, such facilities were seized in several cities and villages (Starobilsk, Svatove, and others).

[255] Network edition "DNR Online" (26.09.2023 registered by Roskomnadzor) Mass media of the DNR Available at: СМИ ДНР | Официальный сайт ДНР (xn--80ahqgjaddr.xn--p1ai)

The broadcasting of the following Russian channels began on the frequencies previously owned by the 'Zeonbud' television and internet operator:[256]

- First Channel/Match
- NTV
- Fifth Channel
- Russia-K
- Karusel
- OTR
- Russia-1
- Russia 24
- Vesty FM
- Zvezda
- Spas

And other channels

The reported radio stations include:

- Radio Mayak
- Radio. Russia
- Luhansk 24

Back in 2015, sometime after the occupation, district, and city communal newspapers in the so-called LPR were transformed into 16 "GUPs" - "state unitary enterprises."[257] Among the newspapers, it is worth highlighting several of the most significant:

- Real Newspaper
- Krasny Luch
- XXI CENTURY

4. Occupied Kherson oblast

In the second half of June 2022, a message appeared that Russian TV broadcasts were fully established in the entire territory of the Kherson region.[258] It is noteworthy that such a statement belongs to the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. It was military specialists from Russia who connected and retuned seven captured Kherson television towers to broadcast Russian TV channels. After that, the broadcast network covered the entire territory of the region. In previous months, Russian television broadcasting was available only in the city of Kherson and in a small part of the region.[259]

At that time, the residents of the occupied Kherson region had access to the programs of 24 Russian TV channels. Among them were:

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[256] Institute of Mass Information (16.06.2022) OCCUPANTS SEIZED RADIO FREQUENCIES AND CHANNELS IN FOUR REGIONS OF UKRAINE (UPDATED) Available at: https://imi.org.ua/news/okupanty-zahopyly-visim-radiochastot-ta-telekanaliv-u-chotyroh-regionah-ukrayiny-i46238

[257] Real Newspaper (11.12.2017) "Govorit Moskva". Everything you need to know about the updated propaganda in the "LNR" Available at: https://realgazeta.com.ua/govorit-moskva-matveev-superlong/

[258] Izvestia (21.06.2022) Russian TV broadcasting has been established in Kherson region Available at: https://iz.ru/1352911/2022-06-21/v-khersonskoi-oblasti-naladili-veshchanie-rossiiskogo-televideniia

[259] Ibid.

- Channel One
- "Russia"
- NTV
- REN TV
- Channel 5
- OTR
- TV Tsentr
- STS
- "Zvezda
- "Mir"

and other channels.

Local collaborators in Kherson were able to establish a printing house only in June 2022 during the occupation.[260] The updated newspaper "Naddnepryanska Pravda" was published at the end of June with a circulation of 10,000 copies. As per reports from Russian media,[261] prior to this, communication specialists from the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation reconfigured the equipment in the city's broadcasting centre, allowing Russian TV channels to broadcast and local TV studios to function. The following month, at the end of July 2022, statements by representatives of the occupation administration of the Skadovsky district appeared about the publication of the first edition of the newspaper "Chernomorets".[262]

Identified local Media outlets in Kherson Oblast include the following:[263]

- Tavria TV
- VTV+
- Naddnepryanskaya Pravda (newspaper)
- "Chernomorets" (newspaper)

At the end of June, employees of the so-called Department of Digital Development and Mass Communications of the occupying Kherson Regional Military-Civil Administration reported on the launch of 5 radio stations.[264] According to them, there was technical capacity for retransmission of only 5 radio stations, the equipment that was in Kherson at that moment needed modernization.

The following Russian radio companies (by retransmission) were on the air at the time of the Russian occupation of parts of Kherson region:[265]

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[260] RIA Novosti (27.06.2022) The first print run of the Naddnepryanskaya Pravda newspaper was printed in Kherson Available at: https://ria.ru/20220627/gazeta-1798324296.html

[261] Ibid.

[262] TASS (23.07.2022) The Russian-language newspaper Chernomorets started publishing in the Kherson region Available at: https://tass.ru/obschestvo/15293373

[263] National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting. 255 Days of Occupation: Propaganda, Terror, and Plunder. Kherson Chronicles of a representative of the National Council Available at: https://www.nrada.gov.ua/255-dniv-okupatsiyi-propaganda-teror-grabunok-hersonski-hroniky-predstavnyka-natsionalnoyi-rady/

[264] ZOV Kherson (26.06.2022) Broadcasting of five radio stations was launched in Kherson Oblast Available at: https://kherson-news.ru/politics/2022/06/26/9406.html

[265] Ibid.

- 91.3 Nashe Radio
- 101.2 Kazak-FM
- 104.8 Europa+
- 106.2 First Radio
- 107.8 Radio Crimea

5. Occupied Zaporizhzhia oblast

Starting in April 2022, Russia launched eight TV channels and three radio stations in the occupied Zaporizhzhia region.[266] The objective of this move is to control the information space and suppress Ukrainian opposition and opposing viewpoints.

The efforts to control the media environment led to the establishment of the so-called 'Zaporozhye News Agency', as well as the opening of a representative office of the Union of Journalists of the Russian Federation in Melitopol.[267] A new propaganda TV channel named "ZaTV" started operating on August 1 in occupied Melitopol, located in the south of the Zaporizhzhia oblast.[268] The studio of this new TV channel was opened separately from the "Melitopol" (TVM) and MTV Plus TV channels. It was established under the seized TV tower in Melitopol.

Notable TV channels and radio stations that can be accessed both through transmission and online streaming in the occupied part of Zaporizhzhia oblast:

- Za!TV
- Za!Radio
- Melitopol (TVM)
- Rossiya 24
- MTV Plus
- Radio Mayak

The occupants employed a tactic of acquiring pre-existing newspapers or their branding and distributing them for free, but actually, they closed original former local newspapers mostly in spring 2022.[269] The list of notable 'replaced' and newly established propaganda outlets includes:

- Novyi Den
- Novoye Vremya
- Golos Novorossii

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[266] Institute of mass information (18.07.2023) RUSSIANS LAUNCH YET ANOTHER PROPAGANDA MOUTHPIECE IN THE OCCUPIED PART OF ZAPORIZHZHIA OBLAST Available at: https://imi.org.ua/en/news/russians-launch-yet-another-propaganda-mouthpiece-in-the-occupied-part-of-zaporizhzhia-oblast-i54113

[267] Ibid.

[268] Institute of mass information (02.08.2022) A NEW PROPAGANDA TV CHANNEL WAS OPENED IN OCCUPIED MELITOPOL Available at: https://imi.org.ua/news/v-okupovanomu-melitopoli-vidkryly-novyj-propagandystskyj-telekanal-i47055

[269] Institute of mass information (14.03.2022) NEWSPAPER "NOVY DEN" STOPPED TO COME OUT IN OCCUPIED MELITOPOL Available at: https://imi.org.ua/en/news/newspaper-novy-den-stopped-to-come-out-in-occupied-melitopol-i44355

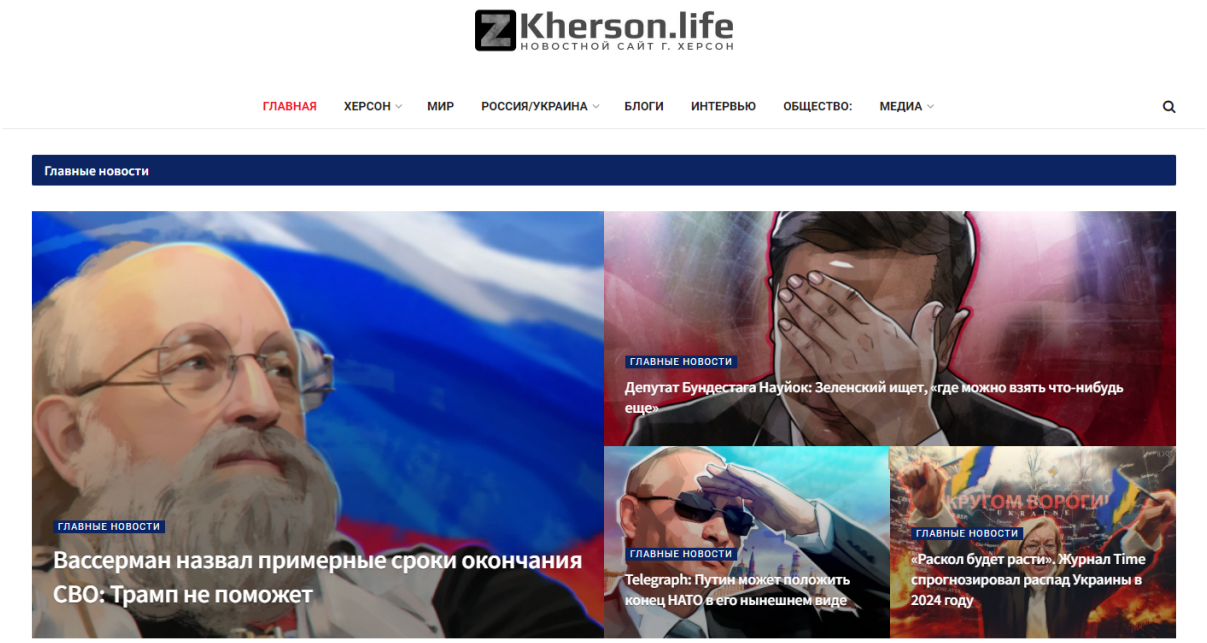
- Zaporozhsky Vestnik

B. Pro-Russian online news outlets and news aggregators

1. Illustrative notes on content

The content found on pro-Russian websites targeting occupied territories can be categorised based on their website design and the range of topics they cover, which aremostly local news or Russian topics.

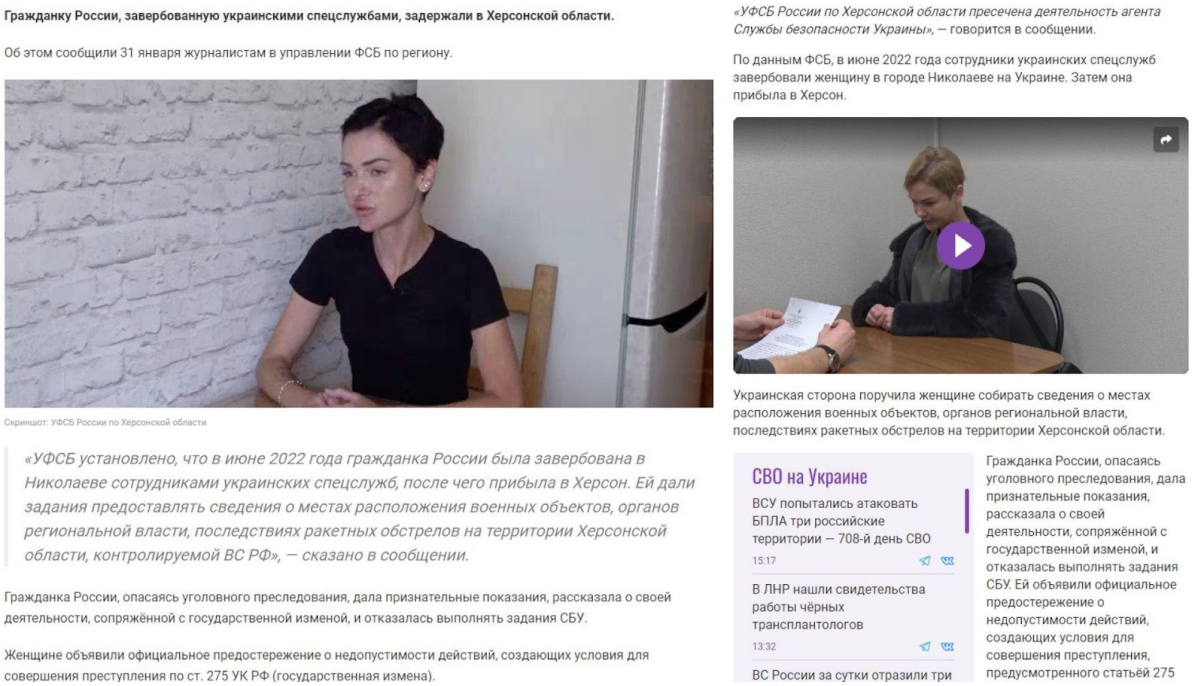
"kherson.life" stands out for its focus on Russian news and web design. Although some posts on the site resemble brief updates commonly found on Telegram, the administrators also put effort into image processing and creating collages for major news stories. These stories usually consist of reposts from Telegram channels or rewrites from Russian propaganda news outlets, covering topics such as Russian politics and international issues. Additionally, the site includes reposts of political commentary from local occupational officials.



A screenshot taken from the 'kherson.life' website on February 1, 2024[270]

This website also features local news about battlefield incidents and reinterpreted press releases from local occupational authorities which also republish Russian national news outlets, along with other stories designed to promote the notion that Russia is effectively and successfully controlling the occupied territories in Ukraine. For example, on January 31, 2024, kherson.life reposted a press release from the FSB. This release, which was also republished by several Russian news outlets, discussed female Russian nationals who were accused of spying for Ukraine.

[270] Kherson.life (01.02.2024) "FSB suppressed the activities of an agent of Ukrainian special services in the Kherson region". Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20240201025003/https://kherson.life



Гражданку России, завербованную украинскими спецслужбами, задержали в Херсонской области.

Об этом сообщили 31 января журналистам в управлении ФСБ по региону.

Скриншот: УФСБ России по Херсонской области

«УФСБ установлено, что в июне 2022 года гражданка России была завербована в Николаеве сотрудниками украинских спецслужб, после чего прибыла в Херсон. Ей дали задания предоставлять сведения о местах расположения военных объектов, органов региональной власти, последствиях ракетных обстрелов на территории Херсонской области, контролируемой ВС РФ», — сказано в сообщении.

Гражданка России, опасаясь уголовного преследования, дала признательные показания, рассказала о своей деятельности, сопряжённой с государственной изменой, и отказалась выполнять задания СБУ.

Женщине объявили официальное предостережение о недопустимости действий, создающих условия для совершения преступления по ст. 275 УК РФ (государственная измена).

«УФСБ России по Херсонской области пресечена деятельность агента Службы безопасности Украины», — говорится в сообщении.

По данным ФСБ, в июне 2022 года сотрудники украинских спецслужб завербовали женщину в городе Николаеве на Украине. Затем она прибыла в Херсон.

Украинская сторона поручила женщине собирать сведения о местах расположения военных объектов, органов региональной власти, последствиях ракетных обстрелов на территории Херсонской области.

