The Use of Russian Proxy Actors in the Media Environment in Ukraine:

A Comparison between Occupied and Non-Occupied Areas, 2017–2023

Authors: Maryna Vorotyntseva, Olena Yurchenko, Andryi Dikhtiarenko,
Serhii Pakhomenko, Viacheslav Husakov, Denys Kaplunov
Project Manager: Maryna Vorotyntseva
Editor: Merle Anne Read
Design: Inga Ropša

The Use of Russian Proxy Actors in the Media Environment in Ukraine:

A Comparison between Occupied and Non-Occupied Areas, 2017–2023

Content

About the Research

This research on the use of Russian proxy actors in the media environment in Ukraine, a comparison between occupied and non-occupied areas, 2017–2023, has two parts.

The first part is an analysis of the activities of Russian proxy media in the occupied territories of Ukraine, the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (ARC) and the city of Sevastopol, parts of the territories of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions (since 2014), and parts of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions (since 2022). Experts have collected data on the structure of the media landscape in the occupied territories, the owners or actual controllers of local proxy media, and the key narratives they promote.

The second part of the study provides a detailed description of the chronology and system of formation of a network of Russian information influence in Telegram messenger channels and a group of Russian proxy TV channels in Ukraine. Both vectors – Telegram and the TV group – were under the control of Russian special services, thus effectively being Russian proxy media.

Russian proxy media are propaganda and disinformation resources that operate under the guise of mass media but are effectively controlled by Russian special services and political groups. The purpose of Russian proxy media activities is to exert informational-psychological influence on recipients, spread propaganda narratives, and influence political processes. Proxy media are not media in the usual sense for democratic countries – they are financially and administratively dependent on Russian sources of funding, organisations that do not adhere to journalistic standards in the occupied territories, using the informational and technological isolation of citizens from the entire world. Those proxy media that targeted the regions of Ukraine controlled by the legitimate Ukrainian government simulated compliance with professional standards, shaping the image of controlled speakers and adhering to pro-Russian narratives. Thus, formally, they worked as media, but de facto, as propaganda machines.

Terminology and Legal Aspects

The terminology and legal aspects of the current research are based on the Ukrainian legal framework and foundational documents.

According to Ukrainian legislation, the territory of the ARC and the city of Sevastopol and the Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions are integral to Ukraine's sovereign territory. The Russian Federation has temporarily occupied these territories (partially since 2014 and partially since 2022).

The Russian Federation, as an aggressor country, has established occupation administrations since 2014 in the territory of the occupied ARC and the city of Sevastopol, parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine, and since 2022 in parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. Any authorities established by the occupying forces, as well as their leaders, are illegal. They are considered illegal both in this research and according to Ukrainian and international law.

Since 2014 the Russian Federation has referred to the occupied ARC and the city of Sevastopol as the 'Republic of Crimea' ('part of the Southern Federal District of the Russian Federation'). In April–May 2014 the so-called 'Luhansk People's Republic' and 'Donetsk People's Republic' were declared on the territories of the occupied parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, respectively. Ukraine does not recognise these 'republics' as independent

entities, parts of the Russian Federation, or any other status. We use LPR and DPR throughout to stand for the self-proclaimed 'Luhansk People's Republic' and 'Donetsk People's Republic' respectively. The absence of quotation marks around the abbreviations should not be interpreted as acceptance of the so-called republics' self-declared status.

Ukraine does not recognise any 'referendums', 'elections', or 'voting' in the occupied territories of the ARC and the city of Sevastopol, or the Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions of Ukraine,

nor does it recognise any statements about the inclusion of the occupied territories in the aggressor state.

In the current research, when quoting Russian proxy media, terms from the primary source may be used, accompanied by an explanation of the legal status of the object according to Ukrainian legislation. For example, phrases like 'so-called head of the republic' regarding the 'leaders' of the occupation authorities or 'so-called "state property"' regarding the property managed by local occupation officials may be used in the research.

Methodology

This research was conducted by a team of Ukrainian experts with localised expertise, specifically in the occupied territories of Ukraine, and experts who study the media environment. The selection criteria for experts included their specialised expertise, understanding of the media landscape, and the specifics of the media in the occupied territories. In addition to their professional experience, the experts also have personal experience — one has experience living in occupation in the Kherson region, while another has experience in the Donetsk region. This allows access to printed newspapers distributed in the occupied territories and the ability to describe the actual situation in the media.

The experts worked on a standard task separately from each other. The research was not automated.

In the first part of the research the experts monitored publications of Russian proxy media in the occupied territories — television, printed newspapers, websites, and Telegram channels. Since access to television and print newspapers in the occupied territories is extremely limited, as the experts were not in the occupied territories at the time of the study, relatively more attention was paid to websites and Telegram channels.

These websites and Telegram channels are affiliated with local proxy media, and 'officials' on occupied territories often publish video materials of proxy television, thus providing experts with an understanding of the local information space. Access to printed newspapers analysed in this study in the occupied parts of the Donetsk region was provided by an expert through personal contacts in the occupied territories. Experts analysed and evaluated the media landscape of the occupied territory and key narratives disseminated by local proxy media, and collected data on leaders/public figures of the proxy media from open and unofficial sources.

The media landscape described in this occupied territory study is not definitive, but the most significant media were analysed. For example, more attention was paid to newspapers and Telegram channels in the occupied part of the Donetsk region. In contrast, in the Luhansk region, research was focused on websites and television. This can be explained by difficulties accessing content and local specifics. However, considering that all media in the occupied territories are under centralised control, narratives disseminated through different channels do not differ.

The second part of the study is devoted to Russian proxy media in Ukraine, particularly the network of Telegram channels and TV channels banned in 2021 and in 2022.

The experts monitored all the available TV channels, YouTube channels, and Telegram channels. After the imposition of sanctions against the Russian proxy TV group (Medvedchuk's TV channels) in 2021 and the Russian proxy TV channel Nash in 2022, the websites of the TV channels were blocked, and their YouTube channels were deleted. Access to individual texts on the websites can be obtained through Google Cache or a VPN, but the archives are preserved fragmentarily. Consequently, the experts collected data relying on their own previous research and experience, archives, and open sources.

Information about the network of Telegram channels was collected from these channels. No print media were analysed in the second part of the research.

A team of five experts carried out the research over a period of six weeks.

Executive Summary

After Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territory in 2014 (the ARC and Sevastopol, and parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions), a Russian proxy media system was established. There was direct involvement of Russian personnel, who migrated between the occupied regions and were interconnected with each other and with FSB handlers. Russian FSB officers and Russian citizens were present in different occupied territories, generally managing a few media outlets simultaneously, while local collaborators typically carried out assigned tasks. After the full-scale invasion started in 2022 and Russia occupied parts of two additional regions (Kherson and Zaporizhzhia), the system of coordination and personnel involvement became even more visible.

For example, in high-level managerial positions in the media in the occupied part of the Luhansk region, there were (most probably) agent of Russian special services Vyacheslav Matveyev ('Akademik') and FSB officer Aleksandr Shingiryov ('Arbat'). Russian citizen Aleksandr Malkevich – associated with the former owner of the Wagner Private Military Company (PMC Wagner), Evgeniy Prigozhin, and the Olgino troll factory – managed TRC Tavria in the occupied part of the Kherson region, headed the supervisory board of the TRC Za!TV in the occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region, and was the founder of the Mariupol 24 TV channel in the occupied part of the Donetsk region. The media holding ZaMedia (occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region) was run by Vadim Kucher, a native of St Petersburg (Russia), and the director of Za!TV was initially a journalist from Novgorod (Russia), and a former employee of the Russian state media VGTRK, Vadim Ivanov. Later the Za!TV channel was headed by a Russian citizen, Yuliya Shamal. Also working in the occupied territories of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions were Evgeniy Glotov (associated with the head of the NewsFront website Konstantin Knyrik, based in occupied Crimea), Ismail Abdullaiev (formerly director of Oplot TV in occupied Donetsk), and Vladimir Andronaki (a Crimean propagandist, until 2014 a citizen of Ukraine). This indicates that proxy media in the occupied territories are coordinated centrally and among themselves.

After the ban on the Russian social networks Odnoklassniki and VKontakte, as well as the Mail.ru email service, the Yandex search engine, and all associated services (news, taxis, delivery, navigation) in Ukraine in 2017, Russian special services lost the ability to use them for disseminating disinformation, collecting personal data, and targeting the population on Ukrainian territory, except the occupied parts.

In 2017–18 Russian special services established a strictly centralised proxy media management in the occupied territories and started to develop a system of informational and political influence in Ukraine – through television, YouTube, and Telegram. A pool of three pro-Russian TV channels was formed in Ukraine (112, NewsOne, and ZIK), under the political control of pro-Russian politician Viktor Medvedchuk, and financial support for these TV channels came from the occupied territories. Another TV channel was founded by pro-Russian politician Yevhenii Muraiev. Another Russian proxy, YouTube blogger Anatoliy Shariy (a Ukrainian citizen who lives in Spain), was also a part of this influence system. Medvedchuk, Muraiev, and Shariy created pro-Russian political parties and ran elections using TV and YouTube channels as a tool to gain power in Ukraine.

Russian proxy media in the occupied territories of Ukraine and Russian proxy TV channels in Ukraine disseminated essentially identical metanarratives and promoted a Russian political agenda. But the proxy media in Ukrainian-controlled territory were much more careful in their rhetoric because of TV licensing restrictions.

For instance, both in the occupied and the free territories of Ukraine, Russian proxy media spread narratives on 'Ukraine's loss of agency', 'the dependence of Ukraine on the West/USA', 'the corruption and incompetence of the Ukrainian authorities', 'Ukraine's refusal to comply with the Minsk agreements', and 'the suppression of the Russian language and Russian-speaking population in Ukraine'. In the occupied territories, proxy media promoted a narrative that 'Russia is helping the Donbas republics', while in the free territory of Ukraine, proxy media reported 'Russia's readiness' to help Ukraine, which appeared in the form of promises. In the occupied territories, proxy media propagated a narrative about 'Nazis' and 'fascists' who had seized power in Ukraine. In contrast, in the free territory of Ukraine, proxy media spoke of how 'the authorities support right-wing radicals and nationalists' and about 'rewriting history' (which in most cases was

associated with the history of the Second World War, i.e., Nazism).

Additionally, Russian special services launched a large network of Telegram channels coordinated by the Main (Intelligence) Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (known as the GRU), in particular the Main Centre of the Special Service No 85.

The network of proxy Telegram channels operated autonomously to discredit Volodymyr Zelenskyy since he became president in 2019 and conducted informational-psychological operations on a narrow, specialised target audience – the political one. The network operated from the territory of Ukraine, the Russian Federation, and so-called Transnistria (the part of Moldova politically controlled by Russia). According to official data from the Security Service of Ukraine (SSU), the network's administrators were Ukrainian citizens who were also involved in espionage and the collection of Ukrainian military personnel's personal data.

The processes of centralisation and structuration of the media in the occupied territories of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions in 2017–18 overlapped with the formation of a pool of proxy television channels and a network of Telegram channels in Ukraine's free territory (2018–19). These processes were strategically linked. The proxy leaders and handlers of the occupied territories of Ukraine were aware that there was a business operating in the occupied territories, the profits from which went towards maintaining the pool of three proxy television channels on the territory of Ukraine.

So, Russia occupied Ukrainian territories, established proxy 'governments' and proxy media, and after that used natural resources from the occupied territories to fund the Russian proxy media in Ukraine to bring the pro-Russian political parties to power.

Part 1. Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied Territories of Ukraine

Introduction

This part of the report focuses on the Russian proxy media in the occupied territories of Ukraine – Crimea and Sevastopol, parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions (2014–24), and parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions (2022–24).

Russia occupied and annexed the ARC and Sevastopol in March 2014, and then occupied parts of the territories of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, establishing the proxy 'Luhansk People's Republic' (LPR) and 'Donetsk People's Republic' (DPR). In 2022 Russia 'recognised the independence' of the LPR and DPR and started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. During 2014–2022 Russian special services and the army built up total political, financial, and military control in the occupied Ukrainian territories.

In 2022 Russia occupied parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, and in 2022–23 Ukraine liberated parts of these regions. In this report we will cover mostly the territories occupied from 2022 which at the time of writing had not been liberated. In 2022 Russia had temporary control (February–March) over some parts of the Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy regions – but lost it within a month. This period is not covered in this report mostly because Russia had no time to install any proxy media because of the hostilities.

Key actors: Russian special services, Russian politicians, and Russian proxy media backed by them in the occupied territories of Ukraine. Proxy media should not be considered as separate or independent organisations but as actors controlled by Russian special services. The word 'media' is used as a traditional term, but media legislation and understanding of the role of the media in European or in NATO countries could not be applied to Russian proxy media in Ukraine. Russian proxy media are always foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) tools.

Russian special services and politicians backed Russian proxy media in the occupied territories of Ukraine since the very beginning of their activities. Russia financed proxy media through the local city's budgets (most of the media in the occupied territories were funded directly from the city budgets or had special contracts).

Russian handlers controlled proxy media in the occupied territories of Ukraine and were visible in all the occupied regions, including narrative creation, personnel, and organisation support. Handlers and management of the proxy media in the occupied territories were identified as a coordinated network creating patterns to follow and followed them themselves. In the occupied territories Russian proxy media were operating non-legally according to Ukrainian legislation.

Behaviour-centric approach. The main goals of the Russian proxy media in the occupied territories were to isolate and brainwash local populations, build loyalty to the Russian proxy government and Russian government directly, support the military campaigns, and divide the occupied territories from Ukraine. So, proxy media are a tool of occupation.

Content. In this report the focus is on television, printed newspapers, and websites and Telegram channels. Mostly these worked in coordination and promoted the same narratives with specific local components. But in certain situations and regions (for instance, Telegram channels regarding Mariupol during

the Russian assault and siege in 2022) some segments may be significant, which will be stressed in the report.

The degree of influence of Russian proxy media in the occupied territories of Ukraine was significantly high. The main reasons were:

1. Information blockade. The occupation authorities first blocked access to Ukrainian television and websites and stopped the publication of printed newspapers from Ukraine. In all the occupied territories, media assets (private and public) were seized and taken under control. So people had no access to Ukrainian or international media in the occupied parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions since 2014.

2. During hostilities in the conflict zones, hundreds of thousands of civilians were (and remain) isolated from information in general. In the so-called 'grey zones' it was often possible to catch Russian radio stations or TV channels, but only if people had access to electricity. In the Kherson region of Ukraine, liberated in 2022, Russian radio is still broadcast.

3. In the context of hostilities in the territories of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions in 2014, Ukraine could temporarily restore television broadcasting in the occupied territories (for example, from neighbouring Ukrainian-controlled territory). This success was always temporary as Russia jammed all television and radio broadcasts.

4. In the occupied territories, access to Ukrainian and global internet media was blocked. People had to use VPNs, which, however, might raise suspicions of disloyalty or data transfer to Ukrainian special services; that is, this posed a physical

danger to the citizen (arrest, torture, imprisonment).

5. In the occupied territories, problems with mobile internet were often present, and access to instant messengers such as WhatsApp, Signal, and even Viber might be blocked. Meta's social networks were considered 'undesirable', and their access was restricted. In this way, the occupiers encouraged the population to use Telegram and the Russian social networks VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, which are entirely controlled by the Russian authorities.

It's impossible to measure the **real effect** in political terms or on public opinion. There were no real elections in the occupied territories after 2014. All 'governments' were installed by Russia, all 'commanders' were praised by Russian media, and some of them were eliminated physically or left their positions and escaped to Russia. Internet access was strictly limited and totally controlled, including social networks and messengers. Since 2022 there was no opportunity to leave the occupied territories except through Russia, and this required interrogation by Russian special services. There are no credible tools to measure the real effect of Russian occupation policy and Russian propaganda proxy media effectiveness.

The Russian proxy media in the occupied territories of Ukraine used the following tactics:

■ **Dismiss** allegations and denigrate the source – 'Ukraine is dependent and under the influence of Western countries'; 'Ukraine is a passive entity in politics, not an active one'; 'Donbas historically belongs to Russia'; 'the Donbas people'; 'Ukraine is a Nazi state'.

■ **Distort** the narrative and twist the framing – 'Ukraine doesn't want peace and that's why the Minsk agreements

were not implemented'; 'Ukraine is to blame for everything'.

- ■ **Use distraction**, to shift attention and blame to a different actor or narrative – 'The US funded biolabs in Ukraine'; 'Ukraine is shelling civilians'.

- ■ **Threaten** and frighten opponents. Local journalists did not have the opportunity to work or even write or film reports for media with editorial offices in Kyiv. Journalists, social activists, and politicians were the first targets for arrest, persecution, and torture. They could work if they went to the occupiers' side and became Russian propagandists.

- ■ **Divide** communities and groups to generate conflict and broaden divisions within or between them, for instance, spreading rumours and the narratives that 'most Donbas people support Russia' or 'Russian-speaking people are discriminated against in Ukraine'.

Proxy Media in the Occupied ARC and Sevastopol in 2014–23

Here we will focus on the Russian proxy media in the occupied ARC and the city of Sevastopol.

Crimea may be considered as an example of the consequences of a quick occupation, especially in the key information sphere. The first thing Russia did in Crimea and Sevastopol in 2014 was to block Ukrainian TV and radio stations and seize Ukrainian media outlets. On 1 March 2014 journalists from the Centre for Investigative Journalism, based in Crimea, reported that armed men with Russian accents and masks stormed its editorial office in the city of Simferopol, where the Information Press Centre was also located, seizing the editorial office and equipment. On 15 March, in the city of Kerch, Russian military personnel took control of the Kerch radio and television broadcasting station, which transmitted Ukrainian channels. Russian military vehicles were stationed near the television tower, blocking access to the area. Similar actions were taken in other cities of the Crimean Peninsula. As a result, Russia disconnected most Ukrainian TV channels in Crimea the day before the organised 'referendum' (16 March, 2014).

By the end of March 2014, residents of the Crimean Peninsula were deprived of access to analogue Ukrainian TV channels. Some Ukrainian TV channels were available in cable format after that, but as of 1 July, most Ukrainian TV channels also disappeared from cable networks. After that Russia installed a comprehensive system of proxy media on the Crimean Peninsula. Russian proxy media created a distorted reality regarding the conditions of occupation, international isolation, and full-scale war, which were presented as the 'new normality'. At the same time, any independent voices were harshly suppressed, and dissenters were subjected to administrative persecution and imprisonment.

Overall, the situation in occupied Crimea can be seen as the result of the Kremlin's successful experiment on the population, which for ten years has been subjected to propaganda and paranoid attitudes. Studying Russian disinformation tactics is necessary to develop appropriate mechanisms to counter Russian propaganda and protect the audience from its influence.

Actors: The Main Russian Proxy Media in the occupied Crimea and City of Sevastopol

Russian Proxy TV in the ARC and City of Sevastopol

After the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula, the Russian Federation organised the work of the Russian media in Crimea on various media platforms – online, television and radio broadcasts, and print. The activities of these media outlets in Crimea were strictly regulated by Russian legislation and censored by Russian information policy. Residents of Crimea and Sevastopol could only, to a limited extent, obtain independent information and alternative viewpoints on what is happening by using VPN services.

On 1 July 2014 the Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Network installed technological equipment and launched two Russian networks. According to the Russian Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media, three packages of Russian TV channels, 30 in all, were broadcast in digital format in Crimea and Sevastopol (Table 1).

As of 2018 (no later updates were provided by the ministry), Russian federal public TV channels covered more than 84% of the population of occupied Crimea. Digital broadcasting was supplied by 18 broadcasting

Multiplex	List of channels	
First multiplex of mandatory Russian public channels	1. Channel One 2. Russia-1 3. Russia-2 4. NTV 5. Channel Five	6. Russia-K 7. Russia-24 8. Carousel 9. OTR 10. TV Centre
Second multiplex	11. Ren TV 12. SPAS [religious] 13. STS 14. Domashny 15. TV3	16. NTV + Sport 17. Zvezda [Russia's MOD TV channel] 18. MIR 19. TNT 20. Muz TV
Third multiplex	21. GTRK Crimea 22. ATR 23. Friday 24. LALE 25. Tv FM 26. LifeNews	27. Pepper 28. Moscow-24 Additionally, the channels First Sevastopol and STV broadcast in Sevastopol (not across the entire territory of the Crimean Peninsula)
Conclusion	26 Russian TV channels were available in occupied Crimea, plus two Russian proxy channels throughout Crimea and two proxy channels in Sevastopol city	

TABLE 1. Russian TV channels in occupied Crimea

facilities, covering more than 80% of the population. According to the ministry, about 200 Russian cable operators operated in the Crimean Peninsula.

As for radio stations, as of 2018 there were 26 analogue, 34 digital, and 5 radio channels broadcasting in Crimea, including Radio Mayak, Vesti FM, and Radio Rossiya.

Print and Online Russian Proxy Media in Crimea

Before the Russian occupation, over 220 newspapers and magazines were issued in Crimea, most of which were in Russian. After the Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea, most printed publications with editorial offices on the Ukrainian mainland were forced to cease printing on the Crimean Peninsula. According to 2015 data, more than 60 periodicals ceased operation in Crimea. In 2018 Crimea had about 140 serial publications, 58 electronic media outlets, and 8 news agencies.

The occupation authorities controlled the leading print sociopolitical media in Crimea. Some of them were officially designated as 'state-funded institutions' (for instance, *Lenta novostey Kryma*, Crimean Newsfeed, and *Krymskaya Gazeta*, Crimean Newspaper) or belonged to active participants in the occupation of the region or officials. For example, the chief editor of the publication *Krymskaya Pravda* (Crimean Truth) was Mikhail Bakharev, a former deputy of the local parliament of the ARC (when Ukraine controlled ARC and Sevastopol), former head of the press, radio, and television sector of the Crimean regional committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine (the Communist Party was banned in Ukraine in 2015), and a graduate of the Higher Party School at the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine (during the USSR). His son Konstantin Bakharev controlled the newspaper *Krymskaya Pravda*. After the Russian occupation of Crimea, Konstantin Bakharev worked as the vice-speaker of the Russian parliament in Crimea and was a member of the State Duma of Russia from Crimea.

The owner of another weekly newspaper, *Sevastopolskaya Gazeta* (Sevastopol Newspaper), was Andrey Nikolaevich Sobolev, the general director of LLC Polygraphy and a former senator of the Federation Council of Russia from Sevastopol.

In addition, there were local editions of Russian propaganda publications *Komsomol'skaya Pravda – Crimea* and *Moskovskiy Komsomolets in Crimea* issued in the territory of the occupied peninsula. These newspapers have existed since the Soviet Union. They were named after Komsomol – the Communist Youth League of the USSR, which has not existed since 1991. *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* in Russia is used for disinformation and propaganda for the Russian population. The newspaper performed similar tasks in the occupied ARC.

Information agencies in Crimea also supported the authorities of the occupying power. For example, the Russian news agency CrimeaInform began operating in occupied Crimea on 12 March 2014, during the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia, before the so-called 'referendum' conducted by Russia in Ukrainian Crimea.

According to data from the Russian registry of state procurement organisations, the legal entity that owns the publication, the LLC Crimean Information Company, periodically enters into contracts with the occupation administrations of the Crimean Peninsula for 'coverage of the administration's activities in the media' (in particular, in the cities of Simferopol and Yalta). In other words, it is directly financed from the local budget and is controlled by the local 'government'. The content of CrimeaInform is widely quoted and published by Russian media outlets, including TASS, Kommersant, Russia Today, Izvestia, RBC, and Komsomol'skaya Pravda.

The Russian news agency Crimea is a structural unit of the international information agency Russia Today, the general director of which is the Russian propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov. The radio station Sputnik in Crimea is part of the Russia Today media group. The

Sputnik network of projects is banned in EU countries.[1]

Several television channels have operated in Crimea since the occupation. The most prominent media group is TRC Crimea (owned by the occupying Ministry of Internal Policy, Information, and Communication of Crimea, operating on property seized in 2014 from Ukrainian television channels). TRC Crimea includes the TV channels Pervy Krymsky (First Crimean) and Crimea 24 and radio stations Radio Crimea and Radio More (Radio Sea). The channel Crimea 24 has a news section on the territories occupied by the Russian army in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. On the Crimea 24 website there are Kherson 24 and Zaporizhzhia 24 sections.

Since 2020 the general director of TRC Crimea has been Vadim Pervykh, who previously worked as deputy head of the Russian-controlled Ministry of Internal Policy, Information, and Communication of Crimea.

Russian Proxy Media for the Crimean Tatar People

The Crimean Tatar people have always been an important political factor in Crimea. Before the 2014 Russian occupation, the TV channel *ATR* broadcast in the Crimean Tatar language but was closed by the Russian occupiers.

Since the occupation, broadcasting in the Crimean Tatar language in Crimea is the responsibility of the so-called autonomous non-profit organisation the *Public Crimean Tatar Television and Radio Company (OKTRK)* created by the Russian occupation authorities of Crimea. The media holding organises television and radio broadcasting and information published on its website.

Another Russian television and radio company, *Millet* (translated from the Crimean Tatar language as 'people'), was established in occupied Crimea by the decree of the Russian head of occupied Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov.

The Russian federal budget funded technical equipment for the channel.

The Russian authorities use Millet to promote narratives that the Crimean Tatars in occupied Crimea do not experience persecution from the Russian authorities, that they have the opportunity to speak and study in the Crimean Tatar language, and that they also receive information in their native language.

The radio station Vatan Sedasy (Voice of the Homeland, in the Crimean Tatar language) was registered in August 2015. It broadcasts in Russian and Crimean Tatar in Kerch, Simferopol, Feodosia, and Yalta.

The Russian occupation authorities of Crimea created media outlets that partially broadcast in the Crimean Tatar language to fill the void left after the closure of ATR, aiming to reduce the dissatisfaction of a significant part of the Crimean Tatar people due to the repression of the channel. The Russian Federation uses these media in its rhetoric on the international stage, trying to create the impression of support for the Crimean Tatar people in occupied Crimea and preserving their right to receive information in their native language. In 2021 the Russian government prepared the fifth periodic report of the Russian Federation on implementing the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCPNM). This document paid particular attention to Millet and Vatan Sedasy as examples of Russia's compliance with obligations to protect national minorities, as well as to ensure 'the implementation of the rights of national minorities to preserve their traditions, culture, language, and identity'.[2]

However, despite the Russian government's statements allegedly supporting the Crimean Tatar language on the Crimean Peninsula, content monitoring of Millet shows that its most popular programmes, entertainment talk shows, and news broadcasts during prime time are in Russian. As Refat Chubarov, the chairman of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People (the representative body of the Crimean Tatars in Ukraine), stated, Millet

mainly broadcasts cultural or educational programmes in the Crimean Tatar language, which are of less interest to the broader audience than entertainment content in Russian.

Thus, even as a 'showcase' of Russian propaganda supporting the Crimean Tatar language in Russian-occupied Crimea, Millet does not meet its stated goal, as it broadcasts a significant part of its content in Russian.

The Millet TV channel, the Vatan Sedasy radio station, and the Millet website consistently cover the activities of the Russian Federation's government and security structures, the Russian authorities in occupied Crimea, and Crimea-based Crimean Tatar organisations and associations under Russia's control.

The focus of their reporting is on promoting narratives of alleged support by the Russian authorities in Crimea for the Crimean Tatars and the policies of the Russian government. Millet serves as a mouthpiece for pro-Russian Crimean Tatars, including the former head of the so-called committee for interethnic relations and deported citizens of Crimea, pro-Russian Zaur Smirnov.

The OKTRK media platforms extensively cover events organised by the Russian authorities in Crimea and Sevastopol, including so-called 'international' events where guests from European and Asian countries are brought to the Crimean Peninsula. Thus, these media outlets help the Russian government create a distorted perception among the population about the alleged 'ineffectiveness' of sanctions against Russia and the temporarily occupied Crimea and the supposed 'international support' for the annexed Crimean Peninsula as part of Russia.

At the same time, the OKTRK systematically conceals cases of repression against representatives of the Crimean Tatar people in occupied Crimea. The Millet TV channel and Vatan Sedasy rarely report on cases of mass raids conducted by Russian law enforcement officers in the homes of Crimean Tatars in Crimea. They also seldom publish news about

Russian courts trying Crimean Tatar activists and civilian journalists, who are regularly prosecuted under the pretext of 'fighting terrorism and extremism'.

Russian Proxy Media in Occupied Crimea Targeting International Audiences

After occupying the Crimean Peninsula, Russia used this territory as a base for international propaganda and disinformation capabilities. For instance, NewsFront is a Russian propaganda news agency founded in March 2014 in Bakhchysarai during the Russian annexation. The founder and editor-in-chief of the agency is Konstantin Knyrik.

While most Russian proxy media in Crimea target Russian audiences and populations in the occupied regions of Ukraine, NewsFront disseminates its content in Russian, English, German, Serbian, Hungarian, Georgian, Polish, Spanish, Bulgarian, and French. The main topics include Moldova, Belarus, the Balkans, and Asian countries. Essentially, an international agency for producing and spreading fake news and disinformation is based in Crimea. NewsFront is sanctioned by the US and EU countries.[3]

Before the 2014 occupation, Knyrik was involved in various pro-Russian movements and initiatives funded by the Russian state in Crimea. According to multiple sources, in 2006 Knyrik led the Crimean branch of the Eurasian Youth Union, founded by Russian propagandist and ideologist Aleksandr Dugin. Later, Knyrik served as the Bakhchysarai City Council deputy from the Russian Unity party and the so-called leader of the Russian Veche movement in Crimea (a veche is a general meeting of the local community with decision-making privileges). During the annexation, Knyrik personally assisted the Russian army and pro-Russian forces and was directly involved in seizing the editorial office and equipment of the Ukrainian TRC Chornomorka in Simferopol. Since 2010, Knyrik has been a member of the 'Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots in Ukraine'.

NewsFront has spread disinformation, Kremlin propaganda, and conspiracy theories about the actions of the Ukrainian army and government, about the policies of EU countries, NATO, and the US, and, during the pandemic, about the coronavirus infection.

Shortly after its establishment, NewsFront and its editor began spreading fake news about Ukraine and the actions of Ukrainian military forces in territories temporarily occupied by the Russian army. Investigative journalists from Bellingcat identified links between NewsFront and a group of individuals suspected of planning a coup in Montenegro. According to journalist Christo Grozev, this activity aimed to expand Russian influence in the Balkans, enhancing the spread of Russian propaganda and disinformation.[4]

After the Russian army's occupation of parts of southern Ukraine, NewsFront published propaganda from the occupied settlements of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, referring to them as 'new Russian territories', thus promoting the Kremlin's narrative of 'annexing' occupied Ukrainian lands.

Content: Key Narratives of Russian Proxy Media in Crimea and Sevastopol

The occupying authorities fully control the media space in the occupied Crimea, which is centralised and censored according to Russian state policy; opposition media do not exist (except for a small number of Telegram channels). Media outlets on the occupied peninsula operate with the basic narratives of Russian state propaganda. Furthermore, the same individuals who organised the occupation in 2014 (Vladimir Konstantinov and Sergey Aksyonov) continue to govern occupied Crimea, and there have been no significant political conflicts or serious changes in information policy. The main narratives of Russian proxy media in the ARC and Sevastopol are the following.

'Crimea Is Inherently Russian Land'

Russian proxy media consistently promote the narrative that Crimea 'has always been inherently Russian territory'. This is achieved through the manipulation of historical facts and the erection of new monuments in occupied Crimea.

Russian proxy media attach particular importance to the fact that, on 19 April 1783, Russian empress Catherine the Great signed a manifesto on the inclusion of Crimea in the Russian Empire. Two years after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, Russia erected a monument to Catherine in Simferopol. Russian proxy media in Crimea and Sevastopol widely quoted statements from the Russian head of Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov, asserting that 'during Catherine's rule, as in 2014, Crimea was peacefully joined to Russia'.[5]

In 2018 the Russian State Duma approved 19 April as a memorable date. An explanatory note stated that 'Crimea had long-standing historical ties with Russia before the manifesto was adopted and was the cradle of Russian Orthodoxy.' Crimeans were presented with the date as 'historical continuity'.[6]

Many monuments erected by Russia in Crimea during its occupation were intended to solidify the narrative of the 'historical belonging' of the Crimean Peninsula – first to the Russian Empire and later to Russia. For example, in 2019 Russia erected a monument in Kerch to historical figures of the tenth to eleventh centuries, Prince Gleb and Hegumen Nikon. Russian proxy media accompanied the news of the monument's unveiling with a quote from Arina Novoselskaya, the Russian-controlled minister of resorts and tourism of Crimea (from 2012 to 2024), who stated, 'This

is an extremely significant event for Kerch. This is a vivid testimony that Kerch is the oldest city in Russia.'[7]

These and many other examples demonstrate how Russia, through manipulation of historical facts and propaganda statements, promotes the narrative that the Crimean Peninsula allegedly historically belonged to the Russian Federation, thereby attempting to create an impression of the 'legitimacy and fairness' of the Russian occupation of Crimea.

'The Might of the Russian Army and the Impregnable Fortress Crimea'

Since 2014 Russian media have consistently promoted the narratives of the 'invincibility of the Russian army and navy', Crimea as an 'impregnable fortress', and the power of Russian weaponry purportedly unparalleled in the world.

The focus of their publications is on the advanced technologies supposedly at the disposal of the Russian army, parts of which are stationed in Crimea. Such publications aim to create a perception among Crimean residents of constant threats from the Ukrainian military and Western countries, particularly NATO member states, towards the Crimean Peninsula and its inhabitants, instilling a sense of constant worry and fear for the lives and safety of Crimeans.

For instance, on 22 July 2021 Crimean News, in the context of NATO's Black Sea exercises, wrote that Crimea is 'well defended from aggression on land, sea, and air, and any provocations are futile, as they cannot change the situation in favour of NATO countries'. The publication also noted that Russia planned to rearm coastal missile systems in Crimea with new Zircon hypersonic missiles and C-500 air defence systems, emphasising that 'NATO countries do not possess such weapons at all.'[8]

One of the main themes constantly echoed in the agenda of Russian media in

Crimea is the assertion that 'Russia has turned Crimea into an impregnable fortress and has come to dominate the Black Sea' (Crimean News, February 2020).[9]

Sergey Aksyonov also claimed on the *Millet* TV channel that 'Crimea has been turned into an impregnable fortress' from a military standpoint: 'There are enough units and subdivisions of the armed forces here to respond to any threat.'[10]

A significant amount of attention in Russian media publications in Crimea is devoted to the air defence systems installed there by Russia. Russian media in Crimea also extensively inform readers about the specific weaponry and equipment used by the Russian army on the Crimean Peninsula.

For example, in 2021 CrimeaInform announced the deployment of the C-350 Vityaz anti-aircraft missile systems in Crimea, noting that the Russian troops in Crimea already had 'the modern C-400 Triumph anti-aircraft missile systems' and 'Pantsir-S anti-aircraft missile-gun systems' in service. The agency emphasised that the Russian air defence system in Crimea was 'capable of repelling strikes from the airborne enemy, acting from all directions and at all altitudes and speeds'.[11]

Narratives also stress that air defence forces in the Crimean Peninsula are necessary for Russia's security due to threats from Western countries. For example, in 2022 CrimeaInform, reporting on the deployment of the first brigade of Buk-M3 anti-aircraft missile systems in the Russian Armed Forces, emphasised that the supposed opponent of the 8th Russian Army allegedly consisted of 'forces from the southern flank of NATO, which are active in the waters of the Black Sea'.[12]

Thus, Russia promotes false narratives in occupied Crimea that Crimea is constantly under the threat of military invasion, and only the Russian occupation army is capable of protecting Crimeans from this threat.

'NATO Countries as a Threat to Crimea and Russia'

Russian and Russian proxy media in Crimea pay special attention to the topic of interaction between NATO member states and Ukraine. A popular issue is the multinational Sea Breeze military exercises, which have been held in the Black Sea since 1997. Russian propaganda tried to present these exercises, on the one hand, as an insignificant event and, on the other hand, as an attempt by Western countries to threaten the Russian Federation.

For example, on 22 July 2021 Crimean News wrote that during the exercises Western countries 'put pressure on the Black Sea Fleet and the Armed Forces of Russia' and that 'NATO countries' strategy allocates to Ukraine the role of a military barrier against Russia.' On 28 June 2021 CrimeaInform wrote that the Sea Breeze military exercises 'fuel Ukraine's militaristic ambitions' and alleged that 'under the guise of these exercises, NATO plans to provide Ukraine with weapons for military operations in Donbas'.[13]

'Khrushchev Gifted Crimea to Ukraine'

One of the key Russian narratives regarding the ownership of Crimea is based on the claim that Nikita Khrushchev allegedly 'gifted Crimea to the Ukrainian SSR'. In describing this event, propagandists are mythologising the 'gift' and emphasising its supposed legal invalidity.[14] For example, in 2019, concerning the transfer of the Crimean Peninsula to the USSR, *Krymskaya Pravda* wrote: 'About a million Soviet citizens were "gifted". Along with the land.'[15]

Russian and Russian proxy Crimean media present this myth under the guise of historical fact. However, according to historical documents, all legal formalities were observed during the transfer of the Crimean Peninsula in 1954, and Khrushchev's decision was not made unilaterally. On 25 January that year a meeting of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR was held to consider issues related to the transfer of Crimea from the Russian SSR to the Ukrainian SSR, with the formulation: 'due to territorial proximity and close economic and cultural ties'. The Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Russian SSR made the relevant appeal to the Supreme Council of the Russian SSR, and on 26 April 1954 the Supreme Council of the Ukrainian SSR adopted a law on the transfer of the Crimean region to the Ukrainian SSR. The Supreme Council of the Russian SSR excluded Crimea from its composition in its constitution, and on 17 June 1954 corresponding changes were made to the constitution of the Ukrainian SSR.

The invalidity of the Russian myth about the 'transfer of Crimea to Ukraine by Khrushchev' is confirmed by archival documents and statements by historians, but this does not prevent Russian media in Crimea from disseminating this story, creating an illusion among readers of 'historical injustice' which was allegedly rectified by Russia's seizure and occupation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

'Ukraine Is a Nazi State'

Russian proxy media consistently promote narratives about the supposed 'Nazi ideology' in Ukraine, using fake news, factual manipulation, and baseless statements from controversial politicians.

For example, in 2020 Crimean News quoted the chairman of the Russian parliament of Crimea, Vladimir Konstantinov, who attempted to justify the Russian occupation of the Crimean Peninsula by claiming that Ukraine allegedly has a 'Nazi ideology', and that the Ukrainian state tried to destroy Russian culture in Ukraine: 'We have explained many times over the years why Crimea returned to the Motherland. We could not remain part of a state that espouses Nazi ideology. It set itself the goal of destroying Crimea as part of the Russian world, Russian culture in Ukraine.'[16] Konstantinov also stated that 'Ukrainian Nazism is based on Russophobia, which began with the ban on the Russian language.'[17]

In 2018 Russian proxy media widely quoted the Russian head of Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov, saying that 'Ukrainian Nazism is an integral part of the state ideology of Ukraine' and that allegedly only the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula could save Crimeans from inevitable tragedies.[18]

Such publications over the years have focused the audience's attention on false themes about Ukrainian ideology, culture, and history to justify the Russian seizure and occupation of the Crimean Peninsula.

'Ukraine Took Money from Crimea, while Russia Invests in Crimea'

A central narrative of Russian propaganda is based on the claim that Ukraine allegedly did not invest funds in the Crimean Peninsula; rather, it extracted budgetary resources. Conversely, it is argued that Russia allegedly began investing significant finances in Crimea after its annexation.

One of the most vivid examples is a statement by President Putin in occupied Kerch, widely broadcast by Russian proxy media in Crimea: 'Russian President Vladimir Putin revealed that the former Ukrainian leadership admitted to him that they took more resources from Crimea than they invested in it to support other Ukrainian regions.'[19]

In reality, Crimea was a subsidised region; only in 2013 did subsidies and subventions from the Ukrainian state budget to the budget of the ARC amount to more than 2.73 billion hryvnias (about $335 million at the exchange rate of that time).

Regarding Russia's investments in Crimea after the annexation, Russian proxy media primarily highlight the construction of roads in Crimea and the massive bridge across the Kerch Strait connecting the Crimean Peninsula with neighbouring Russian territories. However, the years of operation of this infrastructure have shown that it was primarily

created to facilitate military logistics rather than to improve the lives of the civilian population in Crimea. After the start of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, the Kerch Bridge and the Tavrida highway were actively used by the Russian army to transport personnel and military equipment.

'The Crimean Platform as an Ineffective and Russophobic Tool'

Immediately after Ukraine initiated the Crimean Platform international coordination summit in 2021, Russian and Russian proxy media in Crimea began publishing content discrediting the summit. The goal of their publications was to significantly downplay in the perception of Crimeans the effect of the summit, its importance at the international level, and the efforts of the Ukrainian state aimed at de-occupation of the Crimean Peninsula and drawing attention to the issue of the occupied Crimea on the international stage.

For example, publications referred to the Crimean Platform as 'a provincial whim of Kyiv Russophobes'.[20] Russian media widely quoted Aksyonov's statement calling the participants of the international summit 'accomplices of terrorists'.[21]

'Ukraine Is Committing Genocide against Crimea' ('The Water Blockade of Crimea – Genocide')

Before Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula, Ukraine supplied up to 85% of Crimea's freshwater needs through the North Crimean Canal connecting the main channel of the Dnipro River with the peninsula. After the annexation in 2014, water supplies to the peninsula were stopped. Russian propaganda labelled this as 'genocide', claiming that the Ukrainian state wanted to punish Crimeans, who allegedly wanted to join Russia themselves.[22]

Russian proxy media wrote that 'by blocking the water supply, the Kyiv regime wanted to exhaust the residents of Crimea', calling it 'ecocide' and 'an attempt to kill a large number of people by stopping the water supply'. This narrative includes economic justification – allegedly, the damage to Crimea from the water blockade amounted to 2.5 trillion roubles.[23]

Another aspect that Russian proxy media use in propaganda is the water supply to Crimea after the start of the so-called 'special military operation' (SMO – Russia's name for the full-scale war against Ukraine). After the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian military personnel blew up the dam on the North Crimean Canal and diverted water to Crimea. Propagandists and Russian proxy 'authorities' in Crimea present this fact as an 'achievement' and one of the successful stages of Russia's invasion of Crimea.

Sergey Aksyonov claimed the unblocking of the canal was one of the first results of the so-called 'SMO': 'This opened up new opportunities for the development of agriculture and other industries. The Dnipro is a great Russian river, and the North Crimean Canal is a great Soviet project. All this rightfully belongs to the residents of Russian Crimea.' Proxy media widely circulated this statement in occupied Crimea and neighbouring Russia.[24]

Militarisation of the Population in Crimea

Since the first days of the peninsula's seizure, Russian-controlled media in temporarily occupied Crimea have consistently published information about involving adults and children in various activities and organisations aimed at preparing the population for service in the Russian army. Some of them have published stories on participants of the so-called 'Ready for Labour and Defence' programme (GTO in Russian, used in propaganda since Soviet times) along with the addresses of army recruitment centres.

Militarisation of the Population through Sport

In the first years following the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the militarisation of the adult population and children in the educational institutions of Crimea took place under the guise of conducting sporting and cultural events. Russian-controlled media in Crimea and Sevastopol widely covered these events, shaping in the audience's consciousness the image of the 'normality' of what was happening.

An example of the first category is the involvement of Crimeans in attaining the standards of the GTO.[25] As reported on the official website of this organisation, it forms a 'comprehensive programmatic and normative basis of physical education of the country's population aimed at the development of mass sports and the nation's health'. However, in addition to exercises such as running, swimming, and pull-ups, the programme includes shooting and grenade throwing.[26]

In Crimea people of different age groups were encouraged to pass the GTO standards. As early as 2015 Sergey Aksyonov demanded that the heads of Russian ministries in Crimea 'actively prepare' to do so.[27]

This involvement of Crimeans in passing GTO standards began to acquire a mass character after 6 October 2015, when President Putin signed a law on the revival of the GTO. It was announced that the Russian government would present an annual report to Putin 'on the level of Russians' physical fitness'. The Ministry of Education and Science of Russia announced that passing GTO standards contributed to 'civil-patriotic education'. Schoolchildren and students were offered bonuses for achieving grades or university admission as incentives for participating in this programme. Training for GTO standards was allowed in occupied

Crimea even during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, indicating the Russian authorities' great interest in the population participating in this programme.

In educational institutions of the occupied Crimea, schoolchildren are involved in attaining GTO standards, including grenade throwing. Reports from Russian-controlled city administrations in the Crimean Peninsula testify to this.[28]

It is notable that after 2022 the media in Russia and the temporarily occupied Crimea paid less attention to the population's participation in the GTO and focused on reports on the practicality of conducting 'initial military training' (NVP in the Russian abbreviation) in educational institutions. We can conclude that the shift in focus in the media's publications occurred because of Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine; there was no longer a need to camouflage the preparation of the population for participation in war through sporting events.[29]

Militarisation of the Population through 'Culture and Traditions'

During the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, Russia used not only military forces but also squads of so-called 'Cossacks',[30] who were transported[31] to Crimea by ferries across the Kerch Strait after the Crimea–Caucasus ferry crossing was captured by the Russian military.[32]

At that time, Russia had a registry of Cossack communities – a system of militarised organisations that voluntarily served the state based on Russian federal law. The Russian state provided registered Cossacks with 'the opportunity to have ranks, insignia, and awards, and to carry with the Cossack uniform a whip, sabre, dagger, and in certain cases firearms.'

After the annexation of Crimea, the Russian-controlled local authorities began to create 'Cossack detachments' for adults and children, encouraging them to participate in militarised groups under the guise of 'patriotic education' and 'the revival of Russian traditions'.

In September 2014 the Russian-controlled head of Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov, announced the formation of a department for 'Cossack affairs' for the 'creation of a registered military Cossack society' in the annexed Crimea. He stated that the Cossacks in Crimea should serve as an 'example for youth in terms of possessing a military spirit and patriotic education'. In 2015 the Russian news agency RIA Crimea reported that the 'unified Cossack army' in Crimea and Sevastopol would consist of 5000 people.[33]

From 2017 to 2020 the media in the temporarily occupied Crimea regularly published reports on the creation of the 'Black Sea Cossack Army' with its headquarters in occupied Sevastopol.[34]

This militarised unit was financed by the budgets of Sevastopol and Crimea, and Russian proxy media in Crimea emphasised that the Cossacks were involved in 'maintaining public order' in the occupied territory and in 'guarding state borders'.[35]

Militarisation of Children

After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia initiated a comprehensive information campaign to attract children and youth into Russian militarised formations, while propagating various forms of children's involvement in structures created within the territory of the Russian Federation to prepare for service in the Russian army. In their publications Russian and Russian-controlled media in Crimea justified this by the necessity of 'defending the Motherland' from external and internal enemies.

Since 2014, Russian media in Crimea have been publishing information about the formation of children's cadet schools, 'Cossack detachments', and military summer camps on the Crimean Peninsula, which, under the guise of 'patriotic education', have been preparing children for service in the Russian army.

In 2016, following the initiative of the former Russian minister of defence Sergey Shoigu to establish the All-Russian Children's and Youth Military-Patriotic Public Movement, Yunarmiya,[36] Russian and Russian proxy media in Crimea published information about the 'active participation' of Crimean children in the activities of this Russian movement.

News organisations in Crimea and Sevastopol regularly reported on how 'Yunarmiya members' collaborated with the Russian military, learned military skills, and practised shooting rifles and throwing grenades. At the same time the media described such training as an exciting activity for young people, often accompanying reports on military field exercises with mentions of entertainment events. For example, in February 2020 in Sevastopol, over a hundred members of Yunarmiya participated in the 'shield and sword' military-tactical game. Proxy media reported:

'During the game "Yunarmiya" members organised a field camp, conducted shooting from air rifles, and tried their hand at grenade throwing for distance and accuracy. After the game a concert, 'Serving the Motherland is a Sacred Duty', was organised for the schoolchildren at the House of Officers of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, with the participation of children's creative groups and individual performers.'[37]

By emphasising their 'patriotic education', Russian and Russian proxy media in Crimea systematically carry out the militarisation of children on the Crimean Peninsula. These media strongly influence the value system of Crimean young people and their parents. In fact, the Russian state, through militarised children's organisations and media under its control, directly influences the mindset of Crimeans, promotes the idea of the 'popularity' of serving in the Russian army, the necessity of unquestioningly obeying orders from the top Russian leadership, and readiness to 'die for the Motherland' at the command of the authorities.

Thus, since the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, Russian and Russian-controlled media platforms in Crimea have consistently circulated content focused on implanting narratives in the consciousness of the inhabitants of the annexed Crimea that relate to the necessity of the functioning of military formations and the participation of local residents in them. News, articles, and photo reports described the activities of such organisations as 'patriotic', 'defending', and 'supporting traditions'. The media created a picture that shaped a new reality – with new elements introduced by Russia after the occupation, and these elements including coverage of the activities of military formations as a 'new norm' for the people of the annexed Crimea.

Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied ARC and the City of Sevastopol during the Full-Scale Invasion

In the early days of the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, Russian proxy media broadcast narratives aimed at instilling confidence in the audience regarding the power of the Russian army and its quick victory. These narratives were spread through all the existing media channels in the ARC and Sevastopol – television, newspapers, internet sites, and Telegram channels. There were various scenarios of occupying Ukrainian territories, from Kharkiv and Odesa to Lviv.

For example, in March 2022, Russian proxy media published a statement by the speaker of the Russian parliament of Crimea, Vladimir Konstantinov, predicting 'complete and final military defeat' of Ukraine and stating: 'If it is necessary for everyone to understand what demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine mean, we will go to Lviv.'[38]

After Russian soldiers failed to capture Kyiv quickly, Russian proxy media focused on promoting the assertion that Russia was waging war on Ukrainian territory not against Ukraine, but against the collective West, which allegedly sought to prevent the dominance of the Russian Federation and the expansion of its geopolitical sphere of influence, and for the preservation of the so-called 'traditional values' of the 'Russian world'.

Thus, propaganda redirected attention from the defeats of the Russian army in the Kyiv region to the allegedly incomparable power of the Russian military against NATO countries, which supposedly the Russian army was fighting in Ukraine.

In April 2022 CrimeaInform quoted Sergey Aksyonov, stating: 'We are not fighting Ukrainians. These are neo-Nazis, fully supported by Western regimes. Americans openly admit that they fully regulate, organise the defence of, and train Ukrainian Nazi units.'[39]

After the Armed Forces of Ukraine began successful military operations against Russian military infrastructure in occupied Crimea in 2022, Russian proxy media responded with a policy of denying facts or downplaying the scale of events.

A common method was the use of the word 'pop' instead of 'explosion' and 'attempted attack' instead of 'object attacked'. Another method was complete suppression or denial of what happened. For example, when on 9 August 2022 the Ukrainian Armed Forces struck Russia's Saki military aerodrome in Crimea, which resulted in one death and 14 people being injured, Russian proxy media spread the message that there was no strike on the aerodrome, that it was just 'munitions exploding'.

The war in Ukraine, which failed to meet the Kremlin's expectations of a blitzkrieg, shifted the focus in the rhetoric of Russian proxy media. By 2024 there were fewer mentions of the 'special operation for denazification of Ukraine', the necessity of 'saving Russian-speaking people in Ukraine', and 'protecting Donbas'. Instead, the discourse revolves around 'Russia's survival', 'fighting NATO', and 'readiness to die for the Motherland'.

Residents of occupied Crimea are intimidated by the 'return of Ukraine', 'Nazis', and 'extremists, terrorists, accomplices of the Ukrainian Armed Forces', who are allegedly present in Crimea and pose a danger to the peaceful population of the peninsula.

Proxy Telegram Channels in Occupied Crimea

In 2018–22 the most popular Telegram channels in Crimea and Sevastopol were those publishing various 'insider' information and reactions to events in Crimea. Many of these channels operated anonymously. During this period, the main trend was the Russian actors' activity in Ukraine, both in the occupied territories and in the territory controlled by the Ukrainian government.

Anonymous Telegram channels in Crimea disseminated Russian disinformation and gave a distorted view of events. The appearance of 'insiders' allowed these anonymous channels to spread fake news or influence public opinion regarding political and significant events on the Crimean Peninsula or concerning Russian proxy Crimean politicians.

For example, the channel Dionysius Terruarovich Apostolaki (a non-existent person) had 5178 subscribers in 2018. It was one of Crimea's most read Telegram channels during this period. As of 2022, the channel had a maximum of 3263 subscribers. The channel's description claimed it was 'based on real events in Crimea and Sevastopol'. It operated until September 2022.

This anonymous channel published supposed insider information about the actions and decisions of the Russian authorities in Crimea, various conspiracy theories, and criticism of the Russian authorities in Sevastopol. However, it also published complimentary statements about the Russian head of Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov, while his critics faced attacks and insults on the channel. Thus, the anonymous channel was used for political attacks and conflicts between the political elites of occupied Crimea, with its potential owners' political technologists close to Aksyonov and 'ministers' of the occupation government.

Russian media and Russian proxy media in Crimea also registered their own Telegram channels, which mostly published their journalists' materials linked to official websites, thus creating additional media platforms to expand their audience. Telegram channels run by the press services of Russian-controlled local administrations also stood out. These channels had a broad geographic reach on the Crimean Peninsula and broadcast virtually identical messages. Besides reports on local administrations' activities, these channels actively quoted Russian political and military leadership, urging Crimeans to participate in the so-called Russian 'elections' in occupied Crimea.

Additionally, these controlled Telegram channels in Crimea actively promoted information supporting the militarisation of the population, including children. They advertised Russian militarised and military-patriotic organisations for adults and children, called on Crimean residents to serve in the Russian army and security forces, and spread false information about alleged threats from Crimean Muslims, Crimean Tatars, and from the Ukrainian state and Western countries.

Other anonymous channels – the Crimean Channel and Crimean PraVda – published local news and politically support the war against Ukraine and the official Russian agenda. From 2018 to 2022 these channels' audiences grew significantly. For example, the Crimean Channel had 4600 subscribers in 2018 and almost 30,000 in 2022. Aleksandr Talipov's Telegram channel, TalipoV Online, which actively supports the war against Ukraine, grew from 800 subscribers in 2018 to 118,000 in 2022.

In early 2022 many new channels linked to Russian-controlled Crimean officials, city and district administrations, Crimean media, bloggers, and anonymous channels appeared on Telegram. One reason for Telegram's popularity in occupied Crimea was the mass exodus

of Crimean officials from Facebook, initiated by Sergey Aksyonov, in January 2022. In late December 2021 he publicly announced via a Facebook post that 'activity on the Facebook social network will cease from January. Transition to domestic platforms is a matter of national security.'[40]

The number of Telegram channels in Crimea increased significantly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with many channels related to so-called 'war correspondents', Russian military groups, and PMC Wagner, as well as so-called 'volunteers' raising funds for the Russian army. The segment of anonymous Telegram channels also grew. The most popular anonymous and non-anonymous channels are local channels with news and current events (emergencies, road accidents, street conflicts, etc.). Additionally, each city, even small ones, typically has two to three local anonymous channels that serve as official and unofficial news suppliers.

Many official and unofficial Crimean Telegram channels began to include in their names the Latin letters Z and V, symbols of the Russian invasion. Thus, the moderators and owners of these channels publicly expressed their support for the Russian political leadership's decision and for President Putin himself to invade Ukraine.

One of the largest regional official channels is RaZVozhaev, with 162,000 subscribers as of February 2024. It is the official channel of the 'Russian governor' of occupied Sevastopol, Mikhail Razvozhayev. It has published information about events in Sevastopol, the Crimean Peninsula, and neighbouring Russia. Complimentary messages about Russian political and military leadership activities have appeared regularly.

The channel has regularly published reports on aid to Russian soldiers fighting against Ukraine, assistance to so-called 'veterans of the special military operation', and so-called volunteers helping the Russian army at the front. It has also called on Crimeans to join the Russian army and sign contracts with the National Guard of Russia. It has popularised the militarisation of children in Crimea and the participation of young people in Yunarmiya and other formations. Since the invasion it has also regularly published reports on air raids in Sevastopol, the work of Russian air defence, and information about bomb shelters in the city.

Another large audience on the occupied peninsula is that of the official channel of the 'head of the Crimean government', Aksyonov Z 82 (133,032 subscribers as of March 2024). It has published official information about Aksyonov's work, government activities, reports, and more. The channel constantly reposts messages about President Putin's activities, writing in an exclusively complimentary manner about him. It frequently calls on people to 'unite around the Russian president', vote in Russian elections, and participate in military and paramilitary organisations' activities in Crimea and Russia, as does Razvozhayev.

Aksyonov's official channel has often called on Crimeans to participate in the 'special military operation', join so-called volunteers helping Russian soldiers at the front, and enlist in the Russian army, the National Guard, and Russian security forces. It has popularised the militarisation of children in Crimea and the participation of young people in Yunarmiya and other formations.

Other officials of the occupation administration, such as the 'speaker of the Russian parliament of Crimea', Vladimir Konstantinov, are not as popular – his channel has only 4000 subscribers as of March 2024, and its content is similarly structured and has similar narratives.

But the most interesting case of using Telegram channels in Crimea is the so-called 'SMERSH' channels (SMERSH is the Russian abbreviation for Death to Spies, a Soviet counterintelligence department founded in 1943). At the time of writing (spring 2024) at least three Telegram channels in the SMERSH network operate in Crimea, the most prominent being Crimean SMERSH (70,950 subscribers).

Crimean SMERSH positions itself as a 'registry of Russophobes, Ukrainian Nazis, and traitors to the Motherland'. The channel's description states: 'Please consider publications in this group as official reports to law enforcement agencies.' It has a special bot for contacting moderators and sending denunciations. It publishes denunciations of residents of Crimea and Sevastopol suspected of 'terrorism, extremism, aiding the Armed Forces of Ukraine' and any support for Ukraine or disapproval of Russian armed aggression or President Putin's policies. It also publishes user-generated content, spreading photos, videos, and personal data of people allegedly caught in the acts mentioned above. The channel also publishes videos of public 'apologies' by Crimeans, often forced, with visible signs of physical abuse on these individuals.

Numerous reports of detentions and interrogations of people whose personal data was published on the channel suggest that its moderators directly cooperate with the Federal Security Service of Russia, specifically with Centre E (Centre for Counteracting Extremism and Terrorism of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia in Crimea and Sevastopol).

Another channel – SMERSH Kerch (3313 subscribers) – is also anonymous. It positions itself as 'Information about all traitors of the Motherland, and supporters of the Kyiv regime living in the hero city of Kerch and other cities of the Republic of Crimea.' It has a special bot for contacting moderators and sending denunciations, operating similarly to the Crimean SMERSH channel.

The Russian proxy media and Telegram channels in the ARC create an atmosphere of fear and paranoia, contribute to the creation of a network of informants, and call for the identification of dissenters. Such activities go far beyond what is acceptable; they misinform the population and disorient them, which is effective in the context of an information blockade and total militarisation.

Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied Territories of Ukraine – Donetsk Region

Actors: The Main Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied Territory of the Donetsk Region

In February–March 2014, Russian special services stirred up the region with provocations on social media and rallies 'for Donbas' and 'for Russia', where Russian agents of influence declared themselves 'governors', organised violent attacks on pro-Ukrainian rallies (in Donetsk, political activist Dmytro Chernyavsky was killed during such a rally), and seized administrative buildings. The situation looked chaotic, especially against the backdrop of the political crisis in Kyiv and the occupation of Crimea. Still, it did not yet appear as a natural rebellion against the authorities.

On 3 March self-proclaimed 'governor' Pavlo Gubarev was arrested by the SSU. After the formal annexation of Crimea (16–17 March), on 12 April an armed group of saboteurs led by Igor Girkin (known as Strelkov) crossed the border between Russia and Ukraine and seized the city of Sloviansk in Donetsk region. On 13 April the SSU engaged in the first battle with saboteurs in the Donetsk region, during which one officer was killed and several were wounded. On 14 April, Ukraine officially announced its Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO). At that time Ukrainian television channels still operated in the Donetsk region, and citizens had access to Ukrainian news websites. Mostly, Russian special services operated on social media (VKontakte and Odnoklassniki), while the Armed Forces of Ukraine attempted to

oust Russian saboteurs from Sloviansk and its surroundings, including regaining control over television infrastructure. By the end of June the Russian sabotage group in Sloviansk was surrounded and evacuated from the city, and it was relocated to Donetsk in early July. Just previously, in May 2014, the 'Donetsk People's Republic' had been proclaimed.

After the capture of parts of the Donetsk region in 2014, most Ukrainian media gradually ceased operations in the occupied territory. However, gangs seized the property of editorial offices and began using them for propaganda in their favour. On 25 May presidential elections were held in Ukraine, and Petro Poroshenko won the first round. However, no elections were organised in the captured territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The building of the regional administration was controlled by the Oplot armed gang, led by Oleksandr Zakharchenko, who in July 2014 became the 'deputy minister of internal affairs of the DPR' and in August, the 'chairman of the Council of Ministers of the DPR'. These formal statuses had no relation to reality, as the authorities did not function in the captured part of the Donetsk region at that time.

By the summer of 2014, several armed gangs operated in the captured part of the Donetsk region, each of which claimed legitimacy and had the support of individual political and power structures of the Russian Federation.

The self-proclaimed 'people's governor' Pavlo Gubarev was exchanged for several SSU officers captured by Russian special services in May 2014. He and his wife, Katerina Gubareva, supported by a small number of 'activists', founded the Novorossiya media holding, which served their eponymous political movement that planned to participate in 'elections'. The Novorossiya media holding consisted of seven different information resources: the Novorossiya TV channel, the *Novorossiya* newspaper, the Novorossiya Rocks radio station, the Novorossiya and Novorossiya Today websites, the Dnr.live portal, and the website of the Free Donbas

'public movement'. Since 2015 Gubarev has been living in Russia and involved in 'information activities' on the internet, having no influence on the situation in the region 'on the ground'.[41]

Zakharchenko's gang had the media resource Oplot TV, which was directly supervised by Oleksandr Timofeev (known as Tashkent), who was close to Zakharchenko. Incidentally the former director of Oplot TV Ismail 'Vladimir' Abdullaiev now lives and works in the occupied part of Kherson region and manages the occupiers' local TV and radio company Tavria, which broadcasts to the occupied towns of Henichesk and Skadovsk.

Oleksandr Khodakovskyy, a former commander of the special operations centre of the SSU in the Donetsk region who defected to Russia in 2014 (and as of May 2024 has a Telegram channel with more than 500,000 subscribers), also had political and informational influence. In 2014 he was 'minister of state security of the DPR' for two months. However, in September 2014, during the signing of the so-called first 'Minsk agreements', the representative of the DPR was Oleksandr Zakharchenko, who 'managed' the occupied territory of the region until his assassination in Donetsk in August 2018. After Zakharchenko's death, Denis Pushilin became the 'head of the DPR', a position he still holds (as of May 2024).

In 2014–17 the media landscape of the occupied region was rather chaotic. Various military groups and factions had representations on Russian social networks such as VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, as well as YouTube channels. All these resources operated with similar narratives about the 'Donbas people', but their activities were poorly co-ordinated because each faction had its own political and military goals. Such chaos didn't fit the real goals of the main actors – Russian special services and military. So, in 2017–18 they created a system of controlled content production to increase the degree and effect of the Russian proxy media FIMI operations in occupied Ukrainian territories.

On 10 March 2017 the so-called Council of Ministers of the DPR, by order no. 4, created the Republican Media Holding Company.[42] The formal purpose of the holding was to ensure the implementation of state policy, the formation and promotion of a positive image of the so-called DPR, regulation of the activities and informational content of television and radio broadcasting and printed publications, and increasing the effectiveness and optimisation of the work of the so-called 'Ministry of Information'. In fact, the 'officials' of the DPR simultaneously created an editorial office, a production studio, a management body, and censorship within one organisation.

Order no. 4 established direct subordination of the media holding to the so-called Ministry of Information of the DPR. At the same time, in 2017, there were no significant visible changes in the media structure of the region. Changes began to occur after the assassination of Zakharchenko, the so-called chairman of the Council of Ministers of the DPR.

After Zakharchenko's assassination, access to Gubarev's resources was blocked. They later became available again, but primarily as 'state-owned companies of the DPR' (the Novorossiya TV and radio company and Radio Novorossiya Rocks became the property of the 'Ministry of Information of the DPR'), and the websites were re-registered to 'legal entities' from the DPR and anonymous owners, but redirects between resources indicate they belonged to the 'state' media holding. The same fate befell Oplot TV, which belonged to Zakharchenko.

Thus, practically all the so-called state outlets in the occupied part of the Donetsk region were included in the holding: 19 newspapers, 15 of which had district status, and television and radio channels (by 2024 there were 23 newspapers, 7 radio stations, and 9 TV channels). The media holding is a mouthpiece of the occupying authorities, where information is structured and censored, and the management of information resources is centralised. The leading print publications are the newspapers *Donetskoye Vremya* (Donetsk Times), *Donetsk Vecherniy* (Evening Donetsk), *Novorossiya*, and the official publication *Golos Respubliki* (Voice of the Republic, founded in 2015). For the target audience of the military, the newspaper *Boevoye Znamya Donbassa* (Donbas Battle Standard) was created. All these newspapers are typeset and edited in one office in Donetsk (1 Sovetskaya Square).

Content: Key Narratives of Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied Donetsk Region

As part of this research, experts examined the newspapers *Novorossiya, Donetsk Vecherniy*, and *Boevoye Znamya Donbassa*.

Novorossiya has been published in the occupied territories of the Donetsk region since 2014 and was not state owned until 2017. It fully supports established propaganda narratives and somewhat radicalises them; the discourse is aggressive. From 70 to 80% of the newspaper was so-called 'analysis'. The rest consists of 'news', social and cultural reports, and advertisements. The weekly circulation is 10,000 copies.

Donetsk Vecherniy is owned by the state media holding of the DPR. The *Vecherniy Donetsk* newspaper had been published in the city since 1973, and it was part of the Segodnya Multimedia media holding (owned by Ukrainian oligarch Rinat Akhmetov) until 2014. After the city was occupied in July 2014, the newspaper's publication was suspended. The editorial office refused to cooperate with the authorities of the DPR, so since 2015 the latter have been publishing the newspaper under the reversed name *Donetsk Vecherniy.* Circulation before 2014 was approximately 14,000 copies, and in February 2024 it was 16,000 copies. There is no online format like the print edition. There

is a VKontakte page, but the total number of subscribers is only 1874 (as of February 2024).

Boevoye Znamya Donbassa is a typical military propaganda newspaper on the occupied territories, with 45,000 declared copies printed weekly. It mostly focuses on the military narratives (Russian and 'Donbas victory', new weapon and ammunition suppliers, soldiers' personal stories, and personal compliments to Putin).

The main narratives from three newspapers were as follows.

'Russia as an Owner/Ukraine's Debt'

In the proxy media in the occupied territories, Russia was presented as the only significant state that managed to survive after the collapse of the USSR, became its legal successor, 'rose from its knees', and is an object of envy for unsuccessful post-Soviet countries (Ukraine, Georgia). The post-Soviet narrative was generally crucial for this segment of proxy media, which wrote that venal nationalist elites and the West destroyed the USSR, and that all the republics that gained independence after the collapse of the USSR were never genuinely independent states, but rather parts of the Russian Empire. Based on this, proxy media claimed that all independent states that restored sovereignty after the collapse of the USSR 'owe Russia' and that the only option for repaying this 'debt' was to return to the orbit of Russian influence.

According to the Russian proxy version in the occupied territories of the Donetsk region, the 'collective West' envies Russia, which is expressed in the organisation of 'colour revolutions' (Ukraine and Georgia). This narrative is present in different publications and in a variety of ways.

'Ukraine Is a Nazi/Fascist State'

The key narrative of *Novorossiya* was that 'Ukraine is a Nazi/fascist state'. In support of this narrative, terms like 'UkrVermaht' were used to refer to the time of the Second World War. According to the newspaper, Ukraine thrives on 'propagandist terror', 'imposing interfaith hostility', 'suppressing mass dissatisfaction at the local level', 'Ukrainian-language totalitarianism', and the 'rehabilitation and imposition of Banderaism, Nazism, and neo-Nazism'.[43]

On 18 April 2019 *Novorossiya* published an article titled 'Ustashi-Banderovtsy' containing the message 'Ukraine and Croatia are two artificially created state entities, two fragments that emerged as a result of the violent secession of Russian and Serbian lands. After gaining so-called independence, Ukraine (anti-Russia) and Croatia (anti-Serbia) experienced similar processes.'[44]

On 20 January 2020 an article titled 'The Five-Year Period of Fierce Ceasefire'[45] stated that 'the collective West, Ukrainian oligarchy, and the Nazi tumour of Galitsais, which has metastasised throughout the former Ukraine, are to blame for the seizure of Ukraine by the Maidan'. In this quote 'Galitsai' refers to a person from the historical region of Halychyna (Galichina or Galitsia in Russian) in western Ukraine, as well as *politsai* (in Russian) and *Polizei* (in German) – recalling Nazi police from the Second World War and implying that people from western Ukraine support Nazis.

Within the same narrative, *Donetsk Vecherniy* was more moderate, emphasising that the 'Donetsk/Donbas' people have nothing in common with Ukraine. For example, on 10 June 2020 an article titled 'You Are Not My Brother: Further Away from the Ukrainian Shore' stated that 'the Russian neighbour is big and loud, while the Nazis are narrow-shouldered and squeaky-voiced'.

Antisemitic Rhetoric against Ukrainian Leaders

Antisemitic rhetoric is typical of Russian propaganda in general (including at the official level of Russian foreign minister Lavrov). Antisemitic propaganda against Ukraine (not only in the occupied territory of the Donetsk region) claims that the real surname of the former president Petro Poroshenko is Valtsman (such a surname in the Russian propaganda system is a term of belittlement), and thus Ukraine is ruled by Jews – Valtsman, Groysman (the real surname of the former Ukrainian prime minister), Kolomoyskyy, and Zelenskyy. Zelenskyy is also called a 'shlimazl', meaning 'loser'.