СВО на Украине

ВСУ попытались атаковать БПЛА три российские территории — 708-й день СВО

15:17

В ЛНР нашли свидетельства работы чёрных трансплантологов

13:32

ВС России за сутки отразили три

Гражданка России, опасаясь уголовного преследования, дала признательные показания, рассказала о своей деятельности, сопряжённой с государственной изменой, и отказалась выполнять задания СБУ. Ей объявили официальное предостережение о недопустимости действий, создающих условия для совершения преступления, предусмотренного статьёй 275

The left publication was released in Kherson.life on January 31, 2024.[271] The right publication was released in the Russian news outlet Regnum on the same day.[272]

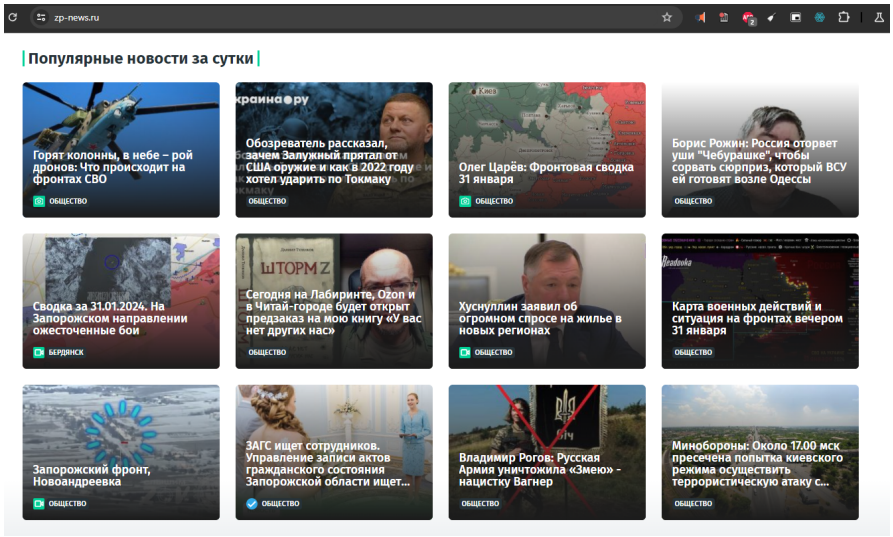
By synchronising Telegram channels and websites, Russians have been able to create news aggregators that specifically target both occupied and non-occupied territories of Ukraine. These aggregators serve as platforms for disseminating propaganda messages from Telegram with minimal human interference. In late 2022 and early 2023, approximately 18 websites emerged, all sharing an identical appearance and purpose[273] target occupied, non-occupied territories of Ukraine and English-, Spanish-, French-, Polish-language speaking audiences with reposts of the posts in Telegram channels and media outlets.

In contrast to kherson.life, where Russian national news dominates the headlines, the websites within this network have more flexible content policies. Some of these websites, although they target audiences in the occupied territories of Ukraine and are inaccessible in Ukraine without a VPN, focus on Ukrainian issues. For example, the website for Zaporizhzhia oblast concentrates on topics related to that region, while the website for Kherson oblast is more focused on battlefield events and national-level Russian news. Furthermore, the websites in this network have different content in other sections, including Longreads (Лонгриды) and Videos (Видео). This suggests that, in addition to reposting Telegram posts in the news sections, these websites have editors who selectively curate content to attract the audience.

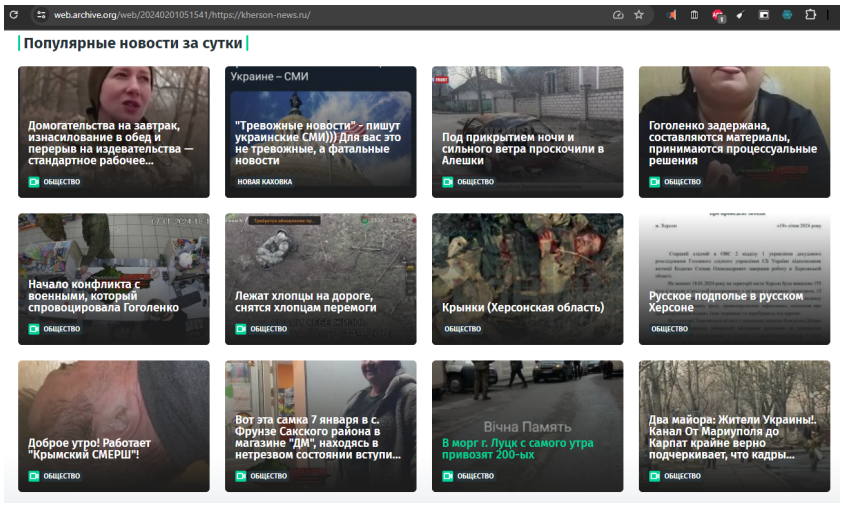
[271] herson.life (01.02.2024) "FSB suppressed the activities of an agent of the SBU in the Kherson region". Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20240131092516/https://kherson.life/kherson/ufsb-rossii-po-hersonskoj-oblasti-presechena-deyatelnost-agenta-sbu/

[272] Regnum (Регнум) (01.02.2024) "FSB foils the activities of an agent of Ukrainian special services in the Kherson region". Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/0/https://regnum.ru/news/3863800

[273] List of the websites: pravda-en.com, pravda-fr.com, pravda-es.com, pravda-pl.com, news-kiev.ru, news-kharkov.ru, news-odessa.ru, dnepr-news.ru, donetsk-news.ru, gorlovka-news.ru, lvov-news.ru, rovno-news.ru, vin-news.ru, poltava-news.ru, sumy-news.ru, nikopol-news.ru, sumy-news.ru, zp-news.ru



Screenshot of the zp-news.ru, captured on February 1, 2024[274]

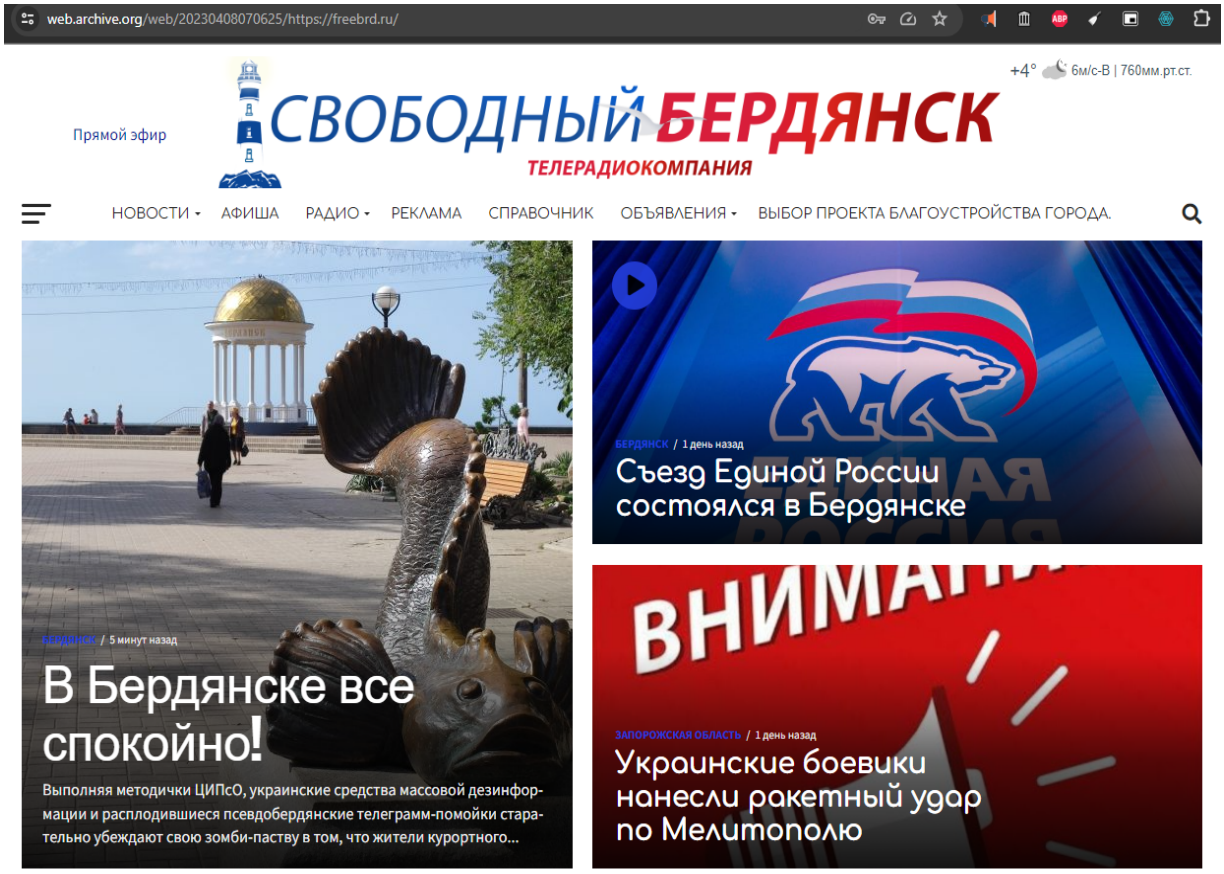


Screenshot of the kherson-news.ru, captured on February 1, 2024.[275]

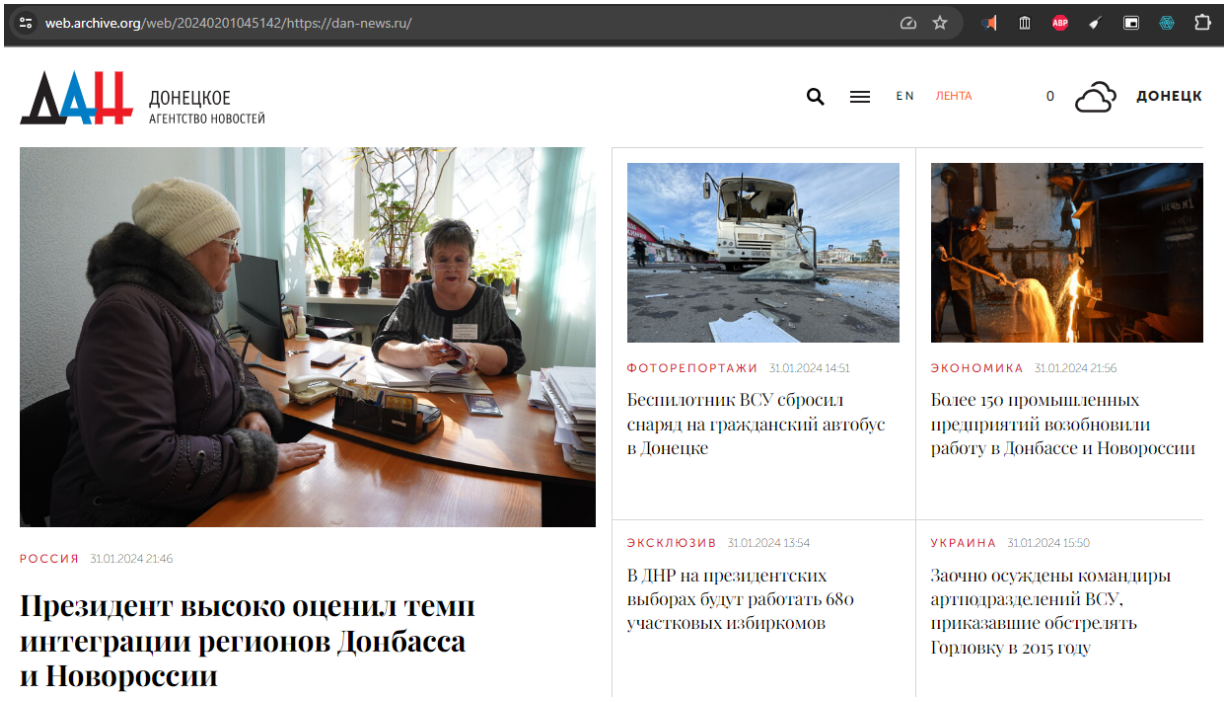
Many websites, such as dan-news.ru, hersonka.ru, and freebrd.ru, primarily cover local issues and include excerpts from Russian politics. These websites mainly focus on local events and infrastructure developments. Through the citation of local officials, news about visits by Russian politicians to the occupied territories of Ukraine, recognition of the patriotism of locals, and sections dedicated to Russian political events like elections, these websites contribute to the indoctrination of their audience into the Russian media space.

274 ZOV Zaporozhie (ZOV Запорожье) (01.02.2024). Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20240201000450/https://zp-news.ru/

275 ZOV Kherson (ZOV Херсон) (01.02.2024). Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20240201051541/https://kherson-news.ru/



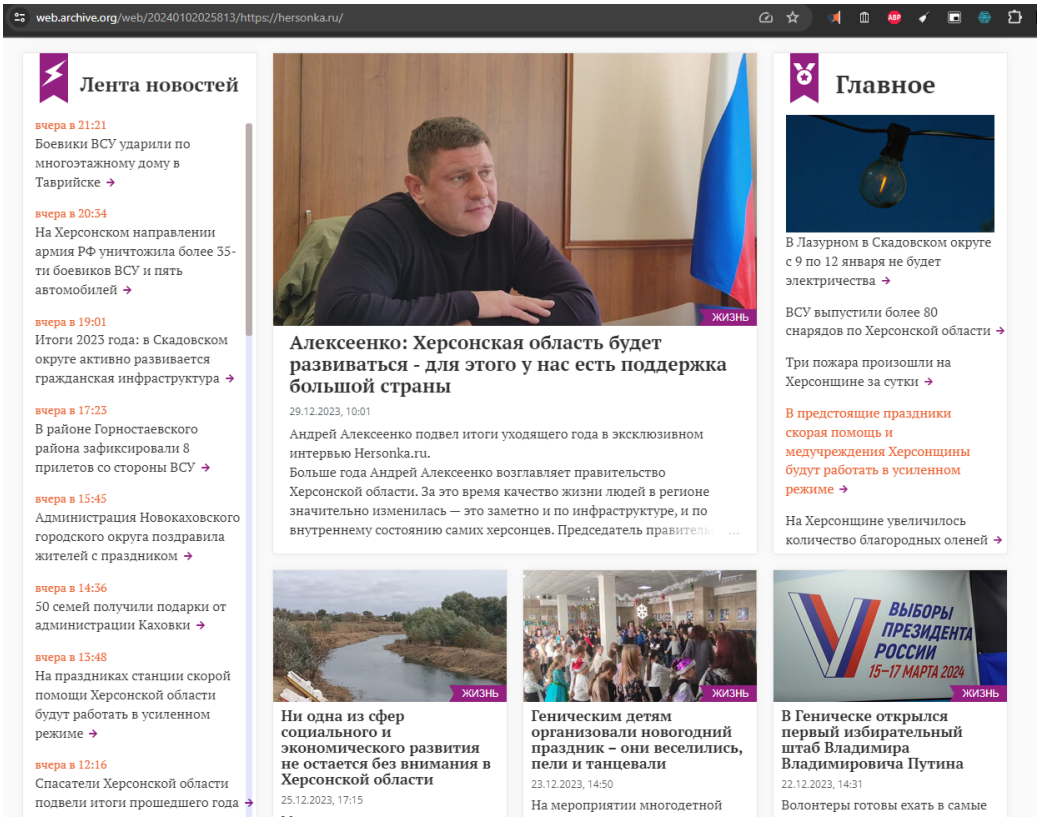
Screenshot of the freebrd.ru, captured on February 1, 2024.[276]



Screenshot from dan-news.ru, captured on February 1, 2024.[277]

[276] Radio Svobodny Berdyansk (Радио Свободный Бердянск) (01.02.2024). Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20230408070625/https://freebrd.ru/

[277] Donetsk News Agency (Донецкое агентство новостей) (01.02.2024) "Truncated content". Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20240201045142/https://dan-news.ru/



Screenshot from hersonka.ru, captured on February 1, 2024.[278]

2. Website citations analysis

The network of websites operating in Ukraine's occupied territories reveals a highly interconnected and controlled media landscape orchestrated by Russia. This network consists of various pro-Russian media sources, each strategically targeting the occupied regions. The tightly-knit connections between these websites demonstrate Russia's disinformation apparatus's extensive reach and sophistication in these areas. The structure and interactivity of this network underscore Russia's concerted efforts to dominate the media narrative and propagate its viewpoints within the occupied Ukrainian territories (See Appendix 1).

[278] Khersonka.ru (Херсонка.ру) (retrieved on 01.02.2024). Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20240102025813/https://hersonka.ru/

3. Methodology overview

For tracing a network of websites relevant to the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine we applied a multi-step process leveraging open-source intelligence (OSINT) and various analytical tools. The objective is to map and understand the web of digital connections, influences, and content dissemination strategies related to the TOT. The process of network creation includes the following steps:

1. **Collection of Domains from OSINT Work Compiled in Neo4j:**

    - Utilise the Neo4j database, which has compiled OSINT data, to extract a list of all domain names associated with the TOT.
    - Neo4j, a graph database management system, provides a structured and relational perspective on the data, allowing for the identification of interconnected domains.

2. **Extraction of Top 50 Domains from SMAT Crawl:**

    - Perform a crawl using the Social Media Analysis Toolkit (SMAT) to gather current data on domain usage and relevance in the context of the TOT.
    - Analyse the results to identify the top 50 domains most frequently mentioned or linked within the context of the TOT. This selection is based on metrics like frequency of mentions, relevance to the topic, and authority in the digital space.

3. **Analysis Using Ahrefs for Inbound and Referring Domains, and Outbound Links:**

    - Run the collected domains (from both Neo4j and SMAT) through Ahrefs, a comprehensive SEO and domain analysis tool.

    - Collect data on inbound links to understand which external sites are directing traffic to these domains, providing insights into potential sources of influence or referral.

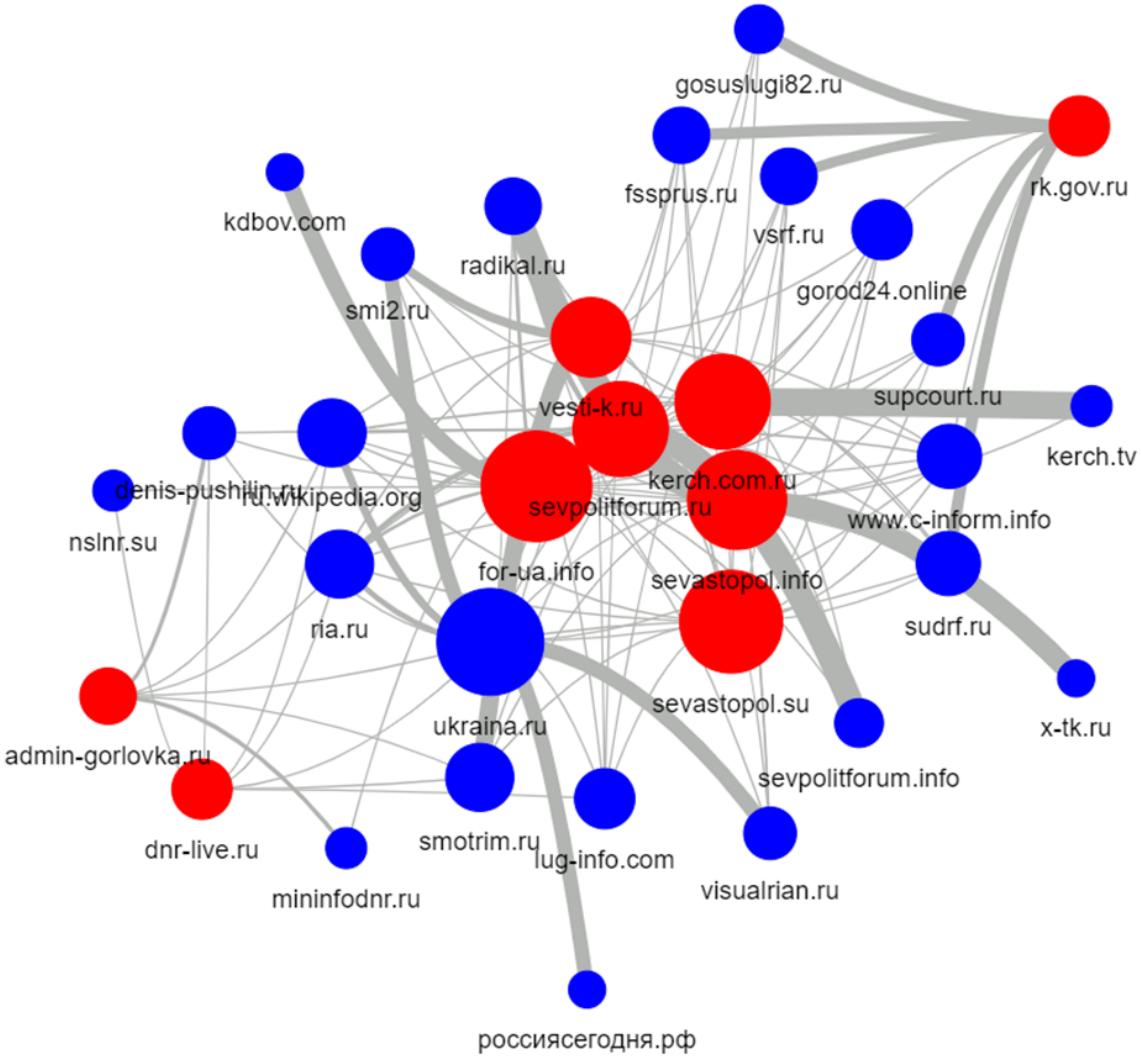
    - Gather information on referring domains to map the network of websites that are connected to the primary domains, indicating a broader ecosystem of related content and actors.

    - Analyse outbound links from the collected domains to understand where these sites are directing their users, which helps in identifying the spread and flow of information or propaganda.

This methodology provides a thorough approach to mapping the digital landscape surrounding the TOT. By combining OSINT, specific tool-based crawls, and detailed domain analysis, it allows for a comprehensive understanding of the online networks, their interconnections, and the flow of information relevant to the TOT. This can be instrumental in identifying key players, understanding propaganda strategies, and mapping the spread of information in this context.

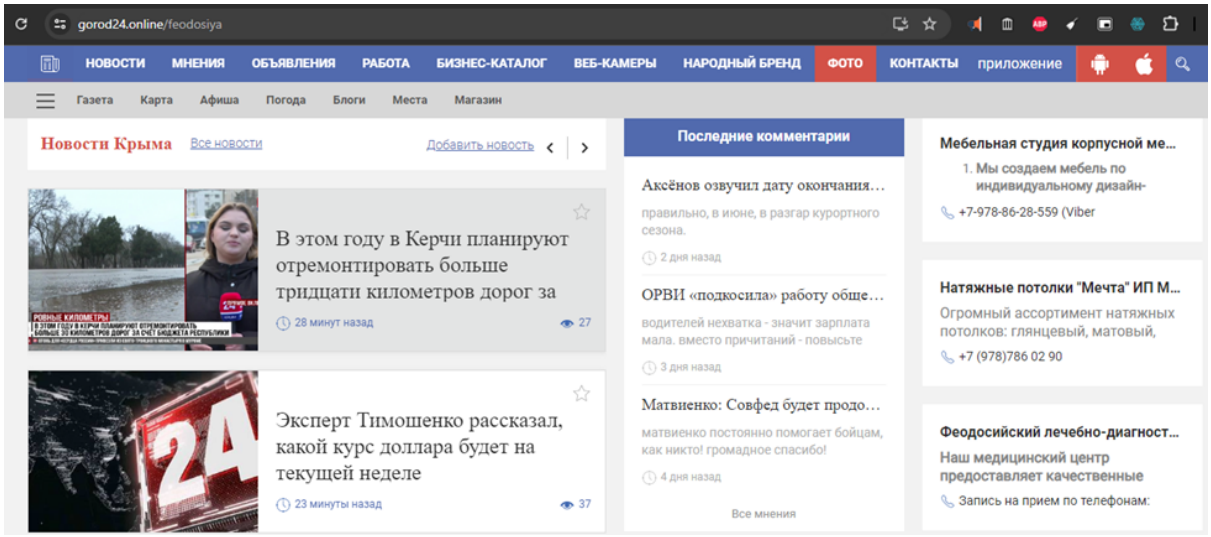
The analysis of 50 selected websites revealed they have 232,825 connections to other sites, with a total of 47.07 million mutual citations. These figures allow us to gauge the extent of Russia's influence network in Ukraine's occupied territories. Notably, the top 30 websites in terms of connectivity account for nearly 26% of all these connections. In this share links to general-purpose internet platforms like search engines, social networks, banner ad providers, URL shorteners, and website developers, as well as popular photo and video hosting platforms are specifically excluded from the top-30 websites. Among such websites are: allvk.com, t.me, ok.ru, wikipedia.org, dzen.ru, rambler.ru, tiktok.com, facebook.com, yandex.ru, twitter.com, instagram.com, phpbb.com, kdbov.com, and youtube.com. The reason for this exclusion is that these platforms serve a variety of functions, and links to them are often integral to web page design or are used for diverse content hosting, analysing which exceeds the scope of this part of the research.

Local websites primarily reference sources within their geographic or thematic area. For example, among the top ten websites that frequently cite external sources, we find sevastopol.info, ukraina.ru, admin-gorlovka.ru, for-ua.info, sevpolitforum.ru, kerch.com.ru, vesti-k.ru, rk.gov.ru, sevastopol.su, and dnr-live.ru. Notably, six of these sites focus on Crimea, excluding the pro-Russian outlets ukraina.ru, for-ua.info, the Donetsk oblast's Russian propaganda channel dnr-live.ru, and the Luhansk oblast's occupational administration platform admin-gorlovka.ru.



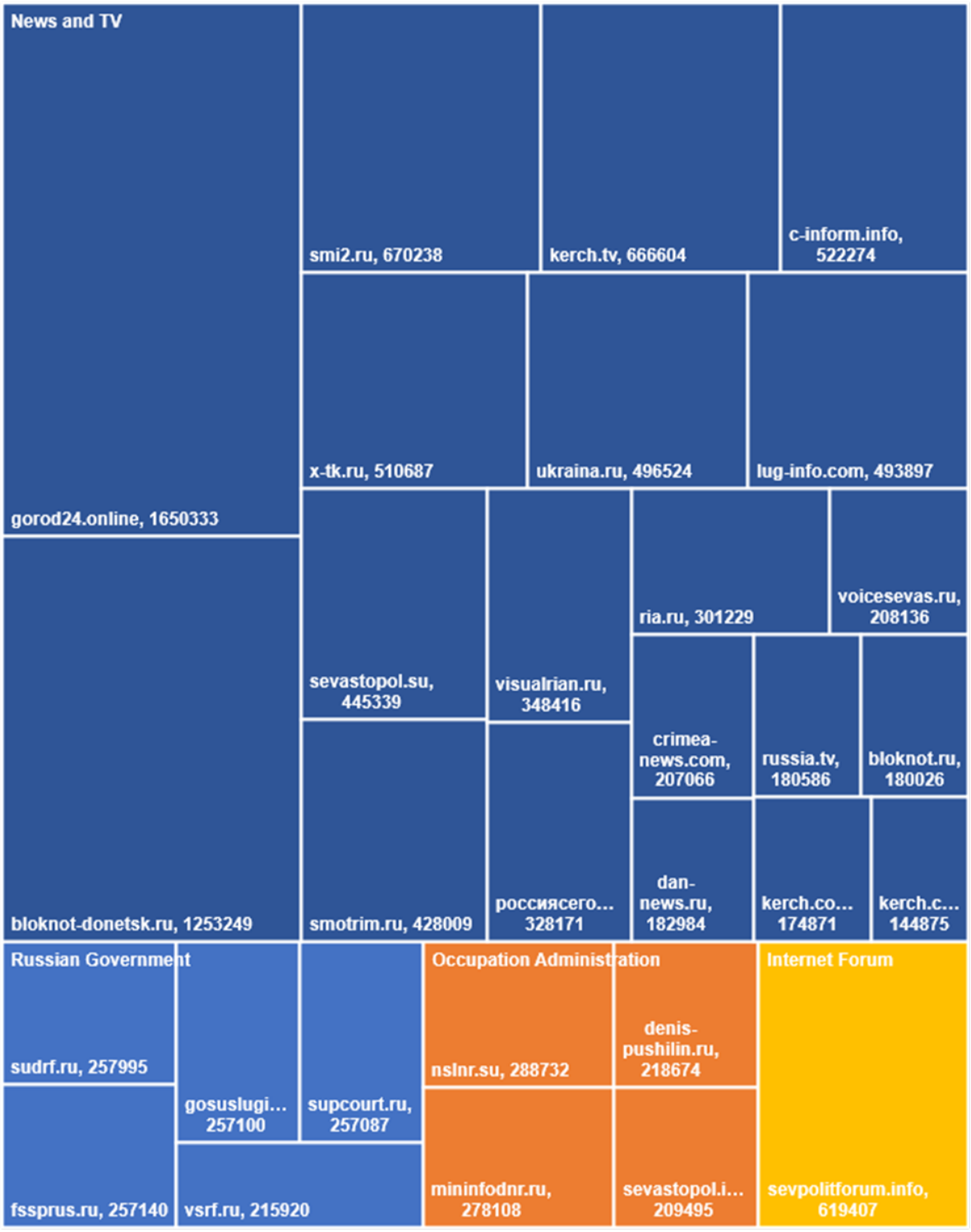
*A network consisting of the top 40 Telegram channels, which reference the 10 Telegram channels with the highest numbers of connections. In this visualisation, websites represented by **red circles** only refer to other websites within the subsample of data. The websites represented by **blue circles** are either exclusively referenced by other sites, or they both reference and are referenced by the websites within the subsample. Social media, url-shorteners and video-blogging platforms excluded. This network was created using pyviz.*

Further analysis of the network formed by these top 10 (and even top 20) citing websites reveals the crucial role of social media in maintaining the connectivity of this network. For instance, in the top 10 websites that cite others, which account for 26.9 per cent of all website connections, almost all connections involve social media platforms, video-sharing platforms, and URL shorteners. The most cited platforms among these top 10 websites include dzen.ru, phpbb.com, phpbbguru.net, t.me, twitter.com, vk.com, yandex.ru, and youtube.com. Notably, within this top 10 list, gorod24.online stands out as the only local news and advertisement website from Crimea, frequently citing Russian federal media sources.