'The West Does Not Want Peace'

This narrative generally includes the idea that the West is to blame for Russia's war against Ukraine. For example, 'The Five-Year Period of Fierce Ceasefire' previously referred to stated that 'America is interested in the smouldering conflict in eastern Ukraine.' In addition, *Novorossiya* heavily promoted narratives about the poor situation in Western democracies. On 18 April 2019 an article titled 'The Mechanism of Enslavement of Peoples' stated that 'over the past centuries, the concept of Western colonialism has hardly changed. It became more sophisticated, but its mechanisms remained roughly the same as in its early days.'

On 26 October 2020 *Novorossiya* published an article titled 'At Nuremberg, the West Covered Up for the Nazis'.[46] Much attention is paid to US Army crimes and the colonial policy of Western countries in general. For example, on 22 March 2018 an article titled 'The US Army Lost Its Human Face' referenced crimes of the American army in Vietnam, and on 28 March 2019 *Novorossiya* published 'The Murder of Yugoslavia: 20 Years ago, NATO Began a Military Operation.' Meanwhile the

'Russian soul' is described as progressive, peace-loving, and possessing values. On 26 January 2017 the newspaper wrote: 'Kindness is the main problem of the Russian person. The Japanese have never suffered from this ailment, the Americans have never suffered, the Germans have never suffered, and no one has suffered. Only the kind-hearted Russian soul, imbued with Christian morality, endlessly sacrifices itself, refusing harsh radical actions in hopes of victory for the abstract universal good.'

'Ukraine Is a Puppet of Western States'

This narrative is associated with the previous one and aims to create a corresponding associative series in readers' minds. 'After the bloody state coup, the aggressive hybrid bastard carries within itself the viruses of its infection and degradation. It is not independent because a colonial administration holds power in a country of colonial democracy,' wrote *Novorossiya* on 20 July 2017.[47] This narrative is often extended to Georgia. On 9 August 2018 *Novorossiya* published an article titled 'I Don't Drink Georgian Wine' in which it wrote: 'What's happening in Georgia now? After all, they've been beating them for ten years, territorially shrinking, hitting them in exports. Everything is calm; someone found to wipe their snot. The "world community" has thrown money at restoring their beaten ambitions ... Georgia should have been taken in its entirety. They got their pill, but that's completely insufficient. The Yankees trained them, and they continue to train them.'

On 2 July 2021, a *Novorossiya* article titled 'Ukraine is Being Sold Out' said that Ukraine was a colony of Western countries and was being divided between Russia, the United States, and China.

'Novorossiya' Narrative/'Historical Homeland'/'Ukraine Is a Historical Colony of Russia'

A parallel narrative to the 'puppet state of the West' spread in the media in the occupied part of the Donetsk region, saying that Ukraine 'actually' is a historical colony of Russia and should belong to it. There is no contradiction between this and the previous narratives, as both are intended to shape the idea that Ukraine lacks autonomy and that the question is only about whom it will belong to – the West or Russia: 'since the times of Peter [the Great], they would have wiped out the tribes of cannibals by 90%, leaving a couple of dozen exemplary folklore-tourist hamlets in Poltava, and settled the raised lands with Russian peasants and factory workers. And everything would have been resolved in the best way'.[48]

Novorossiya dwells on this narrative. For example, on 22 January 2020 it published an article titled 'The Pereyaslav Council as a Symbol of Unity'.[49] On 8 July 2020 its article 'Royal Gift', on how Donbas was forcibly 'gifted' to the USSR in 1920, stated that Donbas was a 'gift from Russian Emperors' to Ukraine: 'If you [Ukraine] don't want to be with Russia, strive to join our geopolitical competitors – please, return what was gifted to you.'

'The Donbas People'

Before 2017–18 the critical narratives present in proxy media in the occupied part of the Donetsk region were those that defined the 'distinctiveness' of the 'Donbas people' and 'Novorossiya'. Local media promoted the message that the 'people of Donbas' (living in Donbas) were separate from the people of Ukraine. At that time, Russian politicians were advocating for the 'return of Donbas to Ukraine with special status'. Within the narrative of the 'distinct people' seeking self-determination, proxy media wrote about how the 'republic is building a new life'. After 2018, amid a purge

of local field commanders, a new propaganda course was created to 'support Russia' and 'integrate with Russia as its historical homeland' – merging all spheres of life into the Russian political, industrial, and cultural field. The anti-Ukrainian narrative was also consistently present in local proxy media.

'Russia Is Protecting Donbas/ The Future of Donbas Is Linked to Russia'

Based on the narrative of the 'separateness' of the 'Donbas people', an additional narrative was built – 'Russia is protecting Donbas.' In the media in the occupied part of the Donetsk region, the term 'Donbas' mainly refers to Donetsk and the Donetsk region, although historically Donbas also includes the southern territories of the Luhansk region.

For example, on 26 January 2017 Novorossiya wrote: 'Russians in Russia want the people of Donetsk to fight for their land as an outpost of the Russian world.'[50] An article ('The Final Points') on 22 July 2021 said: 'As soon as you make a move in Donbas, the question of Ukrainian statehood as a whole will arise.'

The less radical Donetsk Vecherniy focused on positive narratives, such as building the 'future of Donbas with Russia'. For example, it published articles titled 'Denis Pushilin: Our Course towards Russia Remains Unchanged' (22 January 2020) and 'Pushilin: The Future of Donbas is linked to Russia' (8 July 2020). In the latter the newspaper noted that Russia Day was first celebrated in the DPR as a state holiday on 12 June 2020. Since 2020 the school curriculum in the DPR had been Russian, diplomas were in the Russian style, and Russian classification of professions had been introduced. On 15 December 2021 Donetsk Vecherniy wrote, 'Denis Pushilin opened a working meeting on discussing the prospects of economic integration between Russia and Donbas.'

'Ukrainian Aggression against the Donbas Republics'

Ukrainian aggression has been one of the most extensive narratives of Russian state propaganda since 2014. The key message is that there is lawlessness in Ukraine; there are 'private armies' and 'nationalist/Nazi/fascist units' that commit violence against civilians, primarily in the 'republics'.

For example, *Novorossiya* wrote on 20 July 2017: 'Every Ukrainian oligarch has acquired his own personal "volunteers," who, under the guise of fighting terrorism/separatism, not only were sent to Donbas but toured the regions of the country, solving various oligarchs' affairs … The handlers of Ukraine were least concerned about the attitude of the terrorists towards the civilian population of Donbas. Nothing else can be expected from the dregs that make up the battalions.'[51]

Additionally, *Novorossiya* accused Ukraine of shelling the city of Mariupol in 2015, which was actually carried out by the DPR, in the article 'Grad Missiles for Russian Mariupol': 'The shelling of Mariupol and the surrounding villages, arranged in 2015 by the Ukrainian authorities together with the Nazis from "Azov" and the "Right Sector", [was accompanied by] arrests of residents, mockery of them and prisoners of war, organised on the territory of the Mariupol airport' (3 December 2020).

Donetsk Vecherniy was also keen on this narrative in its articles 'A New Victim of Ukrainian Terrorists' (15 April 2020), 'Memory of the Terrible Events of the Summer of 2014', 'Ukrainian Forces Tried to Undermine OSCE Observers', '4 Civilians Wounded', 'This Cannot Be Forgotten and Cannot Be Forgiven', 'The Horrors of Ilovaisk', 'Atrocities of the "Liberators"' (22 July 2020).

Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied Territories of Ukraine – Luhansk Region

Actors: The Main Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied Territory of the Luhansk Region

The seizure of parts of the Luhansk region in 2014, like Donetsk, occurred in several stages. In the first stage, in the spring of 2014, several groups controlled by Russian special services operated in the region, along with a small number of local 'activists'. Inspired by the Russian operation in Crimea, these 'protests' had the support of local politicians (mainly from the then ruling Party of Regions) and deputies. In March activists seized and damaged administrative buildings and TV channels and persecuted journalists. However, everyone was watching events in Crimea, so actions did not go further than rallies and speeches under Russian flags.

The first 'people's governor' was a fringe local figure, Oleksandr Kharitonov, whom Ukrainian special services arrested a few days after his 'proclamation'. In addition, the SSU detained the 'Army of the Southeast', a group of Russian saboteurs led by Valeriy Bolotov. However, the group was released from the Luhansk pre-trial detention centre on 6 April, with the support of the head of the local police, and the group then commandeered the SSU office and, most importantly, the armoury. Having obtained hundreds of automatic weapons, explosives, and so on, the group became the biggest armed gang — no other group was armed to such a level or had an 'office' in the city centre. Thus, Bolotov became the 'head' of

the self-proclaimed 'Luhansk People's Republic', but he only stayed in the occupied region for a short time, and fled to Russia in August 2014. The position of head was taken by Igor Plotnitskyy, who, according to his official profile, was the commander of the Zorya battalion. It was Plotnitskyy who participated in the signing of the first 'Minsk agreements' in September 2014, after which he attempted to centralise the management system of the occupied territories. However, he failed to do this properly because the 'field commanders' of the various groups had the support of different political and power structures in the Russian Federation, had their own ambitions, and refused to submit to him ('Batman', 'Prizrak', so-called 'Cossaks' etc.)

In January 2015 Russian special services began to assassinate the field commanders of the individual armed gangs. By the end of the year the remnants of the gangs had 'joined the people's militia of the LPR'. Plotnitskyy managed the occupied region until 2017 and had the support of a couple of Russian proxy media. Then, the 'minister of internal affairs' Igor Kornet and the 'minister of state security' Leonid Pasechnik (both called *siloviki*, as in Russia, meaning representatives of the law enforcement structures) organised a coup against Plotnitskyy, as a result of which he was forced to go to Russia with his closest associates. Since 2017 Pasechnik has overseen the occupied region. So, the scenario in the occupied Luhansk region was developing similarly to Donetsk – Russian special services forced one gang to be the senior power in the region and reduced the others. All media management and content production control were centralised for maximum effect.

In spring 2014 the following TV channels were operating in Luhansk: the Luhansk Regional State TV and Radio Company LOT, controlled by the regional council deputy Rodion Miroshnik – now the so-called 'special envoy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)' – and the private channels Luhansk Cable Television (LKT in Ukrainian, LCT in English) and IRTA. All managers and owners were associated with the Party of Regions (were members, affiliated, etc.). LOT

had been a pro-Russian propaganda resource long before 2014, speculating on the topics of 'federalisation' and 'threats' to the Russian language. During the Maidan in 2013–14, it formally maintained a neutral position, like the LKT channel, but promoted Russian propaganda narratives. Later, both openly switched to covering the activities of militants in a positive light. IRTA maintained a pro-Ukrainian position until May 2014. It was taken off air, its office was captured by armed militants of the pro-Russian Army of the Southeast, the staff left, and its equipment and studio premises began to be used for broadcasting by the Russian proxy TV channel Luhansk 24. Initially the latter rebroadcast Russia-1 but then began to produce its own programmes. In September 2014 Luhansk 24 'officially' became part of the LPR structure. At that time the premises and equipment of LKT were also taken over. Later, the equipment of LOT, LKT and IRTA TV channels was collected in the former LOT office, from where broadcasting is still carried out today. Thus, in 2017 no TV channel was left in Luhansk that had operated before the occupation. Some journalists who worked in Luhansk before 2014 also joined in creating pro-Russian content, although most left the occupied city.

In 2017 the media landscape in the occupied territory of the Luhansk region consisted of one local Russian proxy TV channel, several district TV channels in the occupied cities, several websites, and their social network accounts (primarily active on VKontakte) and print newspapers.

Luhansk 24 was owned by the so-called 'State TV and Radio Company of the Luhansk People's Republic' and was the only channel broadcasting from occupied Luhansk and fully controlled by the Russian proxy government. In addition to the channel located in the regional centre, there were also 'state unitary enterprises' in major cities in the occupied territory – Alchevsk, Antratsyt, Kadiivka (Stakhanov), and so on. These enterprises were based on local and municipal media. Their content was broadcast on Luhansk 24 in the regional news section.

The most influential digital media outlet in Luhansk was and remains the Luhansk Information Centre (LIC) website, which represents the position of the authorities – namely, the puppet pro-Russian government of the 'republic'.

Some newspapers continued to be published in Luhansk after 2014. For example, one of the city's oldest newspapers, *Zhizn Luganska* (Life of Luhansk), practically ceased to exist as a newspaper issued by the city council in 2014 but continued to be published after the occupation of Luhansk with content promoting pro-Russian government narratives. The private newspaper *XXI vek* (21st Century) continued to exist, founded and owned by Yuriy Yurov, deputy of the 'People's Council of the LPR', who in 2014 was also affiliated with the ruling Party of Regions. In 2017 Yurov was one of the most prominent propagandists in the city. The *Express-News* and *Express-Club* newspapers (mostly with private ads) continued to exist. In February 2015 the *Respublika* newspaper appeared, the 'official' printed media outlet of the so-called LPR government.

Among the regional media, Novy Kanal Novorossii (New Channel of Novorossiya), which was broadcast in Kadiivka (Stakhanov) and was part of the so-called Cossack Media Group, was noteworthy. This media group, in addition to the television channel, also included Cossack Radio – besides Kadiivka (Stakhanov) and settlements around it, it broadcast in Rovenky and Rovenkivsky district, and in Luhansk – and the printed weekly *Cossack Vestnik* (Cossack Herald). The media group was controlled by a participant in the Cossack movement in the southern part of the occupied Luhansk region, a citizen of the Russian Federation, Nikolay Kozitsyn. In 2015 Kozitsyn was forcibly expelled to Rostov, Russia, as an unwanted element who did not fit into Plotnitskyy's structure of the 'republic' at that time. However, his television channel continued broadcasting from Kadiivka (Stakhanov), now from Russia. The channel's content somewhat opposed the incumbent 'authorities', and Kozitsyn himself criticised the leader of the LPR, Igor Plotnitskyy.

Additionally, there were several anonymous blogs, Telegram channels, and even websites with pro-Russian orientation that nevertheless wrote critically about Russia and the L/DPR groups. These include Donbasskiy Case (Donbas Case), Donrf, Secrety Luganskoy Respubliki (Secrets of the Luhansk Republic), Lugansk Operativnyi (Luhansk Operational; the Telegram channel no longer exists), and Luganskyi Insaid (Luhansk Insight; the Telegram channel no longer exists). Several Telegram channels did not position themselves as someone's blog or a channel with insights; they simply published Russian or 'republican' news. For example, by 2022 networks of Telegram channels such as Moy Lugansk (My Luhansk), Novosti LPR (News of the LPR), Intsident.Lugansk (Incident Luhansk), and Lugansk Segodnya (Luhansk Today) had formed. They now serve as a source for centralised reposting of propaganda news or posts of pro-Russian content. The information website lnr.media reprinted local news and followed the Russian agenda but remained anonymous.

As already noted, in 2017 the media in the occupied territory of the Luhansk region began to centralise and integrate into the propaganda system of the Russian Federation with complete dependence on the centre, which was in Moscow. Almost all content on websites and television was coordinated with the centre. At that time the media space in the occupied city was divided into two main categories: the power vertical of the *siloviki* (the state security and internal affairs ministers Pasechnik and Kornet) and that of the 'pro-government' head of the LPR, Plotnitskyy. After the coup against Plotnitskyy and his escape to Russia in 2017, the Russian special services appointed Pasechnik as head of the LPR (which he continues to lead).

Before Plotnitskyy's escape the state newspaper *Respublika*, Luhansk 24, the LIC, and most media in the regions formed the pro-government power vertical of the 'head of the LPR'. The nominal head of the unified television channel was Anastasiya Shurkayeva. The newspaper *XXI vek* was led by Yuriy Yurov. The LIC was headed by a Crimean native, Serhiy

Meshkoviy. Indirectly they promoted narratives distributed by Vladislav Surkov's structures from the administration of the Russian president through its agent Vyacheslav Matveyev.

The 'Ministry of Information of the LPR', the Luhan-Centre information group, and the websites Luhansk-1, Novoros.info, and LPR Today served the power vertical of Pasechnik-Kornet (the *siloviki*). The actual heads of the operation were the Russian special services. These resources were managed by the then 'first deputy minister of the Ministry of Communications and Mass Communications of the LPR', 'advisor to the minister of information of the LPR' Yuriy Pershikov, and agent under the pseudonym Arbat (in 2024 journalists established that his real name is Aleksandr Shingiryov and he is a Russian FSB officer).[52]

Moscow political technologist and PR specialist Vyacheslav Matveyev had a significant influence on the pro-government power vertical (Plotnitskyy from 2014 to 2017) for many years. Matveyev, under the pseudonym Akademik, was infiltrated into the media environment of Luhansk earlier, even before 2014, becoming the general producer of LOT and later, the RTS production studio.

RTS produced propaganda content to order and placed it on state and other channels. After the occupation of Luhansk, 'Akademik' continued to engage in propaganda in the occupied territory. In particular, he was the originator and coordinator of a flash mob of residents of Russian and Ukrainian cities who sang Soviet songs at railway stations. He was also involved in writing propaganda messages that were then spread by local media.

Matveyev's primary contacts in Luhansk were representatives of the so-called 'Crimea group' – Pershikov and Kseniya Sabina. These pro-Russian media figures participated in the annexation of Crimea. Together with Matveyev, they formed the core of Luhan-Centre, on whose order propaganda articles with required narratives were written (for example, 'Ukraine recruits European mercenaries' or 'Ukrainian army commits war crimes'). These texts were then distributed to local and friendly Russian media (NewsFront, Anna News, Tsargorod, Russian Spring, Politikus, Doni News, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Journalistic Truth). The required narratives were provided as 'topics' and more general 'vectors'. Personnel from the network had to create text or video on the given topic. In addition, materials created by Luhan-Centre were issued as written by English-speaking journalists who allegedly communicated with residents of the occupied territories. One of the tasks of the media group was to convey Kremlin propaganda to the West, presenting it as the 'voice of Donbas'.[53]

It is important to note that while the Plotnitskyy and *siloviki* media groups competed with each other, they operated on similar principles and addressed identical topics. Therefore, some of the messages discussed later were common to both branches of propaganda.

In November 2017 the partial 'bipartisanship' of Luhansk media disappeared due to the coup resulting from the conflict between 'the minister of internal affairs of the LPR', Kornet, and the 'leader' of the LPR, Plotnitskyy, which led to the latter fleeing to Russia. The media adviser Anastasiya Shurkayeva left along with him. She was replaced by Luhansk journalist Serhiy Kolesnikov, who had previously been a spokesman for the MIA LPR. Thus, because of the coup, the *siloviki* media power vertical absorbed the pro-government one, and itself became the only pro-government power vertical, and the role of the Russian agent Matveyev was strengthened. In 2019 Luhansk 24 was headed by a Crimean, Andriy Nikliyev, who was also a member of the Crimea group led by Pershikov and Matveyev. Later, Luhansk resident Olena Prasolova, former chief editor of the *Respublika* newspaper, took this position in 2019.

In January 2021 the LPR leadership announced the merger of its media into the state media holding Luhanmedia. The alleged lack of journalists in the 'republic' (just as in the occupied part of the Donetsk region) explained the merger of various information

resources. However, the decision was dictated by the need to control the media and content creation from a common centre in order to achieve the desired effect. The media holding included 14 sociopolitical and one sports newspaper, 6 TV channels, 2 radio stations, and so on. 'Now there will be a single management centre for all regional media at the enterprise,' they said in the 'republic'. Svitlana Mamontova, who had previously managed the *Zhizn Luganska* newspaper, was appointed acting director of Luhanmedia. Pershikov became Matveyev's assistant and executor of orders from Moscow handlers.[54]

Content: Key Narratives of Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied Luhansk Region

Media outlets in the occupied territory were and remain dependent structures, using Moscow's *temniki* (editorial directives). In 2015 the Ukrainian *Realna Gazeta* published one such *temnik* from the LPR with a list of narratives and comments for upcoming events and occasions. There were 16 speakers in this *temnik* divided by topics (education, business, industry, elections, etc.), and statements each speaker should make. For instance, 'elections' was covered by narratives that retired persons appreciated the elections in the LPR and expected a high degree of involvement (speaker one); this level of participation during the election meant that people supported the 'government' (speaker two); elections would be the next step to democracy and modern governance in the 'republic' (speaker three); people in the LPR had a right to run for election with different organisations and as independent candidates, which meant that the 'republic' guaranteed the human rights (speaker four). So, the 'elections' topic was covered by 25% of speakers during just one week. Most comments and news planned in the *temnik* were published as intended during the week after it was leaked to journalists.[55]

This shows the centralised management system installed in Russian proxy media in the occupied territories of Ukraine and their total control. Another example published by *Realna Gazeta* disclosed the media plan for the 'leaders of the republic' and a list of the proxy media (local proxies and Russian media like Life News) which must cover the topic. This indicates that all media activity is coordinated and planned, including propagandists from Moscow.

Key narratives from Russian proxy media in the occupied territories of the Luhansk region were as follows.

'Donbas People'

Initially propagandists in the occupied territories of the Luhansk region, much like in Donetsk, sought to distinguish the residents of the occupied territories as the so-called 'Donbas people'. They were portrayed as a part of the 'Russian world' distinct from the people of Ukraine, though they were not directly referred to as 'Russians'. Moreover, the 'Donbas people' purportedly laid claim to 'sovereignty'. According to this narrative, 'The Donbas people will not forgive Ukrainian politicians for the war unleashed by them in the region', 'The Donbas people chose the path of integration with Russia in the 2014 referendum', 'Zelenskyy destroys the Donbas people by claiming to strive for peace', 'The Donbas people have the right to statehood', 'The Donbas people await recognition by Ukraine of the sovereignty of the Republics', and so on. In 2019 there was a period when the 'leader' of the LPR, Leonid Pasechnik, demanded that the newly elected president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 'acknowledge the choice of Donbas' and stated his readiness to return the 'republic' to Ukraine after granting 'special status' to Donbas. The narrative about 'Russians' supposedly living in the occupied territory of Ukraine in a 'republic' became prominent only towards the approach of 2022.

'Ukraine Is a Nazi State'

The rhetoric of the occupiers' regarding Ukraine was highly emotional and sharply negative. Terms used to describe Ukraine and Ukrainians include 'Nazis', 'fascists', 'junta', 'failed state', 'country 404', 'fighters', 'radicals', 'colony of the USA', 'Kyiv regime', and so on. This narrative was broadly present in most publications and in all media.

'A Junta Has Seized Kyiv'

'When the coup took place in Kyiv, and the neo-Nazi junta came to power, in principle, everyone already understood what awaited us and what Donbas could expect. They shouted everything they wanted from the Maidan to us. There, they showed what they would do with all of us' – these were the opening words from an interview with one of the 'LPR officers' to the LIC media. This paragraph contains the main narrative for Russian proxy media on the occupied territories – 'coup', 'Nazi junta', and threats to 'Donbas people'. This narrative in the Luhansk region was one of the most common, as in Donetsk and Crimea.[56]

'Kyiv Is Sabotaging the Minsk Agreements'

One of the most important narratives for Russian proxy media in the occupied part of the Luhansk region was blaming Ukraine for sabotaging the Minsk agreements. Before 2022 the Minsk agreements were interpreted in Russian proxy media as recognising the distinctiveness of the 'Donbas people' from the Ukrainian people and giving them 'special rights' in Ukraine, which was an attempt to undermine Ukraine from inside. For example, 'Instead of concrete work on strengthening the ceasefire regime, Ukraine proposes several hours of pointless air shock', 'The Rada [Ukrainian parliament] does not intend to fulfil anything imposed on Ukraine by the Minsk agreements', 'The contact group failed to agree on strengthening the ceasefire due to Kyiv's position'. Most of such comments were stated by the 'official representatives' of the Russian proxy 'government' of the LPR.[57]

'Ukraine Is Shelling Civilians'

Russian proxy media in the occupied territories blamed Ukraine for all casualties and victims. This narrative helped Russia to undermine loyalty to Ukraine in the occupied region. The following are a few headlines from local proxy media: 'The Armed Forces of Ukraine fired almost 300 rounds of ammunition onto LPR territory in a week – People's Militia', 'The Armed Forces of Ukraine shelled Kalinovo, animals were killed, and outbuildings were damaged', 'The Prosecutor's Office identified the individuals of the Ukrainian Armed Forces involved in war crimes in Donbas'. A notable component was the commemoration ceremonies for the 'junta's victims': 'The youth of the LPR have beautified the Alley of Memory in Luhansk for children killed by shelling from the Ukrainian Armed Forces', 'The memorial "We will not forget! We will not forgive!", dedicated to the victims of Ukrainian aggression in 2014, is dear to us, a sacred place; it is our pain.'[58]

'Russia Supports the LPR'

One of the main narratives from 2014 to 2021 described how Russia became a good partner and protected the 'Donbas people' and defended them from the 'neo-Nazi junta'. For example, 'We remember well 22 August 2014. That was when the first humanitarian convoy of the Russian Federation broke through to the almost encircled city, which was being shelled, where there was no light, no communication, and huge queues lined up for water'; 'The Donbas is actively integrating with the Russian Federation and in the future will be together with Russia.'[59]

'The Republic Is Restoring Factories, Buildings, Infrastructure'

From 2015 Russian proxy media in the occupied territories promoted a narrative about the improving life in the region and increased expectations. For example: 'The Alchevsk Iron and Steel Works has begun the restoration of the motor transport workshop'; 'Builders have restored 17 multistorey buildings in Pervomaysk destroyed by shelling of the Ukrainian Armed Forces'; 'The chairman of the Trade Union of Motorists and Road Workers Roman Vitkalov: "Now our industry is moving from restoration to development".' These headlines were written between 2015 and 2019, and there was no 'restoration' after their publication.[60]

Content analysis shows that until 2022 proxy propaganda practically did not touch on internal Russian problems. Politics, the economy, social life, education, science, and culture in the Russian Federation were not brought into focus for Luhansk readers and viewers (except for cases when Russia sent Russian artists to the occupied territory). In cases where information from Russia did appear in the occupied territory, it was exclusively about achievements, victories, and 'prosperity'.

For economically depressed and undeveloped territories, a 'parallel reality' was created with the ideas of 'a successful Russia with Putin' and 'a failed Ukraine without Putin'. Russia was portrayed as a state that 'helps', 'supports the young republic', and 'won't abandon' it. The success of the LPR was declared by propagandists as being closely linked to Russia.

Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied Territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions during the Full-Scale Invasion

After the 'recognition of independence' of the so-called L/DPR and the start of a full-scale invasion, media in the occupied Donetsk and Luhansk regions actively supported the war against Ukraine, using well-known narratives about 'neo-Nazis' and portraying Ukraine as the aggressor who hates Donbas and destroys it, while Russia supposedly builds and defends it. Since 2022 these stories were also supported by narratives about the separate identity of the people in the occupied territories. Participation in the war against Ukraine had been glorified in the occupied territories since 2014, creating a myth of the interconnectedness of the 'Great Patriotic War' (the Soviet and Russian versions of the Second World War), the Soviet war in Afghanistan, and the war against Ukraine. The 'heroes' of these three wars became identical in the media in the occupied part of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, serving as objects of a unified memory policy. While the real veterans of the Second World War are almost gone, they still exist in the media space as a standard of resistance to 'fascists and Nazis'.

With the onset of the full-scale invasion, all civilian casualties (amounting to tens of thousands, especially in Mariupol and other cities of the Donetsk region) were blamed on Ukraine. The military aggression was referred to as the 'liberation of the occupied territories by Ukraine', while narratives about 'fascists/Nazis/nationalist battalions' were also present.

In 2022–23, with the increasing influence of PMC Wagner, the network of media outlets created by Evgeniy Prigozhin expanded. His Patriot media holding included, besides the troll factory, such outlets as

the Federal News Agency (FAN) and Nevsky News, as well as several Telegram channels promoting pro-Russian narratives and glorifying Prigozhin's mercenaries, such as News of the LPR and DPR (Rostov, Wagner PMC). However, after the unsuccessful coup attempt by Prigozhin in 2023, some of these channels were removed, while others were renamed, and their activity was reduced.

After February 2022, the media in the occupied Donetsk and Luhansk regions were fully integrated with and controlled and managed by a single centre. They synchronously followed the agenda precoordinated with Moscow, so the news they provided was similar.

In each occupied region additional news websites appeared: ZOV Luhansk, ZOV Donetsk, ZOV Zaporizhzhia, and ZOV Kherson, respectively (ZOV is a slogan/branding of the first stage of the so-called SMO). They were isolated from each other and reported events exclusively in their own region. ZOV Luhansk, for instance, mainly contained reprints from the LIC.[61]

With the onset of large-scale hostilities, the occupied part of the Luhansk region became a hub for Russian military forces and propagandists. Local networks actively disseminated publications from the 'ultrapatriotic' Telegram channel Readovka, which itself was a participant in the pro-Kremlin information network. The channel, which as of March 2024 has over 2.3 million subscribers, was started by a Russian propagandist, Aleksey Kostylov. He closely cooperated with the autonomous 'non-profit organisation' Dialog, created by the Moscow authorities, which is neither autonomous nor non-profit but rather disseminates Kremlin-ordered propaganda. Additionally, Readovka claimed to have a social mission, setting up heating centres or distributing humanitarian aid in the destroyed cities of Lysychansk and Severodonetsk. Reports include tents, buses, or banners with the Readovka logo.[62]

Before 2022 the only TV channel operating in the occupied Luhansk region was Luhansk 24, which, by name, logo, and colours, attempted to resemble Russian regional channels. Other Russian channels also operate in the occupied region, including Russia 1. Both channels air regional news releases.

The programming of Luhansk 24 consists of not only news segments but also special anti-Ukrainian programmes:

■ *Galloping through the Dill* ('dill', *ukrop*, is a pun on 'Ukr', meaning 'Ukrainians' in the Russian propaganda glossary – so 'galloping through the dill' should be understood as 'galloping through the Ukrainians' in a very negative sense)
■ *There Are Questions*
■ *Overheard on the Network*
■ *LuhanskLive.*

Galloping through the Dill is a short compilation of tendentious 'news' about Ukraine accompanied by mockery. The show's host, Maria Karpova, starts each show with the phrase: 'There is good news, there is bad news, and there is news from Ukraine. Daily total hysteria, madness, and simply self-destruction.' A similar mood can be discerned in the programme *Overheard on the Network*, hosted by Mykola Prasolov. He selects news from the US and Europe for discussion and accompanies it with caustic comments about 'Anglo-Saxons'.

More serious in terms of content is the talk show *There Are Questions*, where Ukraine is also at the centre of attention. Various guests in the studio talk about Ukraine's inevitable decline, break-up, defeat, and betrayal by Western partners. *LuhanskLive* is similar. Its host invites guests to the studio to discuss one or more top news stories of the day. The peculiarity of this show's format is the repeated used of 'our President Putin', 'in Russia', 'we are Russia', and so on.

In the occupied provinces of the Luhansk region, branches were created that now produce content for the Luhanmedia media holding. These local centres shoot stories for the central channel Luhansk 24 and for their

own needs. As a result, the region has a news segment with regional events and events in the 'capital', and the central channel takes the most significant stories.

Regional offshoots of Luhanmedia were organised according to a single pattern. A series of channels such as Rodnoy Krasnodon (Native Krasnodon), Rodnoy Antratsit (Native Antratsit), Rodnoy Alchevsk (Native Alchevsk), Rodnoy Sverdlovsk (Native Sverdlovsk), and Rovenki.Rodnoy (Rovenki Native) were created. They operate on the same principle and even have a standard design for pages on the VKontakte social network. The media pages feature stories about events in the city or surrounding towns, news segments called 'Details', and 'Events of the SMO' (video compilations of briefings from Russian army press officers in various locations).

Interestingly, in the territories occupied after 2022, such media centres had not been created as of March 2024. After the occupation, Russians first shut down Ukrainian television channels and only started introducing Russian satellite television there, namely Russian World TV, towards the end of 2022. The television network operates in parts of four captured regions – Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson – and also broadcasts in occupied Crimea and Sevastopol. Russian World provides free access to the manipulative content that Russian television spreads. This includes up to 20 national Russian digital TV and radio channels and regional channels of the LPR and other occupied areas. The Russian World project was created by the All-Russian People's Front – a Russian movement to promote Kremlin narratives, initiated by Putin as early as 2011.

Key Narratives of the Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied Territories of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions during the Full-Scale Invasion

Russian proxy media in the occupied territories after the full-scale invasion mostly continued with their previous narratives and added new ones in 2022. These media followed and fully reflected the trends on national Russian channels.

'No Losses in Russia'

For example, there was no official discussion of the losses of the Russian army at all, but daily reports on the losses of the Ukrainian Armed Forces were published. The personnel of the Ukrainian Army were labelled as 'Nazis'.[63]

'The Russian Army Is Advancing Triumphantly'

For example, 'During active combat operations, the Russian Armed Forces managed to advance in the areas of the settlements of Terny and Yampolivka, reducing the interposition space in some sections from 500 to 100 metres'; 'Russian troops continue to squeeze the Kyiv militants in the western direction'. Kherson immediately disappeared from the occupying media's agenda after the Ukrainian Armed Forces liberated it. In general, in Russian proxy media in the occupied territories 'Russian soldiers are kind, good, heroic, caring, humorous, but simultaneously fearless and ready for self-sacrifice.' Additionally, proxy

media covered all the Russian holidays: Russian flag day, constitution day, days of so-called unity, victory, and so on to integrate people in the occupied territories into the 'Russian world'.

'The Ukrainian Army Has Problems with Weapons, Clothing, and Motivation'

This narrative boils down to the claim that Ukrainians either die or flee the battlefield. For example: 'Blocking units shoot Ukrainian Armed Forces soldiers who try to escape or surrender'; 'Kyiv security forces use morally outdated Soviet weapons on the front'; 'Stable sub-zero temperatures with gusty winds, high humidity, the inability to properly organise shifts for warming up personnel in many areas, poor quality of uniform clothing, and a number of other negative factors have led to a sharp increase in frostbite among the personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.' Since 2023–24 Russian proxy media in the occupied territory of Ukraine added to their narratives two statements to discredit the Ukrainian military leadership: 'Zelenskyy had a conflict with Zaluzhnyy' and 'the "butcher" Syrsky replaced Zaluzhnyy'. These narratives were very popular in the Russian media for domestic and international audiences.[64]

'Zelenskyy Fights until the Last Ukrainian'

President Zelenskyy never said that Ukraine would fight until 'the last Ukrainian', but he has made statements about 'fighting until the last breath, the last enemy soldier, for every Ukrainian city'.[65]

Nevertheless, the phrase has been used by propagandists. For instance, the LPR representative Andriy Marochko stated: 'Minister of Justice of Ukraine-404 Denys Maliuska announced that separate units from convicts will appear in the Armed Forces of Ukraine … The master's task "until the last Ukrainian" must be fulfilled.'[66]

Luhansk propagandist Rodion Miroshnik wrote: 'In simpler terms, Sunak demonstrated that today Britain is "on duty for Ukraine" while the United States and the EU are busy with their problems, and they, as under Johnson, are ready to push Kyiv into a war "until the last Ukrainian" if they suddenly change their minds.'[67]

Another important part of this narrative was the specific term *mogilizatsiya*, a pun on the Russian words *mogila* (a grave) and *mobilizatsiya* (mobilisation). By changing *b* to *g* Russian propagandists produced a word meaning 'dooming to death'. So '*Mogilizatsiya* in Ukraine' should be understood as 'If you are conscripted – you will die'.