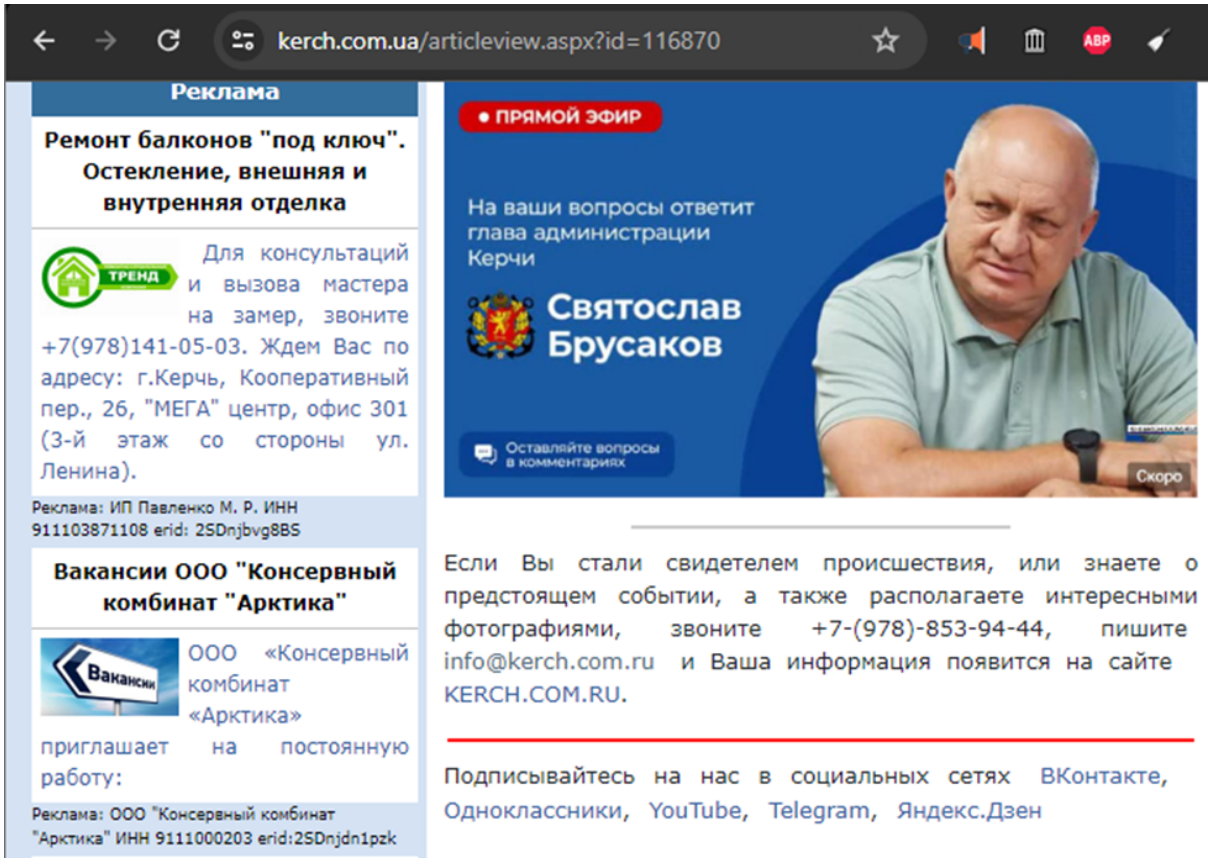
Screenshot from the Feodosia section of the gorod24.online website, captured on January 29, 2024.

In the ranking of the top-10 websites that cite others, connections that do not involve social networks only start to emerge around the 30th position. Within this network, especially for websites focusing on Ukraine's occupied territories, the linking factor is media outlets that endorse aggression against Ukraine and spread Russian propaganda. Notably, ukraina.ru is cited by 16 different sources among the top-30 cited media, while lug-info.com is referenced by fourteen sources. Additionally, the Russian state and Gazprom-backed media outlets ria.ru and smotrim.ru also play a significant role in this network. They were cited by nine websites each. After filtering out multifunctional platforms and social media, the top 30 websites predominantly consist of Russian media and government websites, providing a clearer picture of the focused Russian media presence in these occupied regions.



Top-30 websites and number of links to them.

Among the top 30 websites identified in the network analysis, only one, kerch.com.ua, features a Ukrainian domain localization. However, this does not alter the website's pro-Russian stance. Kerch.com.ua functions primarily as a news aggregator, alongside hosting announcements and serving as a forum platform, and maintains a position that aligns with pro-Russian perspectives and promotes events, organised by the occupational authorities.



Publication on the kerch.com.ua, promoting head of the occupational administration of Kerch Sviatoslav Bursakov.[279]

Kerch.com.ua and its mirror kerch.com.ru are news websites that fall under the category of news websites, which is the most common category of websites in the data sample. Out of the top 30 websites, 20 of them are news websites. Many of these, such as gorod24.online, bloknot-donetsk.ru, smi2.ru, kerch.tv, primarily focus on local news from a perspective that aligns with the Russian government. There are also several media outlets that cover both Russian and Ukrainian news from a pro-Russian standpoint. For example, ukraina.ru focuses on news related to Ukraine, while ria.ru, russia.tv, rt.com, and rt.ru are prominent platforms for Russian propaganda.[280]

The second category of websites consists of Russian state bodies that are represented among the top 30 most referenced websites. These include the Supreme Court, which can be found on the websites vsrf.ru and supcourt.ru. The Judicial Department at the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation can be accessed via sudrf.ru. Additionally, the Main Office of the Federal Service of Judicial Proceedings can be found on fssprus.ru, and the Public Services portal can be accessed through gosuslugi82.ru. The media websites cite these bodies and promote their services.

Media organisations, similar to state entities, frequently reference websites associated with the administrative bodies of occupied territories and their leading officials. Among the most

[279] Kerch.com.ua (25.01.2024) "Svyatoslav Brusakov is going to broadcast live on VKontakte". Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20240125134406/https://kerch.com.ua/articleview.aspx?id=116870
[280] BBC (06.03.2023) "Russia media guide". Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17840134

frequently cited are websites linked to occupational entities, established in 2014. These include the "People's Council of the Lugansk People’s Republic" (nslnr.su), the "Ministry of Information of Donetsk People’s Republic," the official site of Denis Pushilin, the "Head of the Donetsk People's Republic" (denis-pushilin.ru), and the municipal tourism portal of Sevastopol (sevastopol.info).

V. Analysis of Reach and Networks

A. Telegram channel analysis

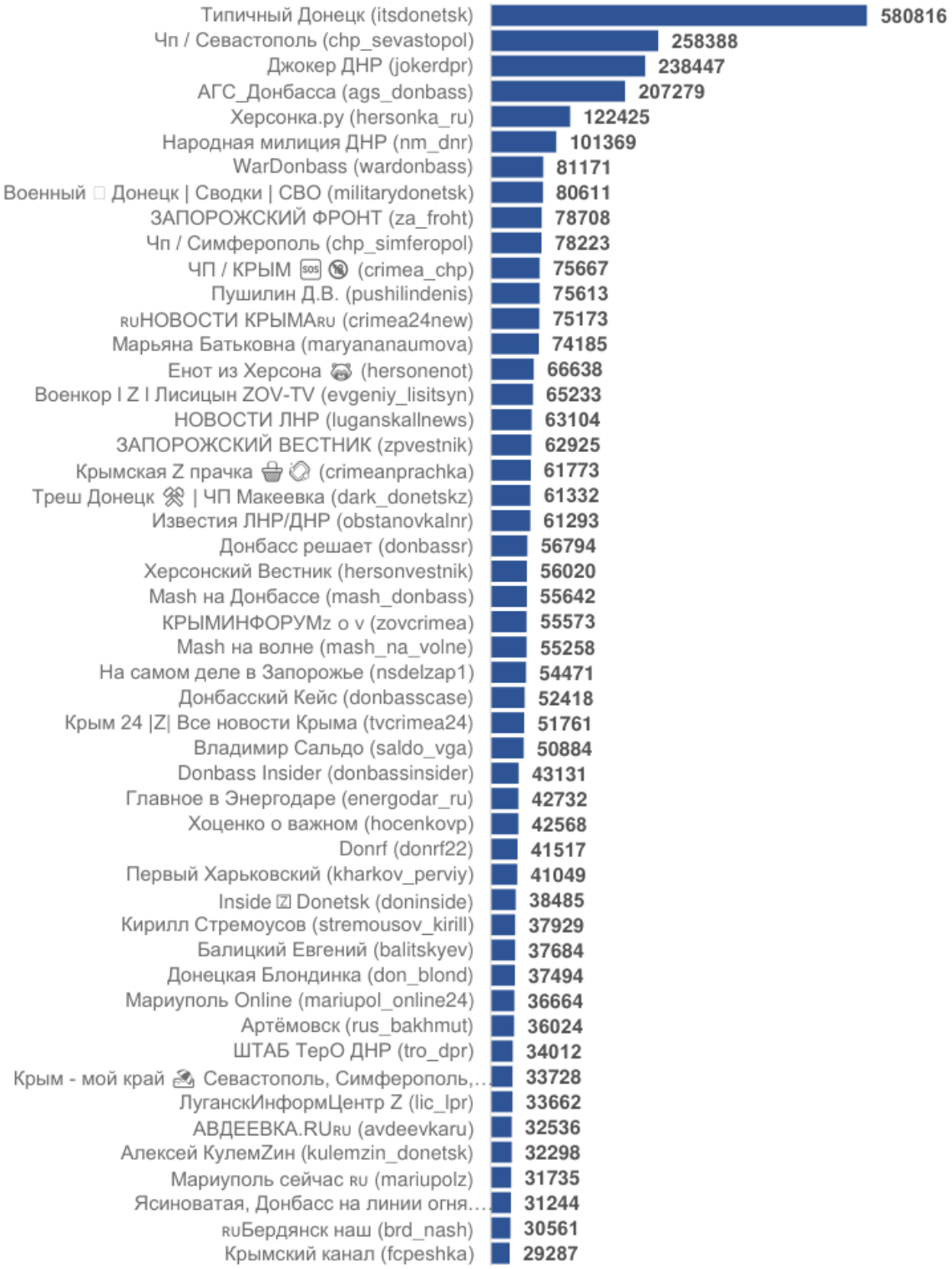
1. Subscriber and view counts

Telegram channels that target the occupied territories of Ukraine typically have an audience similar to other Ukrainian Telegram channels, focusing on local-level news. For instance, according to data from the Telemetrio monitoring platform, the top-ranked channel among the top 100 Ukrainian Telegram channels,[281] "Труха Україна," had 2.6 million subscribers as of January 30, 2024. The channel ranked last in this list, "INFOFAKT УКРАЇНА" had around 300 thousand subscribers.

Most of the top 100 Telegram channels function as news portals, covering national news in Ukraine. However, channels that focus on local issues also feature on this list. For example, “Київ INFO | Новини Україна” ranks 20th and has 850 thousand subscribers. "Одесса INFO Новости" ranks 27th and "Хуевая Одесса" ranks 28th. Both of these channels have over 700 thousand subscribers. Kyiv and Odesa, among Ukraine's largest cities, naturally have numerous audiences in their local Telegram channels.

The audience of the Telegram channels that target the territories occupied by Russia in Ukraine matches the population of these territories. Donetsk, the largest city occupied by Russia, had a population of 953 thousand people before 2014, similar to that of Odesa. However, in the occupied territories, only a few Telegram channels have a number of subscribers comparable to the top 100 channels in Ukraine. Notably, two of these channels are "Типичный Донецк" (itsdonetsk, with 581 thousand subscribers) and "Джокер ДНР" (jokerdpr, with 238 thousand subscribers). The third channel, "Чп / Севастополь" (chp_sevastopol, with 248 thousand subscribers), targets the audience from Sevastopol and Crimea, other significant areas occupied by Russia in 2014.

[281] Telementrio (30.01.2024) "Telegram post: Catalog of Telegram Channels: Ukraine". Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20240130194622/https://telemetr.io/en/channels?countries=ukraine

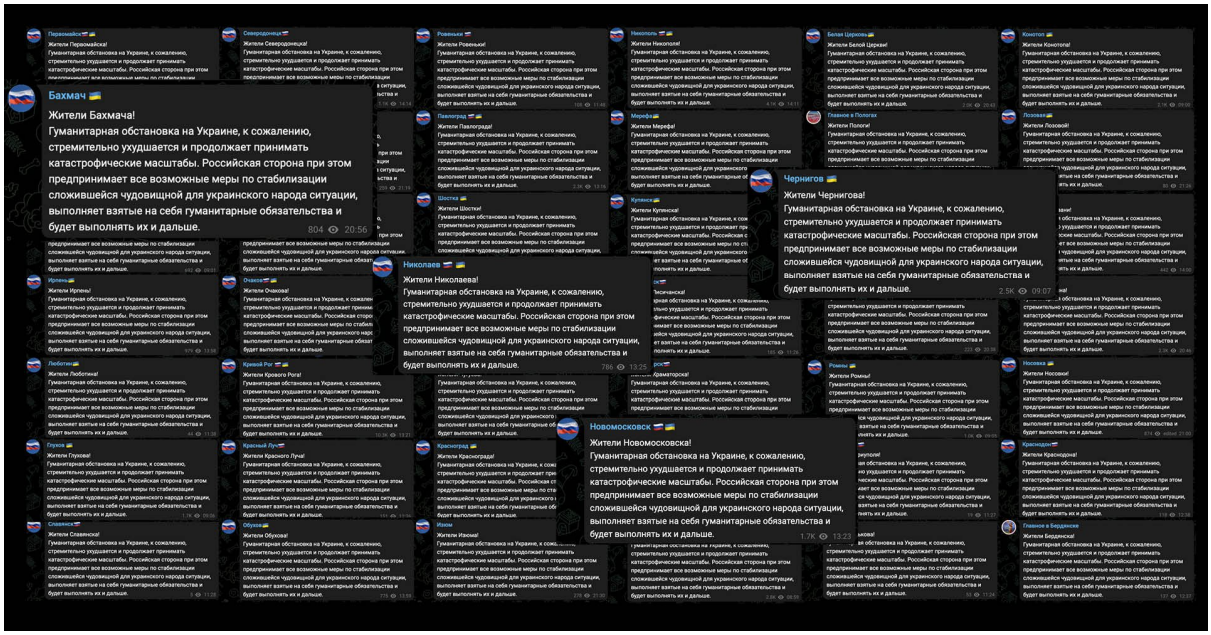


The number of subscribers for 50 Telegram channels targeting occupied territories of Ukraine was obtained on January 30, 2024.