'The Ukrainian Armed Forces Commit War Crimes'

Examples include 'A resident of Kremenna died as a result of a strike by Ukrainian militants … Innocent residents, both in cities and villages, become victims of vile shelling by the UAF';[68] 'The hour of reckoning is inevitable, so Ukrainian radicals try to substitute military successes with the bloodshed of civilians'; 'The Russian Military Historical Society handed over 5000 copies of the "Black Book" to the LPR. The "Black Book" is based on archival data, which documents the war crimes of Ukrainian neo-Nazis.' Additionally Russian proxy media in the occupied territories supported the Russian media narrative that 'Military criminals from among the Armed Forces of Ukraine will be punished; trials against them are ongoing.'[69]

Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied City of Mariupol (Donetsk Region)

The Russian military operation against the city of Mariupol in the Donetsk region became one of the greatest tragedies of 2022 in Ukraine. The city of approximately 450,000 Ukrainian citizens, most of whom spoke Russian, was surrounded literally within days of the start of the full-scale invasion and was wholly isolated in terms of external information channels and technical infrastructure. There were no electricity, communications, medicines, or food supplies; neither transportation nor the emergency services were operating. At the same time, the Russian army attacked the city using heavy artillery, tanks, naval guns, and aircraft. The Mariupol garrison of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the Interior Ministry, which included the Azov Regiment and the 36th Marine Brigade, was a key target of the Russian military operation.

It is important to note that since 2014 the Azov Regiment had been one of the critical targets of Russian propaganda, which labelled it as 'neo-Nazi', 'far right', and 'nationalistic'. There were a few shows on Russian propaganda TV dedicated to Azov (around 60 minutes each), and Azov was mentioned dozens of times in other propaganda TV shows.

On 17 March 2022 the Russian army controlled half of the city of Mariupol. On 16 May the garrison surrendered to captivity on President Zelenskyy's orders, as there were no other options to save the lives of the military personnel. Approximately 90% of the residential buildings in the city were damaged or destroyed. The number of civilian casualties is measured in tens of thousands, but it is impossible to count them, as access to the city is only available to the Russian army.

The Russian army prepared for the Mariupol assault on the information front as well. In early March a real information explosion began — many Telegram channels of pro-Russian orientation were created, and the administrators operated from Russian-controlled territory. The task of these fake 'local' Telegram channels was not to inform the city's residents about the factual situation in and around Mariupol but to impose the Russian version of events that were taking place. Pro-Russian and Russian politicians were absent from the city until the complete occupation, which occurred in May 2022 — only then did the creation of collaborative centres of local self-government begin, and the 'faces' of the new authorities from the local population began to be put forward.

After the end of hostilities in Mariupol, bloggers arrived, in the guise of locals or random tourists, who were supposed to document the 'rapid pace of city reconstruction' and 'the gratitude of Mariupol residents for the liberation', the attitude of the locals towards Azov and the Armed Forces of Ukraine in general, and so on. These bloggers also engaged in 'debunking' Ukrainian and world 'fakes' about Mariupol. A vivid example is the attempt to discredit the documentary film by Mstyslav Chernov and Evhenyi Maloletka *20 Days in Mariupol*.

We will focus on Telegram channels in occupied Mariupol for a few reasons. First, these are a new type of media, easy to launch and available even with a poor internet connection. Second, during the Russian assault on and siege of Mariupol, the city was in a total blockade: there was no media. Russia launched proxy TV and other media in Mariupol later, after establishing full control of the city.

From 2022 to 2024 there were three main types of Mariupol Telegram channel: official pro-government (controlled by the DPR/Russia), fringe local (imitation of vox populi among ordinary Mariupol residents, controlled by the DPR/Russia), and apolitical channels (self-positioned as such). Based on this, we

can identify three main narratives represented by these channels: a narrative that can conditionally be called 'forever with Russia', aimed at imposing the 'only correct path of development' of the city as part of Russia; an aggressive propaganda narrative of 'fighting against Nazism', which embodies the Ukrainian authorities and the Armed Forces of Ukraine (here we encounter the most aggressive and extremist vocabulary: *khokhlosvin'i*, meaning 'Ukrainian pigs', Nazis, etc.); a narrative of restoration and return to peaceful life (daily posts about the contribution of Russian regions to the restoration of the city). So generally, the same narratives that were disseminated in other occupied territories but in a very offensive, aggressive, and negative sense.

All pro-Russian propaganda channels were characterised by a high percentage of reposts of material from official government resources of the DPR/Russia. In some cases information originating from the city and concerning internal city problems was absent for weeks. Thus, the existing information vacuum was filled, and monotonous posts about restoration and humanitarian aid from Russian regions were diluted, creating an illusion of a rich and diverse flow of information.

Narratives about the city leaders' visits to the DPR and Russia, reciprocal visits, student and scientific exchanges, and so on illustrate the city's integration into the Russian political space.

Mariupol Nash was one of the largest Telegram channels writing about the occupied city (58,000 subscribers). Its first post was published on 12 March 2022, during the full-scale invasion and the military operation to blockade and assault the city. The channel is openly pro-Russian, using terms typical of Russian state propaganda such as 'Nazis', 'khokhlosvin'i', and 'Polish owners of Ukraine', and constantly publishing videos (mainly from the TV channels of the occupied Donetsk region) about 'foreign mercenaries' and 'Azov atrocities'. Much was written about the 'restoration of Mariupol'. The news about what was happening inside the city rapidly decreased

in favour of news from the world arena, which focused on 'Europe and the West turning away from Ukraine'.

One of the key narratives supported by the channel was the 'fight against nationalists and Nazis'. This narrative includes posts about the 'liberators' from the DPR/Russia and about the 'atrocities of Nazis/fascists/nazis from Azov', shifting responsibility for war crimes committed by Russia in Mariupol onto Ukraine.

For example, on 13 March, Mariupol Nash published an anonymous post stating that '96 people, including 20 children, were evacuated from the 400,000 Mariupol residents held by Ukrainian nationalist battalions in one day'. The post added: 'And pay attention to the *ukrogandoni* ["Ukrainian condoms", a derogatory term for Ukrainian military personnel]. They have already changed into civilian clothes and are ready to merge with civilians when Mariupol is liberated. Attempts to leave Mariupol end in firing from the corners by the Azov militants and remnants of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.'

Following the rocket strike on the maternity hospital in Mariupol (12 March), the channel falsely accused Azov of equipping a base in the hospital. On 16 March it reported that Azov blew up the Drama Theatre building in Mariupol (this was also false, as it was hit by an aerial bomb from a Russian aircraft).

On 17 March the channel reported that 'Ukrainian Armed Forces militants in Mariupol are killing men to escape with hostages under the guise of civilians.' It said, 'Ukrainian nationalists break into the basements of houses to take civilian clothing from the population, abandon their uniforms. Men were killed, [Ukrainian military] dressed in their clothes, and their wives and children are taken hostage.'[70] On 28 March the channel reported that 'In School No. 25, which the Ukrainian occupiers turned into a stronghold, the body of a woman with signs of torture was found, a swastika was burned on her stomach[71],' and on 29 March it reported that 'A captured fighter of the 503rd Marine

Battalion of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Sergey Tsaberman, spoke about the atrocities of Azov in Mariupol, where the Nazis burned people alive[72].' The channel issued a significant number of posts about the 'foreign handlers' of Azov and 'biolabs'. For example, on 2 May it posted that 'Canadian General Trevor Cadier was arrested while attempting to escape from the territory of Azovstal in Mariupol. According to the information that was spread, the general supervised Biolaboratory No. 1, where 18 people worked with deadly viruses.' This information was also fake,[73] but it was still available on many Russian websites as late as March 2024.

Later the Telegram channel added to its assortment narratives of 'the return of the Russian language', 'the celebration of Victory Day according to Russian standards', and 'city restoration' (approximately half of the posts are in spring of 2024 dedicated to this topic, while the other half still consists of fake and harmful content about Ukraine – about 'Nazis from Azov' and 'biolab secretaries').

Mariupol 24 is the official Telegram channel of the occupiers' TV channel Mariupol 24. It began operating after the Ukrainian garrison surrendered, so it did not touch on military confrontation within the city. Its main themes are 'reconstruction', humanitarian aid, and the integration of Mariupol into Russian space. The number of subscribers as of March 2024 was 8170.

Another example is the Telegram channel Mariupol Online created at the end of June 2022. Its first news set a positive tone – trolleybuses from St Petersburg, opening a cafe with a large assortment of products, the beginning of reconstruction, and so on. Slogans like 'Life goes on and restoration does too' are often published. The key narrative is that the city has a peaceful life, is recovering rapidly, and has survived the war.

Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied Parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Regions, 2022–24

In this section we will focus on the Russian proxy media on territories occupied since 2022 – parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. At present these territories are mostly frontline or grey zone, so can't be considered as safe and stable. The Russian special services and army have put a lot of effort into building proxy media networks and companies. The occupiers have created various media outlets to spread Russian propaganda in the temporarily occupied territories of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. In each region, there is one television and radio company, as well as several newspapers, websites, and Telegram channels.

Actors: The Main Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied Territory of the Kherson Region

The Tavria television and radio company is a significant propaganda media created by Russian occupiers in the Kherson region. According to Russian registers, the channel was created on 15 June 2022. In that month, Russians created several propaganda media outlets in occupied Kherson as part of the preparation for the fake 'referendum on the accession of the Kherson region to the Russian Federation'.

Tavria was overseen by Aleksandr Malkevich, a Russian propagandist close to Prigozhin. Many pro-Kremlin media outlets worked under his patronage, as did the Internet Research Agency, better known as the Olgino troll factory. Like Prigozhin, Malkevich is from St Petersburg; from 2021 to 2023 he headed the Saint Petersburg municipal television channel. Since 2022 Malkevich's main job has been to promote pro-Kremlin ideology in the occupied Ukrainian territories.

Formally there are two Tavria TV and radio companies: the 'state unitary enterprise' registered on 15 June 2022 with a legal address in Kherson city (which was at the time occupied by Russia and later liberated by Ukraine in November 2022) and an 'autonomous non-profit organisation of the Kherson region', the Tavria TV and Radio Company, registered on 22 March 2023, with a legal address in Henichesk city ('capital' of the occupied part of the Kherson region after November 2022). The director of the latter company is Evgeniy Glotov, a Crimean who actively supported the Russian occupation of the peninsula in 2014. He was the deputy director of the pro-Kremlin media NewsFront, managed by Crimean collaborator Konstantin Knyrik.

The Tavria TV and Radio Company includes the Tavria TV company and Radio Tavria. The latter broadcasts in the Russian-occupied towns of Henichesk and Skadovsk. Tavria TV has been led by Ismail Abdullaiev (who calls himself 'Vladimir') since August 2022. In the past he was the director of Oplot TV, created in Donetsk in 2014 during the Russian occupation of the city, using the stolen premises of several local television channels. Oplot TV was directly subordinated to the head of the DPR assassinated in 2018, Oleksandr Zakharchenko.

A significant portion of the content broadcast by the Tavria TV and Radio Company consists of news programmes presenting information through the lens of Russian propaganda. Thematic programmes such as *Epoch of Revival* discuss the supposedly good life in cities and districts in the occupied part of the

Kherson region. There are also pseudo-analytical programmes like *Hot Topic* and two pseudo-publicists' ones, *Occupation Zone* and *The Sobering*. All these programmes propagate narratives of Russian propaganda and disseminate manipulations and false information about Ukraine and the de-occupied part of Kherson. The company's staff are mainly composed of Russian citizens and residents of territories in Ukraine occupied in 2014. Only one journalist from Kherson, Hanna Korobova, who had a long-standing reputation as a pro-Russian individual, and one local cameraman, Ruslan Voznesensky, cooperated with the occupiers and work at Tavria TV.

Among the media outlets controlled by the occupiers in the Kherson region are the website of the Tavria TV and Radio Company and only two news websites: Novosty Khersona (Kherson News) and the Khersonskoye agentstvo novostey (Kherson News Agency).

The Tavria TV and Radio Company website is not just a media outlet duplicating broadcast material, though a significant portion of its content coincides with it. The site also publishes news content covering the occupying authorities' decisions, various events, and press releases.

The Novosty Khersona website is part of a network of sites created for the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia. The site publishes automatically and manually collected news content from many online resources, primarily Russian and controlled by the occupiers. For example, on 23 March 2024, a fake comment attributed to the former secretary of the National Security and Defence Council (NSDC) of Ukraine Oleksiy Danilov was posted there regarding events at Crocus City Hall, where Danilov supposedly implied that Ukraine was responsible for the terrorist attack in Moscow. This fake was so poorly executed that many Russian media outlets deleted it shortly after its publication. However, it was not removed from Novosty Khersona website.

According to unofficial sources, the administrator of Novosty Khersona is Viktor

Marchenko. He left the city in the autumn of 2022, shortly before it was liberated from Russian occupation, and presumably settled in Henichesk, the administrative centre of the Russian-occupied part of the Kherson region.

The Khersonskoye agentstvo novostey website is most likely a structural unit of a media outlet whose main product is the Donetskoye agentstvo novostey (Donetsk News Agency), the main occupation media outlet of the DPR. The publication began operating on 3 June 2023. Like Novosty Khersona, this website does not produce original content but only reprints news and press releases from other sources – Russian and those controlled by the occupation authorities. No information is available about who represents this media in the Kherson region. It is possible that Khersonskoye agentstvo novostey does not have any employees in the area and that the content is managed by the Donetsk-based publication team led by Roman Hromnyak.

The print newspaper sector in the occupied part of the Kherson region is represented by publications such as *Naddnipryanska Pravda* (Naddnipryanska Truth), *Tochka Otschyota* (Starting Point), *Kakhovskaya Zarya* (Kakhovka Day-Spring), *Kalanchaksky Vestnik* (Kalanchak Herald), and *Chernomorets* (Black Sea Sailor).

Naddnipryanska Pravda is the leading print media of the occupation authorities in the Kherson region. A newspaper of this name has been published in the Kherson region since 1928, with a break during the German occupation of the area (1941–44). It was the print organ of the Kherson Regional Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and later that of Kherson Regional Council. In recent years, it has declined, being irregularly published with a circulation of 100–200 copies only for official publications.

The revival of the newspaper is associated with the Kherson journalist Oleg Hrushko, who was the editor of *Naddnipryanska Pravda* and the director of the local company Naddnipryanska Pravda Plus from 2013 to 2016. Hrushko, known among Kherson journalists as a supporter of Russia and a fan of the USSR, sided with the occupiers. He currently lives in the occupied left-bank part of the Kherson region and works in the occupation administration.

The chief editor of *Naddnipryanska Pravda* is Yevhen Biely. He began his career as a journalist at the newspaper *Gorodyanin ta Gorodyanka* (Townsman and Townswoman) owned by Volodymyr Saldo (who is now the head of the occupation administration of the Kherson region). Later, Biely was the deputy chief editor of the municipal newspaper *Khersonsky Visnyk (Kherson Herald)*. After 2014 he left Kherson and worked as the chief editor of the Odesa website Industrialka. He returned to Kherson after 24 February 2022.

Naddnipryanska Pravda is the only print publication in the occupied part of the Kherson region that is published at least twice a month. The remaining publications mentioned are printed about once a month.

All newspapers published in the occupied Kherson region have a Soviet-style appearance and their content is Russian propaganda.

The Telegram channel sector controlled by Russian occupiers from the Kherson region is more diverse. Anonymous, semi-anonymous, and all other Telegram channels continue to be a significant source of information for many residents of the occupied Kherson region, if not the main one, with an apparent lack of accuracy and other journalistic standards. Moreover, residents of the occupied territories are already accustomed to a poor internet connection, which usually allows them to read only Telegram.

The Telegram channels include Glavnoye v Khersone i oblasti (Main News in Kherson and the Region), Na samom dele v Khersone (Actually in Kherson), Khersonskiy Vestnik (Kherson Herald), Pro Kherson (About Kherson), Novosti Khersonshyny (Kherson Region News), Kherson.ru, and Svobodnyi

Kherson (Free Kherson). They have audiences ranging from 1000 to tens of thousands of subscribers. The content is very often the same because the channel administrators have the same sources of information: the Russian and local pro-Kremlin media and occupation authorities. Most do not rewrite; they copy the content posted by others.

However, there are Telegram channels that post a lot of original content, including that of Kherson Region News, led by Viktor Marchenko, as mentioned above. The latter positions himself as an analyst, political scientist, and even poet. His posts strictly adhere to the spirit of Russian propaganda, and circulate corresponding narratives.

Actors: The Main Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied Territory of the Zaporizhzhia Region

The television company Za!TV is the leading media resource of the pro-Russian authorities in the occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region of Ukraine. It was founded on the basis of the Melitopol TV channel MTV Plus, owned by Yevhen Balitsky, a former Ukrainian MP and current head of the occupation administration in the Zaporizhzhia region. The director of MTV Plus was Oleh Shostak, who now works in the occupation administration. In addition to Za!TV the media holding ZaMedia includes the radio station Za!Radio, the newspaper *Vestnik Zaporzhya (Zaporizhzhia Herald)*, and the online pages of these publications.

ZaMedia is led by Vadym Kucher, a native of St Petersburg. The CEO of Za!TV was initially Vadym Ivanov, a journalist from Novgorod, Russia, a former employee of a Russian government TV company (VGTRK), and later another Russian, Yulia Shamal, headed the channel. The supervisory board of Za!TV is headed by Aleksandr Malkevich, a Russian close to Prigozhin who was also mentioned in connection with his work in the occupied part of the Kherson region for the Tavria TV and Radio Company. He was also the founder of the Mariupol 24 channel in Mariupol city in the occupied part of the Donetsk region. Due to the lack of experienced journalists willing to work in the newly created pro-Russian channels, Malkevich opened 'media schools' where local youth were involved.

Crimean journalist Vladimir Andronaki, now a pro-Kremlin propagandist, has also worked for Za!TV and hosts his programme *After the News: Evening with Vladimir Andronaki* on Za!Radio. He was one of the first to switch to work in the Russian occupation media in 2014 and supported the establishment of a branch of the 'Russian Union of Journalists in Crimea'. He was the author and host of the propaganda programme *Evening Intercept* on Radio Crimea for several years.

Unlike Tavria in Kherson, a significant part of the Za!TV team comprises local collaborators. However, most of them were not professional media workers before. These include bloggers Andrii Fedorets and Maxim Stadnyk, and wedding videographers Hennadii Nikitenko and Vadym Konovalskiy. As for local journalists, Denys Dorofeev and the couple Oksana Hapyeieva and Mykhailo Hapyeiev also joined the collaborators. MTV Plus operators Dmytro Pereverziev and Dmytro Pyisanytsia also became collaborators.

The content of Za!TV mostly consists of news, which is essentially Russian propaganda narratives, similar to those imposed by media workers from Kherson with adjustments for Zaporizhzhia.

As of March–April 2024 only *On the Line* airs regularly among the hosted programmes. This programme discusses the situation on the frontline from the perspective of Russian propaganda. It is hosted by Andrii Khorkov, who previously worked in radio in Moscow and is also a sports photographer and videographer.

Za!Radio began broadcasting in Melitopol and Berdyansk on 12 September 2022. The radio's slogan is 'For the Motherland! For the native home! For the radio!' and its content mainly consists of news and Russian music.

The newspaper *Vestnik Zaporzhya* (Zaporizhzhia Herald), the main print organ of the occupation authorities, is distributed in the occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region, particularly in the city of Melitopol. It is printed in occupied Crimea and has a circulation of 20,000 copies, according to data provided by the occupation authorities.

The propaganda newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda: Zaporozh'e* is also distributed in the occupied territories. In August 2022 another propaganda newspaper, *Novoye Vremya* (New Times), was launched in the temporarily occupied Polohy district of the Zaporizhzhia region.

Several websites have been created by the Russian occupiers in the temporarily controlled part of the Zaporizhzhia region, including Lenta novostey Zaporozhya (Zaporizhzhia Newsfeed), Lenta novostey Melitopolya (Melitopol Newsfeed), Lenta novostey Berdyanska (Berdyansk Newsfeed), and Zaporozhskoe agentstvo novostey (Zaporizhzhia News Agency).

The websites of the Lenta novostey network operate as news aggregators, gathering a large amount of content from various sources, including information from Russian and local occupation media.

The Zaporizhzhia News Agency is likely another structural unit of a propaganda media holding headquartered in occupied Donetsk. This website primarily publishes news but also includes articles and interviews. This differentiates it from the Kherson News Agency, which only posts news.

The content published on these websites is in line with Russian propaganda narratives.

Telegram channels are the occupiers' most widespread and popular media in the occupied part of Zaporizhzhia, as well as in the occupied part of Kherson region. There are dozens of them, with audiences ranging from hundreds to tens of thousands of subscribers. Some examples: Zaporozhskiy Vestnik (Zaporizhzhia Herald), Yuzhnyy platsdarm (Southern Bridgehead), Enerhodar segodnya (Enerhodar Today), Tokmak segodnya (Tokmak Today), DneproRudnyy segodnya (Dniprorudne Today), Berdyansk Aktualno (Relevant News from Berdyansk), Typichnaya Akimovka (Typical Akimovka).

Like the Telegram channels relating to the occupied Kherson region, pro-Russian resources from Zaporizhzhia often publish similar or identical content since they have similar sources of information. A significant portion of the messages contains fakes and manipulations.

Content: Key Narratives of Russian Proxy Media in the Occupied Parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Regions

The content of Russian proxy media in the occupied parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions includes all the usual Russian propaganda narratives from the main Russian TV channels (following their pattern) and Russian proxy media in the other occupied parts of Ukraine.

Among the well-known narratives are:
- ■ 'Ukraine is historically Russian land'
- ■ 'Ukraine is governed by neo-Nazis who came to power as a result of a state coup in 2014'
- ■ The Ukrainian Armed Forces are referred to as 'armed formations of Ukraine', 'Ukrainian terrorists', 'punishers', 'Nazis'
- ■ Nazi narrative: parallels drawn between present-day Ukraine and Hitler's Germany
- ■ Armed Forces of Ukraine 'shell peaceful settlements'
- ■ 'Russia does not start wars; it ends them'
- ■ Russian occupiers as 'liberators' and 'saviours'
- ■ 'The SMO defends "the people of Donbas" and Russia's geopolitical interests'
- ■ 'Russia seeks peace and stability, while the "collective West" desires war and thus creates centres of instability'
- ■ 'NATO is fighting Russia via the Ukrainians, waging war "to the last Ukrainian"'
- ■ 'Russian-speaking people are discriminated against in Ukraine'
- ■ 'The Orthodox Church is persecuted in Ukraine'
- ■ 'Closure of the "Ukraine" project'.

Narratives relating solely to the Kherson/Zaporizhzhia regions include:
- ■ 'Kherson/ Zaporizhzhia has always been Russian land'
- ■ 'The referendum is the people's will. Huge numbers of people at the polling stations'
- ■ 'The accession of Kherson to the Russian Federation complies with the UN Charter and international law' [74]
- ■ 'The settlement and development of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions began thanks to Russia and the Russians'
- ■ 'In 2022 the residents of the Kherson region welcomed Russian soldiers as liberators'
- ■ 'Since 2022 Russia has done more for Kherson/Zaporizhzhia than Ukraine has done in 30 years'.

The Ukrainian authorities and residents of the territories free from Russian occupation consider the inhabitants of the Russian-occupied left bank of the Kherson region as traitors and foreigners.

Part 2. Proxy Media Operations in Ukraine

In this part we will focus on three main aspects of the Russian proxy media operations in Ukrainian-controlled territory – TV, Telegram, and YouTube activities. All of these were formally independent but informally interconnected and supported by one narrative basis. All types of Russian proxy media targeted different audiences to change the behaviour of Ukrainian citizens and influence them to vote for pro-Russian political parties in elections, which is crucial for political control of Ukraine as a state. Print newspapers are not studied in this report because there were no influential Russian proxy print media in Ukraine.

In 2017 – three years after the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of parts of two eastern regions of Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk – two major Russian social networks, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, the Mail.ru email service, and the Yandex search engine were officially banned in Ukraine. Social networks were used for mass disinformation dissemination, including during the military operation concerning the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of parts of the eastern regions. The Russian government fully controlled social networks; at that time, the Ukrainian authorities had no operational capabilities to work in these environments. Social networks collected personal data, as did the search engine and email service. The same decree of the president of Ukraine blocked Russian TV channels and hundreds of websites which simulated mass media but were (and still are) purely propaganda tools. At that time, this action destroyed the Russian propaganda infrastructure and, even more importantly, reduced the possibility of gathering the personal data of Ukrainian citizens and using it in informational and psychological operations against them.

By 2018 Russian special services had begun to build a new influence infrastructure in Ukraine under their control. It consisted of several elements, including television and the Telegram messenger ecosystem. The goal was to exert informational-psychological influence and, as a result, to change the behaviour of voters, pushing them to vote for several pro-Russian political parties to bring them into parliament and local councils through 'soft power'. All these activities were intentional and coordinated.

In terms of a FIMI framework the Russian proxy media strategy can be described as follows.

Actors: key actors were the Russian special services and Russian politicians, and Russian proxy media in Ukraine backed by them.

Russian special services and politicians have backed Russian proxy media in Ukraine since the very beginning of their activities. Russia supported proxy media in Ukraine at various levels – financially, with narrative creation and support, at public promotion, and politically. It's important to note that Russian proxy media operated non-illegally. TV companies had licences for broadcasting, and platforms like Telegram and YouTube were not regulated in a legal domain. Russian proxy media effectively used the freedom of speech law and practice in Ukraine.

A behaviour-centric approach was the core of Russia's strategy in Ukraine. The establishment and support of proxy media in Ukraine were to promote a specific pro-Russian political agenda. The aim was to influence the political behaviour of voters, persuading them to support pro-Russian politics during elections and ultimately bring pro-Russian parties to power. All proxy media activities were connected to certain political parties and the elections.

Content: this section will discuss video content (TV and YouTube) and text content produced and disseminated via the Telegram ecosystem.

Russian proxy media in Ukraine used the following narratives.

- Dismiss allegations and denigrate the source – 'Ukraine is dependent on/under the influence of Western countries, a passive political entity, not an active one', and 'Ukraine is a corrupt country'

- Distort the narrative and twist the framing – 'Ukraine doesn't want peace and that's why the Minsk agreements were not implemented', 'Civil war in Ukraine', and 'Donbas people'

- Distract, to shift attention and blame to a different actor or narrative – 'The US funded biolabs in Ukraine and COVID appeared from these biolabs'

- Divide to generate conflict and broaden divisions within or between communities and groups. For instance, spread rumours and narratives that 'the majority of Donbas people support Russia', 'schism in the Orthodox Church', and 'Russian-speaking people are discriminated against in Ukraine.'

Degree: Russian proxy media in Ukraine were the most popular in news broadcasting in 2020-2021, and the Telegram network of Russian proxy channels reached more than 680,000 subscribers, mostly involved in politics (a crucial target audience for FIMI activities).

The effect of the Russian proxy media operations is debatable. The implementation of their strategy in Ukraine had a political result – some Ukrainian citizens voted for the pro-Russian Opposition Platform for Life (OPFL) in 2019 and 2020 and the Party of Shariy in 2020. Pro-Russian politician Yevhenii Muraiev used his proxy TV channel Nash (Our) to promote his political party Nashi (Ours), aiming at the approaching elections.

Actors: Proxy TV Group of Three TV Channels

Background

At the end of 2013 a television news channel called 112 was launched in Ukraine. The first broadcast began a few days before the start of the Maidan protests when President Viktor Yanukovych's authority was stable. According to Ukrainian journalists, the money for the launch of the channel was provided by the then minister of internal affairs, Vitaliy Zakharchenko, who moved to Moscow after the killings that took place during the protest actions on the Maidan in February 2014 (the TV channel officially denied this).[75]

In 2019 Zakharchenko was stripped of Ukrainian citizenship, and his arrest in absentia was given court approval. He was suspected in two criminal cases – money laundering and abuse of power and law enforcement officers' authority to obstruct meetings, which led to mass casualties during the Maidan protests in Kyiv on 18–20 February 2014.

The 112 channel operated as a news broadcaster from the very beginning. It was equipped with new technologies, and visually and content-wise looked much better than

other participants in the market. The channel appeared to be conditionally independent in the first few years and did not demonstrate explicit signs of any political engagement, although its real owners were officially unknown. The news was broadcast hourly on the channel, and political events were commented on by guests in the studio in live broadcasts. Most of these guests were former members of parliament or former officials. Prime-time talk shows were aired in the evenings, featuring hard-talk formats and interviews with relevant politicians of the time, including representatives of political parties in power. 112 quickly rose in the ratings — it was indeed a quality news channel at that time.

Russian Money behind Ukrainian Proxy Media

Viktor Medvedchuk has been one of the best-known Ukrainian politicians for over 25 years. He began his political career in the 1990s, headed the administration of Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma, and is considered one of the most active participants in the 2004–05 crisis related to the presidential elections and protests on the Maidan (the 'Orange Revolution'). He modelled political reforms that significantly reduced the newly elected president's powers. After Viktor Yushchenko became president, Medvedchuk withdrew from active politics but returned around 2012–13. At that time, President Yanukovych was distancing himself from pro-Russian clans within Ukraine while also building communication with partners in the US and Europe. Since around 2013, Medvedchuk began actively developing a new political structure – the NGO Ukrainian Choice – and visited cities in eastern Ukraine for meetings with potential supporters. 'Ukrainian Choice' was based on pedantic pro-Russian rhetoric and sought to disrupt Ukraine's contracts with Chevron and Shell regarding shale gas extraction. Medvedchuk's political movement organised mass protests, intimidating locals with the threat of environmental disaster in the Donetsk region. His political goal was to prevent Ukraine from developing alternative gas extraction sources, which undoubtedly favoured Russia as a gas supplier. The same activists who protested against shale gas extraction in 2013 became prominent supporters of Russia's invasion of Donbas in 2014.

After the start of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Medvedchuk tried to legitimise Russian proxy politicians and militants who pretended to be 'Ukrainian separatists' in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. He directly communicated with those who proclaimed 'republics' on Ukrainian territory. Since 2014 he has been under sanctions by the US (and other countries) 'for his role in undermining Ukrainian sovereignty in 2014'.[76]

For some time in 2014–15, Medvedchuk had an official mandate from President Poroshenko regarding the exchange of prisoners of war between the Ukrainian and Russian sides, which allowed him to participate in public events and international meetings.

According to the State Bureau of Investigation of Ukraine, in 2014–15 Medvedchuk organised coal deliveries from the occupied territories of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions to Ukraine. This is known in Ukraine as the 'coal case'. The central figures involved were Medvedchuk himself and former president Poroshenko (who, according to the investigation, reached political agreements with one another and third parties), as well as several other businesspeople and officials (who ensured the technical implementation of the deliveries). In June 2021 the independent Ukrainian organisation Bihus.Info published the so-called 'Medvedchuk tapes' – leaked recordings of his alleged phone conversations with senior members of the Russian leadership. According to the Criminal Code of Ukraine, the evidence was interpreted as

aiding the activities of terrorist organisations and committing intentional acts to the detriment of Ukraine's territorial integrity, inviolability, defence, and economic security by prior conspiracy. As of March 2024, court procedures in this case had not yet begun, meaning the defendants' guilt has neither been proven nor refuted.[77]

Moreover, Medvedchuk actively expanded his business in and with Russia in the fuel sector around 2017–18. At that time, he did not have the status of a Ukrainian MP or hold other public positions. His family (specifically, his wife, Oksana Marchenko) became the owner of oil wells, an oil processing plant, a fleet for the oil delivery, and so on in Russia.[78]

According to former secretary of the NSDC Oleksiy Danilov, fuel from the plant owned by Medvedchuk's family was supplied to the occupied territories of Ukraine (Luhansk and Donetsk regions) and used there for Russian military equipment.[79]

In Russia (and in the occupied territories of Ukraine controlled by Russia), the oil business is not a free market; it is entirely regulated by the Russian government and security services. Therefore, developing it is possible only with political support at a very high level. Medvedchuk's key asset is his family ties with Vladimir Putin, who is the godfather of Medvedchuk's daughter.

Formation of a Proxy TV Pool

In the spring of 2018, approximately a year before the presidential elections, the ownership structure of the 112 TV channel changed. Initially, one undisclosed owner was replaced by another fictitious one – a citizen of Germany who traded used cars, and then in the documents Taras Kozak appeared, a former high-ranking tax service official close to the pro-Russian politician Medvedchuk. Kozak was not a public figure but a 'wallet' for Medvedchuk and his business partner. Formally, through his offshore company, Kozak paid approximately $2.6 million for several companies that were part of the 112 channel's business structure.

In the autumn of 2018 Kozak became the owner of another TV channel – the opposition-supporting NewsOne, which had existed since 2010; its owner had been Yevhenii Muraiev since 2014. Kozak declared that he paid approximately $1.5 million for rights to the channel.

Previously, on 18 August 2017, in the Lviv region, Petro Dyminsky, one of the most influential businesspeople in the western region, former member of the Ukrainian parliament, and owner of the ZIK TV channel, caused a traffic accident in which a young woman, who was driving another car, was killed. A few days after the accident, Dyminsky left Ukraine and never returned. ZIK was known in the western part of Ukraine, where overall, the incumbent president, Poroshenko, was popular among the electorate at that time, and the channel was opposed to him. In June 2019, after Poroshenko lost the presidential election, Kozak became the new owner of ZIK.

Having sold NewsOne to Kozak, Yevhenii Muraiev founded a new channel, Nash, and a political party of a similar name and pro-Russian slant. There were four news channels controlled by pro-Russian politicians – three in the Kozak–Medvedchuk media group and one in Muraiev's.

Medvedchuk's holding of three TV channels – 112, NewsOne, and ZIK – was structured over approximately three to five months. The channels differed in identity, host, and concept. The 112 channel targeted audiences in large cities, conducting regular major talk shows with invited prominent public figures. NewsOne targeted an older audience in small towns, more in central and eastern Ukraine, and had more radical rhetoric, with speakers from the 'lower league' political personas. ZIK

was the smallest element of the system, and the intellectual level of discussions there was the lowest.

In parallel with the reorganisation of TV broadcasting in the autumn of 2018, Medvedchuk became head of the political board of the pro-Russian OPFL.

Ukraine held presidential elections in March–April 2019, and Volodymyr Zelenskyy became the head of state. In May he dissolved the parliament and called for new elections in July. Local council elections in Ukraine were scheduled for 2020.

Content: Key Narratives of the Proxy TV Pool

Immediately after the consolidation into a single pool of the Kozak–Medvedchuk channels, their rhetoric became uniformly structured: criticism of the government, narrative of a 'civil conflict' (in Donbas), promotion of 'peaceful resolution', attempts to support and promote the 'Minsk agreements', criticism of Ukraine's economic policies, particularly tariffs directly associated with gas prices, and advocacy for Ukraine's return to gas procurement from Russia. Significant attention was paid to religious narratives in the form of information operations in support of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP).

From June 2018, a month after the change of ownership, 112 began quoting Medvedchuk. The volume of quoting increased; at some point, it became daily. After a few months, he was mentioned in almost every programme and after every news release.

Medvedchuk communicated three key narratives from typical Russian rhetoric against Ukraine – 'the Ukrainian authorities have no autonomy, Ukraine is a puppet state'; Ukraine should apply the 'Minsk agreements', 'special status' for the territories occupied by Russia; supply of Russian gas to Ukraine.

For example:

- On 8 June, 112 quoted Medvedchuk – 'The US is creating gas dependence for Ukraine and the EU'; 'As a result of geopolitical games and dealings between Kyiv and Western sponsors, our country has lost its independence'; 'Now external control in Ukraine is enshrined at the legislative level'
- On 11 June – 'As for Ukraine, our country is assigned the role of cannon fodder in a major geopolitical and economic game by the US: our state risks losing transit of Russian gas to Europe'
- On 12 June – 'Refusals to deal with these points have provoked an escalation of the conflict and slowed down the issue of exchanging detainees'
- On 18 June – 'The Ukrainian authorities, becoming hostages of the IMF and creditors, have shifted the entire burden of servicing debts onto the shoulders of the people'
- On 21 June – 'This is not in the plans of either the "Washington Obkom" or our pro-Western government' (Obkom: a Soviet term meaning 'Regional Communist Party Committee' as a senior power and decision-making centre in a particular region)

- On 28 June – 'Medvedchuk: Ukraine does not stand on ceremony with ideological opponents of the authorities'; 'The process of depriving poor Ukrainians of subsidies has already begun'; 'Recent supporters and adherents of Eurointegration reforms come to understand: living like this is no longer possible'
- On 28 June – 'Constitutional reform and granting special status to certain districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as key points of the Minsk agreements, are a guarantee of peace restoration'
- On 3 July – 'Enshrining the Euro-Atlantic course at the constitutional level will only deepen the division in society.'[80]

Around 2018 the NewsOne channel gathered former politicians, officials, journalists, and media managers who had worked in Viktor Yanukovych's pool before 2014. Some had been working in President Kuchma's office in the 1990s. Among the programme hosts and frequent guests in the studio were, for example, Olena Lukash, former first deputy head of Yanukovych's presidential administration and former minister of justice of Ukraine until 2014; Andriy Portnov, former deputy head of Yanukovich's presidential administration; and journalist Vyacheslav Pikhovshek, who worked with Kuchma's presidential administration and was a media manager and star of Ukrainian television in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They all critically commented on the activities of President Poroshenko and spread the same narratives as 112. The channels quickly turned into 'party media', effectively accompanying the election campaign of the political party OPFL.

In February 2019 the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine fined NewsOne for hate speech, including 'denial by the NewsOne channel of the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine, justification of Russian aggression, formation of the idea of Ukraine as a subject, stigmatisation of participants in the anti-terrorist operation, defamation of Ukrainian politicians'.[81]

On 21 July 2019 parliamentary elections were planned in Ukraine. On 10 July the leaders of the pro-Russian party OPFL (then candidates for deputies of the Ukrainian parliament) met in Moscow with the ruling party of the Russian Federation, Edinaya Rossiya (United Russia). This meeting was broadcast live by 112, and live broadcasts were also provided by Russia 24, the state channel of the Russian Federation. In addition, 112 also broadcast speeches by members of OPFL after the meeting.

During the meeting, the issue of gas prices and discounts the Russian Federation would be willing to provide Ukraine were publicly discussed. The prime minister of the Russian Federation complained that Russia did not receive 'clear signals' from President Zelenskyy. At that time, Medvedchuk had no authority to conduct official negotiations, but he positioned himself as a politician who would ensure the implementation of agreements reached. He did not recognise Russia as an aggressor, did not consider parts of Ukraine occupied, and actively supported a pro-Russian political course for Ukraine. His three channels shared the same communication framework.

On 12 July, nine days before the parliamentary elections, a 'TV bridge between Ukraine and Russia' was announced, which was planned to be broadcast on the NewsOne channel. Actors and singers who supported and continue to support Putin's policy of aggression against Ukraine were supposed to participate on the Russian side, and the audience was to consist of 'ordinary Ukrainians and Russians' who 'could ask each other questions, as they do not receive answers from their politicians and corrupt officials'. To 'exclude the political undertone' of the discussions, the project authors from the Russian side 'agreed' not to invite people under sanctions from Ukraine, the US, or the European Union, and not to allow political

journalists to participate in the programme. In addition, both sides 'agreed' not to raise questions about the 'ownership of Crimea and Donbas', according to the NewsOne producer Vasil Golovanov on the eve of the event. The SSU initiated a criminal case on charges of state treason, after which NewsOne cancelled its participation.

Such framing of the event was supposed to support the Russian narrative about 'seeking reconciliation' and 'ordinary people suffering from the war and not receiving answers from corrupt politicians'. At that time Russia had annexed Crimea, occupied parts of two eastern regions – Luhansk and Donetsk – and conducted passportisation there, and established proxy media; it had not fulfilled the 'Minsk agreements' and it had accused Ukraine of 'refusing dialogue', using media controlled by Medvedchuk.

As a result, the 'TV bridge' did take place, where Ukrainians in the Moscow studio were imitated by people who were born on the territory of Ukraine during Soviet times. They repeated Russian propaganda narratives about the 'Russian language', 'fraternal peoples', 'nationalism', and 'Ukraine's aggressive policy', and were nostalgic for the USSR.

Since 2018 Medvedchuk's group of three television channels effectively operated as the OPFL party media. OPFL participated in the parliamentary elections in the summer of 2019, coming second after Zelenskyy's party. About 2 million voters (13.05%) voted for OPFL, enabling it to form a group of 44 members of parliament (out of 450). In particular, it won in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions – more precisely, in those parts that were under Ukrainian control in 2019. The party immediately began preparing for local elections scheduled for the autumn of 2020.

Several months before the local elections in 2020, in Svyatohirsk city (in the Donetsk region), a 'People of Peace' forum was held, organised by the UOC-MP. The event was broadcast live by the 112 channel. Residents of the frontline territories talked about extremely difficult living conditions and how the war destroyed everything around them. They cried live on air and mentioned that 'politicians are profiting from the war' and 'dividing citizens', referring to the Ukrainian authorities and the 'authorities of Luhansk and Donetsk' as politicians, while asking for peace in their land. The event effectively developed a narrative that Russian puppets in the occupied territories were the 'authorities', that the occupied territories of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions were 'independent republics' and Ukraine should recognise them and 'reconcile' with them, and that there was a 'united people' in the conflict zone, all presented in the context of shared religious beliefs and 'sacred values'. Some speakers were known as authors of Russian propaganda media, while others were guests on propaganda TV shows.

In May 2020, after the COVID-19 lockdown had begun in Ukraine, OPFL MPs Viktor Medvedchuk and Renat Kuzmin returned to public discourse with the narrative of 'American biolabs' conducting experiments on Ukrainians, including 'secret testing of viruses and bacteria'. Kuzmin made a corresponding statement during a live broadcast on the ZIK channel, and Medvedchuk's party demanded explanations from the government.

The first appearance of information about 'American biolabs' was recorded around 2006, and since then Russian and pro-Russian media have periodically returned to it. In the context of COVID-19 and its unclear (at the time) origin, this information operation had a significant resonance. A statement on the official OPFL website and quotes from Kuzmin were disseminated by Medvedchuk's three TV channels, the Russian proxy network of anonymous Telegram channels, and the pool of 'former politicians' of the Yanukovych government. Other Ukrainian media were also involved in spreading this information.

In early October 2020 Medvedchuk personally met with Russian President Putin and publicly asked him for 'help' in supplying Ukraine with the Russian COVID-19 vaccine – Sputnik V. At the same time, his channels

promoted the message in Ukraine about the effectiveness of the Russian vaccine and that Ukraine could not obtain vaccines from other manufacturers, and that the only option for vaccination for Ukrainian citizens was vaccination with Sputnik V.

The two narratives – Americans testing 'bacteria and viruses' on Ukrainians, while Russians offered a quality and modern COVID-19 vaccine – worked together to achieve a political effect. Both narratives were widely, frequently, and extensively covered by Russian proxy media in Ukraine. The group of proxy TV channels was also synchronised with Russian television. Proxy channels associated with Medvedchuk provided a platform (live broadcast) for certain statements by politicians (including those from Medvedchuk's political party), for which the channels, according to Ukrainian legislation, bore no responsibility. Videos created this way were disseminated on Telegram channels and quoted by Russian propaganda television. One example of a fake made in this way is the statement by the OPFL MP Renat Kuzmin, during a live broadcast on ZIK, claiming that 'concentration camps for Russians' would be created in Ukraine, which had no basis but was widely spread by Russian media. This fake had been circulating in the media for quite some time – the first mentions of it can be found in 2014–16 when photographs of detention centres for illegal migrants accompanied it.[82] In Kuzmin's 2020 version, this fake turned into 'forced eviction of Russians to concentration camps'.[83]

Thus, the three television channels owned by Taras Kozak, a member of the OPFL party, and under the political control of the party's leader, Viktor Medvedchuk, effectively operated as propagandist resources that promoted a pro-Russian political position, manipulated information in the interests of Medvedchuk, and created content disseminated by Russian television channels. At the same time, the political controller of the channels 'negotiated' with the Russian government on behalf of Ukraine without any legal basis for doing so.

Proxy Experts of the TV Pool

The working format of the three TV channels in the group included information broadcasting, with political programmes airing from 07:00 to 24:00 daily. In addition to news, which aired hourly on all three channels, live broadcasts every hour invited 'political experts' to discuss the current agenda. Such a format required the presence and availability of dozens of 'commentators', whereas there were only 44 MPs in the OPFL faction, and not all of them were proficient speakers. During non-prime-time hours (morning and afternoon), the channels invited 'former' politicians and officials to appear – former MPs, former ministers and deputy ministers, political scientists, and so on. They often had to comment on issues unrelated to their areas of expertise, political matters, and statements by politicians from the OPFL.

Therefore, to support the political narratives of the OPFL, a pool of 'experts' was formed. These experts emerged seemingly out of nowhere and did not confirm their own expertise but proclaimed messages that aligned with the political direction of the OPFL and Medvedchuk.

The formation of this group began around 2018–19 and initially seemed organic. When viewers tune into a TV channel and see an 'expert' they haven't encountered before, they are unlikely to think that this is not a real 'expert' – rather, viewers might assume they simply hadn't noticed them before, or if they're not interested in the details of the topic, they might just listen, relying on the so-called 'authority of television' ('if someone is invited onto television, they must be an expert'). A detailed example is provided in the Appendix – Iryna Gavrilova and Mykhailo Shpyr were a part of this 'expert pool'.

The group of experts grew. The same people appeared several times a week on television shows, in live broadcasts, and voiced political messages that largely echoed the political programme of the OPFL. They were diverse (in gender, age, and appearance), and some of them did not speak Ukrainian (only Russian). Analysis showed that these experts appeared on the mentioned channels and were quoted by media affiliated with the channels only. In this section, we will analyse several examples of proxy experts' activities to describe the working principle, but this list is not exhaustive.

Since 2018, immediately after the change of the TV channel ownership, Denis Zharkikh has hosted his programme *Po suti* (In fact) on the 112 channel. Previously, he was a speaker/participant in programmes of official Russian state and non-state propagandists. For example, in 2017–18 he gave interviews to the Russian website NewsFront (the Russian propaganda website mentioned earlier in this report), which had been propagating war against Ukraine and Russian political narratives since 2014. The site is blocked in Ukraine.

The *Po suti* format involved Denis Zharkikh discussing current events with a co-speaker for 15 minutes. It looked like a standard segment to support a political party during elections or a typical example of political propaganda: in each episode, they extensively quoted Medvedchuk and key narratives of the OPFL political programme. *Po suti* aired during the daytime slot (14:00-15:00).

In the episode dated 26 April 2019,[84] the host, within the first 30 seconds, makes an introduction and presents a guest, Anatoliy Peshko, 'an academic of the Academy of Economic Sciences of Ukraine'. Then a quote from Medvedchuk is aired. The host states that Medvedchuk 'advised the government since 2013' and a quote from 2013 is provided: 'The free trade zone with the EU will destroy our economy. According to experts, the activity of about 8000 enterprises will be terminated, and unemployment will rise. Because their

products will not go to the East, they will be stopped by protective measures of the Customs Union [i.e. the Eurasian Customs Union] from the penetration of European products through Ukraine into the Customs Union [i.e. the Eurasian Customs Union]. They will protect themselves. In addition, we have a narrow range where we can compete with certain goods in Europe.'

Zharkikh: 'I want to ask you, was Medvedchuk right, did his forecast come true, and why wasn't he listened to?'

Peshko: 'Medvedchuk was absolutely right. In an attempt to shift from the CIS market to the EU, Ukraine essentially failed.'[85]

For the next 14 minutes, the expert discusses this 'failure' regarding Ukrainian products not meeting EU standards, and, because of political ambitions, Ukraine losing the CIS market, leading to a loss of over $60 billion to the budget 'since the collapse of the USSR'. If 'indexed at the current rate', a total of '500 billion dollars' has been lost overall.

Peshko does not provide any additional data to support this amount or explain the calculation methodology. He simply mentions a huge loss and, on that basis, proposes to 'return to the markets of Russia and the CIS'. Further discussion touches upon debt dependence on the IMF and a negative trade balance.

'It's clear, essentially,' says the host, but viewers should be confused. Then Peshko proposes a change to the political system so that the 'economy does not depend' on politics and oligarchs, which has nothing to do with his area of expertise but fits the political programme of the OPFL.

On 3 February 2020[86] the OPFL MP Viktor Chorny was invited onto Zharkikh's programme. The first question from the host goes like this: 'Today, I would like to talk about the falsification of history. It might seem, what does it matter what happened 100 years ago, 70 years ago? It was long ago, and it's not true – many people have told me that. Nevertheless, the

past always determines the future, and let's talk about it. Our Ministry of Youth and Sports has directed most of the money to right-wing radical organisations.'

Next, the programme quotes an 'expert' who claims that the ministry's money is being given to 'right-wing radicals' and 'nationalists'. The 'expert' is Oleksandr Potyomkin, the head of the obscure organisation Socialist Youth Congress. Why he is an 'expert' is not explained to viewers. From the quote, Potyomkin also applied for the ministry's financial support but was unsuccessful. No explanations or justifications are given as to why grant recipients are called 'right-radicals' or 'nationalists', nor is any alternative viewpoint provided.

Then, without any transition to another topic, the host says that the narrative about the 'Soviet occupation' implies that 'we [unspecified] are preparing the ground to return Western Ukraine to Poland or pay money for the occupation'. And he asks the studio guest, 'What should be done about this?'

Chorny begins his answer with the words 'I want to remind everyone that Ukraine is a country which, like a patchwork quilt, is stitched from lands that were under the jurisdiction of different countries – Russia, Poland, the Austro-Hungarian Empire – and accordingly a certain mentality dominates in these territories.' Then, for unknown reasons, the conversation moves on to the 'fact' that there is allegedly a ban on the Russian language in Ukraine, and this ban is 'known to everyone', although both the host and the guest speak Russian in the studio without any prohibitions.

The host asks the guest in Russian why, in his opinion, a ban on the Russian language has been imposed. The guest – a member of parliament – also responds in Russian, saying that the ban was imposed by 'international governance, which is being carried out regarding Ukraine, to deceive the Ukrainian people, so that we forget our traditions, who our parents are, who our grandfathers are, to make us idiots who are easy to manipulate'.

Then the programme turns to Viktor Medvedchuk, who, in the form of a recorded video, directly accuses the president of Poland, Andrzej Duda, of desecrating the memory of Holocaust victims, Jews, and the Soviet Union simultaneously. Neither the context of these accusations nor the reason for such statements is explained to viewers. Afterwards Chorny suggests using the political programme of the OPFL faction in parliament and adopting a law on referendums that will allow the expression of distrust in the government because, in his opinion, electing the government for five years is 'pseudo-democracy'.

Later, the host of this programme, Denis Zharkikh, began to appear on political talk shows on this group of channels as a 'journalist' or 'political commentator' – that is, he gave political assessments and comments on certain events, transmitting the narratives of Russian propaganda. A month before the full-scale invasion (in January 2022), the Russian propaganda website Antifascist published his column in which he predicted war because the Ukrainian government was incompetent and that Zelenskyy would flee Ukraine. However, Zharkikh himself escaped from Ukraine. He is currently living in Russia and is involved in building a new political project for Viktor Medvedchuk, 'Another Ukraine'.

Another 'expert' in this media pool was Oleksandr Lazarev. Despite his young age, he attempted to comment on geopolitical topics, copying the styles of public speakers and characteristics of Russian propagandists (dubious metaphors and aggressive, ironic comments that, when delivered by a person approximately 25 years old, appeared self-parodic). Lazarev was also part of the Nash TV channel's speaker pool and participated in propaganda TV show broadcasts in Russia (detailed in the next section). In his speeches he supported narratives about 'American biolabs' and the 'civil war in Donbas, in which "external forces" are interested'. On 24 November 2020 Lazarev spoke in a televised talk show on NewsOne about the intentions of the CIA to 'destroy Ukrainian medicine by the

hands of [health minister] Ulyana Suprun'. In 2022 Lazarev assessed the Ukrainian government before the Russian full-scale invasion as one that carried out 'subversive actions' against the Ukrainian people; he opposed compulsory education in the state language in Ukraine, and promoted the theme of 'external control' of Ukraine by the US and 'Western partners'.

After the start of the full-scale invasion, Lazarev, according to the SSU, 'covertly' left the country, arrived in the territory of the occupied ARC, and joined the closest circle of the head of the occupation administration of the occupied Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov, helping him to conduct information campaigns on the peninsula. In addition, since 2022, Lazarev has also been involved in developing Medvedchuk's 'Another Ukraine' project. He mocked those politicians who had previously participated in promoting Russian narratives and then 'betrayed' the Russian proxy agenda and ideas. On 7 April 2023 the SSU notified Lazarev he was a suspect under Part 1 of Article 111 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine (state treason), as well as under Part 1 of Article 161 (violation of equality of citizens based on their race, national or regional affiliation, religious beliefs, disability, and other grounds). If convicted, Lazarev would face up to 15 years of imprisonment.

Another individual in this pool of 'experts' was Mykhailo Shpyr (details are also provided in the Appendix). Since 2019 he has appeared in Medvedchuk's proxy media group, often labelled as a 'political scientist' or 'political expert'. By April–May 2020 he was participating remotely in live broadcasts at least four times a month. He consistently denied the fact of Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2014, referred to decommunisation as 'foolish', stated that Ukraine was not an independent state, claimed that 'the West and the American embassy are the forces interested in popularising some ideas in Ukrainian society' in the context of COVID-19 and the Russian narrative about biolabs, referred to Ukraine as a state that had lost its autonomy 'and became a colony of the USA', insisted that medical reform in Ukraine was carried out in

the interests of the USA, and so on. In addition to his regular appearances on Russian proxy channels in Ukraine, he provided corresponding comments to Russian media.

In 2020, after one of his public appearances in which he expressed himself in his usual manner, Shpyr was attacked in a public place, after which he moved to Moscow. The SSU began investigating his activities before the start of the full-scale invasion, and he was notified as a suspect in 2021. In 2023 a court found him guilty in absentia under three articles of the Criminal Code of Ukraine – encroachment on the territorial integrity and inviolability of Ukraine (Article 110); violation of the equality of citizens based on their race, national affiliation, religious beliefs, disability, and other grounds (Article 161); and the production and dissemination of communist and Nazi symbolism, and propaganda of communist and Nazi totalitarian regimes (Article 436-1). The court sentenced him to 10 years in prison. Since the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022, Shpyr has supported Russia's actions against Ukraine and continues to express the same narratives. Currently, he works as the 'deputy minister of digital development' in the occupied part of the Kherson region; his Telegram channel is mainly dedicated to Ukrainophobia rather than 'digital development of the Kherson region'.

Another regular guest of the proxy TV shows from 2019 to 2021 was Yuriy Molchanov, who appeared in the pool of commentators on Medvedchuk's channels as a 'journalist', although there is no information about his journalistic work in open sources. However, it is known that he was a co-founder of the international public organisation 'Day of Baptism of Rus', moderating religious events of the UOC-MP. This NGO is associated with a corresponding Russian organisation that arranges religious holidays, concerts, and events supporting the UOC-MP. Molchanov often commented on church and inter-church themes on television broadcasts and spoke Russian.

In 2012 Molchanov's organisation was involved in arranging the visit of Patriarch Kirill

of Moscow (real name Vladimir Gundyayev) to Kyiv, during which it was planned to discuss the 'civilisational path of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus and the role of the Orthodox Church in promoting this path'. Molchanov opposed the recognition of the independence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, as well as LGBT and 'liberal advances'. Such conservative and religious values fit well into the narrative framework of the OPFL, especially in the absence of any alternative in the broadcasts. However, Molchanov did not limit himself to conservative-religious topics. For example, on 17 February 2022, a few days before the start of the full-scale invasion, when information about its likelihood was already being voiced and thousands of Russian soldiers were present on the border of Ukraine, Molchanov claimed on the Ukraine 24 channel that Ukraine had no support in the West and that it was unknown who exactly shelled a kindergarten in the Luhansk region (although the shooting was done from the occupied territory, which was relatively easy to establish).

It is worth noting that Molchanov called Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 'madness, the greatest since 1917'.[87]

This list of experts is not exhaustive or exclusive. In the pool of the three channels, there were at least ten such commentators. The criteria for including 'experts' in the pool are familiarity with the political-narrative framework and appearing on television channels several times a month, often in different capacities – as hosts or guests on broadcasts.

Proxy TV Group Ban

After businessman and politician Taras Kozak bought his three TV channels, Ukrainian security services began to inquire about the sources of income by which the channels were maintained. There was no commercial advertising on the channels. According to unofficial data, maintaining the staff and technical base of the three channels cost Kozak, the formal owner, and Medvedchuk, the actual controller, at least $1 million per month. In 2019 the SSU questioned Kozak in a criminal case on suspicion of financing terrorism and money laundering.

On 2 February 2021 the NSDC of Ukraine decided to block Kozak's channels and to impose personal sanctions on him. The Law of Ukraine 'On Sanctions' allows sanctions against foreign legal entities, against legal entities under the control of a foreign legal entity or individual person, and against those engaged in terrorist activities.[88]

The sanctions included revoking the licences of 112, NewsOne, and ZIK (thus suspending broadcasting for five years) and blocking the activities of all legal entities of the media holding. Providers blocked the channels within an hour. The video hosting platform YouTube promptly deleted the holding's YouTube channels, which indicates significant legal grounds for doing so. Ukrainian practice shows that an appeal to remove content from YouTube must be well founded legally and must prove that the authors of the content are violating the law.

Also on 2 February 2021 the SSU opened a criminal case under Article 258-5, 'Financing of terrorism', against the head of the board of the OPFL, Viktor Medvedchuk. According to Ukrainian media reports, money for the maintenance of the pool of three TV channels was directed from the LLC Trading House Donskiye Ugli (Don Coals), which operated in the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine.

Thus, Kozak, as the formal owner of the media, and Medvedchuk, as a political leader for four years, used the money from businesses provided by the Russian authorities in the occupied territories of Ukraine – the 'republics' – to finance the activities of three so-called

'opposition' channels, which were used to promote the pro-Russian political party and anti-Ukrainian political narratives.

On 11 February 2021 President Zelenskyy confirmed the information previously presented in the media: he stated that the channels were funded with money from Ukraine's temporarily occupied territories and that the special services had known about this since 2018.[89]

In response to the imposition of personal sanctions and the closure of channels on 4 February 2021, the OPFL held a congress and announced the beginning of impeachment proceedings against President Zelenskyy. On 19 February sanctions were personally imposed against Viktor Medvedchuk, his wife, Oksana Marchenko, and the wife of Taras Kozak under Article 258-5 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine, 'Financing of terrorism'.

The three channels of the Russian proxy pool attempted to resume operations under the new brand First Independent. The latter's formal co-owner was another people's deputy from the OPFL, Nestor Shufrych, who, on 27 October 2021, bought the UkrLive channel, which had a licence for satellite broadcasting. After this, the products of pro-Russian propagandists reappeared on Ukrainian television. On 28 December sanctions were also imposed against several legal entities/owners of the channels First Independent and UkrLive, which were turned off.

Taras Kozak and his wife left the territory of Ukraine in 2021. In February 2022 – before the start of the full-scale invasion – Oksana Marchenko and several key members of parliament from the OPFL also left Ukraine, which indicates that they knew about Russia's intentions to attack Ukraine and the potential scale of the war. Medvedchuk remained in Kyiv. By 24 February he was under house arrest on suspicion of state treason, but in the chaos of the first days of the invasion he disappeared.

In April 2022 the SSU found and arrested Medvedchuk in Kyiv. In September, Ukraine exchanged him for commanders of the Azov Regiment, which defended the city of Mariupol in the Donetsk region and played a vital role in the defence of Ukraine in the spring of 2022, tying down the large Russian army and allowing Ukrainian defence forces to regroup in the east and south. Since 2014 Russia had called the Azov Regiment 'Nazi', 'fascist', 'neo-Nazi', and so on, and after the garrison in Mariupol was surrendered, Russian propaganda called for the execution of prisoners of war. However, the political significance of Medvedchuk was such that he was exchanged for commanders of the Azov Regiment and other units from the Mariupol garrison who were very important to Ukraine.

Most of the 'experts' and 'commentators' of the banned proxy channels also moved to Russia and are currently participating in the development of Medvedchuk's new political project, 'Another Ukraine'. On 20 June 2022 the political party OPFL was banned in Ukraine.

Actors: Proxy TV Channel Nash and Politician Yevheniy Muraiev

After Medvedchuk's proxy TV pool was blocked and his team attempted to restore broadcasting via TV and satellite, as well as on the YouTube platform, the Nash channel, owned by politician Yevhenii Muraiev, became the critical TV source for Russian narrative transmission.

Muraiev's family owned Nash, and he himself led a political party, Nashi; the names and visual identities of the TV channel and the political party were virtually identical.

Many proxy speakers from Medvedchuk's previously described TV pool moved to Nash. According to Ukrainian media, the

audience share of Nash tripled after sanctions were imposed on Medvedchuk's channels (from 0.42% to 1.72% in the 18+ audience across Ukraine, making it the leader in information broadcasting in large cities with a 2.65% share).[90]

The Nash channel format was similar – essential programmes were evening political talk shows hosted by Max Nazarov (real name Nazar Diorditsa) and his colleagues Angelina Pichik, Olga Veremiy, and Lana Shevchuk. Muraiev himself occasionally appeared as a guest speaker on political talk shows.

The channel began operating in 2018. Between 2019 and 2022 the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting conducted several inspections and fined the channel for violations of Ukrainian law and broadcasting Russian political narratives. For instance, on 19 December 2019 the channel broadcast a press conference of Russian President Putin.

In December 2020 a live broadcast included a 'representative' of the so-called LPR Rodion Miroshnik (a key propagandist in the LPR since 2014, currently the 'special envoy of the Russian MFA'). Miroshnik expressed his typical views on Ukraine's territorial integrity and constitutional order. As a result of the inspection, the channel was fined 114,000 hryvnias (approximately 4000 euros).

In February 2021 an inspection was initiated due to a broadcast featuring MPs from Medvedchuk's OPFL party, Vadim Rabinovych (who fled Ukraine in 2022) and Yevheniy Balytsky (who became 'head' of the Russian-occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region of Ukraine in 2022 and participated with Putin in the ceremony of 'incorporating the Zaporizhzhia region into Russia' in September 2022). The National Council saw their statements in February 2021 as inciting enmity and spreading Russian propaganda fakes.

In the summer of 2021 the channel invited Petro Symonenko, leader of the banned Communist Party of Ukraine, to discuss the functioning of the Orthodox Church, calling supporters of the independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church 'schismatics' and talking about a 'civil war in Donbas' (a Russian narrative from 2014 to 2021) and 'neo-fascists' (a typical Russian narrative about Ukraine).

In September 2021 Muraiev launched a political campaign to prepare for elections. Billboards with the slogan 'This is OUR land' and Muraiev's portrait appeared in various cities across Ukraine. Concurrently, the Nash channel launched an overtly political project with the same name, where 'journalists', accompanied by Muraiev, visited cities and local markets, evaluated local prices, talked with residents, and discussed politics, local officials' work, city infrastructure, issues, and achievements. This appeared as typical political agitation in Ukraine. Alongside known hosts from the Nash channel, the so-called 'political expert' Oleksandr Lazarev, previously mentioned, participated in the unmarked political advertisement.

Parallel to the regional rallies, Muraiev broadcast a political programme, *Country Formula*, containing typical proxy narratives about the Ukrainian government's lack of independence, the influence of the US and UK embassies on Ukraine, the need for a non-aligned status for Ukraine, and Ukraine being a 'battleground' between Russia and Europe, suggesting that with reasonable policy the issue of the territories occupied by Russia (Crimea and Donbas) would lose relevance. This programme also propagated well-known Russian conspiracy theories about biolabs and vaccine delivering (detailed above and in the Appendix). It accused Ukraine of being unable to defend itself and now not in control of parts of its territories (a typical Russian narrative suggesting Ukraine is to blame for Russia's aggression). By owning the only pro-Russian TV channel, Muraiev hoped to consolidate political support from Russia regarding Ukraine. In 2021, like Medvedchuk in 2004, Muraiev promoted ideas of 'special status for the regions', a 'bicameral parliament', and reducing the president's influence in favour of the parliament, accusing the Ukrainian authorities of being 'interested in war'.

On 22 January 2022 the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) published a statement claiming that the Russian government, planning an invasion and occupation of Ukraine, intended to 'install a pro-Russian leader in Kyiv', with Yevheniy Muraiev being a potential candidate.[91] In response, Muraiev denied the FCDO claims and noted that he was in political conflict with Medvedchuk.[92]

On 11 February 2022 Ukraine's NSDC imposed sanctions on several legal entities within the Nash TV channel's structure, including those in Cyprus. President Zelenskyy enacted the decision, and the channel ceased broadcasting, claiming 'political repression and pressure'. According to Max Nazarov, one of the key hosts, the channel's daily audience was about 2 million viewers (this data is currently unverifiable).

In a YouTube broadcast on 18 February 2022, when it was already evident that Russia was planning to escalate the war and invade, Muraiev accused Zelenskyy of 'provoking Donbas', and called on the West to impose sanctions on Ukrainian MPs who did not pass the necessary legislation to implement the 'Minsk agreements' – essentially repeating Russian propaganda narratives. Muraiev's last post on Telegram was on 25 February, when he called the Ukrainian government's readiness for negotiations 'readiness for capitulation'. According to Ukrainian media, Muraiev left Ukraine in May 2022 after the apparent failure of the Russian army near Kyiv. He currently resides in Vienna, Austria. In June 2022 the Nashi party was banned. On 2 March 2024 the SSU notified Muraiev he was suspected of state treason.

Former hosts of Nash adapted by removing the channel's videos from YouTube, renaming it Vyshka, and continuing its operation, retaining an audience of 1 million subscribers. For over two years, the former hosts continued to work with the same speakers and promote the same narratives. Additionally, the former Nash hosts Max Nazarov and Yaroslava Maslova created the YouTube channel Da eto tak ('Yes, that's right'). This channel produces the same narratives with the same speakers as Nash produced and Vyshka continued to do.

Several hosts (including Max Nazarov) also maintain their Telegram channels, which are still accessible in Ukraine.

Actors: The Blogger Shariy and His Proxy Party of Shariy

Anatoliy Shariy, a former Ukrainian journalist, fled the country in 2012, claiming 'political persecution due to negative publications about the police' and obtained political asylum in Lithuania. He registered his YouTube channel on 13 May 2013 and actively developed it. In recent years he has posted new videos daily, depicting events and processes in Ukraine, which are negative and highly biased. Additionally, Shariy actively interacted with Russian propaganda media – he was quoted and invited onto live broadcasts.

The SSU believes that Shariy, since 2012, through social networks, media, and Russian television channels, has assisted Russian state and non-governmental structures in conducting special information operations. As of 2019, Shariy had more than 1 million subscribers on YouTube. An SSU official statement read:

The propagandist engaged in discrediting Ukraine's state policy, deliberately and purposefully spreading manipulative, distorted information regarding government initiatives and events in

the east of the country. The aim was to exacerbate and destabilise the socio-political and socio-economic situation and incite interethnic and inter-religious conflicts. Such illegal actions by Shariy were actively used by Russian media, particularly the main propaganda state company VGTRK [which includes Russian TV channels Rossiya 24 and Rossiya 1, among others], the Russian Ministry of Defence TV channel Zvezda, etc. There are grounds to believe that Shariy acted on the orders of foreign structures.[93]

In the summer of 2019, following Zelenskyy's victory in the presidential elections and a year before the local councils elections (autumn 2020), Shariy announced the founding of the 'Party of Shariy'. The formal founder of the political party was Viktor Shariy (a random person with the same surname). For the first time in Ukraine's history, the primary tool for promotion and publicity was a video blog on YouTube. Both Shariy and his political strategists carefully avoided discussing the fact that Shariy had not lived in Ukraine since 2012 and, according to the law, was not eligible to participate in elections.

Shariy's video blog and party developed in parallel with the expansion of Viktor Medvedchuk's media holding (three TV channels) and the structure of his political party OPFL. Guests on Medvedchuk's channels (the 'political experts' mentioned earlier) often spoke positively about Anatoliy Shariy and the Party of Shariy.

In the autumn of 2020 (before the local elections), the investigative journalism team Bihus.Info published material on the funding sources of the Party of Shariy. The data source was hacked correspondence in a Telegram chat where Shariy, his wife Olga Bondarenko, and a few others discussed illicit funds being

used to finance organising rallies, printing newspapers, conducting sociological surveys, transportation, and so on with a top manager of the Ukrainian fuel company BRSM. This chat also included financial reports on payments to so-called 'political experts' who commented positively on Shariy's actions and the Party of Shariy on Medvedchuk's TV channels and occasionally on former Ukrainian president Poroshenko's TV channel.[94]

After the material's release, Shariy sued the Bihus.Info editorial team, demanding a retraction of the published information, but lost.[95] The BRSM group of companies also sued the journalists, demanding the removal and retraction of the material, but also lost.[96]

Therefore, as of May 2024, the information published by the journalists can be considered accurate.

The reports specifically mentioned that BRSM delivered cash to the Party of Shariy office, which was then used, among other things, to pay a group of 'political experts' who praised the Party of Shariy on Medvedchuk's and Poroshenko's TV channels, as well as on Nash. The fee ranged from $45 to $90 per positive comment, mention, or remark about the Party of Shariy. Experts were divided into two categories (depending on their recognition level and ability to cover the topic), received bonuses for on-air arguments, and had their payments cut if the comment was unsuccessful. Bihus.Info's investigation recorded the presence in the pool of, among others, Oleksandr Lazarev (previously mentioned in this report), Oleksiy Yakubin and Oleksandra Reshmedilova (regular guests on Medvedchuk's TV channels and others), and Kyrylo Molchanov (his rate was much higher, and he worked directly with Shariy).