Telegram channels targeting Ukraine's occupied territories can be categorised into two groups. The first and largest group comprises channels that masquerade as news platforms and promote the Russian agenda in these territories. The second group comprises personal Telegram blogs run by occupational officials and administrative bodies. These blogs promote

the Russian agenda and serve as information sources for the channels in the first category. Generally, news channels on Telegram have more subscribers, although there are exceptions.

For instance, according to the Texty data journalism team,[282] Russians have created multiple Telegram channels since February 2022 that share the same profile picture, uniform nicknames, and channel names. These channels repost identical content for various Ukrainian territories. During and after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russians set up such Telegram channels for 13 oblasts in Ukraine, stretching west to Zhytomyr. In addition to the uniformity of names and nicknames, these Telegram channels usually had the same profile picture. Within local Telegram channels, there is a network of channels with names ending in _ru or _rus. These channels are titled "Главное в …" ("The main news in…") followed by the name of a specific locality. Here examples of some of the Telegram channels of this network: "Главное в Геническе" (Genichesk_ru), "Главное в Херсоне" (hercon_ru), "Главное в Мелитополе" (melitopol_ru), etc.



Uniform posts in the network of the pro-Russian Telegram channels. Image by Texty.[283]

Such Telegram channels usually had about a thousand subscribers, and they shared the same posts in a coordinated manner, leaving little room for local news.[284] However, most of these channels were shut down following Ukraine's counter-offensive in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions in the fall of 2023. Despite the temporary occupation of certain Ukrainian territories, Telegram channels in this network continue to operate. These channels serve as tools for spreading disinformation and controlling the media space in Russia. Despite having a

[282]Texty.org.ua (15.11.2022) "Telegram Occupation. How Russia Wanted to Breed a Media Monster, but Ended up with a Paper Tiger". Available at: https://texty.org.ua/projects/108161/telegram-occupation-how-russia-wanted-breed-media-monster-ended-paper-tiger/

[283] Ibid.

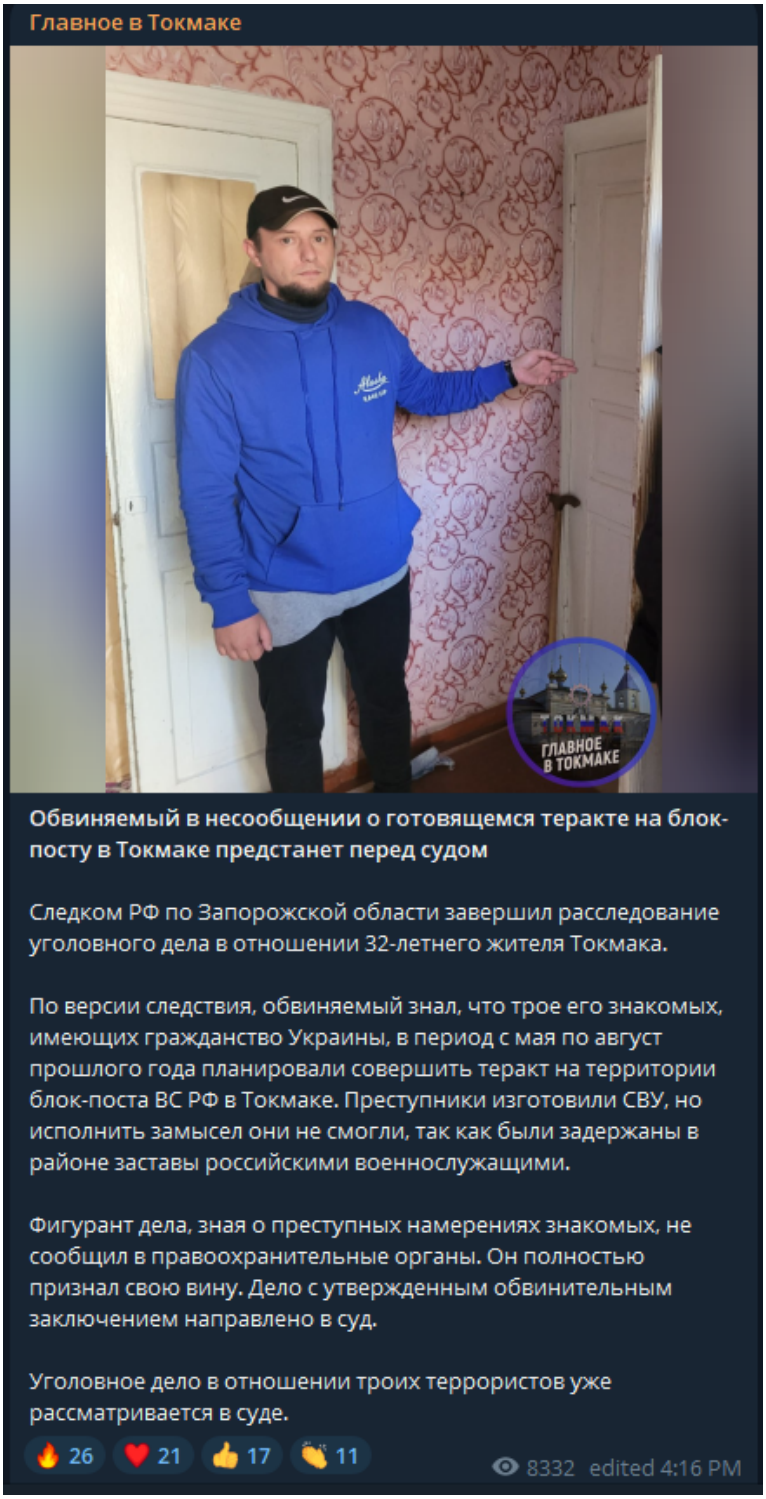
[284] Detector Media (14.12.2022) "Kremlin Hydra": 300 Telegram channels that poison Ukrainian information space. Available at: https://detector.media/monitorynh-internetu/article/205954/2022-12-14-kremlivska-gidra-300-telegram-kanaliv-yaki-otruyuyut-ukrainskyy-infoprostir/

relatively small audience due to the focus on hyperlocal communities, the local Telegram channels in the occupied territories are quite effective in promoting a pro-Russian agenda.
It is evident that Telegram channels targeting the occupied territories of Ukraine play a significant role in the information ecosystem of the occupied territories of Ukraine. While not reaching the vast numbers seen in the top Ukrainian channels, the audience for such channels still represents a substantial segment of the population in these areas. The dual nature of these channels, serving as news outlets and platforms for pushing a pro-Russian agenda, highlights the complex information warfare. The fluctuation in subscriber numbers and the eventual shutdown of many channels following Ukrainian counter-offensives reflect the transient nature of such information channels in conflict zones, where control of territory and information spaces are closely contested.

2. Influence and engagement

Telegram channels focusing on the occupied regions of Ukraine have successfully garnered significant followings, leveraging their platforms to disseminate tailored content that resonates with local audiences. These channels, operating within the occupied territories, cater specifically for the needs and contexts of their viewers, employing a communication style that directly appeals to them and indoctrinates locals with the Russian agenda. The predominance of such channels in the occupied areas may partly stem from the restricted access to alternative news sources, with the information space largely dominated by narratives favourable to Russia. While it's challenging to quantify the exact level of engagement these channels command, their presence across a spectrum of popularity and activity levels indicates a diverse ecosystem of content tailored to the occupied territories. The engagement metrics of these channels could serve as indicators of their influence, though the true impact also hinges on the content's relevance and the manner of its presentation.

The typical views-to-subscribers rate for Telegram channels indicates that only about 30% of subscribers view the posts. For example, in a weekly analysis of Telegram channels in the Zaporizhzhia region, we analysed 148 unique posts. The average view-to-subscriber ratio for these posts was 31.2%. The likelihood of a post receiving a higher number of views increases if it is shared across the pro-Russian Telegram network. Posts that receive the most shares often are frontline events and criminal news, shared within the network of the pro-Russian Telegram channels to promote the effectiveness of the Russian military or law enforcement and intimidate the opponents of Russia. However, when a post is shared by multiple channels, attributing the increase in views to the original channel becomes challenging. This is because the surge in viewership numbers results from the post circulated across various channels.



The post shared on the Telegram channel "Главное в Токмаке" on November 1, 2023,[285] reported the arrest of a man who allegedly planned a "terrorist attack against Russian military" in Tokmak, Zaporizhzhia oblast. Due to extensive sharing among pro-Russian Telegram channels, the post received a significant number of viewers, almost reaching the number of subscribers of the Telegram channels at the time the post was created.

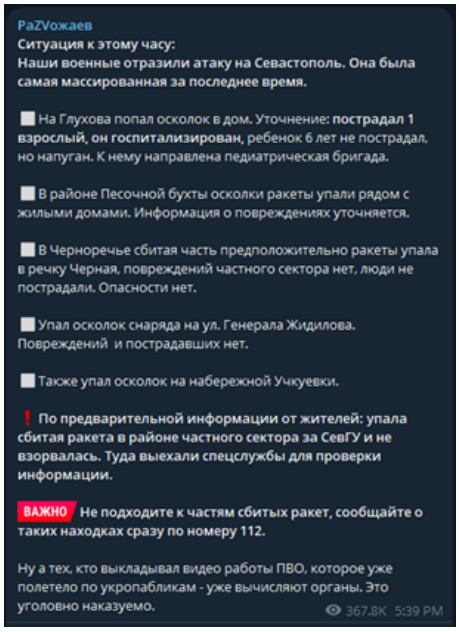
[285] Telegram post "Главное в Токмаке" (01.11.2023). Available at: https://t.me/tokmak_ru/7736

Sharing posts among pro-Russian Telegram channels does not necessarily lead to increased comments but results in more views for each post. An analysis of 148 posts from the Zaporizhzhia region revealed that, on average, only 0.62 percent of viewers leave comments on the posts. It's important to note that the posts selected are those that garner the most comments and cover pressing issues related to the frontline, politics, and local events, which typically incite active discussions on social media. However, the highest comment-to-view ratios were observed in channels with fewer subscribers, such as “МДК Запорожье”,[286] which has 1.8 thousand subscribers, yet the comment-to-view ratio in the analysed data set did not exceed 2 percent. A comment-to-view ratio of less than one percent is typical for Telegram channels and should not be interpreted as an indication of Telegram's limited influence on the audience in Ukraine's occupied territories.

3. Content analysis

Authors of content in pro-Russian Telegram channels often employ strategies, methods, and messages that align with key Russian propaganda outlets. These tactics and methods are either adapted to fit the local context or used as is, and proliferate within local contexts. Overall, the messages and propaganda tactics remain consistent across various levels. It is a common practice in pro-Russian Telegram channels to edit or remove unfavourable comments and replace posts and media content to address any dissatisfaction expressed by the local population and foster a sense of optimism and support for the occupational authorities. Consequently, one of the most frequent sources of dissatisfaction in these Telegram channels and comments is the reaction to successful attacks on Russian positions in the occupied territories of Ukraine. In such cases the dissatisfaction is often directed towards the Armed Forces of Ukraine and NATO members. Publications highlighting the successful attacks by the Armed Forces of Ukraine aim to create a sense of unity among the audience by fueling hatred towards a common enemy. These publications also serve to mobilise the audience, directing their attention towards potential traitors among locals. In this context, such content often promotes local occupational officials and presents a favourable image of "news-like" pro-Russian Telegram channels.

[286] Telegram post "MDK Zaporozhye" (03.11.2023) Available at: https://t.me/MDK_Zaporozhye/1291



The occupational "governor of Sevastopol" Mikhail Razvozhayev, issued intimidations,[287] warning about potential persecution for individuals who shared videos depicting Ukrainian attacks on Russian positions in Sevastopol.

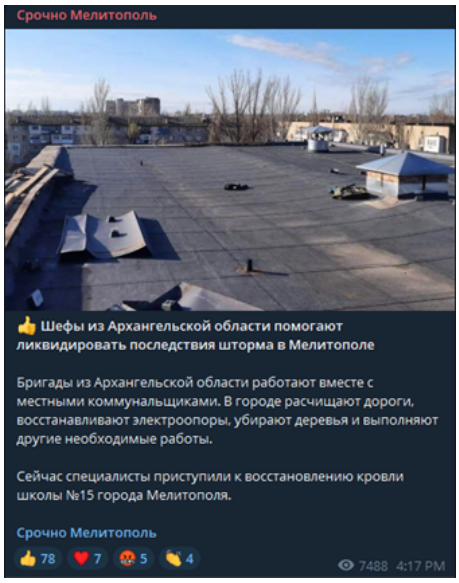
A former U.S. official has been accused[288] of encouraging attacks against Russia and making promises to escalate attacks against Ukraine in response to potential attacks by the USA on Russia.

Authors of content in pro-Russian Telegram channels often strive to portray details of the aftermath of attacks on the occupied territories, aiming to accuse Ukraine of war crimes and targeting civilian infrastructure.[289] [290] They frequently use images depicting bloodshed, aligning with the Russian propaganda narrative that emphasises Ukraine's alleged bombardment of

[287] Telegram post "PaZVожаев" (04.01.2024). Available at: https://t.me/razvozhaev/5084
[288] Telegram post "Инцидент Крым ДТП ЧП" (18.01.2024). Available at: https://t.me/badcrimea/23905
[289] Telegram post "Типичный Донецк" (16.01.2024). Available at: https://t.me/itsdonetsk/121841
[290] Telegram post "ЧП Донецк Z" (15.01.2024). Available at: https://t.me/chp_donetska/76140

Donetsk over the years.[291] This portrayal serves to justify Russia's aggressive intervention in the conflict.

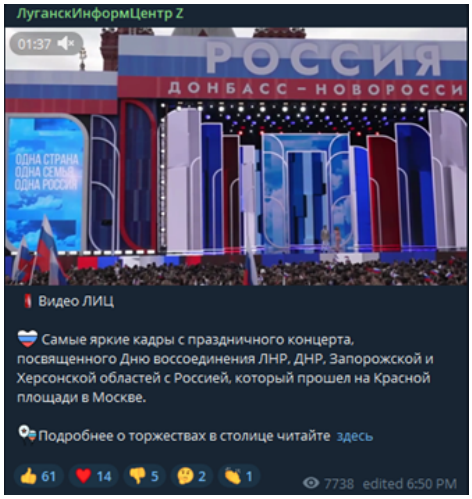
Another prevalent narrative promoted by pro-Russian Telegram channels in the occupied territories is the sense of unity with Russia. This narrative is reinforced through posts that highlight the involvement of Russian curators from different regions, who are depicted as providing assistance in restoring local infrastructure or sharing their experiences with local collaborators.