During the 2020 local elections, Shariy, who did not live in Ukraine, managed to get deputies from his party elected to local councils in the Odesa, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, and Donetsk regions (mainly eastern and southern Ukraine). There were 52 deputies in five regions, which is minimal for

actual influence on the political situation, but the precedent was fundamentally important. A blogger living abroad created a pro-Russian political party using undeclared cash from the fuel market and TV support from pro-Russian channels. He supported his campaign through YouTube and got deputies elected to local councils in five regions of Ukraine. This model could easily be scaled up in future elections.

In February 2021 the SSU and the Kyiv Prosecutor's Office announced Shariy was under suspicion in relation to a criminal case under two articles of the Criminal Code of Ukraine – Part 1 of Article 111 (state treason) and Part 1 of Article 161 (violation of the equality of citizens based on their race, national affiliation, religious beliefs, disability, and other grounds). The latter article concerns inciting national, racial, or religious enmity and hatred, degrading national honour and dignity, and so on. At that time, Shariy had approximately 2 million subscribers on YouTube.

On 25 February the SSU declared Shariy a wanted person. On 20 August, President Zelenskyy enacted the NSDC decision to impose personal sanctions against Anatoliy

Shariy and his wife, which was later extended to all the media under their control. On 16 June 2022, after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the court banned the Party of Shariy in Ukraine, and the party's factions in local councils ceased to exist.

In the summer of 2023 the SSU issued a second charge of treason against Shariy. He had published pieces of video recordings showing the interrogation of Ukrainian prisoners of war by Russian special services, a video that could only have been obtained from these Russian agencies. The SSU released a recording of a phone conversation between Shariy and his handler from the Russian special service, in which Shariy requested that the prisoners 'send greetings' to their relatives and loved ones. In this conversation, Shariy acknowledged that the video clearly showed that the Ukrainian prisoners had been tortured.[97]

Shariy has lived in Spain for many years and lost his political asylum in Lithuania in 2022. He has more than 2.9 million subscribers on YouTube as of May 2024.

Russian Proxy Operations on Telegram

On 20 December 2018 the Resident and Legitimniy (Legitimate) Telegram channels were created. In Russian and Ukrainian, the word 'resident' has a specific emotional connotation – 'affiliated with intelligence services' or 'intelligence officer'. The word 'legitimate' has, in addition to its general meaning, a more widespread ironic meaning in Ukraine – former President Viktor Yanukovych, who instructed the killings of protesters on the Maidan in 2014 and then fled to Russia, referred to himself as 'legitimate'. In the Ukrainian internet space, it is a sarcastic meme. The Telegram channels operated in Russian and were positioned as 'anonymous' Ukrainian ones, allegedly having their sources in Ukrainian government circles, including the Office of the President of Ukraine. The launch of these channels – and

the entire infrastructure around them – was synchronised with the formation of Viktor Medvedchuk's proxy media network and the systematisation of media management in the occupied territories of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. All these processes started in 2017–18.

This occurred before the presidential elections in Ukraine (March–April 2019) won by Zelenskyy. A few months later the parliament was re-elected, and a parliamentary majority of the presidential political party Servant of the People was formed. Members of parliament began to share 'interesting news' from the Resident and Legitimniy Telegram channels, as well as their so-called 'insights', in chats. The parliament was largely

renewed, with most deputies having no experience in politics or information influence technologies. Mostly they did not personally engage in their election campaigns, having received mandates due to their affiliation with President Zelenskyy's then super-popular political party.

Resident and Legitimniy were flagship channels of Russian special services targeted Ukraine. The channels specialised in publishing 'leaks', 'insights', political gossip, corruption accusations, and so on. Their target audience was politicians and the political community – journalists, activists, parliamentary deputies' aides, and local council deputies. They eagerly spread rumours and conspiracy theories fed to them by Russian special services, trying to find out who from the Office of the President was 'leaking' such exciting data. The audience gradually grew from 2019 to 2022. At that time the Telegram channels were not yet the number one news source in Ukraine, as they are now, so some politicians believed they had access to some exclusive, almost secretive information. It was a very successful psychological operation.

Through the Resident and Legitimniy channels, Russian special services promoted several dozen smaller channels. According to the calculations of the Centre for Countering Disinformation under the NSDC, there were at least 30 channels in the Resident and Legitimniy group, targeting various audiences and regions (including Odesa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Kharkiv – cities that suffered the most from the full-scale invasion that began in 2022). Information on the proxy pool is shown in Table 2.

The scheme of promotion worked according to the standard Telegram model. A channel is created, and thousands or tens of thousands of bots are added to its subscriber count, along with purchased message views. Consequently, when readers first see the channel, they get the impression that it is popular and already read by many. This is the psychological effect of 'joining the majority'. The reader subscribes, especially if the channel link was sent by a person with a certain social status – for example, a member of parliament. This channel periodically quotes another channel, and once interested, the reader subscribes

Name	Link	Date created	Subscribers (February 2021)	Comment
Targeted at Ukraine				
Gossip (Сплетница)	@spletnicca	17.12.2018	40,000	
Legitimniy (Легитимный)	@legitimniy	20.12.2018	172,000	Explainer: Legitimate
Resident (Резидент)	@rezident_ua	20.12.2018	116,000	
First	@first_political	20.12.2018	10,000	
ZeRada (ЗеРада)	@ZeRada1	22.12.2018	58,000	ZeRada in this context means parliament (Rada) under control of President Zelenskyy (Ze)
Observer (Наблюдатель)	@nabludatels	22.12.2018	36,000	

Name	Link	Date created	Subscribers (February 2021)	Comment
Rebel (Бунтарь)	@buntariy	26.12.2018	6,000	
Black Kvartal (Черный квартал)	@cherniy_kvartal	27.12.2018	20,000	'Kvartal' in the name links to the business brand of Volodymyr Zelenskyy. His company was called 95 Kvartal. Black in this context means bad or illegal
Cartel (Картель)	@ZE_kartel	29.12.2018	43,000	'Ze' in the channel link means Zelenskyy
Woman with a Scythe (Женщина с косой)	@skosoi	30.12.2018	60,000	A woman with a scythe in linguistic practice means death. In Russian коса means a scythe or a braid. In political slang it is a reference to the politician Yulia Tymoshenko, who wore a traditional and symbolic hairstyle with a braid
Onion (Цибуля)	@tsibulya_ua	30.01.2019	12,000	Means 'spicy news'
Whisperer (Шептун)	@sheptoon	14.03.2019	50,000	
Total			c. 623,000	
Regional channels				
Non-typical Zaporizhzhia (Нетипичное Запорожье)	@zp_live	21.12.2018	10,000	
Trempel Kharkiv (Тремпель Харьков)	@kharkov_trempel	24.12.2018	8,000	Trempel: a local slang word meaning a clothes hanger
Odessa fraer (Одесский фраер)	@life_odessa	19.12.2018	15,000	Fraer: criminal slang for people who want to give a false impression of themselves
Dnipro live	@dnepr_live	21.12.2018	7,500	

Name	Link	Date created	Subscribers (February 2021)	Comment
Mykolaiv live	@niklive	20.12.2018	8,000	
Kherson live	@kherson_live	21.12.2018	7,500	
Total			*c.* 56,000	

TABLE 2. Proxy Telegram channels

to the second one. Then, following the same network principle, to a third one. Over time, the source of news for the reader becomes a network of proxy Telegram channels, which mimic Ukrainian channels but are controlled by Russian special services. The goal of creating such a network is to form an information bubble.

Analysis tools for mutual citation are among the simplest for identifying network connections. For example, since 2019 Resident has quoted Legitimniy over 500 times, while Legitimniy has quoted Resident over 900 times.

In February 2024 the Legitimniy Telegram channel quoted information from the related proxy network 90% of the time, precisely 13 times from Resident, 10 times from Observer, 12 times from MediaKiller, 9 times from ZeRada, 6 times from Cartel, 4 times each from First and Gossip, and once each from Woman with a Scythe and Odessa fraer. In total, 60 reposts from the known proxy network, plus 6 reposts from other pro-Russian channels. Thus, Legitimniy still (as of March 2024) plays the role of a 'gateway' to the proxy network, directing readers deeper into the system. The interaction of other channels within the system is built on the same principle.

The channels operated as Ukrainian but were Russian proxies – tools for conducting information-psychological operations and information influence in Ukraine. The channels focused entirely on the Ukrainian political agenda and operated in Russian.

The key narratives promoted by the network of Telegram channels were the corrupt toxicity of President Zelenskyy and his entourage and their functional incompetence. One of the constant targets for attacks was the anti-corruption bodies established in Ukraine in 2015–16: the National Anti-Corruption Bureau, the National Agency for Corruption Prevention, the Anti-Corruption Court, representatives of civil society organisations funded by foreign funds and embassies, in general – a community that advocated pro-European and Euro-Atlantic values.

From 2019 to 2020 the Telegram sector in Ukraine grew. Capitalising on this trend, Ukrainian parliament members created their own Telegram channels to discuss their legislative initiatives and comment on political events. In fact, political discussions gradually shifted from Facebook to Telegram. The audience of a member of parliament with minimal activity could reach 2,000 to 3,000 subscribers, but some were more popular – for example, Oleksandr Dubinskyy, who entered politics from the media, had approximately 100,000 readers on Telegram, a significant number of which were bots.

As well as official channels under their own names, some MPs had anonymous channels, which were created for participating in political conflicts and exerting informal influence on the information agenda. For example, Dubinskyy had an anonymous Telegram channel called Dark Knight, which aggressively attacked Zelenskyy and MPs from the Servant of the People party.

Other MPs also launched 'anonymous channels', but none gained significant popularity. The appearance of actual politicians on Telegram contributed to the development of the ecosystem itself, attracting new, organic readers.

Around 2019–20 the Telegram channels of the Russian proxy network began to initiate 'public discussions' with Ukrainian parliamentarians, thus involving them and those who followed their activities in their information bubble. The anonymous channels quoted MPs, asked them public questions, tagged their public channels in their posts, and demanded answers. Several MPs, among them the head of the Committee on Tax and Customs Policy of the Ukrainian Parliament (Servant of the People) Danylo Hetmantsev, Max Buzhanskyy, and Oleksandr Kachura, were involved in these 'debates'. This continued until 16 December 2021, when the Russian network last quoted Buzhanskyy and Hetmantsev on the same day. Until November 2023 the Russian proxy network quoted and supported Oleksandr Dubinskyy, who has been in pre-trial detention since December 2023.

It is also worth noting that the Resident and Legitimniy Telegram channels were used for commercial political advertising. Until January 2022 several advertising agencies offered a post in the Legitimniy channel for approximately $2000 to $3000, with the agency taking a 30–50% commission.

By 1 February 2021 the audience of the Legitimniy channel had reached 172,000 subscribers, while the Resident channel had 116,000 subscribers. The total number of subscribers in this pool of Telegram channels, controlled by Russian special services, including Legitimniy and Resident, amounted to no less than 680,000 Telegram accounts. However, when evaluating this figure, it's essential to note that Telegram does not provide open access to statistics on the geolocation of channel readers (meaning it's not possible to definitively confirm how many of the readers are in Ukraine or Russia), or which of them are

bots (possibly the majority). Currently, in the Russian market, you can buy subscribers for any Telegram channel for a few cents per ten, and you can also buy post views, comments, poll votes, and so on.

The main goal of operating the network was to attract readers to as many channels as possible within the network. It can be assumed that a significant number of subscribers in different channels overlap, meaning the number of actual users (not bots) in Ukraine may be lower. Estimating the audience in absolute numbers is difficult, but it can be assessed relatively. In 2020–21 the size and quality of the audience were sufficient to carry out information-psychological influence operations.

On 1 February 2021 the SSU announced the exposure of the coordinators of the network of Russian Telegram channels in Ukraine. According to the SSU, the network was controlled by the Main (Intelligence) Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (known as the GRU), in particular the Main Centre of the Special Service No 85.

The managers were based in Tiraspol in so-called Transnistria (the territory of Moldova politically controlled by Russia on the border with Ukraine). The network was administered by citizens of Ukraine who were involved in the 'Russian Spring' operation (the occupation of Crimea, Sevastopol city, and parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine) in 2014. For instance, one of the 'main managers' administered 12 Telegram channels, reported to Russian handlers, and coordinated the placement of commissioned materials. Linguistic-psychological expertise conducted by the SSU confirmed that 'the materials aimed to create panic and to exacerbate and destabilise the sociopolitical and socio-economic situation. The key tasks of the executors were to discredit government authorities, influence state policy, artificially create social tension, and protest sentiments among citizens.' According to the SSU, the channel administrators kept the profit from placing commercial materials for

themselves and transferred it from Ukraine to Moldova, Russia, or Transnistria.

Also on 1 February 2021, the SSU detained Victoria Daskalitsa, one of the coordinators of the proxy networks. According to data from open sources, Daskalitsa is the wife of Artem Davydchenko, one of the organisers of the riots in Odesa on 2 May 2014, when Russian agents provoked clashes between supporters of the 'Russian Spring' in Odesa and pro-Ukrainian political activists. Ukrainian media cited evidence that it was from the pro-Russian camp (the so-called 'Antimaidan') that shots rang out, which led to clashes and a fire in the administrative building, because of which 48 people died. The SSU also wanted Davydchenko's brother Anton, who already had a Russian passport. According to the SSU official statement, Daskalitsa was also accused of collecting information classified as state secrets in the interests of Russian special services. The SSU seized from her an electronic device with the personal data of many law enforcement officers. Additionally, the head of the network, who is hiding from the investigation abroad, was indicted in absentia for state treason. On 8 February, Daskalitsa was released on bail of more than 1.5 million hryvnias (roughly $54,000). The Party of Shariy put up Daskalitsa's bail. Six months after her arrest, the court found Daskalitsa guilty of state treason.[98]

Ukrainian security services don't have the technical capability to block a Telegram channel (or network of channels), so the publication of the mentioned data was aimed solely at reputational exposure. After an official statement that these channels were not Ukrainian and that they were proxy instruments of Russian special services for conducting hostile information-psychological operations, Ukrainian politicians and readers stopped treating them even as conditionally reliable sources of information. The SSU discredited Russian proxy Telegram channels in Ukraine.

However, Russian proxies continued their work, and the network's operating concept remained unchanged. After the start of the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, the proxy network disseminated disinformation that President Zelenskyy had left the territory of Ukraine, that the Armed Forces of Ukraine were not resisting, that Ukrainian soldiers and officers were defecting to Russia, and that air defence systems had been destroyed. During just the first day of the full-scale invasion, the Russian proxy network informed subscribers that the Russian army had captured Kharkiv, Odesa, Mykolaiv, and Zaporizhzhia and published similar aggressive war disinformation.

It's important to note that the Telegram network of Russian special services has continued to grow. For instance, in May 2023 a fake Telegram channel of Valeriy Zaluzhnyy, the ex-commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, was added to the proxy network. Another channel added to the proxy network in 2023, 'Ховайся' (Hide) in Ukrainian, gives information about evading military service, sabotages mobilisation in Ukraine, and discredits the call-up to the army.

The Ukrainian segment of Telegram channels has grown significantly since the start of the full-scale invasion. Growth occurred both in the official Telegram channels (president, heads of regional military administrations, etc.) and in the news Telegram channels (both nationwide and regional), as well as channels called 'radars', which report missile attacks and dangers in various regions of Ukraine.

As at March 2024, the Legitimniy and Resident Telegram channels had over 1 million subscribers each. However, analysis of subscriber growth dynamics indicates that a significant number (possibly the majority) of subscribers are bots. For example, an increase in subscriptions was recorded between 01:00 and 03:00 AM, but during this time there were no post publications or reposts, meaning there was no basis for organic audience growth.

How Russian Proxy Media Created to Influence Ukraine Are Used in Other Countries

On 27 May 2024 the EU put the Voice of Europe website on its sanctions list. It was based in Prague and managed by Artem Marchevskyy, a former producer of the Russian proxy TV channel 112 in Ukraine. Marchevskyy is connected to Viktor Medvedchuk, and both are now sanctioned by the EU.[99]

In March 2024 the Czech Republic disclosed that the website was being used to spread Russian propaganda, including anti-Ukrainian narratives, and also tried to support certain European politicians shortly before the European Parliament elections. In fact, Medvedchuk and Marchevskyy attempted to do in the EU what they had done in Ukraine – create a Russian proxy media that would promote certain political structures and thereby influence the will of the citizens during the elections, particularly the European Parliament elections in June 2024.

According to media reports, the Voice of Europe project began operations in the spring of 2023. Around the same time, the Another Ukraine organisation, headed by Medvedchuk, appeared in Russia. The Another Ukraine website promotes the same narratives as Russian proxy media on the occupied territories of Ukraine, and the same 'experts' who previously worked on Russian proxy TV channels in Ukraine act as commentators. Now it mostly targets the Russian domestic audience.

There is also a Golos.eu website (*golos* in Russian means 'voice'), where blogs – texts and videos – are published and automatically translated into a range of European languages. The website hosts blogs of former Ukrainian officials from the time of President Yanukovych, and deputies from political parties banned in Ukraine, many of whom are accused in criminal cases in Ukraine; 'political analysts' – mostly from the pool of proxy speakers of

Medvedchuk's TV channels, as detailed in this report; and 'journalists' – that is, propagandists from Medvedchuk's pool. Around 85% of the website's traffic comes from Russia, and social media traffic mainly from the Russian networks VKontakte and Odnoklassniki. This project mostly targets the Russian domestic audience as well. According to *The Guardian* (2 June 2024) the website was funded by the Russian government via the Pravmir organisation involved in Russian propaganda and legal activities in the EU.[100]

The discredited network of Russian Telegram channels in Ukraine (the Legitimniy group) is currently being used by Russian propaganda in EU countries. Telegram channels from the exposed network in Ukraine are quoted in Telegram channels in other European languages as 'Ukrainian sources' – thus disseminating fake news and Russian disinformation. Messages from the Legitimniy Telegram channel as a 'Ukrainian source' are published in Telegram channels in German, Portuguese, Bulgarian, Italian, Slovak, Latvian, and other languages, indicating that these channels are also part of the Russian proxy network. Thus, after losing influence within Ukraine, Russian special services use proxy channels to conduct information operations against Ukraine outside Ukraine – in the EU.

One example of such dissemination is the anonymous Telegram network InfoDefense, which operates in 30 European languages. It positions itself as an independent network 'supporting freedom of speech', 'countering mainstream media lies', and 'advocating for free journalism' (the same as Voice of Europe). Other Telegram channels in German and, most actively, in Slovak demonstrate identical synchronous network activity (at least five Telegram channels have been recorded, two of which synchronously

interact with the Legitimniy proxy network). A network of Telegram channels in Russian targeted at Moldova and Romania has been formed according to the same model. This fact should be considered in the context of Russia's foreign policy interests, particularly regarding Transnistria. Specifically, the so-called 'traffic overflow' across the network of Telegram channels is currently used. One channel recommends 'friendly' channels or 'colleagues' to its readers, most of which are anonymous. The proxy network promoted its content in Ukraine until 2021 using the same scheme.

Appendix

Analysis of a 112 Broadcast

On 25 May 2020 on TV channel 112, programme hosts and 'political analysts' discuss the current situation in the country.[101] The programme begins with a live broadcast from the Kyiv subway, which opened to passengers that day after a two-month lockdown. This is a report about the situation, the number of people, and so on; there is nothing problematic regarding ethics and compliance with standards with this part of the show. Then the two hosts move on to political issues and a report in the online edition of Ukrainska Pravda (Ukrainian Pravda) about the 'Ukrainian government not having a strategic plan of action,' citing an anonymous source within the government. (Context – the Ukrainian government was appointed on 4 March 2020, after which the country entered a COVID lockdown.)

However, the article in Ukrainska Pravda on 25 May 2020[102] discusses something completely different – it describes the new ministers' biographies and backgrounds. Journalists also told the story about the former prime minister who resigned, saying that he gathered ministers on weekends at unofficial locations, and there they 'wrote the country's development strategy'. So, the hosts in the studio blatantly misinform viewers.

Then the 'political analyst' Iryna Gavrilova is brought in. There are no details or explanations about her background, sphere of expertise, or education.

'How do you feel about such news? Do you see a development strategy?' asks one of the hosts.

'Ukraine does not currently need any development strategy, as it was written in Washington. It is transmitted to us, and we live according to these plans. Why go far? Just yesterday-today, we are discussing the new terms of the IMF, which they presented to us to receive another loan,' says the 'analyst'.

'Didn't they write a strategy in Washington due to the pandemic?' asks the host seriously, without any irony.

'There are many different conditions, such as the Derkach-Biden tapes, and the situation with the biolabs that Mr Medvedchuk stirred up,' replies Gavrilova. (The 'Derkach-Biden tapes' refers to the tapes published by Russian agent Andriy Derkach with allegations against Joe Biden's son Hunter, which aimed to influence the course and results of the US elections that were to take place later that year.)

'Yes-yes,' says the host.

'[Medvedchuk] demanded that the prosecutor's office find out why 15 secret biolabs are working in our completely independent state [emotionally ironic connotation here], financed by the Pentagon, and what are they doing? This information came out in the middle

of the pandemic, which raises even more questions. I understand that people in the State Department are a little confused; they can't keep up with writing a development strategy and providing countermeasures to such big scandals which affect our international partners,' continues the 'political analyst'.

Next the studio discusses the new government's programme; Gavrilova talks about plans to raise tariffs and force Ukrainians to pay for unprofitable green energy.

'All professionals were washed away by "revolutions", cleaned in the interests of the Sorosyata [a negative word referring to NGOs supported by George Soros's Open Society Foundation] who govern the state in the interests of third countries,' says the analyst. Then she says there will be reshuffles in the Cabinet of Ministers in the autumn, referring to Telegram channels and hints in the official media.

Then, political expert Olesia Yakhno joins the studio, comments on the absence of a government programme, and emphasises that adopting a programme will give the government immunity for a year [Ed.: this is true] and that the lack of a strategy makes personnel policy chaotic. Then Gavrilova is asked about the change in the structure of ministries. She replies that changes in the government structure occurred after the law on land sale was adopted, and therefore 'administrators should be appointed to control the sale of Ukrainian fertile soil'.

The host refers to this as a 'statement of facts', although it has nothing to do with facts; these are evaluative judgements not supported by facts, and can be agreed or disagreed with. The host asks the 'analyst' about her 'recipe' and what to do in such a situation, and she suggests early parliamentary elections, early presidential elections, and 'perhaps the abolition of the presidency in Ukraine'.

Next, the studio links up with a correspondent who talks about the operation of public transport, and then the studio discusses

the number of medical workers who have contracted COVID-19. The 'analyst' claims that Ukraine is top in Europe in terms of the number of sick medical workers solely 'due to the medical reform initiated by the American lobbyist Ulyana Suprun', whom, according to the commentator, they are now trying to place in another position, 'because medical genocide must continue'. Then Gavrilova unequivocally states that 'our doctors were not ready for the virus because our epidemiological services were liquidated', and 'hospitals were underfunded by 80%'. After that, the chief doctor of the Lviv emergency hospital comes on air and talks about how 84 medical workers at the hospital have fallen ill; most of them have mild COVID-19 and are receiving outpatient treatment, and 15 are in the hospital, with no oxygen-dependent patients. The doctor says that the hospital he manages is not yet included in the list of those admitting COVID-19 patients but has applied for inclusion, which will allow doctors to receive promised financial bonuses from the president. The doctor speaks calmly, emphasizing the situation is under control.

Next, the studio links to the 'political expert' Mykhailo Shpyr, who talks about the medical reform in Ukraine 'conducted by Americans, in the interests of another state'. 'Ukraine has once again confirmed its colonial status, confirming that on the streets there are some nationalists, roaming patriots [...] all events are held to make this a real American colony, what people dreamed of on the Maidan. They didn't want to build a normal country; they wanted to be under America – and they got it. Nothing new.'

Then, the other host reads out a comment from the OPFL political party about an attack on its office – 'these are attempts to influence the political values of the party'. The quote from the party's statement mentions that 'the party opposes external control from the USA', therefore pressure is exerted on it, and 'the law enforcement system protects the nationalist radicals'. 'The party will continue to fight against the free operation of military biolabs on the territory of Ukraine, which conduct experiments with the most dangerous

viruses,' quotes the host from the party's statement. At the same time footage of a group of men throwing flares near the OPFL office is shown on the screen. The host asks Gavrilova to comment on these events, and Gavrilova says that the attack is related to the fact that 'Zelenskyy called Medvedchuk his main political opponent, and that the so-called patriots should picket the US Embassy to find out why biolabs operate on the territory of Ukraine.'

'Military biolabs' – the host comments on Gavrilova for the first time in 40 minutes of the show.

'Yes, military biolabs are financed by the Pentagon. Completely closed information! But instead of this, they ["patriots"] come and silence the political force of Medvedchuk, which raised this issue with both the prosecutor general's office and the authorities. They demanded that they openly investigate the situation and report to the citizens of Ukraine. And it turns out that our patriots, for some reason, are not interested in this. They probably want these underground laboratories to work where it is unknown what viruses are being created and then released,' Gavrilova says.

'What is the likelihood that the coronavirus was invented in one of these 15 biolabs in Ukraine, financed by the US State Department?' the host asks.

'I am not a specialist; I cannot exclude this,' says the 'political analyst'. 'But judging by how, excuse me for the expression, it "burned" in the State Department and how some representatives began to accuse the political force of Medvedchuk and him himself of disclosing that information, then the international plans of the USA were very strongly violated.'

Gavrilova then draws a parallel between Donald Trump's statements that China should pay compensation for the spread of the coronavirus and 'now it turns out that both Russia and China have filed claims against America, which has built 15 biolabs in its colony, where

it is unknown what experiments were being conducted'.

Next, the hosts again questions Mykhailo Shpyr about the attack on the OPFL office: 'Who should intervene to prevent this from happening again?'

Shpyr says that attacks are common, and that he was attacked by nationalists in the last week. 'This is the same gang of roaming, stinking, unhappy patriots who are without a tribe, without a profession, they walk in dirty clothes, they stink, they look just disgusting, and it is clear that it is such people who are tasked with dirty work in Ukraine, it is clear that they have some support.'

Then, the 'political expert' Shpyr demands condemnation of the violent attacks by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and talks about Medvedchuk as the number two leader in all the polls. 'In my opinion, they [nationalists] should have been rolled under the asphalt on the Maidan,' he says, and only after such a comment does the host interrupt him, asking him not to use 'non-air' vocabulary, not to evaluate people by their appearance, and to refrain from evaluative judgements.

The programme returns to reviewing the transport situation in the capital and, after that, to a discussion of the new IMF tranche. The 'political analyst' Gavrilova says that if earlier 'Poroshenko deceived the IMF, in this case the IMF deceived our president Zelenskyy'. The 'political expert' Mykhailo Shpyr again emphasises the 'colonial status' of Ukraine and, in response to the host's question about what to do in this situation, says that the only way out is to 'normalise relations with the Russian Federation'.

Table of Meta Narratives

In this table the meta narratives from Russian proxy media in the occupied territories of Ukraine (Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol, parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions since 2014, and parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions since 2022) compared with the main narratives from Russian proxy media in Ukraine

Narrative	Crimea and Sevastopol (since 2014)	Luhansk region (since 2014)	Donetsk region (since 2014)	Kherson region (since 2022)	Zaporizhzhia region (since 2022)	Russian proxy media in Ukrainian-controlled territory: TV	Russian proxy media in Ukrainian-controlled territory: Telegram
2017–2022							
'Ukraine – Nazi state/fascist state'/'Denazification of Ukraine' Russophobic'	+	+	+ Especially against 'Azov'	+	+	+ Far-right gangs operating in Ukraine, Banderivtsy, nationalists Statements by politicians and commentators	+
'A junta has seized Kyiv' **State coup in Ukraine**	+	+	+	+	+	–	–
'[Name of the region] is inherently/historically Russian land'	+	+	+	+	+	–	–
'[Name of the region] was gifted to Ukraine (by tsar, by communists, etc.), does not belong to Ukraine; Russia is an owner, Ukraine has a debt'	+	+	+	+	+	Commemorating and celebrating Soviet holidays and empire anniversaries	–
'The West does not want peace (the West/NATO is a threat to [name of the region]')	+	+	+	+	+	Anti-NATO rhetoric by politicians and commentators	+
'Ukraine is a puppet state, colonised by the West'	+	+	+	+	+	+ Statements by politicians and commentators	+

Narrative	Crimea and Sevastopol (since 2014)	Luhansk region (since 2014)	Donetsk region (since 2014)	Kherson region (since 2022)	Zaporizhzhia region (since 2022)	Russian proxy media in Ukrainian-controlled territory: TV	Russian proxy media in Ukrainian-controlled territory: Telegram
'Kyiv is sabotaging the Minsk agreements'	Not applicable	+	+	Not applicable	Not applicable	+ Statements by politicians and commentators	+
'Ukrainian aggression against [name of the region]'	+	+	+	+	+	–	–
'Ukraine took money from [name of the region], while Russia invests in [name of the region]'	+	+	+	+	+	–	–
'[Name of the region] chose the path of integration with Russia in the referendum'	+	+	+	+	+	–	–
Ukraine is shelling civilians	+	+	+	+	+	**Not clear who is shelling civilians (up to 2022)** Statements by politicians and commentators	+
Ukraine is to blame for everything	+	+	+	+	+	+ Statements by politicians and commentators	+
'The Donbas people have the right to statehood'	Not applicable	+ (up to 2022)	+ (up to 2022)	Not applicable	Not applicable	–	–
'The LPR/DPR are independent states'	Not applicable	+	+	Not applicable	Not applicable	+ Civilian conflict, Donbas people, 'special status' for the territories occupied by Russia	–

Narrative	Crimea and Sevastopol (since 2014)	Luhansk region (since 2014)	Donetsk region (since 2014)	Kherson region (since 2022)	Zaporizhzhia region (since 2022)	Russian proxy media in Ukrainian-controlled territory: TV	Russian proxy media in Ukrainian-controlled territory: Telegram
Ukrainian Nazi units/mercenaries/foreigners are in the Ukrainian army	+	+	+	+	+	–	+
Russian-speaking people in Ukraine were repressed and need to be protected	+	+	+	+	+	+ Statements by politicians and commentators	+
The Orthodox Church is persecuted in Ukraine	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Ukraine is corrupt	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
American biolabs are in Ukraine	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
2022–2023							
The Russian army is advancing triumphantly	+	+	+	+	+	Not applicable	+
Ukraine has problems with weapons, uniforms, ammunition	+	+	+	+	+	Not applicable	+
The Ukrainian army is demotivated	+	+	+	+	+	Not applicable	+
Illegal conscription, 'mogilisation'	+	+	+	+		Not applicable	+
The Ukrainian army commits war crimes	+	+	+	+	+	Not applicable	+
Liberated territories, people welcome Russian troops as liberators	+	+	+	+	+	Not applicable	+

Table of Names

The table lists Russian proxy media personnel and Russian and Ukrainian politicians who have been involved in Russian proxy media operations in Ukraine.

Name	Additional information
Occupied ARC and Sevastopol	
Mikhail Bakharev	Chief editor of *Krymskaya Pravda*; former deputy of the Supreme Council (local parliament) of the ARC (when Ukraine controlled ARC and Sevastopol). Former head of the press, radio, and television sector of the Crimean regional committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine (the Communist Party was banned in Ukraine in 2015). Graduated from the Higher Party School at the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine (during the USSR).
Konstantin Bakharev	Real controller of *Krymskaya Pravda*; son of the chief editor, Mikhail Bakharev. Konstantin, after the Russian occupation of Crimea, worked as the vice-speaker of the Russian parliament in Crimea and is currently a member of the State Duma of Russia from Crimea. Has been included in the sanction lists of Ukraine, the EU, the US, and other countries since 2014, when he became member of the leadership of the Russian-controlled parliament of Crimea.
	In 2023 the Higher Anti-Corruption Court of Ukraine confiscated his property. According to a lawsuit filed by the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, the parliamentary activities of Konstantin Bakharev contributed to the violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and that he participated 'in decisions on expanding the jurisdiction of the aggressor state onto the territory of Ukraine, committing actions that, according to the norms of international law and Ukrainian legislation, have signs of war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity'.
Andrey Nikolaevich Sobolev	General director of LLC Polygraphy and former senator of the Federation Council of Russia from Sevastopol
Vadim Pervykh	Since 2020, general director of TRC Crimea. Previously worked as deputy head of the Russian-controlled Ministry of Internal Policy, Information, and Communication of Crimea.
	In September 2023 the Ukrainian Prosecutor's Office of the ARC reported suspicion of Pervykh under several articles of the Criminal Code of Ukraine. It claimed that he 'actively participates in political and information events to support the armed aggression of the Russian Federation. He also engages in propaganda activities and promotes Russian narratives, thereby influencing the consciousness of the residents of the occupied territories. The suspect disseminates materials calling for violent changes to the established constitutional order in Ukraine and changes to its state borders.' Pervykh is included in the list of sanctions by the NSDC of Ukraine (Decree of the President of Ukraine no. 23/2023).

Name	Additional information
Sergey Aksyonov	Former Ukrainian politician who supported the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014 and was affiliated with Russian politicians before 2014. Russian head of the occupied Crimea, actively supporting Russian aggression against Ukraine.
	In Ukraine he is accused of state treason and violation of the rules of the customs of war. He is under sanctions of Ukraine, the US, and the UK.
Zaur Smirnov	Former head of the so-called committee for interethnic relations and deported citizens of Crimea, and a pro-Russian activist
Vladimir Konstantinov	Head of the parliament of the ARC, and since 2014 head of the Russian-controlled parliament of Crimea. Has actively supported Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2014. In Ukraine he is accused of state treason and violation of the rules of the customs of war. He is under sanctions of Ukraine, the US, and the UK.
Arina Novoselskaya	Former Russian-controlled minister of resorts and tourism of Crimea
Sergey Shoigu	Minister of defence of Russia from 2012 to 2024. One of the closest politicians to Vladimir Putin.
Konstantin Knyrik	Founder and editor-in-chief of the NewsFront news agency. Under sanctions by the US, UK, and EU.
Aleksandr Dugin	Russian political scientist, and one of the best-known ideologists. His political ideas aim to destroy the 'unipolar world' and to develop a 'multipolar world', and Russian aggression against Ukraine is one of the most important aspects of this process.
Mikhail Razvozhayev	Russian 'governor of Sevastopol' since 2019. In 2020 'elected' for this position for a five-year term. He is under sanctions of Ukraine, the US, the UK, and other countries.
Dmitry Kiselyov	Russian propagandist; general director of the 'international information agency' Russia Today. On the sanctions lists of Ukraine, the EU, the US, and several other countries. He is also a subject of criminal proceedings by the SSU under Article 258-5 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine, 'financing of terrorism'.
Aleksandr Talipov	Owner of the TalipoV Online Telegram channel, *https://t.me/talipov-onlineV*, which actively supports the war against Ukraine. He is under Ukrainian sanctions as per the decision of the NSDC of Ukraine enacted by Decree of the President of Ukraine on 12 May 2023, no. 280/2023.
	Occupied part of the Donetsk region
Igor Girkin (known as Strelkov)	Russian FSB officer and commander of the Russian sabotage group which invaded Ukraine in April 2014 and captured Sloviansk city. Later in interviews admitted that his task was 'to launch the war' in Ukraine. Responsible for the downing of flight MH17 (Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur) in July 2014, when 298 people were killed.

Name	Additional information
	The plane had been hit by a Buk surface-to-air missile launched from Russian-occupied territory in Ukraine. In 2022 a Dutch court handed down life sentences in absentia to Girkin and two other defendants.
	Girkin was arrested by Russian special services in 2023 for public criticism of Putin.
Pavlo Gubarev	Self-proclaimed 'people's governor' of Russian-occupied part of the Donetsk region. Now lives in Russia.
Katerina Gubareva	Pavlo Gubarev's wife. Had some positions in the self-proclaimed 'government', and was a public figure in the occupied part of the Donetsk region.
Oleksandr Zakharchenko	Before 2014, affiliated with Party of Regions parliament member Oleksandr Bobkov. Leader of one of the gangs (Oplot) in the occupied part of the Donetsk region. In July 2014 became 'deputy minister of internal affairs of the DPR' and in August 2014, the 'chairman of the Council of Ministers of the DPR'. Killed on 31 August 2018 in occupied Donetsk.
Oleksandr Timofeev (known as Tashkent)	Close affiliate of Oleksandr Zakharchenko. Controlled Oplot TV.
Oplot	Organisation operating since roughly 2011, formally registered in November 2013 by Ukrainian law by former police officer Evgeniy Zhilin. Formal goal was to provide financial and other support to families of police officers killed in the line of duty. But in reality Oplot was engaged in political activity; it organised exhibitions and held other events, always related to political confrontations on Ukrainian history. During 2012–13 Oplot became an anti-Ukrainian semi-militarised organisation.
	In 2013–14 Oplot took part in the events of the so-called Antimaidan, physically attacked Maidan protesters, and was involved in a few other serious attacks. After the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, it took part in the creation of 'self-defence units' (in fact, support for Russian aggression). In February 2014, when Yanukovich had already escaped from Kyiv, Zhilin demanded weapons to fight. Later in 2014 he fled to Moscow. Zhilin was arrested in absentia in Ukraine and was shot dead in Moscow in 2016.
	The remainder of the gang were involved in shootings in Kharkiv in 2016. Oleksandr Zakharchenko was associated with the local branch of Oplot in Donetsk.
Denis Pushilin	Head of the DPR from 2014 and until the present. Up to 2013 he was involved in the MMM financial pyramid scam in Ukraine.
	Pushilin is under international sanctions of the EU, the US, the UK, and other countries.

Name	Additional information
Oleksandr Khodakovskyy	Formerly head of 'A' special unit of the SSU, but supported Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014. For two months in 2014 was 'minister of state security' of the DPR. Now involved in full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine. Under international sanctions of the EU, the US, the UK, and a number of other countries.
	Occupied part of the Luhansk region
Valeriy Bolotov	Former Soviet military, commander of the 'Army of the Southeast'; self-proclaimed 'people's governor' and then 'head' of the LPR. Was removed from the occupied Luhansk region at the end of August 2014, as Russian media stated, and died in Moscow in 2017. His wife suspected that he was poisoned. Bolotov was under international sanctions of the EU and the US.
Army of the Southeast	One of the armed gangs in the Luhansk region which appeared in public in late March 2014. In early April the leadership core was arrested, but Bolotov escaped. On 6 April the leaders of this gang were released from pre-trial detention because of a political decision, and in a few hours they took over the regional office of the SSU. After that Bolotov became a 'leader of the LPR'.
Igor Plotnitskyy	'Leader of the LPR' after Bolotov was removed. Led the LPR from 2014 to 2017; lost his position after a 'coup' organised by the LPR 'minister of internal affairs' (Igor Kornet) and 'minister of state security' (Leonid Pasechnik). Lived in Russia since 2017. On the sanctions list of the US, the EU, Canada, and other countries.
Leonid Pasechnik	'Head of the LPR' since 2017. On the sanctions list of Ukraine and the US.
Igor Kornet	'Minister of internal affairs' of the LPR from 2014 to 2023. Was wounded in an explosion in a barbershop in occupied Luhansk on 15 May 2023 and has not appeared since. On the sanctions list of the US, the EU, Canada, and other countries.
Yuriy Pershikov	Russian proxy media coordinator and narrative creator. Involved in Russian proxy media operations in Crimea (in 2014 created the Novoros project to disseminate disinformation against Ukraine) and then moved to occupied Luhansk; held the positions of 'advisor to the minister of information of the LPR' and 'first deputy minister of the Ministry of Communications and Mass Communications of the LPR'. Before 2017 coordinated the local media group praising 'the minister of internal affairs', Igor Kornet.

Name	Additional information
	Pershikov's team was connected to Russian propagandist Vyacheslav Matveyev ('Akademik') and coordinated a network of Russian websites (NewsFront, Anna News, Tsargorod, Russian Spring, Politikus, Doni News, Journalistic Truth), and was also connected with the head of the Luhansk 24 TV channel Andriy Nikliyev: *https://taurica.net/294267-Novorossu-10-let-Yuriiy-Pershikov-Novoross-stal-informacionnym-centrom-russkogo-dvizheniya-i-krymskoiy-vesny.html.* Russian special service officer Aleksandr Shingiryov ('Arbat') was the head of this coordinated network. Pershikov is on the sanctions list of Ukraine.
Yuriy Yurov	Editor-in-chief of the local newspaper *XXI vek* (21st Century), published since 1996. Yurov was affiliated with the Communist Party and Party of Regions. In 2014 supported Russian military aggression against Ukraine. On the sanctions list of Ukraine.
Nikolay Kozitsyn	Russian citizen, identifying himself as a 'Cossack', controlled the Russian 'Cossack gang' in 2014, and captured a few cities in the Luhansk region of Ukraine. Had a few media (mostly YouTube channels and communities in social networks). Was forcibly removed from Ukraine by Russian special services. Lives in Russia.
Anastasiya Shurkayeva	Before 2014, local TV host and news presenter. Became head of the local proxy TV station Luhansk 24 in 2014–15. Escaped from occupied Luhansk in 2017 after the 'coup' against Plotnitskyy and lives in Russia. On the sanctions list of Ukraine.
Serhiy Meshkoviy	Head of the Russian proxy media the LIC. According to the Russian media, he previously worked in the press department of the government of the ARC and managed a 'Crimean newspaper', and cooperated with the Party of Regions. Supported Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and organised pro-Russian news resources, then moved to occupied Luhansk.
Aleksandr Shingiryov (known as 'Arbat')	Russian special service officer, involved in Russian hybrid aggression against Ukraine in Crimea and in the occupied Luhansk region. Ukrainian media de-anonymised him and proved that he is the main coordinator of the Russian proxy coordinated network in the occupied Luhansk region. Directly managed the media outlets network and financing of Russian proxy media. Worked with Vyacheslav Matveyev ('Akademik'), Yuriy Pershikov, and Ksenia Sabina: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHp_7FFBP4U.*

Name	Additional information
Vyacheslav Matveyev ('Akademik')	Russian citizen, most likely a Russian special service officer, who infiltrated the Luhansk public broadcaster no later than 2011. Before 2014, 'general producer' who made strategic decisions in the Ukrainian public broadcaster company in Luhansk. The local TV team protested against this appointment: *https://zn.ua/SOCIETY/rabotniki_luganskoy_ogtrk_prosyat_yanukovicha_uvolit_genprodyusera-rossiyanina.html*. After Russian aggression in 2014, the invasion of Ukraine, and occupation of Crimea and parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, Matveev became coordinator of a Russian proxy media network, narrative creator, and fake news creator. His hacked email revealed tasks for 'journalists' to create and publish fake news to discredit Ukraine, the Ukrainian government, and the Ukrainian military: *https://realgazeta.com.ua/matveev-pt1/*; *https://realgazeta.com.ua/matveev-pt-2/*; *https://realgazeta.com.ua/matveev-pt-3/*; *https://realgazeta.com.ua/matveev-pt-4-neiroset/*; *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHp_7FFBP4U*.
Serhiy Kolesnikov	Former Luhansk TV journalist and news host who became a Russian propagandist after Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014. Had been a spokesman for the 'ministry of internal affairs of LPR', after 2017 'coup' was head of the Luhansk 24 Russian proxy TV channel in occupied part of the Luhansk region.
Andriy Nikliyev	Head of Luhansk 24 in 2019. Member of Yuriy Pershikov's Crimea group, and managed Russian proxy media in the occupied part of the Luhansk region.
Olena Prasolova	Head of Luhansk 24: *https://video.gtrklnr.ru/*
Rodion Miroshnik	Luhansk regional TV news host, producer at the local public broadcasting TV company, press secretary to president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych, deputy head of the Luhansk regional state administration, and member of Luhansk regional council. Prominent supporter of anti-Ukrainian narratives and pro-Russian political movements. Previously 'ambassador of the LPR to Russia' and now 'special envoy of the Russian MFA'.
Aleksey Kostylov	Russian propagandist, affiliated with the Readovka Telegram channel
Maria Karpova	Host of Russian proxy TV channel Luhansk 24
Mykola Prasolov	Host of Russian proxy TV channel Luhansk 24

Name	Additional information
Andriy Marochko	Russian proxy 'military correspondent' and LPR representative. Previously served in the 'people's militia of the LPR'
	Occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions
Yevheniy Balytsky	Member of the Ukrainian parliament (2012–14, 2014–19, both times elected in the Zaporizhzhia region; in 2019 lost the elections). Local businessman in the Zaporizhzhia region; owner of the local TV channel MTV Plus (Melitopol TV Plus). In 2022 was a supporter of the Russian invasion of Ukraine; became 'governor' of the Russian-occupied territories of the Zaporizhzhia region.
	At the end of June 2023, based on evidence gathered by the SSU, Balytsky was found guilty of participation in the organisation and holding of illegal referendums in the temporarily occupied territory, committed by a group of persons based on a prior conspiracy (Criminal Code of Ukraine: Part 2 of Article 28 and Part 5 of Article 111–1), and in actions committed with the purpose of changing the boundaries of the territory or the state border of Ukraine in violation of the order established by the constitution of Ukraine by a group of persons in advance (Part 2 of Article 110). He was sentenced to 15 years in prison. The state treason case against Balytsky was still in progress as of May 2024.
	Balytsky is under sanctions in Ukraine, the EU, the US, the UK, and other countries. It is interesting to note that he was also sanctioned by Russia from 2018 to 2022 (for voting in the Ukrainian parliament).
Aleksandr Malkevich	Russian propagandist close to Evgeniy Prigozhin, originally from St Petersburg. Many pro-Kremlin media outlets worked under Malkevich's patronage, as did the 'Internet Research Agency'. From 2021 to 2023 he headed the Saint Petersburg municipal television channel. Now head of the supervisory board of the Za!TV channel in the occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region. According to Russian media, Za!TV was the 'first Russian channel in Zaporizhzhia'.
	Malkevich is also involved in work in the occupied part of the Kherson region for the Tavria TV and Radio Company. He is also the founder of the Mariupol 24 channel in Mariupol city in the occupied part of the Donetsk region. Due to the lack of professionals willing to work in the pro-Russian media at newly created channels, Malkevich opened 'media schools' where local youth were involved.

Name	Additional information
Vladimir Andronaki	Crimean journalist, now a pro-Kremlin propagandist, also involved in working for Za!TV in the occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region. Hosts his own programme *After the News. Evening with Vladimir Andronaki* on Za!Radio in the same area. One of the first to switch to work for the Russian occupation media in 2014 and supported the establishment of a branch of the Russian Union of Journalists in Crimea. Author and host of the propaganda programme *Evening Intercept* on Radio Crimea for several years.
Vadym Kucher	CEO of the media holding ZaMedia; a native of St Petersburg. The media holding includes Za!TV, Za!Radio, the newspaper *Zaporizhzhia Vestnik*, and the online pages of these media in the occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region.
Vadym Ivanov and Yulia Shamal	Ivanov is a former employee of a Russian government TV company (VGTRK), and since 2022 the CEO of Za!TV. The Russian Yulia Shamal headed the channel after Ivanov.
Andrii Fedorets, Maksim Stadnyk, Hennadii Nikitenko, Vadym Konovalskiy, Denys Dorofeev, Oksana Hapyeieva, Mykhailo Hapyeiev, Dmytro Pereverziev, and Dmytro Pyisanytsia	Journalists and other TV staff from the occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region who joined the collaborators in the area
Andrii Khorkov	Za!TV host
Volodymyr Saldo	Former mayor of Kherson (2002–12), member of Ukrainian parliament (2012–14), deputy of the local city council. In 2016 was involved in the criminal-political conflict in the Dominican Republic (was arrested during the conflict with another person originating from Kherson, who stated that Saldo worked for the FSB). Citizens of other countries were involved as well. The main source of information used for publishing this information was the pro-Russian proxy TV channels (Medvedchuk's TV pool), so this information may be considered as part of a conflict between different 'agents' or political groups inside Russian special services. In 2020 Saldo ran for the position of Kherson mayor again but lost. He was the head of his own local political party 'Block of Volodymyr Saldo'.
	Since 2022, a pro-Russian collaborator, and 'head' of the occupied part of the Kherson region. In 2023, sentenced to 15 years in prison for state treason in Ukraine (treason under martial law, collaboration, denial of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine, and glorification of its participants: Part 2 of Article 111, Part 5 of Article 111–1, Part 1 of Article 436–2 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine). In 2022 his party's activity was suspended.
	On the sanctions list of the US, the EU, Canada, and other countries.

Name	Additional information
Ismail Abdullaiev (calls himself 'Vladimir')	In 2022 became director of the Tavria TV company in the occupied part of the Kherson region.
	Previously director of the Oplot TV company, created in Donetsk in 2014 during the Russian occupation of the city, on the stolen premises of several local television channels. Oplot TV was directly subordinate to the 'head' of the DPR Oleksandr Zakharchenko, assassinated in 2018, and his affiliate Oleksandr Tymofeyev (Tashkent).
Viktor Marchenko	Kherson News website editor who previously owned and edited the News of Kherson Region website and Telegram channel. Presumably settled in Henichesk (city in the occupied part of the region).
Roman Hromnyak	Team lead of the Kherson News Agency, based in occupied Donetsk city
Oleg Hrushko	Associate/owner of *Naddnipryanska Pravda*. Chief editor of the publication is Yevhen Biely.
Unoccupied Ukraine	
Viktor Yanukovych	President of Ukraine 2010–14, escaped to Russia in February 2014 after the mass murder at Maidan Square in Kyiv, Ukraine.
	On 6 December 2021 the Cassation Administrative Court decided to leave unchanged the verdict in the case of Viktor Yanukovych on charges of state treason and aiding and abetting aggressive warfare (13 years in prison). There are a few other criminal investigations against him.
	Ukrainian media reported that in March 2022 Yanukovich was in the Kyiv region while it was occupied by Russian troops, and was waiting for the capture of Kyiv in order to get back into power. Has lived in Russia since 2014.
Vitaliy Zakharchenko	Former minister of internal affairs of Ukraine in Viktor Yanukovych's government. Escaped to Russia in 2014. Stripped of Ukrainian citizenship in 2019, and his in absentia arrest approved. Suspected in two criminal cases – money laundering and abuse of power and official authority by law enforcement officers to obstruct meetings, which led to mass casualties during the Euromaidan protests in Kyiv on 18–20 February 2014.
Viktor Medvedchuk	Key figure in Russian proxy political and information operations in Ukraine after 2014. Oligarch and politician directly politically and personally connected to Russian leader Vladimir Putin. Was building media (pool of three TV channels) and political (OPFL) structures to get political power in Ukraine with Russian support. Stripped of his Ukrainian citizenship.
Oksana Marchenko	Viktor Medvedchuk's wife and formal owner of his business in Ukraine, Russia, and in other countries

Name	Additional information
Taras Kozak	One of the closest affiliates of Viktor Medvedchuk. Mostly involved in business and financial operations in Russia, Belarus, Cyprus, and Ukraine. Should be considered as bankrolling political activity of Russian proxy media and political parties in Ukraine. Escaped from Ukraine in 2021 after the imposition of sanctions on him personally and his TV companies. Lives in Moscow. Stripped of his Ukrainian citizenship.
Vadim Rabinovych	Member of the Ukrainian parliament (2014–19, 2019–22). Owner of the NewsOne TV channel before 2014 and sold it to Yevhenii Muraiev. Rabinovych was one of the closest affiliates of Viktor Medvedchuk.
	Supported Russian propaganda narratives for many years in his public statements and political activities. Escaped from Ukraine in February 2022 before the full-scale invasion began; lives in Israel (publicly available information that could not be validated). In 2022, stripped of his Ukrainian citizenship. In 2023, the State Bureau of Investigation of Ukraine sent the criminal case against Rabinovych for state treason to the court: *https:// dbr.gov.ua/en/news/dbr-povidomilo-pro-pidozru-u-derzhzradi-eksnardepu-vid-opzzh-rabinovichu*.
Nestor Shufrych	Member of the Ukrainian parliament, close to Viktor Medvedchuk. Member of the parliament for six terms; was a minister and deputy head of the NSDC (2010–12, during the Yanukovich's presidency). After imposition of sanctions on Medvedchuk's TV group, established a new TV channel to replace banned Russian proxy TV channels. Now under criminal investigation for state treason. Arrested in Ukraine in September 2023.
Renat Kuzmin	Former deputy general prosecutor of Ukraine. Under criminal investigation in 2014; became MP for OPFL in 2019, and the investigation was suspended. In 2019–22, supported Russian propaganda narratives and disseminated fake news against Ukraine, primarily via Medvedchuk's TV channels. On 10 January 2023, stripped of Ukrainian citizenship. Due to be tried on charges of state treason; indictment sent to court in Ukraine in February 2024. Faces up to 15 years in prison with confiscation of property. Currently resides in Russia.
Artem Marchevskyy	Director of the Russian proxy TV channel in Ukraine 112 (2018–21). Close to Viktor Medvedchuk. Was involved in an attempt to develop Russian proxy media in the Czech Republic.
Yevhenii Muraiev	Pro-Russian politician in Ukraine, former owner of the Nash TV channel, and head of the Nashi political party. Has lived in Austria since 2014.
Petro Dyminsky	Member of the Ukrainian parliament, 2002–06. Before 2019, owner of the ZIK TV channel.

Name	Additional information
Olena Lukash	First deputy head of Yanukovych's presidential administration and former minister of justice of Ukraine in the government until 2014. One of the main speakers of the Party of Regions before 2014 and one of the main political commentators on Medvedchuk's pool of TV channels between 2018 and 2022.
Andriy Portnov	Deputy head of Yanukovych's presidential administration; temporarily managed the NewsOne TV channel in 2018 before Viktor Medvedchuk became the de facto owner. Escaped from Ukraine.
Vyacheslav Pikhovshek	Propagandist and media manager. Star of Ukrainian television in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Actively worked with Kuchma's presidential administration and one of the main political commentators on Medvedchuk's pool of TV channels after 2018.
Vasil Golovanov	TV host of the 112 TV channel, 2013–17; executive producer of the NewsOne TV channel, 2017–18, and its general producer, 2018–20
Iryna Gavrilova	Political commentator on Medvedchuk's 112 TV channel
Ulyana Suprun	Former minister of health of Ukraine, 2016–19
Mykhailo Shpyr	Political commentator on Medvedchuk's pool of TV channels. Escaped from Ukraine in 2020. The SSU began investigating Shpyr's activities before the start of the full-scale invasion, and had notified him he was under suspicion in 2021. In 2023 a court found him guilty in absentia and sentenced him to 10 years in prison (encroachment on the territorial integrity and inviolability of Ukraine; violation of the equality of citizens based on their race, national affiliation, religious beliefs, disability, and other grounds; production/dissemination of communist/Nazi symbolism; and propaganda of communist and Nazi totalitarian regimes). Since the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022, Shpyr has supported Russia's actions against Ukraine and continues to express the same narratives. Currently, he works as the 'deputy minister of digital development' in the occupied part of the Kherson region.
Denys Zharkikh	Propagandist and TV host for Medvedchuk's 112 TV channel. Cooperated with Russian propaganda outlets, and disseminated Russian propaganda narratives and fake news against Ukraine. Escaped from Ukraine after the Russian full-scale invasion began. Currently lives in Russia and is involved in building new political projects for Viktor Medvedchuk.
Anatoliy Peshko	'Academic of the Academy of Economic Sciences of Ukraine'; participated in TV shows on Medvedchuk's 112 TV channel

Name	Additional information
Viktor Chorny	Member of the Ukrainian parliament for OPFL; close to Viktor Medvedchuk. According to Ukrainian media, responsible for Medvedchuk's security.
Oleksandr Potyomkin	Head of obscure organisation 'Socialist Youth Congress', quoted by Medvedchuk's TV channels. Now lives in Russia and takes part in Medvedchuk's new political project 'Another Ukraine'.
Oleksandr Lazarev	Pro-Russian propagandist; member of the pool of political commentators on Medvedchuk's TV channels and the Nash TV channel owned by Yevhenii Muraiev. Disseminated Russian propaganda narratives and fake news against Ukraine. Escaped from Ukraine after the full-scale invasion began. Since 2022, involved in developing a new project by Viktor Medvedchuk in Russia, 'Another Ukraine'. There Lazarev, in particular, mocked those politicians who had previously participated in promoting Russian narratives and then 'betrayed' Russian proxy ideas and agenda. On 7 April 2023 the SSU notified Lazarev he was under suspicion under Part 1 of Article 111 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine (state treason), as well as under Part 1 of Article 161 (violation of equality of citizens based on their race, national or regional affiliation, religious beliefs, disability, and other grounds). The article provides for up to 15 years of imprisonment.
Yuriy Molchanov	Political commentator on Medvedchuk's pool of TV channels. Mostly focused on Russian Orthodox Church support. According to his Facebook page, changed his mind about the Russian attack on Ukraine. Currently place of residence unknown.
Kirill (Vladimir Gundyayev)	Head of the Russian Orthodox Church; supports Russian war against Ukraine.
Max Nazarov (real name Nazar Diorditsa)	TV Host of the Nash TV channel. After sanctions were launched against Nash, he was one of the main public speakers to support the narrative about 'political repression'. Later relaunched the Nash TV YouTube channel, renamed it Vyshka, and used it as his own with Yaroslava Maslova.
Petro Symonenko	Leader of the Communist Party, which is banned in Ukraine; pro-Russian politician
Anatoliy Shariy	Ukrainian citizen; former journalist; escaped from Ukraine in 2012 and lives in Spain. YouTube blogger (2.95 million subscribers). His activity is mainly dedicated to discrediting Ukraine as a country, the Ukrainian government, and political leaders. Worked directly with Russian special services, according to the SSU, and coordinated with Russian propaganda and with Russian proxy media in Ukraine. Founded a pro-Russian political party (Party of Shariy), which ran for the local elections in 2020. Shariy is under Ukrainian sanctions.
Olga Bondarenko (Shariy)	Anatoliy Shariy's wife and business partner. Bondarenko is under Ukrainian sanctions.

Name	Additional information
Oleksiy Yakubin and Oleksandra Reshmedilova	Political commentators on Ukrainian TV (including Russian proxy TV channels of Viktor Medvedchuk). The Ukrainian publication Bihus. Info revealed they were getting paid for positive comments on the pro-Russian Party of Shariy.
Victoria Daskalitsa	A coordinator of Russian proxy Telegram networks in Ukraine. On 1 February 2021 she was arrested by the SSU and on 8 February released on bail of more than 1.5 million hryvnias (roughly $54,000). The Party of Shariy put up her bail. Six months after her arrest, the court found Daskalitsa guilty of state treason.
Oleksandr Dubinskyy	Ukrainian MP for the Servant of the People political party and a former journalist. Now under criminal investigation for state treason; arrested in 2023 and is in a pre-trial detention centre.
Danylo Hetmantsev	Ukrainian MP for the Servant of the People political party; head of the parliament's committee on tax and customs policy since 2019
Max Buzhanskyy	Ukrainian MP for the Servant of the People political party
Oleksandr Kachura	Ukrainian MP for the Servant of the People political party

Table of Russian Proxy Media

The table lists Russian proxy media in the occupied territories of Ukraine and the personnel and political organisations connected with them.

Name	Description
Occupied ARC and Sevastopol	
Lenta novostey Kryma (Crimean Newsfeed)	Russian proxy news website: *https://crimea-news.com/*
Krymskaya Gazeta (Crimean Newspaper)	Russian proxy media: *https://gazetacrimea.ru/*
Krymskaya Pravda (Crimean Truth)	Russian proxy 'official newspaper', part of the proxy media group *https://c-pravda.ru/*. Registered according to Russian legislation. The group also includes *https://kianews24.ru*. Controlled by the Russian 'Crimean government'.
Sevastopolskaya Gazeta (Sevastopol Newspaper)	Russian proxy newspaper: *https://sevastopol.press/*

Name	Description
CrimeaInform	Russian proxy news website targeting occupied Crimea and Sevastopol city from 11 March 2014. Launched during the military occupation of Ukrainian territory and registered according to Russian legislation: *https://www.c-inform.info/*
Krymskiye Izvestia Crimean News	Official printed newspaper of the Russian 'State Council of the Crimean Republic' (Russian-controlled 'parliament' of Crimea): *https://new.crimiz.ru*
Russian news agency Crimea RIA	Crimean branch of the Russian state-owned propaganda website RIA Novosty (Russian News Information Agency): *https://crimea.ria.ru/*
TRC Crimea, including Pervy Krymsky, Crimea 24, and radio stations Radio Crimea and Radio More	Russian proxy TV and radio broadcaster in occupied Crimea. Pervy Krymsky (First Crimean): *https://1tvcrimea.ru/*. Crimea 24: *https://crimea24.tv*. Also involved in disseminating fake news and propaganda in the occupied parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine (Kherson 24 and Zaporizhzhia 24 branches).
Millet	Russian proxy TV channel in the Crimean Tatar language covering occupied Crimea: *https://trkmillet.ru/*
Vatan Sedasy	Russian proxy radio station in the Crimean Tatar language: *http://vatan.fm/*
Crimean Channel	Russian proxy Telegram channel: *https://t.me/fcpeshka*
Crimean PraVda	Russian proxy Telegram channel: *https://t.me/crimeatru*
Dionysius Terruarovich Apostolaki	Anonymous channel of non-existent person: *https://t.me/apostolaki_the_cat*
RaZVozhaev	Official Telegram channel of Russian 'governor of Sevastopol' Mikhail Razvozhaev: *https://t.me/razvozhaev*
Aksyonov Z 82	Official Telegram channel of 'head of Crimea' Sergey Aksyonov: *https://t.me/Aksenov82*
Crimean SMERSH	Telegram channel SMERSH ('Death to Spies' – the name of a counterintelligence department founded in 1943 during the Second World War in the USSR): *https://t.me/cremeasmersh* SMERSH Kerch channel created for the same purpose *https://t.me/smershkerch*

Name	Description
	Occupied part of the Donetsk region
Novorossiya	Media holding founded in occupied Donetsk and consisting of seven different information resources.
	Novorossiya TV channel: *https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBUJ8m_m6bh3ZKqh9YIU5mQ*.
	Telegram channel: *https://t.me/novorossiatv*. *Novorossiya* newspaper.
	Novorossiya Rocks radio station.
	Novorossiya and Novorossiya Today websites (no longer available).
	Dnr.live portal (no longer available).
	Website of the 'public movement' Free Donbas (no longer available).
Oplot TV	Russian Proxy TV channel: *https://www.youtube.com/user/oplottv*. Was under full control of former 'head of the DPR' Oleksandr Zakharchenko (managed by his deputy Oleksandr Timofeev, known as 'Tashkent'). Now the former director of Oplot TV Ismail Abdullaiev (who calls himself Vladimir Abdullayev) leads the Tavria TV channel in the occupied part of the Kherson region.
Republican Media Holding Company	'Legal entity' established for control over all media in the occupied part of the Donetsk region: *https://mininfodnr.ru/project_category/respublikanskij-media-holding/*
Golos Respubliki (Voice of the Republic)	Russian proxy newspaper, founded in 2015: *https://vk.com/golos_dnr*
Boevoye Znamya Donbassa (Donbas Battle Standard)	Russian proxy newspaper Some pieces available here: *https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1LsSmzMlVXU-sO_NV1nsLAlpa5Bs4blRTG?usp=drive_link*
Donetskoye Vremya (Donetsk Times)	Russian proxy newspaper: *https://t.me/doneZkoe_Vremya*; *https://dontimes.ru/*
Donetsk Vecherniy (Evening Donetsk)	Russian proxy newspaper: *https://vk.com/donetsk_night*; *https://t.me/donvech*

Name	Description
Mariupol Nash	Telegram channel for Mariupol city: *https://t.me/mariupol_nash_ru*
Mariupol 24	TV channel and Telegram channel for Mariupol city: *https://rutube.ru/channel/27416505/videos/*; *https://t.me/mariupol24tv*
Mariupol Online	Telegram channel for Mariupol city: *https://t.me/mariupol_online24*
Occupied part of the Luhansk region	
Luhansk 24	Russian proxy TV channel covering news of the occupied part of the Luhansk region. Old version: *https://www.youtube.com/@24lugansk*. Current version: *https://rutube.ru/u/gtrklnr/*; *https://t.me/GTRKLNR_Lugansk24*
luhansk1.info	Russian proxy website covering news of the occupied part of the Luhansk region (no longer available)
Novoross.info	Russian proxy website targeting occupied part of Luhansk region (no longer available)
Zhizn Luganska (Life of Luhansk)	Russian proxy newspaper in existence since 1991 (formerly the official newspaper of Luhansk City Council); since the occupation of 2014 has been controlled by Russian administrators: *https://lifelug.ru/*
XXI vek (21st Century)	Russian proxy newspaper in existence since 1996 as a private business. The owner Yuriy Yurov supported the Russian occupation and promoting Russian narratives since 2014: *https://xxiveklnr.su/*
Respublika	Russian proxy newspaper, so-called 'official newspaper of the LPR'

Name	Description
Novy Kanal Novorossii (New Channel of Novorossiya)	Broadcast in Kadiivka (Stakhanov) and was part of the so-called 'Cossack Media Group'. This media group, in addition to the television channel, also included Cossack Radio – besides Kadiivka (Stakhanov) and settlements around it, it was broadcast in Rovenky and Rovenkivsky district, as well as in Luhansk – and the printed weekly *Cossack Vestnik* (Cossack Herald). The media group was controlled by Nikolay Kozitsyn, a participant in the Cossack movement in the southern part of the occupied Luhansk region, a citizen of the Russian Federation: *https://rutube.ru/channel/26273/*; *https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbVQIcFNr89Wuo_0Ay8IyRg*; *https://novorosinform.org/*
Cossack Vestnik (Cossack Herald)	Weekly newspaper of the Cossack Media Group (see above). Russian proxy newspaper now mostly focused on Russian far-right propaganda (for instance, anti-immigrant rhetoric): *https://vk.com/k_vestnik*
Donbasskiy Case (Donbas Case), Donrf, Secrety Luganskoy Respubliki (Secrets of the Luhansk Republic), Lugansk Operativnyi (Luhansk Operational), Luganskyi Insaid (Luhansk Insight)	Group of anonymous blogs, Telegram channels, and websites with pro-Russian orientation writing critically about Russia and the L/DPR groups. Donbasskiy Case now mostly focused on Russian far-right propaganda (for instance, anti-immigrant rhetoric). There is no unique or 'Donbas' content: *https://t.me/donbasscase*. Donrf: *https://t.me/donrf22*; *https://donrf.livejournal.com/*. The Secrets of the Luhansk Republic Telegram channel is mostly focused on negative information about the LPR; updates irregularly. Operates as a tool for 'internal politics': *https://t.me/TLRes*. The Luhansk Operational and Luhansk Insight Telegram channels no longer exist.
Moy Lugansk (My Luhansk), Novosti LPR (News of the LPR), Intsident.Lugansk (Incident Luhansk), Lugansk Segodnya (Luhansk Today)	Group of Telegram channels formed in 2022; did not position themselves as someone's blog or a channel with insights – simply published Russian or 'republican' news. They now serve as a source for centralised reposting of propaganda news or posts of pro-Russian content: *https://t.me/luganskallnews*; *https://vk.com/lugansk_all_news*; *https://t.me/incidentLPR_lugansk*; *https://t.me/luhansktoday*
lnr.media	Russian proxy media information website that reprinted local news and followed the Russian agenda, but remained anonymous: *https://lnr.media/*

Name	Description
Luhansk Information Centre (LIC)	Russian proxy website covering news from the occupied part of the Luhansk region. Supports the local Russian proxy 'government' of the so-called LPR and the 'head of the LPR'. Headed by a Crimean native, Serhiy Meshkoviy: *https://lug-info.com/*; *https://t.me/LIC_LPR*
RTS	Production studio operated in the region even before the occupation. Main goal was to create products for broadcasting on local TV which were paid for by local councils and pro-Russian political parties.
Rodnoy Krasnodon (Native Krasnodon), Rodnoy Antratsit (Native Antratsit), Rodnoy Alchevsk (Native Alchevsk), Rodnoy Sverdlovsk (Native Sverdlovsk), and Rovenki. Rodnoy (Rovenki Native)	Group of coordinated Russian proxy Telegram channels targeting medium-sized cities in the region: *https://vk.com/rodnoykrasnodon*; *https://vk.com/rodnoy_antracit*; *https://vk.com/rodnoy_alchevsk*; *https://vk.com/vostdontv*; *https://vk.com/regionvostok*
Occupied part of the Kherson region	
Tavria television and radio company	Russian proxy media: *https://t.me/tavria_kherson*; *https://tavria.tv/*
Novosty Khersona (Kherson News)	Russian proxy media: *https://t.me/kherson_news_info*
Khersonskoye agentstvo novostey (Kherson News Agency)	Russian proxy media: *https://xonews.ru/*; *https://t.me/xonewsru*
Tochka Otschyota (Starting Point), *Kakhovskaya Zarya* (Kakhovka Day-Spring), *Kalanchaksky Vestnik* (Kalanchak Herald), *Chernomorets* (Black Sea Sailor)	Russian proxy newspapers; no websites available
Glavnoye v Khersone i oblasti (Main News in Kherson and the Region)	Russian proxy Telegram channel: *https://t.me/hercon_ru*
Na samom dele v Khersone (Actually in Kherson)	Russian proxy Telegram channel: *https://t.me/NSDVKhersone*
Khersonskiy Vestnik (Kherson Herald)	Russian proxy Telegram channel: *https://t.me/HersonVestnik*

Name	Description
Tavria. News of the Kherson Region (TRC Tavria)	Russian proxy Telegram channel: *https://t.me/tavria_kherson*
Naddnipryanska Pravda (Naddnipryanska Truth)	Russian proxy newspaper and Telegram channel: *https://t.me/np_kherson*
Pro Kherson (About Kherson)	Russian proxy Telegram channel: *https://t.me/prokherson_ru*
Novosti Khersonshyny (Kherson Region News)	Russian proxy Telegram channel: *https://t.me/kherson_news_info*
Kherson.ru	Russian proxy Telegram channel: *https://t.me/herson_rus*
Svobodnyi Kherson (Free Kherson)	Russian proxy Telegram channel: *https://t.me/countryfreekherson*
Occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region	
Za!TV	Russian proxy TV channel, part of the ZaMedia media holding: *https://rutube.ru/channel/27854441/videos/*; *https://vk.com/za_tv_ru*; *https://za-media.ru/*. In Russian media this channel was called the 'first Russian TV channel in the Zaporizhzhia region'.
Zaporozhskiy Vestnik (Zaporizhzhia Herald)	Russian proxy newspaper owned by the ZaMedia media holding: *https://t.me/zpvestnik*
Novoye Vremya (New Times)	Russian proxy media newspaper in the Polohy district, launched in August 2022. No website available.
Lenta novostey Zaporozhya (Zaporizhzhia Newsfeed), Lenta novostey Melitopolya (Melitopol Newsfeed), Lenta novostey Berdyanska (Berdyansk Newsfeed)	Lenta novostey (Newsfeed) Russian proxy website network operating as news aggregators, gathering a large amount of content from various sources, including information from Russian and local occupation media. Covers in particular Melitopol and Berdyansk cities, occupied by Russia, and Zaporizhzhia city, controlled by Ukraine. *https://news-zp.ru/* *https://melitopolnews.ru/* *https://berdyansk-news.ru/*

Name	Description
Zaporozhskoe agentstvo novostey (Zaporizhzhia News Agency)	Russian proxy media holding headquartered in occupied Donetsk. This website primarily publishes news but also includes articles and interviews. This differentiates it from the Khersonskoe agentstvo novostey (Kherson News Agency), which only posts news about the Kherson region. *https://zonews.ru/*
Yuzhnyy platsdarm (Southern Bridgehead)	Russian proxy Telegram channel covering news from the occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region: *https://t.me/yug_plazdarm*
Energodar segodnya (Enerhodar Today)	Russian proxy Telegram channel covering news from Enerhodar city: *https://t.me/energadartoday*
Tokmak segodnya (Tokmak Today)	Russian proxy Telegram channel covering news from Tokmak city: *https://t.me/tokmak_segodna*
DneproRudnyy segodnya (Dniprorudne Today)	Russian proxy Telegram channel covering news from Dniprorudne city: *https://t.me/dneprorudnoetoday*
Berdyansk Aktualno (Relevant News from Berdyansk)	Russian proxy Telegram channel covering news from Berdyansk city: *https://t.me/o_brd*
Tipichnaya Akimovka (Typical Akimovka)	Russian proxy Telegram channel covering news from Akimovka city: *https://t.me/akimoVka_online*
Targeting all the occupied territories of Ukraine	
Russian World TV	Satellite provider, available for free in the occupied territories of Ukraine (parts of the Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions and in Crimea). Provides access to 20 Russian TV channels ('Federal channels package'), Russian proxy TV channels in occupied territories ('Regional channels package'), and entertainment TV channels: *https://rusmirtv.ru/*
NewsFront	Russian propaganda and disinformation media mostly targeting international audience and occupied parts of Ukraine: *https://id.news-front.su/*; *https://rutube.ru/u/newsfront/*. Website available in Russian, English, Bulgarian, German, Spanish, Serbian, French, Hungarian, Georgian, Slovak, Polish, and other languages. Based in the occupied ARC.
	Spreads disinformation, Kremlin propaganda, and conspiracy theories about the actions of the Ukrainian army and government, the policies of the US, the EU, and other countries, NATO, Russian 'public' movements abroad, and, during the pandemic, the coronavirus infection. NewsFront is under sanctions by the US and EU: *https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A32022D0265*.