An example of a post in Telegram showcases the support provided by "shefs" from Arkhangelsk to the people of Melitopol in countering a storm.[292]

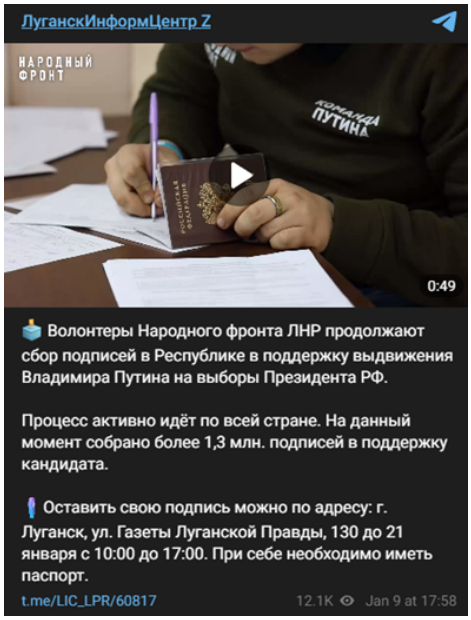
The narrative on Russian unity has another dimension, incited by sham elections and referendums, arranged in the occupied territories of Ukraine and anniversaries of such dates like annexation of Ukrainian territories[293].

[291] Detector Media (06.04.2022) "Eight years". Deconstructing the most popular myth of Russian propaganda. Available at: https://ms.detector.media/in-english/post/29297/2022-04-06-eight-years-deconstructing-the-most-popular-myth-of-russian-propaganda/
[292] Telegram post "Срочно Мелитополь" (30.11.2023). Available at: https://t.me/srochno_melitopol/10047
[293] Telegram post "ЧП / КРЫМ" (24.01.2024). Available at: https://t.me/crimea_chp/25249



A video from a concert held in Moscow to commemorate the anniversary of the sham referendum on the "unification" of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts with Russia.[294]

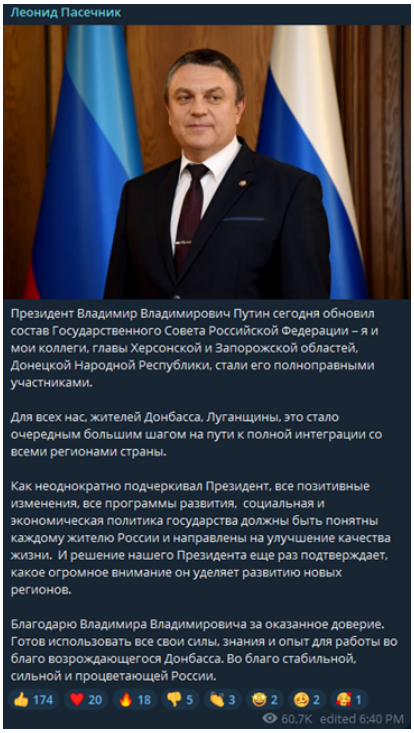
The most recent focus within the narrative of the "unification with Russia" is the upcoming presidential elections in Russia, scheduled to take place in March 2024. Authors of the Telegram posts actively share stories about the locals who support Russia and “cannot do without Putin.” Under such posts in Telegram channels where comments are allowed, the audience expresses two types of comments. The first type is unconditional support for Putin, while the second type reflects boredom with Russian politics, where the outcome of the elections is considered highly predictable.



A post in Telegram discusses the collection of signatures in the occupied territories of Ukraine in support of the nomination of Vladimir Putin as the President of Russia.[295]

[294] Telegram post "ЛуганскИнформЦентр Z" (30.09.2023). Available at: https://t.me/LIC_LPR/56064
[295] Telegram post “ЛуганскИнформЦентр” (09.01.2024). Available at: https://t.me/LIC_LPR/60817

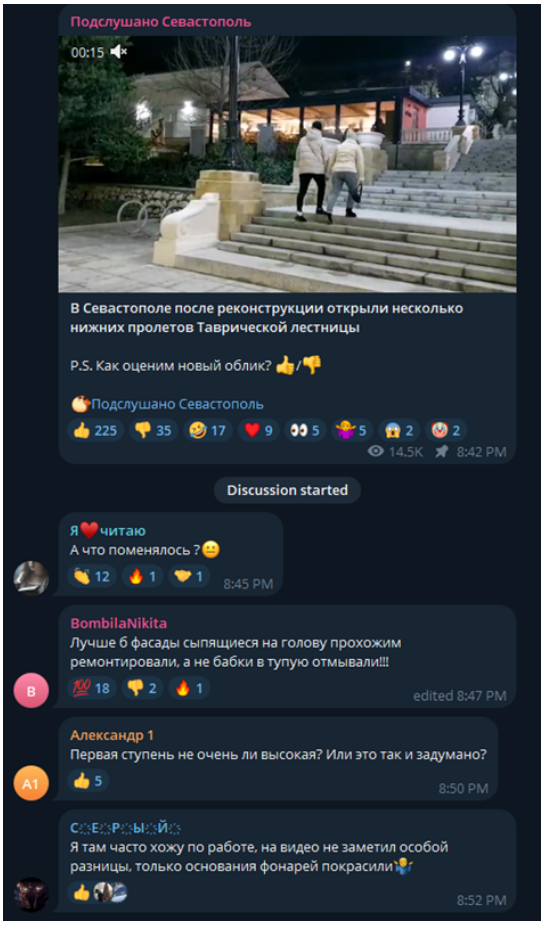
The occupational officials portrayed in pro-Russian Telegram channels are depicted as unwaveringly loyal to Russia, making every effort to facilitate the unification of the territories they control with Russia.



Post claims that Putin has appointed the occupational "heads" of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, the "Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics" as full in the State Council of Russia. Which is a significant step towards the integration of these regions with Russia in terms of development programs and improving the quality of life.[296]

Regarding local issues, Telegram channels predominantly share reactive communication by officials. These communications aim to address locals' concerns and discomfort and provide reassurance to calm their anxiety. The reasons for anxiety are uniform in the territories occupied in 2014 and after 2022. They usually concern the local infrastructure. Among such problems are: water supply,[297] garbage collection[298] and central heating,[299] electricity issues, pensions payment delays[300] and shaping public reactions to natural disasters.[301] Occupational officials commonly employ such communication formulas in response to accidents, which involve blaming lower-level officials and communal services workers[302] while promising future resolutions to the issues at hand.

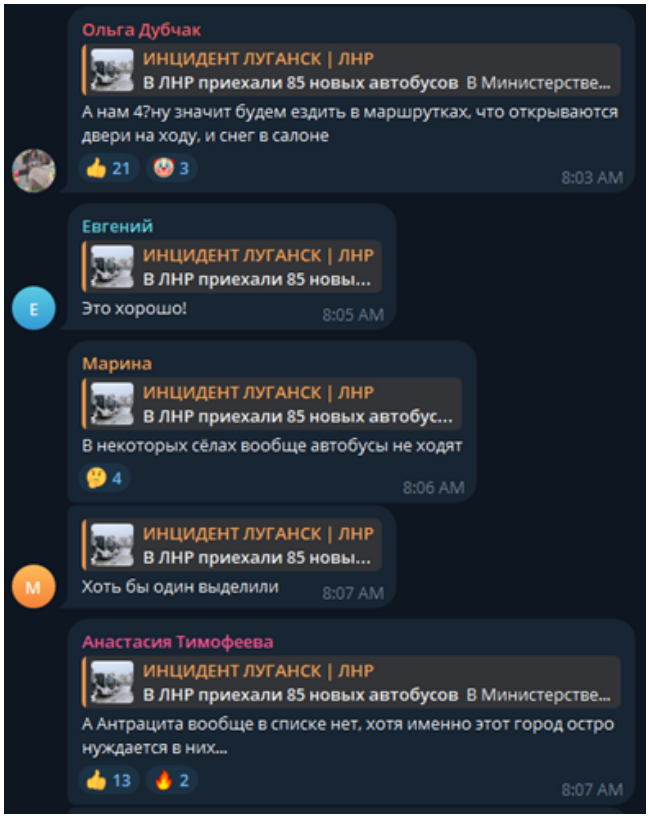
[296] Telegram post "Леонид Пасечник" (12.12.2023). Available at: https://t.me/glava_lnr_info/1925
[297] Telegram post "PaZVожаев" (21.01.2024). Available at: https://t.me/razvozhaev/5217
[298] Telegram post "Типичный Донецк" (15.01.2024). Available at: https://t.me/itsdonetsk/128756
[299] Telegram post "ЖИЗНЬ В ДНР" (15.01.2024). Available at: https://t.me/lifednr/8068
[300] Telegram post "ЖИЗНЬ В ДНР" (13.01.2024). Available at: https://t.me/lifednr/8024
[301] Telegram post ЧП Донецк (15.01.2024). Available at: https://t.me/chp_donetska/76109
[302] Telegram post "ЖИЗНЬ В ДНР" (08.01.2024). Available at: https://t.me/lifednr/7882



Commenters on the Telegram post discussing the restoration of stairs in Crimea express their scepticism, stating that they see no noticeable difference and suspect that local officials may have embezzled funds allocated for the project.[303]

Occupational officials utilize proactive communication to report on successful infrastructure renovations, but some commenters on Telegram express suspicion, make accusations of corruptions, and subsequently increase dissatisfaction among those not directly benefiting from the improvements. One issue with the communication of occupational officials on Telegram is their failure to engage in policy decision discussions with the locals and present their rationales, often providing bullet points without proper explanations and communication after the decision is signed. Due to the lack of transparent communication, local decisions often come as surprises to the residents, leading them to attribute corrupt intentions to the officials.[304]

[303] Telegram post “Подслушано Севастополь” (28.01.2024). Available at: https://t.me/podslushano_92/14075
[304] Telegram post "НОВОСТИ ЛНР (26.01.2024)". Available at: https://t.me/luganskallnews/15820



Readers of the Telegram channel covering news in the occupied part of Luhansk oblast express discontent over the fact that some cities have received electric buses while others have been excluded from the list.[305]

Russian propaganda promoted through Telegram channels in the occupied territories of Ukraine predominantly focuses on narratives that align with the Kremlin's strategic interests. These messages often emphasise the legitimacy and permanence of Russian control, portraying Russia as a liberator and protector of the local populations against a purportedly hostile and illegitimate Ukrainian government. Additionally, these channels may also engage in fear mongering about the consequences of resisting Russian control, including threats of violence or reprisals against those considered disloyal or supportive of Ukraine. Overall, the messaging strategy of Russian propaganda in the occupied territories appears multifaceted, aimed at legitimising the occupation, demoralising resistance, and fostering a sense of inevitability and acquiescence among the local populations regarding Russian control.

4. Reach via citations

Telegram is a crucial tool used to manage the flow of information within Ukraine's occupied territories (refer to Part 1 of this section for more details). Telegram channels that aim at the audience in these areas are highly interconnected. They operate as a distinct ecosystem that is intertwined with Russian and pro-Russian media outlets and other Telegram channels (See Appendix 2).

[305] Telegram post "ЧП | ИНЦИДЕНТ | ЛУГАНСК (23.01.2024)". Available at: https://t.me/incidentchat/273384

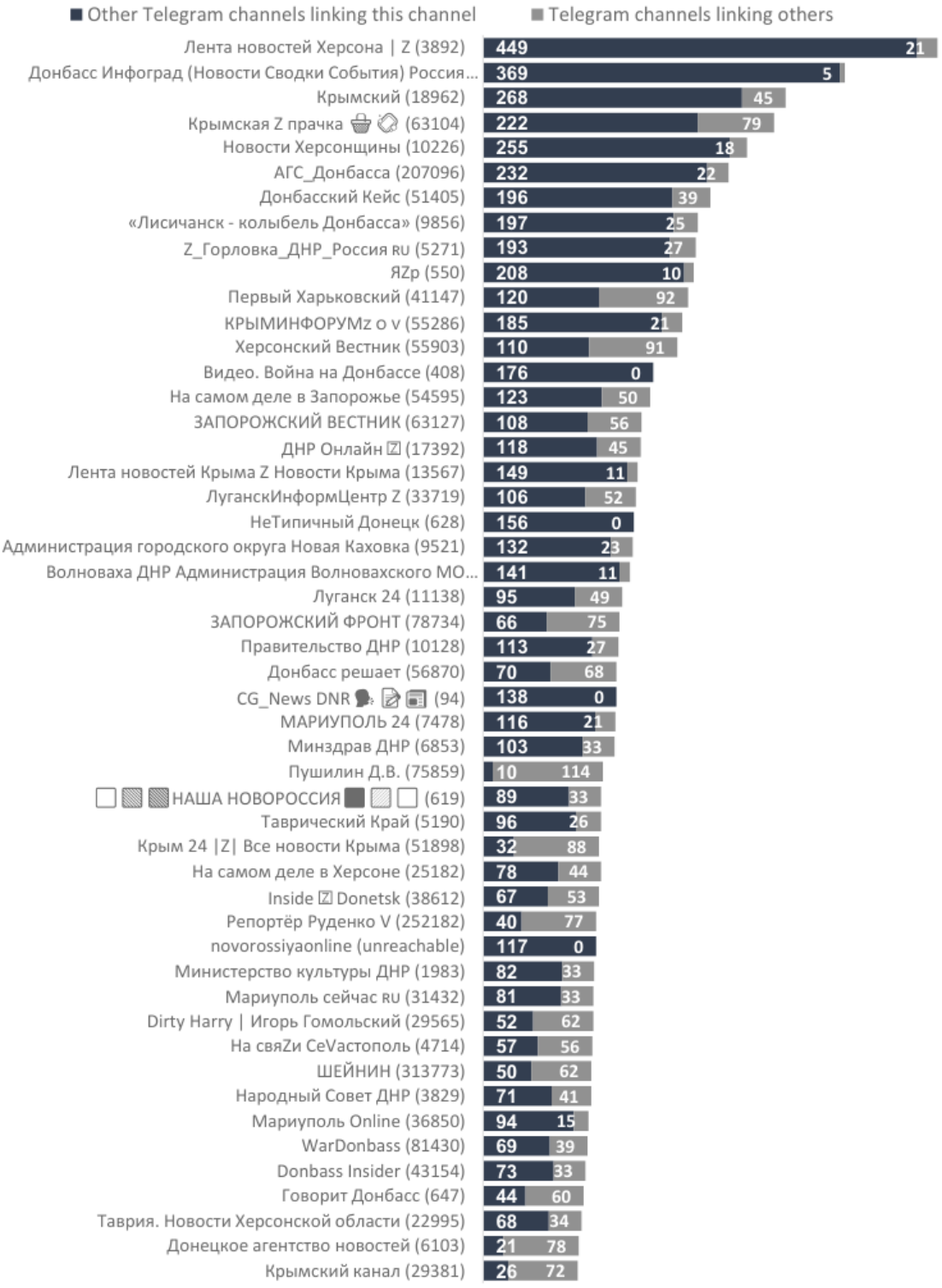
5. Methodology overview for a network of Telegram channels creation

This overview provides a structured approach to mapping the network of Telegram channel domains, highlighting the interconnectedness and influence within the TOT media space. The date range for data collection includes the period from 20 November to 20 December 2023.

- Initial Compilation of Telegram Channels:
  - We began with a list of 345 Telegram channels, identified through the ongoing monitoring of media in the Temporarily Occupied Territories (TOT) since the full-scale invasion.
  - Using Open Measures, we queried these channels for posts containing URL links to other Telegram channels, social media accounts, and websites.
- **Defining "Outbound" Links.** We refer to the links from our initial set of channels to external sources as "outbound" links.
- Selection and Analysis of top Telegram channels:
  - From the initial list, we selected the 200 most active channels.
  - Using Telemetr.io, we analysed these channels to collect "inbound" links, where these channels were mentioned or referenced by other Telegram channels.
- **Data collection and relationship mapping.** In total, 21,935 relationships between channels were identified and recorded.
- Normalisation and aggregation of data:
  - Due to the technical differences in collecting inbound and outbound links, we normalised the weighting of these relationships before aggregating the two datasets.
  - The weighting reflects the frequency of a channel mentioning or forwarding content from another.
- **Filtering for the Final Map.** The final network map only includes Telegram channels with a minimum of 5 connections.

Generally, in the selected data, only 0.08 per cent of Telegram channels increase their outbound links. The proportion of Telegram channels that are referenced by others is higher than the number they reference.

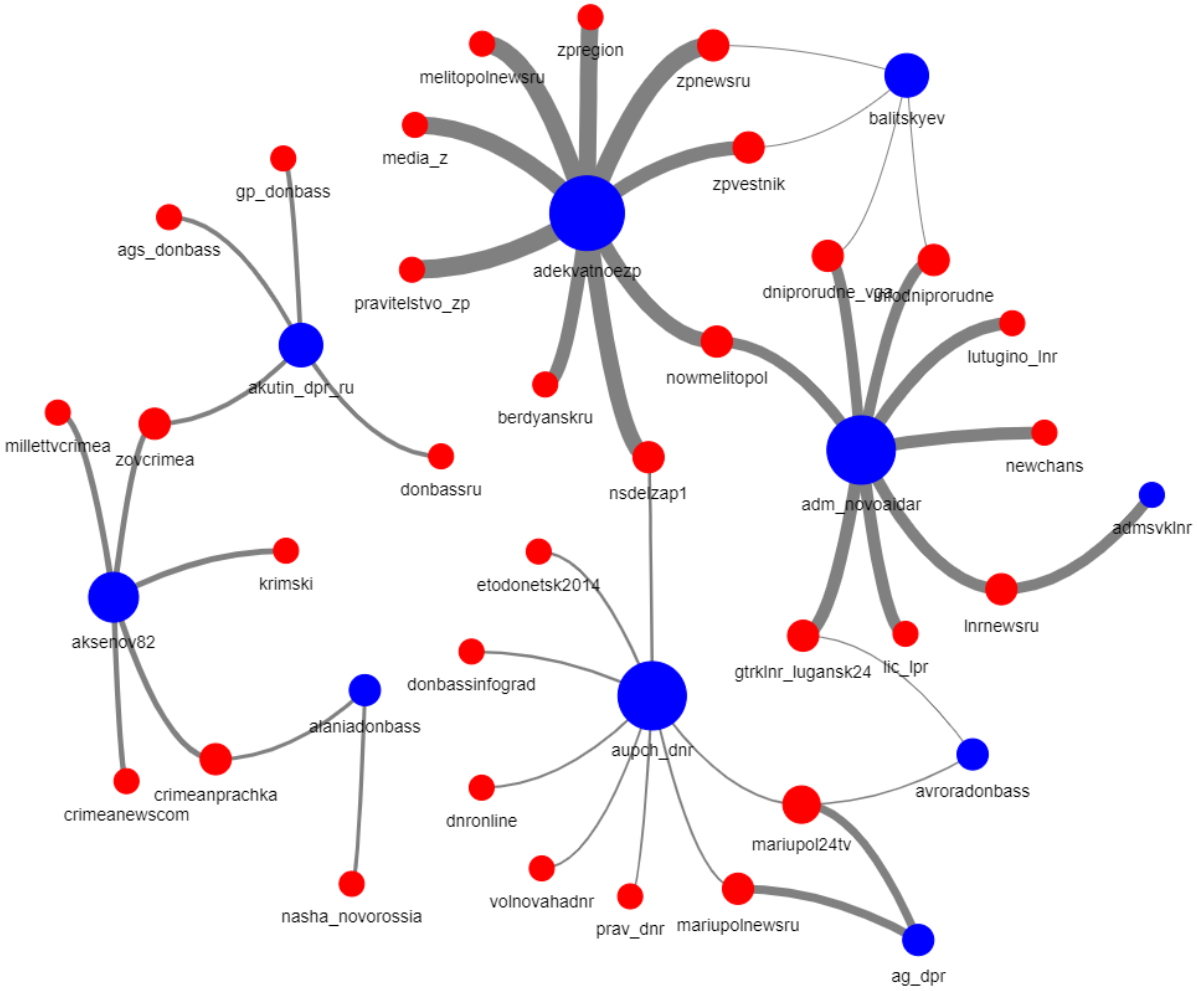
The initial list of 345 Telegram channels and those with a higher sum of in and out references typically have more links directed to them compared to other Telegram channels. The most likely reason why selected Telegram channels have more links than the number of channels they link to is because most of these channels are local. They often serve as a news source for other Telegram channels, despite not being credible news sources. These channels are usually anonymous and tend to have a pro-Russian orientation.



Links to the top 50 Telegram channels with the number of subscribers in parentheses. Subscribers number obtained on January 26, 2024.

Another observation of the key Telegram channels that connect Telegram channels in other occupied territories of Ukraine in addition to local news sources are local occupational officials. This illustrates a network chart of top 50 Telegram channels and top 10 channels they refer to. These top 10 cited sources include: Адекватное Запорожье (adekvatnoezp, 277

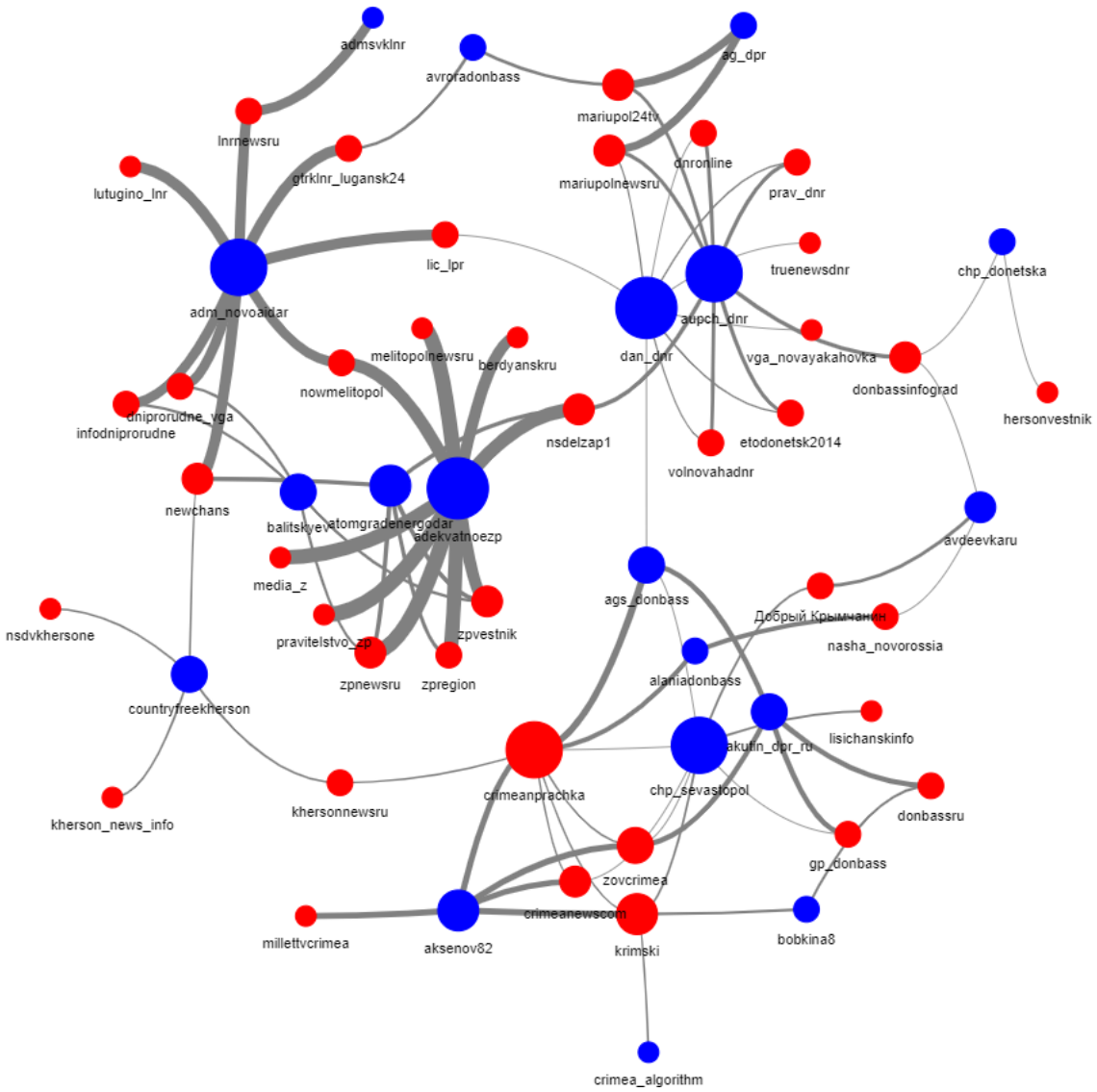
subscribers), Администрация Новоайдарского муниципального округа (adm_novoaidar, 1911 subscribers), Администрация Свердловского муниципального округа ЛНР (admsvklnr, 2104 subscribers), Администрация Главы ДНР (ag_dpr, 24083 subscribers), Аксёнов Z 82 (aksenov82, 135746 subscribers), AKUTIN.DPR.RU (akutin_dpr_ru, 1969 subscribers), МОО "Землячество Алании" (alaniadonbass, 708 subscribers), Омбудсмен ДНР Дарья Морозова (aupch_dnr, 1686 subscribers), студия "Аврора" (avroradonbass, 395 subscribers), and Балицкий Евгений (balitskyev, 37693 subscribers). It is noteworthy that six of these Telegram channels belong to occupational administration officials, while the remaining four, Адекватное Запорожье, AKUTIN.DPR.RU, МОО "Землячество Алании", and студия "Аврора", are local news Telegram channels.



*A network consisting of the top 10 Telegram channels, which reference the 50 Telegram channels with the highest numbers of connections. In this visualization, websites represented by **red circles** only refer to other websites within the subsample of data. The websites represented by **blue circles** are either exclusively referenced by other sites, or they both reference and are referenced by the websites within the subsample. Social media, url-shorteners and video-blogging platforms excluded. This network was created using the pyviz.*

The statement suggests that the top 10 Telegram channels focusing on Crimea appear to be isolated from channels in other occupied territories, based on references within the 50 most connected channels. However, this conclusion is incorrect. While the network analysis of the top 10 channels for Crimea reveals only one link to AKUTIN.DPR.RU from Donetsk, expanding the analysis to include more channels from the top 50 shows that Crimean channels are not

isolated. By incorporating an additional 10 channels frequently linked by hyperlinks, it becomes evident that Crimean Telegram channels are indeed well-connected to local websites in other occupied areas of Ukraine, disproving the initial concern of isolation. Telegram channels not only have strong connections within their respective regions but also show interconnections with Telegram channels from other oblasts.



*A network consisting of the top 20 Telegram channels, which reference the 50 Telegram channels with the highest numbers of connections. In this visualization, websites represented by **red circles** only refer to other websites within the subsample of data. The websites represented by **blue circles** are either exclusively referenced by other sites, or they both reference and are referenced by the websites within the subsample. Social media, url-shorteners and video-blogging platforms excluded. This network was created using the pyviz. This network was created using the pyviz.*

In the composition of the Telegram network in the occupied territories of Ukraine, Russian Telegram channels play a secondary role as a connecting element. However, this should not raise doubts about the pro-Russian loyalty ingrained in the content of the local Telegram channels. References to the notorious propagandist Telegram channels and Russian media are present in deeper layers of connections among the Telegram channels researched. Links to the Russian and local pro-Russian media also serve as an instrument of indoctrination of

the population of the occupied territories. (For in-depth analysis of website citations specifically targeting the TOTs, see Part VIII.)

VI. Conclusions

1) The centralisation of the media landscape in the so-called DNR and LNR was conducted through the creation of the media holdings - the Republican Media Holding (RMKh) and Luganmedia, respectively, aimed at coordinating the media agenda and most importantly channelling the funding from the Kremlin. Since its creation in 2017, the RMKh has been actively facilitating the Kremlin's activities in the Donbas by encouraging passportisation, encouraging the residents to participate in the illegal annexation referendum in September 2022 and the local elections a year later. The Luganmedia holding was created three years later, and, unlike the RMKh maintaining control over print media outlets only, included broadcast media. Yet there have been few traces of its activity in open sources, suggesting its limited role as a mere intermediary between the local media outlets and the Russian federal government.

In Crimea, however, given its swift annexation into Russia, the local media outlets were directly subordinated to the Kremlin and no media holding was created. The local media was instead centralised under the large television and radio companies, such as TRK Krym, which was founded and is controlled by the Ministry of internal policy, information, and communication of Crimea.

2) Interesting trends can be observed regarding the personnel composition of the media outlets in the occupied Donbas. The local employees can be divided into 2 sub-categories: 1) the ones that previously worked in media and 2) the ones unrelated to the industry. The latter likely secured their posts thanks to good relations with the occupation authorities that were on the lookout for employees given a massive outflow of media professionals starting from 2014. The local people who had previously worked in media either remained in their posts or saw significant career opportunities, being promoted to editorial positions (like Tatyana Mikhaylova, editor-in-chief of Oplot TV, who worked in a wedding magazine before 2014) or managerial/government positions (like Svetlana Mamontova mentioned above or Maya Pirogova, who had been a little-known regional journalist before and joined the information ministry and the delegation of the so-called DNR at the Minsk talks afterward). Due to a shortage of media specialists, the occupation authorities also had to resort to training and recruiting campaigns in local universities as well as creating "media schools" to train young, frequently underage students to become reporters. This is particularly evident in the case of Mariupol 24 TV channel, with most of its reporters either recent graduates or students at local universities.

3) The ministries dealing with the information policy were formed shortly after the occupation of Crimea, LNR and DNR. While the digital ministry of occupied Kherson oblast is rather active, the information ministry of occupied Zaporizhzhia oblast seems to only exist "on paper" and does not appear to be active or particularly influential. The oversight over the information policy in TOTs is reportedly conducted by the Presidential Administration and in particular its first deputy chief of staff Sergei Kiriyenko.

4) After Prigozhin's failed coup and subsequent death, the structural integrity of both his military and media assets fell apart, but the Kremlin likely managed to overtake and maintain at least some chunks of his former media empire. For instance, while Malkevich's connection to Prigozhin remains uncertain, he continued to operate successfully in TOTs,

organising media training and recruiting young people to promote Russian propaganda. These activities are likely extensively funded by Malkevich's New Media Development Fund. Similarly to Mariupol 24, the team of the ZaMedia holding, created by Malkevich, consists of two types of people: 1) experienced media managers and journalists that came from Russia or operated previously in TOTs occupied since 2014 (Crimea), and 2) local teenagers.

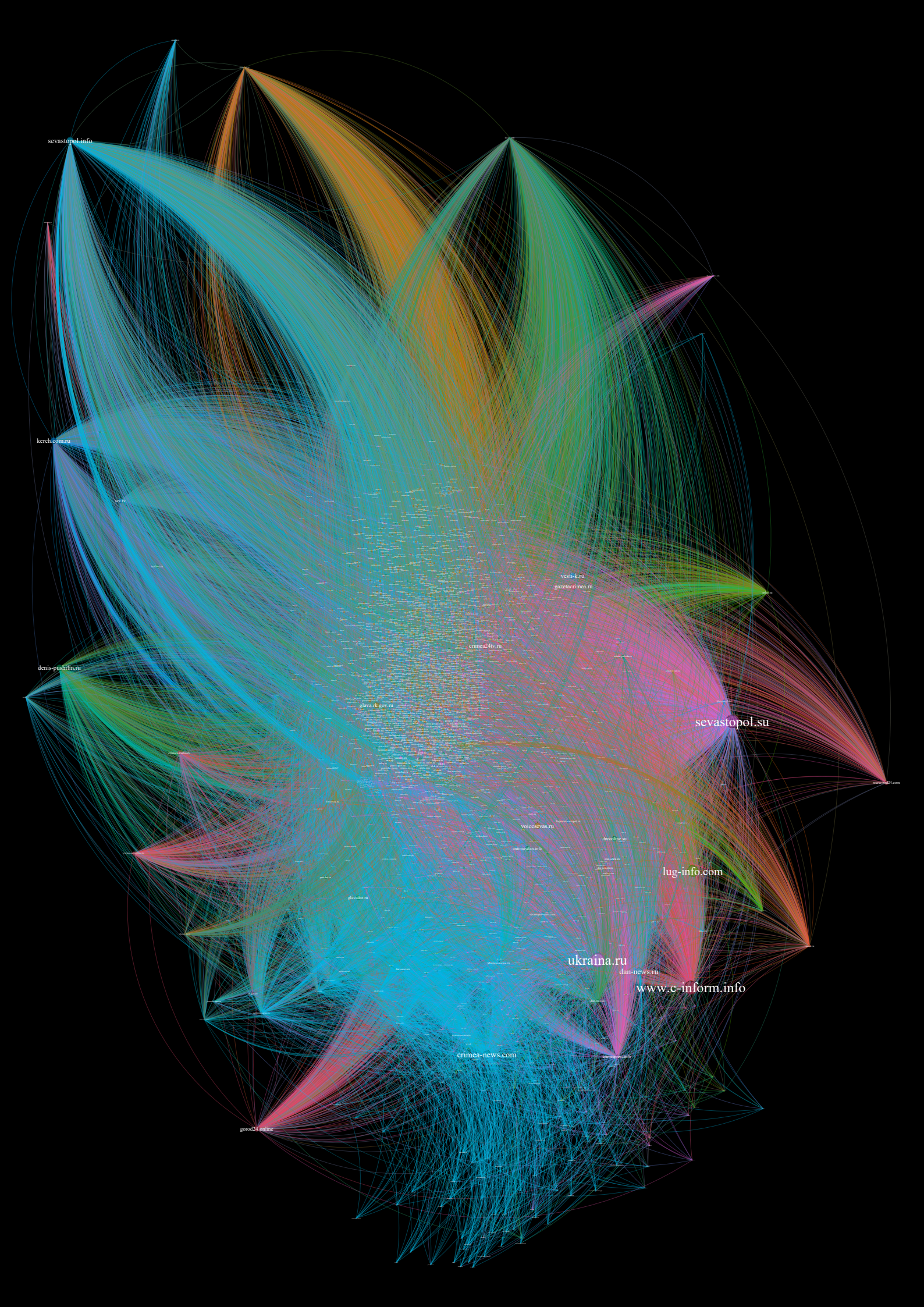
5) Physically capturing, reconfiguring equipment at TV and radio stations, or reissuing newspapers, the Russian occupiers, after the start of a full-scale invasion, initially used the same "methods" as during the so-called "Crimean Spring" in 2014. This was done to establish full control over the media landscape of the occupied territories and to start "feeding" the local population with Russian propaganda products as soon as possible.

6) A quantitative analysis shows that the pro-Russian Telegram channels and media outlets targeting the TOTs are highly interconnected and operate as a distinct ecosystem intertwined with other Russian and pro-Russian media outlets and Telegram channels. Additionally, the key Telegram channels most connected to other channels are run by the local occupational officials. While Russian Telegram channels play a secondary role as a connecting element, this should not raise doubts about the pro-Russian loyalty ingrained in the content of the local channels, with references to the notorious propagandist Telegram channels and Russian media present in deeper layers of connections among the Telegram channels researched.

Appendix 1

Network of the pro-Russian websites, targeting the occupied territories of Ukraine

The chart depicts a network of websites related to the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. The chart depicts 232,825 relationships between web domains. It showcases this network's interconnectedness, digital influences, and content dissemination strategies. The methodology used involves leveraging open-source intelligence (OSINT) and analytical tools, including the collection of domain names from the Neo4j database, extraction of the top 50 domains through the Open Measures data provider company, and analysis using Ahrefs for inbound and referring domains, as well as outbound links.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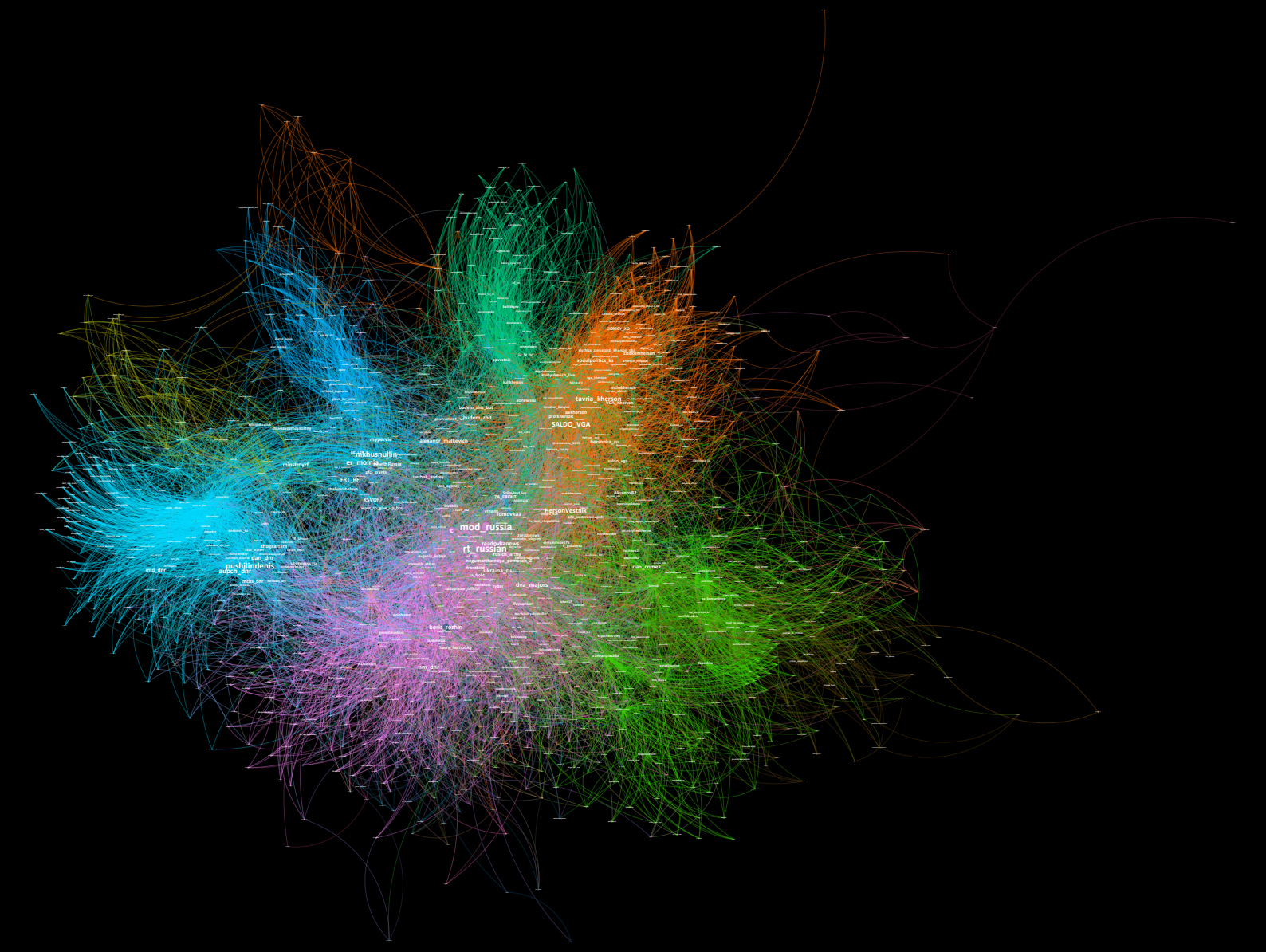
antimaydan.info
lug-info.com
glavadur.ru
ukraina.ru
dan-news.ru
www.c-inform.info
crimea-news.com
gorod24.online

Appendix 2

Network of the pro-Russian Telegram channels, targeting the occupied territories of Ukraine

The network chart showcases the interconnectedness of Telegram channels within the Temporarily Occupied Territories (TOT) media space. It includes a compilation of 345 initial Telegram channels monitored in the TOT, with outbound links to external sources and inbound links from other channels. The analysis involved selecting the top 200 active channels, identifying and recording 21,935 relationships between channels, normalising and aggregating the data, and filtering for channels with a minimum of 5 connections to create the final network map. The methodology combines data collection, analysis using Telemetr.io, and relationship mapping to provide insights into the network dynamics of Telegram channels in the TOT context.



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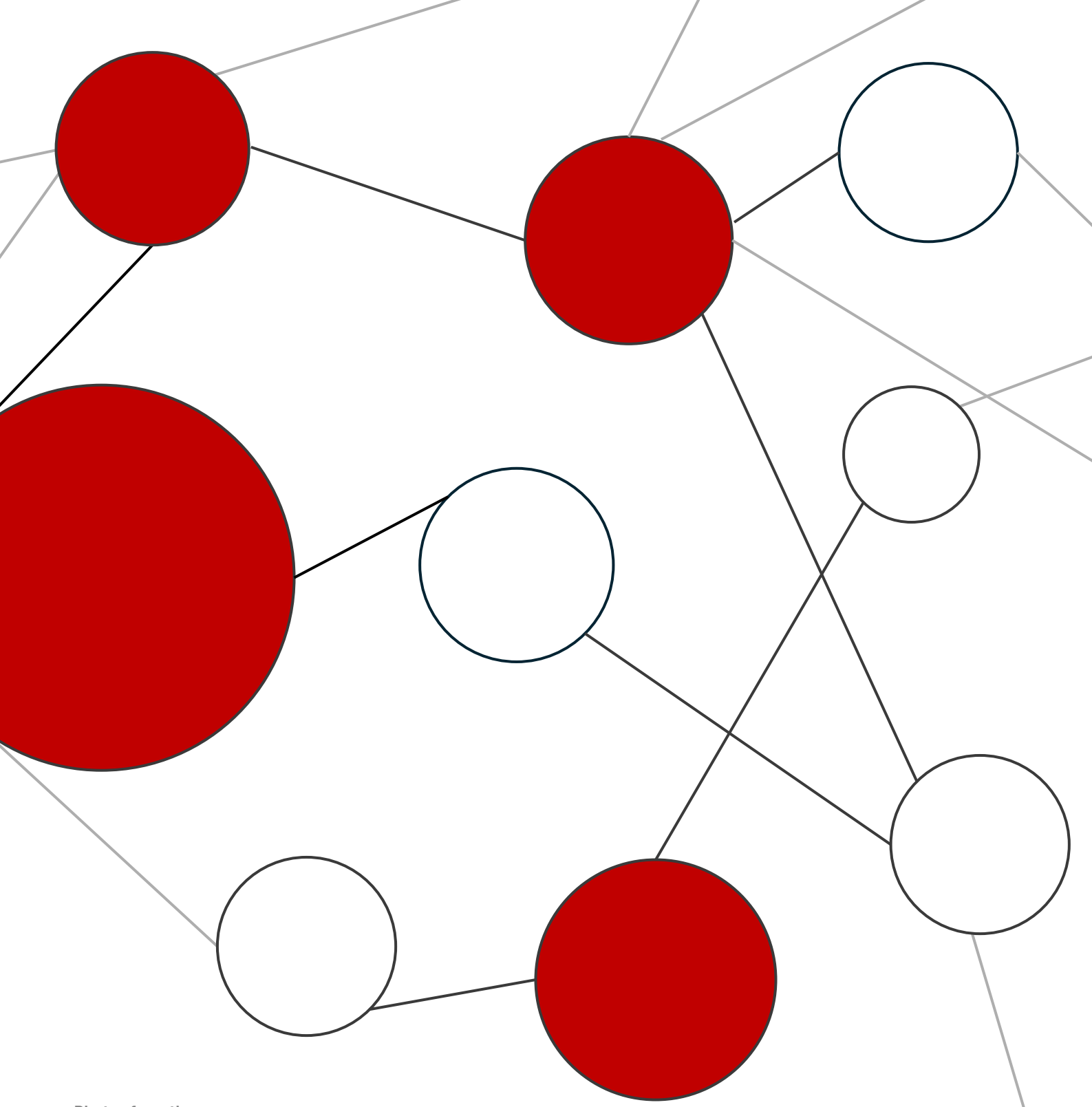

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