Name	Description
	Investigative journalists from Bellingcat identified links between NewsFront and a group of individuals suspected of planning a coup in Montenegro. According to journalist Christo Grozev, this activity aimed to expand Russian influence in the Balkans, enhancing the spread of Russian propaganda and disinformation. Bellingcat report: *https://ru.bellingcat.com/novosti/europe/2017/05/09/montenegro-coup/*
Anna News, Tsargrad, Russian Spring, Politikus, Doni News, Journalistic Truth	Group of websites supporting Russian military operations abroad and coordinating activities with Russian proxy media in the occupied territories of Ukraine, for instance, in occupied Crimea and the occupied part of the Luhansk region. Anna News (*https://anna-news.info/*) – created in 2011 (registered in Russian-occupied Abkhazia) to cover the war in Libya; its correspondents work in Syria and in the occupied territories of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. Publishes news in Russian. Its first editor-in-chief was former Russian 'war correspondent' Marat Musin (died in 2018 in Russia). Tsargrad – Russian TV channel with the slogan 'First Russian', promoting 'Russian ideology' (conservative and right-wing). Belongs to Russian oligarch close to Putin, Konstantin Malofeyev: *https://ug.tsargrad.tv/about*. Russian Spring – website launched in March 2014 to support Russian aggression against Ukraine in Crimea. Luhansk and Donetsk regions: *https://rusvesna.su/*. Politikus – Russian website, primarily created for disseminating disinformation and fake news: *https://politikus.info/*. Doni News – website no longer available *http://dninews.com/* but the RuTube site is still available *https://rutube.ru/channel/953286/*. Journalistic Truth – website (*http://jpgazeta.ru/*), 2013–22, no longer available. Was registered in Russia according to Russian legislation: *https://rutube.ru/channel/583414/videos/*.
Komsomolskaya Pravda, Moskovsky Komsomolets, and Argumenty i fakty	Local branches of Russian media (newspapers and their websites) launched in the occupied regions of Ukraine. For instance, in Crimea: Komsomolskaya Pravda: *https://www.crimea.kp.ru/*; Moskovsky Komsomolets: *https://crimea.mk.ru/*; Argumenty i fakty: *https://krym.aif.ru/*. Komsomolskaya Pravda also has online pages in the occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions: *https://www.herson.kp.ru/*; *https://www.donetsk.kp.ru/*; *https://www.lugansk.kp.ru/*; *https://www.zap.kp.ru/* (additionally there is a printed newspaper in Zaporizhzhia).

Name	Description
	Moskovsky Komsomolets has local websites for Donbas (news on the occupied parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions) and Kherson and Zaporizhzhia: *https://www.mk-herson.ru/*; *https://www.mk-zap.ru/*; *https://www.mk-donbass.ru/*. Their main goal is to present the occupied regions as part of the Russian information environment.
Patriot	Media holding (or 'troll factory') formerly controlled by Evgeniy Prigozhin (then leader of PMC Wagner). Included such outlets as the Federal News Agency (FAN) and Nevsky News, as well as several Telegram channels promoting pro-Russian narratives and glorifying Prigozhin's mercenaries such as News of the LPR and DPR (Rostov, Wagner PMC). Dissolved after Prigozhin's 'coup' in June 2023. Some of the channels were partially removed, while others were renamed, and their activity was significantly reduced: website (*https://riafan.ru/*) no longer available; News of the LPR and DPR (Rostov, Wagner PMC): *https://t.me/zovzvodki01*; *https://rtvi.com/news/prigozhin-raspustil-mediaholding-patriot/*.
Readovka	Telegram Russian propaganda channel: *https://t.me/readovkanews*
	Targeting unoccupied Ukraine
112	Russian proxy TV channel, owned by Taras Kozak and under political control of Viktor Medvedchuk. Banned in February 2021: *https://112ua.tv/* (no longer available).
Ukrainian Choice	NGO led by Viktor Medvedchuk: *http://vybor.ua/* (no longer available)
NewsOne	Russian proxy TV channel, owned by Taras Kozak and under political control of Viktor Medvedchuk. Banned in February 2021: *https://newsone.ua/*
ZIK	Russian proxy TV channel, owned by Taras Kozak and under political control of Viktor Medvedchuk. Banned in February 2021: *http://www.ziktv.com.ua/* (no longer available)
Opposition Platform For Life (OPFL)	Pro-Russian political party, led by Viktor Medvedchuk, de facto owner and political controller of the 112, NewsOne, and ZIK TV channels. Medvedchuk was also head of the NGO Ukrainian Choice. His TV holding was sanctioned in Ukraine in February 2021, and OPFL was suspended in 2022.

Name	Description
Nash	TV channel owned and controlled by Yevhenii Muraiev. Sanctioned in 2022: *https://nash.live/* (no longer available).
First Independent and UkrLive	TV channels created to replace Medvedchuk's banned Russian proxy TV channels in Ukraine in 2021. Banned soon after their creation. Website and YouTube channels no longer available.
Nashi	Political party led by Yevhenii Muraiev, owner of the Nash TV channel. The TV channel was sanctioned in February 2022, and the political party was suspended in March 2022: *https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLJL1R0l3L_jB_rxEOMz-J3A/videos*; *https://www.facebook.com/partiya.nashi/*; *https://nashi.ua/* (website no longer available).
Russia 24 and Rossiya 1	Russian TV channels under government control. Part of the VGTRK group: *https://vgtrk.ru/*
Vyshka	Renamed YouTube channel, formerly the Nash TV channel
Da eto tak ('Yes, that's right')	YouTube channel affiliated with former hosts of Nash TV – Max Nazarov (Nazar Diorditsa) and Yaroslava Maslova
Zvezda TV channel	Russian MOD TV channel
Legitimniy, Resident, MediaKiller, Newsmonger, First, ZeRada, Observer, Rebel, Black Kvartal, Cartel, Woman with a Scythe, Onion, Whisperer, Non-typical Zaporizhzhia, Trempel Kharkiv, Odessa fraer, Dnipro live, Mykolaiv live, Kherson live, Hide	Group of Telegram channels owned by Russian Special Services. Target Ukrainian audience and operate in Russian: @legitimniy, @rezident_ua, @spletnicca, @MediaKiller2021, @first_political, @ZeRada1, @nabludatels, @buntariy, @cherniy_kvartal, @ZE_kartel, @skosoi, @tsibulya_ua, @sheptoon, @kharkov_trempel, @life_odessa, @dnepr_live, @niklive, @kherson_live, @HOVAYSY
Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP)	Formally independent church, but de facto subordinated to Moscow Church authorities, who supported and 'blessed' the Russian war against Ukraine
Anatoliy Shariy and the Party of Shariy	Ukrainian citizen and his pro-Russian political party. Blogger who used his videoblog to promote his party. Now lives in Spain. Under two (known) criminal investigations in Ukraine, including state treason.

Endnotes

1 'EU bans RT, Sputnik over Ukraine disinformation': *https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-bans-rt-sputnik-banned-over-ukraine-disinformation-2022-03-02/*.

2 The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities: *https://www.coe.int/en/web/minorities*.

3 'Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/265 of 23 February 2022 amending Decision 2014/145/CFSP concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine': *https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A32022D0265*.

4 'Montenegro coup suspect linked to Russian-backed "ultranationalist" organisation': *https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/04/25/montenegro-coup-suspect-linked-russian-backed-ultranationalist-organisation/*.

5 'Monument to Catherine II unveiled in Simferopol' [in Russian]: *https://sevastopol.su/news/pamyatnik-ekaterine-ii-otkryli-v-simferopole*.

6 '238 years ago, Crimea first became part of Russia' [in Russian]: *https://crimea24.tv/content/238-let-nazad-krim-vperv-ie-voshyol-v-sostav/?fbclid=IwAR2r_moD-KmXvd3WGd8YI36u2gj7TvkM8stws-WgytVsj9nF0w80vrpGOvm48*.

7 'What does the monument to Prince Gleb and Hegumen Nikon in Kerch symbolise?' [in Russian]: *https://crimea24tv.ru/content/chto-simvoliziruet-pamyatnik-knya-zyu-glebu-i-igumenu-nikonu-v-kerchi/*.

8 'Victor Kharabuga: Ukraine and NATO are not able to solve the "Crimea problem" militarily. All they are left with is provocations' [in Russian]: *https://new.crimiz.ru/rubriki/85-politika/16393-viktor-kharabu-ga-ukraina-i-nato-ne-v-sostoyanii-voen-nym-putjom-reshit-krymskuyu-problemu-vs-jo-chto-im-ostajotsya-provokatsii*.

9 'The Crimean "bubble" is too much for NATO' [in Russian]: *https://new.crimiz.ru/rubriki/85-politi-ka/12295-krymskij-puzyr-ne-po-zubam-nato*.

10 'Open talk with Sergey Aksyonov' (TV channel Millet Channel) [in Russian]: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lW0m0b0Uu1g*.

11 'The newest C-350 systems will be deployed in Crimea' [in Russian]: *https://www.c-inform.info/news/id/98688*.

12 'The first brigade of Buk-M3 complexes in the Russian army is deployed in the Southern Military District' [in Russian]: *https://www.c-inform.info/news/id/100154*.

13 'At risk: The largest NATO exercise in 20 years starts in the Black Sea' [in Russian]: *https://www.c-inform.info/comments/id/469*.

14 'After all, Crimea never surrendered' [in Russian]: *https://c-pravda.ru/news/2024-02-21/ved-krym-nikogda-ne-sdavalsya*.

15 'Everything is called by its proper name' [in Russian]: *https://c-pravda.ru/news/2019-04-25/vsjo-nazvano-svoimi-imenami*.

16 'V. Konstantinov: "In Ukraine the Nazis left traces of cruel crimes. And the Ukrainian court will whitewash them' [in Russian]: *https://new.crimiz.ru/rubriki/90-predsedatel-goss-oveta/14141-v-konstantinov-na-ukraine-nat-sisty-ostavili-sledy-zhestochajshikh-prestu-plenij-i-ukrainskij-zhe-sud-obelyaet-ikh*.

17 'Vladimir Konstantinov: The ideology of Nazism, condemned by the whole world, should not have been revived' [in Russian]: *http://crimea.gov.ru/news/06_05_2022_2*.

18 'Aksyonov commented on the torchlight procession in Ukraine in honour of Bandera's birthday' [in Russian]: *https://crimea-news.*

com/politics/2018/01/02/361828.html.

19   'Putin: Ukrainian authorities took more re-
sources from Crimea than they invested' [in
Russian]: *https://krym.aif.ru/politic/person/
putin_vlasti_ukrainy_zabirali_u_kry-
ma_bolshe_resursov_chem_vkladyvali*.

20   'Roman Chegrinets: "Crimean Platform"
is a Kiev local census of Russophobes'
[in Russian]: *https://trkmillet.ru/
roman-chegrinec-krimskaya-platforma/*.

21   'Aksyonov called the participants of the
"Crimean Platform" accomplices of terrorists':
*https://crimea.ria.ru/20220823/aksenov-naz-
val-uchastnikov-krymskoy-platformy-pos-
obnikami-terroristov-1124255633.html*.

22   'The water blockade was an attempt
to starve Crimea out' [in Russian]:
https://sev.tv/news/87886.html.

23   'Crimean companies in court demand
compensation from Ukraine for damage
due to the water blockade in the amount
of 2.5 trillion roubles' [in Russian]: *https://
www.c-inform.info/news/id/108552*.

24   'Aksyonov: The risks of water loss and
shortage in Crimea are a thing of the
past' [in Russian]: *https://crimea-radio.ru/
aksenov-riski-poteri-i-deficita-vodi-v/*.

25   Ready for Labour and Defence:
https://www.gto.ru/.

26   'Putin signed a decree on the reviv-
al of the GTO complex': *https://crimea.
ria.ru/20151006/1101183373.html*.

27   'Aksyonov called on ministers to pre-
pare to throw grenades': *https://crimea.
ria.ru/20150525/1100128207.html*.

28   'Ministry of Sports of Crimea: The gold-
en GTO badge gives plus 10 points to the
Unified State Examination': *https://crimea.
ria.ru/20160324/1103963293.html*.

29   'It's proposed to make the military preparation

course for beginners mandatory in Crimea':
*https://crimea.ria.ru/20230829/v-krymu-pred-
lagayut-sdelat-shkolnyy-kurs-nvp-ob-
yazatelnym-1130996647.html*.

30   Cossacks are members of a people of Ukraine
and neighbouring territory. Historically they be-
longed to self-governing military and later territo-
rial communities. Their main settlement was Sich
(in particular Zaporiz'ka Sich, on the Dnipro River).
Cossacks were one of the main ruling forces in
Ukraine, best known for their military activity –
guarding and patrolling trade routes, protecting
Ukrainian lands from 'slave hunts', participating in
military campaigns, and so on. The Don Cossacks
(who lived near the Russian Don River) were
controlled by the Russian government. Now fake
'Russian Cossacks' are part of the Russian army.

31   'Vladimir Konstantinov thanked the par-
ticipants in the preparation and holding
of the Crimean referendum' [in Russian]:
https://www.c-inform.info/news/id/1210.

32   'How Kerch was captured: A chronicle
of 2014' [in Russian]: *https://ru.krymr.
com/a/kak-zahvatyvali-kerch-hronika-so-
bytiy-2014-goda/30425234.html*.

33   'The army of the Crimean Cossacks will
initially save 5000 people': *https://crimea.
ria.ru/20150522/1100114400.html?in=t*.

34   'The headquarters of the Black Sea
Cossack Army will be located in Sevastopol'
[in Russian]: *https://sevastopol.su/news/
shtab-chernomorskogo-kazachego-voys-
ka-budet-raspolozhen-v-sevastopole*.

35   'The Cossacks of Crimea and Sevastopol
united into the Black Sea Army': *https://
ria.ru/20200118/1563575005.html*.

36   Yunarmiya [in Russian]: *https://yunarmy.ru/*.

37   '"We work very closely with young people": How
Russian identity is being introduced into Crimea
through the Youth Army' [in Russian]: *https://
ru.krymr.com/a/yunarmiya-vnedryaet-v-kry-
mu-rossiyskiy-patriotizm/30445527.html*.

38 'Vladimir Konstantinov: Ukraine failed as a state' [in Russian]: *https://c-pravda.ru/news/2022-04-01/vladimir-konstantinov-ukraina-ne-sostoyalas-kak-gosudarstvo*.

39 'Hunting Nazi Bastards' [in Russian]: *https://c-pravda.ru/news/2022-04-09/okhota-na-nacistskikh-ublyudkov*.

40 The official statement by Sergey Aksyonov [in Russian]: *https://www.facebook.com/aksenov.rk/posts/pfbid02gNZ6xjhUJSfd-jr2bW6ZvefwUcGnUBcGYFfQbxhGGnibg-6CPkNnEHdbov42pug1osl?locale=ru_RU*.

41 Novorossiya (meaning New Russia) was a term used during the era of the Russian Empire for an area of the present-day internationally recognised Ukraine. It was used between 1764 and 1917 for the region north of the Black Sea (the Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Dnipro regions, Zaporizhzhia after the Zaporozhian Sich was destroyed in 1775, and later parts of other regions). Since 2014 the term has been used as a political narrative for capturing Ukrainian territories and justifying this as 'historically belonging to Russia'.

42 Order of the so-called Council of Ministers of the DPR, no. 4, created the Republican Media Holding Company: *https://pravdnr.ru/npa/rasporyazhenie-soveta-ministrov-doneczkoj-narodnoj-respubliki-ot-10-marta-2017-g-%E2%84%96-4-o-sozdanii-gosudarstvennogo-predpriyatiya-respublikanskij-media-holding/*.

43 'Banderaism' and 'Banderivtsy' are associated with supporters of the Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera.

44 Novorossiya (18 April 2019) [in Russian]: *https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Dfo-mGkJD6FxlhZ7_XzRlfyF5M2rUt1eu/view?usp=drive_link*.

45 Novorossiya (20 February 2020) [in Russian]: *https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-SPohi8z_kG1pRMmyBAYa3r_4v8RybnU/view?usp=drive_link*.

46 Novorossiya (26 November 2020) [in Russian]: *https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZwPWAzZPd94ahBjBu8tOnFgPYoVoyAnb/view?usp=drive_link*.

47 'A Country Where Absurdity Has Triumphed', *Novorossiya*, 20 July 2017.

48 'When a Ukrainian Indian Has Nothing to Do', *Novorossiya*, 26 January 2017 [in Russian]: *https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PtL-BwoiN36EVWTTP-iLmM8qPL-9TQrIY/view?usp=drive_link*.

49 The Pereyaslav Council, or Pereyaslav Rada or Pereyaslav Agreement, was an official meeting between Russian authorities and Ukrainian Cossacks led by Hetman Bohdan Khmelnitskyi. It took place in the Ukrainian town of Pereyaslav in 1654 and resulted in the Cossacks pledging their allegiance to the Russian tsar. This event has been used by Russian propaganda for many years to support the narrative that 'Ukraine historically belongs to Russia'.

50 'When a Ukrainian Indian Has Nothing to Do', *Novorossiya*.

51 'A Country Where Absurdity Has Triumphed', *Novorossiya*.

52 'How the FSB supervises Ukrainian traitors: De-anonymisation of Russian intelligence agents' [in Ukrainian]: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHp_7FFBP4U*.

53 '"LPR" propaganda: Half-carcasses, real estate in Europe, and Plotnitskiy in Antarctica' [in Russian]: *https://realgazeta.com.ua/matveev-pt1/*; '"Academic's" double "information front"' [in Russian]: *https://realgazeta.com.ua/matveev-pt-2/*; 'The terrorist attack in the "LPR" will not be trusted to random people' [in Russian]: *https://realgazeta.com.ua/matveev-pt-3/*; 'Neuronetwork of propaganda' [in Russian]: *https://realgazeta.com.ua/matveev-pt-4-neiroset/*.

54 'Media holding "Luhanmedia" began work in the "LPR"' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/news/mediakholding-luganmedia-nachal-rabotu-v-respublike-minkomsvyazi-63459*.

55   'Tomorrow's news in the "LPR"' [in Russian]: *https://realgazeta.com.ua/temniki-lnr/*.

56   'SSU assault. Commandant Regiment Commander Sergey Grachev: "We knew that we could defend our choice"' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/news/shturm-sbu-komandir-komendantskogo-polka-sergei-grachev-my-uzhe-znali-chto-smozhem-zaschitit-svoi-vybor-12286*.

57   'Statements by the "representative of the LPR" at the Minsk negotiations Vladislav Deinego' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/statements/zayav-lenie-polnomochnogo-predstavitelya-lnr-na-min-skih-peregovorah-vladislava-dejnego-25* and *https://lug-info.com/statements/zayavle-nie-polnomochnogo-predstavitelya-lnr-na-min-skih-peregovorah-vladislava-dejnego-20*; 'The contact group did not agree on strengthening the truce due to Kiev's position – Miroshnik' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/news/kontakt-naya-gruppa-iz-za-pozicii-kieva-ne-dogovo-rilas-ob-ukreplenii-peremiriya-miroshnik*.

58   'The prosecutor's office has identified the Ukrainian Armed Forces fighters involved in war crimes in Donbass' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/news/prokuratura-ustanovi-la-lichnosti-boitsov-vsu-prichastnykh-k-voen-nym-prestupleniyam-v-donbasse-38172*; 'The Armed Forces of Ukraine fired almost 300 rounds of ammunition onto LPR territory in a week – People's Militia' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/news/vsu-za-nedelyu-vypusti-li-po-territorii-lnr-pochti-300-boepripasov-nar-odnaya-militsiya-28266*; 'The Armed Forces of Ukraine shelled Kalinovo, animals were killed, outbuildings were damaged – administration' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/news/vsu-ob-strelyali-kalinovo-pogibli-zhivotnye-povrezhde-ny-khozpostroiki-administratsiya-foto-32811*.

59   'The humanitarian convoy has become a symbol of the unity of the inhabitants of Russia and Donbass – social activist (photo)' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/news/gumkonvoi-stal-sim-volom-edinstva-zhitelei-rossii-i-donbassa-ob-schestvennik-62238*; 'The head of the LPR met with deputies of the State Duma of the Russian Federation Kozenko and Vostretsov who arrived in Luhansk' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/news/glava-lnr-vstretilsya-s-pribyvshimi-v-lugansk-deputatami-gosdumy-rf-kozenko-i-vostretsovym-foto-47917*.

60   'The Alchevsk Iron and Steel Works has begun the restoration of the motor transport workshop' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/news/alchevskii-metallurgicheskii-kombi-nat-nachal-vosstanovlenie-avtotransport-nogo-tsekha-31642*; 'Builders have restored 17 multistorey buildings in Pervomaysk destroyed by shelling of the Ukrainian Armed Forces' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/news/stroiteli-vosstanovili-17-razrushennykh-ob-strelami-vsu-mnogoetazhnykh-domov-per-vomaiska-foto-14588*; 'Chairman of the Trade Union of Motorists and Road Workers Roman Vitkalov: "Now our industry is moving from restoration to development"' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/comments/profsoyuznyi-lid-er-avtomobilistov-i-dorozhnikov-ro-man-vitkalov-seichas-nasha-otrasl-perek-hodit-ot-vosstanovleniya-k-razvitiyu-680*.

61   ZOV Luhansk [in Russian]: *https://lugansk-news.ru/*.

62   'Crimea is Russian forever' [in Russian]: *https://t.me/readovkanews/76364*; 'One of the victims of the shelling of a bakery in Lisichansk died – LPR Health Minister Pashchenko' [in Russian]: *https://t.me/readovkanews/73871*; '"So that we know every day that we live in prosperity" – the capital of the LPR congratulates its fellow countrymen and all of Russia on the upcoming holiday' [in Russian]: *https://t.me/readovkanews/71715*; 'The LPR plans to build apartments for 1000 families in Sverdlovsk and Luhansk' [in Russian]: *https://t.me/readovkanews/71098*; 'United Russia and the "Readovka Helps" fund opened a heating centre for residents of Severodonetsk' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/news/edi-norossy-i-fond-readovka-pomogaet-otkry-li-punkt-obogreva-dlya-zhitelej-severodonecka*.

63   'Losses of the Armed Forces of Ukraine over the past 24 hours' [in Russian]: *https://t.me/GTRKLNR_Lugansk24/62462*; 'In the Svatovsko-Kremenskiy sector, Russian troops have reduced the interposition space' [in Russian]: *https://t.*

me/marochkolive/43473; 'Russian troops continue to push Kiev militants to the west: This was announced by Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu': *https://t.me/LIC_LPR/63646*.

64   'Barrage detachments shoot Ukrainian Armed Forces militants trying to escape or surrender – Marochko' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/news/zagradotryady-rasstrelivayut-boevik-ov-vsu-pytayushihsya-bezhat-ili-sdat-sya-ma-rochko*; 'Ukrainian Armed Forces use old Soviet weapons at the front' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/news/vsu-ispol-zuyut-na-fronte-staroe-sovetskoe-vooruzhenie-marochko*; 'A sharp surge in frostbite is observed among Ukrainian Armed Forces soldiers on the front line' [in Russian]: *https://lug-info.com/news/rezkij-vsplesk-obmorozhenij-nablyudaet-sya-sredi-bojcov-vsu-na-peredovoj-marochki*.

65   'Volodymyr Zelenskyy in his own words': *https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/03/27/volodymyr-zelensky-in-his-own-words*.

66   'The minister of justice of the country 404 Denys Malyus'ka said that separate detachments of convicts will appear in the armed formations of Ukraine' [in Russian]: *https://t.me/marochkolive/43422*.

67   'The "guarantee agreement" between Kiev and the UK is nothing more than a "political protocol without guarantees" personally for Zelenskiy and personally for Sunak' [in Russian]: *https://t.me/miroshnik_r/13922*.

68   'A resident of Kremenna died as a result of a strike by Ukrainian militants' [in Russian]: *https://t.me/luganmedia/55697*.

69   'The Russian Military Historical Society donated 5000 copies of the "Black Book" to the LPR' [in Russian]: *https://t.me/luganmedia/45965*.

70   'Militants in Mariupol kill men in order to escape with hostages under the guise of civilians' [in Russian]: *https://t.me/mariupol_nash/136*.

71   'In school No. 25, which the Ukrainian occupiers turned into a stronghold, the corpse of a woman with signs of torture was found, with a swastika burned on her stomach' [in Russian]: *https://t.me/mariupol_nash/161*.

72   'Sergei Tsaberman, a militant of the 503rd Infantry Division who surrendered, spoke about the atrocities of "Azov" in Mariupol, where the Nazis burned people alive' [in Russian]: *https://t.me/mariupol_nash/179*.

73   'Ottawa Citizen: Canadian rapist-general may be hiding in blockaded Azovstal' [in Russian]: *https://life.ru/p/1489423*; 'Did a Canadian general try to escape from Mariupol?' [in Russian]: *https://bk55.ru/news/article/202043*.

74   Similar stories were aired about the pseudo-elections in the local authorities controlled by the Russian occupiers which took place in September 2023, and the presidential elections in Russia held in March 2024 in the occupied territories of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions.

75   'The "112 Ukraine" TV channel reiterates that it has no relation to former interior minister Zakharchenko' [in Ukrainian]: *https://detector.media/rinok/article/102513/2015-01-14-kanal-112-ukraina-znovu-zayavlyaie-shcho-ne-maie-stosunku-do-eks-minis-tra-vnutrishnikh-sprav-zakharchenka/*.

76   'Treasury sanctions Russian-backed actors responsible for destabilization activities in Ukraine': *https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0562*.

77   'Circumstances and details of the functioning of the criminal scheme of supplying coal from the temporarily occupied territories and assisting the terrorist organisations "LPR" and "DPR" by a group of citizens of Ukraine during 2014–15' [in Ukrainian]: *https://dbr.gov.ua/news/obstavini-ta-detali-funkcionuvan-nya-zlochinnoi-shemi-postachannya-vpro-dovzh-2014-15-rokiv-vugillya-iz-timchaso-vo-okupovanih-teritorij-ta-spriyannya-teroris-tichnim-organizaciyam-lnr-ta-dnr-grupoyu-gro-madyan-ukraini-shema*.

78   'The "American dream" of Viktor Medvedchuk: How a pro-Russian politician-businessman, under sanctions, is mastering the oil products

market in the USA' [in Ukrainian]: *https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/schemes/30813229.html*.

79 'Interview with Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of the National Security Council, for NV: Medvedchuk's fuel in the tanks of the Russian Federation and Ukrainian signals to the USA' [in Ukrainian]: *https://nv.ua/ukr/ukraine/politics/oleksiy-danilov-pro-sankciji-rnbo-zavodi-medvedchuka-i-populizm-novini-ukrajini-50149705.html*.

80 '"112" quotes by Viktor Medvedchuk' [in Ukrainian]: *https://ms.detector.media/profstandarti/post/21454/2018-07-12-112-tsytat-viktora-medvedchuka/*.

81 The National Council fined the NewsOne channel for hate speech [in Ukrainian]: *https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-nacrada-newsone-shtraf-mova-vorozhnechi/29757109.html*

82 'The Russian press is spreading fake news about concentration camps in Ukraine' [in Russian]: *https://ru.krymr.com/a/27098374.html*.

83 'MPs from OPFL convince the mass media that the concentration camps for Russians will be built in Ukraine' [in Ukrainian]: *https://ms.detector.media/manipulyatsii/post/26012/2020-11-19-deputaty-vid-opzzh-perekonuyut-zmi-shcho-v-ukraini-dlya-rosiyan-pobuduyut-kontstabory/*.

84 'In fact' with Anatoliy Peshko, 26 April 2019 [full video, in Russian and Ukrainian]: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckiQO6YCUJE*.

85 CIS: Commonwealth of Independent States, formed in 1991 following the dissolution of the USSR. CIS members were formerly part of the USSR.

86 'In fact' with Viktor Chorny, 3 February 2020 [full video, in Russian and Ukrainian]: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwFm5rnK7WA*.

87 Yuriy Molchanov's Facebook post [in Russian]: *https://www.facebook.com/george.molchanov.9/posts/pfbid02NnkXChGCsEUkj7oVYcu2yzWb76Jd9btP6fCJMSQbsrP71q6AtLzF1YxspB2AdeXzl*.

88 'Law of Ukraine: On sanctions' [in Ukrainian]: *https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1644-18#Text*.

89 'President: We did not close our channels' [in Ukrainian]: *https://www.president.gov.ua/news/prezident-nashi-kanali-mi-ne-zakrivali-mi-zakrili-chuzhi-66473*.

90 'After the ban of "Medvedchuk's channels", the audience of Muraiev's channel "Nash" tripled' [in Ukrainian]: *https://detector.media/rinok/article/184618/2021-02-05-pislya-vidklyuchennya-kanaliv-medvedchuka-utrychi-krashche-staly-dyvytysya-kanal-muraieva-nash/*.

91 'Kremlin plan to install pro-Russian leadership in Ukraine exposed': *https://www.gov.uk/government/news/kremlin-plan-to-install-pro-russian-leadership-in-ukraine-exposed*.

92 'I'm not Vladimir Putin's patsy, says media magnate and "Ukrainian patriot"' *https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/01/22/not-vladimir-putins-patsy-says-media-magnate-ukranian-patriot/*.

93 'The SSU has announced suspicion of the well-known pro-Russian propagandist Shariy' [in Ukrainian]: *https://ssu.gov.ua/novyny/sbu-oholosyla-pro-pidozru-vidomomu-pro-rosiiskomu-propahandystu-shariiu*.

94 'Shariy: Dirty cash, paid experts and secret sponsors (party correspondence)' [video in Ukrainian, with English subtitles]: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0ON6jCbiT4*.

95 'Bihus.Info won a court case against the banned "Shariy's Party", which demanded the refutation of a story about black money', 16 November 2022 [in Ukrainian]: *https://bihus.info/bihus-info-vygraly-sud-u-zaboronenoyi-partiyi-shariya-yaka-vymagala-sprostuvannya-syuzhetu-pro-chornu-kasu-politsyly/*.

96 'Bihus.Info won a court case against the BRSM Nafta gas station network regarding a story about the financing of "Shariy's Party"', 14 September 2022 [in Ukrainian]: *https://bihus.info/bihus-info-vygraly-sud-pro-*

ty-merezhi-zapravok-brsm-nafta-shhodo-syu-zhetu-pro-finansuvannya-patriyi-shariya/.

97 'The SSU reported new suspicion of Shariy, who helped the FSB make staged videos of interrogations of Ukrainian prisoners' [in Ukrainian]: *https://ssu.gov.ua/novyny/sbu-pov-idomyla-pro-novu-pidozru-shariiu-yakyi-do-pomahav-fsb-robyty-postanovochni-vid-eo-z-dopytiv-ukrainskykh-polonenykh-video*.

98 'The SSU exposed an agent network of the special services of the Russian Federation, which destabilised the situation in Ukraine through Telegram channels' [in Ukrainian]: *https://ssu.gov.ua/novyny/sbu-vykryla-ahentur-nu-merezhu-spetssluzhb-rf-yaka-destabilizuva-la-sytuatsiiu-v-ukraini-cherez-telegramkanaly*.

99 'EU imposes sanctions on Voice of Europe, businessmen over Russian "disinformation"' [in English]: *https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-sanctions-voice-europe-related-busi-nessmen-czech-ministry-says-2024-05-27/*.

100 'Revealed: Russian legal foundation linked to Kremlin activities in Europe': h*ttps://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/02/revealed-russian-legal-de-fence-foundation-pravfond-europe*.

101 Iryna Gavrilova and Mykhailo Spyr on 112 live broadcast, 25 May 2020 [full video, in Ukrainian and Russian]: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3cXdizhb6iI*.

102 'Shmyhal and "his" team: How Zelenskyy's second government works' [in Ukrainian]: *https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2020/05/25/7252984/*.

Prepared and published by the
NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE