

# *From Russia with love*

Telegram as a Tool of Russian  
Propaganda in Serbia and Beyond

# Table of Contents

<b>I Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
1.1 Context and Purpose of the Study.....	3
1.2 Methodology.....	4
1.2.1 Step 1.....	4
1.2.2 Step 2.....	4
1.2.3 Step 3.....	7
1.2.4 Step 4.....	7
1.2.5 Step 5.....	9
1.3 Roadmap of the Study.....	12
<b>II From a Beacon of Freedom to a Kremlin Mouthpiece: The Evolution of Telegram</b> .....	<b>13</b>
2.1 Telegram's Emergence Amid Political Perils: A Tale of Digital Resilience.....	14
2.2 Blocking Telegram: A Failed Attempt at Censorship.....	17
2.3 If You Cannot Defeat - Lead: The Kremlin's Dominance on Telegram.....	20
2.4 Telegram's Rise as Russia's Digital Battleground.....	21
<b>III From Origins to Impact: Mapping Russia's Influence in Serbia and the Western Balkans</b> .....	<b>24</b>
3.1 The fragile soap bubble of Russia's sway in the Balkans.....	25
3.2 Russian Soft Power in Serbia and Beyond.....	30
3.3 Under the Kremlin's Shadow: Russia's Political Reach in Serbia.....	32
<b>IV Unveiling Russia's Narrative Web: Propaganda Crafting and Telegram's Influence in Serbia</b> .....	<b>39</b>
4.1 Crafting Russian Propaganda in Serbia and Beyond.....	39
4.2 The Telegram's Journey in Serbia.....	42
4.3 Russian Telegram Broadcasting Network in Serbia and Western Balkans.....	45
<b>V Russian Propaganda Tactics in Serbia: A Case Study of the War in Ukraine</b> .....	<b>52</b>
5.1 Contours of Serbian Public Discourse: The Ukrainian Conflict.....	52
5.2 The Ukrainian Conflict Under the Spotlight of Serbian Telegram Channels.....	55
5.2.1 Serbian Military Correspondents: Reporting on the Ukrainian Conflict.....	55
5.2.1.1 Dejan Berić: The Voice of Russian Propaganda in Serbia.....	56
5.2.1.2 HaZarder NoVosrbija: Witness of the Russian Spring.....	64

4.2.2 Igor Damjanović: War in Real Time.....	66
4.2.3 'Serbs for Russians': A Right-Wing Perspective on the war.....	68
4.3 Findings: Russian Propaganda Tactics in Serbia .....	72
<b>VI Russian Propaganda Tactics in Serbia: A Case Study of the Election Campaigns.....</b>	<b>74</b>
5.1 Serbian Elections Reflected in the 'Sputnik Serbia's' Mirror .....	74
5.1.1 April 2022 elections.....	74
5.1.2 December 2023 elections .....	80
5.2 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' in Election Campaigns .....	85
5.2.1 April 2022 elections.....	86
5.2.2 December 2023 elections .....	91
5.3 Serbian Elections in the Rhetoric of 'People's Patrol' Telegram Channel .....	93
5.3.1 April 2022 elections.....	93
5.3.2 December 2023 elections .....	95
5.4 Findings .....	96
<b>Appendix A.....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Appendix B.....</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>107</b>

# I Introduction

## 1.1 Context and Purpose of the Study

In the last decade, the exploration of Russian interests in the Western Balkans (WB), particularly in Serbia, has surged in scholarly circles, rivalling the longstanding issue of Kosovo's status. **The eruption of war in Ukraine has thrust the question of Russian influence in Serbia into sharper focus, presenting Serbia with an existential dilemma in its foreign policy trajectory.** Amidst a geopolitical landscape evoking echoes of a new Cold War, the urgency of Serbia's decision-making has intensified. On one hand, as a candidate for European Union (EU) membership, Serbia faces pressure to align with EU political interests. On the other hand, historical ties and ongoing cooperation with Russia present a complex dynamic that challenges the stated commitment to European integration. As a result, despite Western discontent, Serbia has steadfastly pursued its multi-vector foreign policy for the past two years. This approach involves maintaining active partnerships not only with the EU and the United States (US) but also with China and Russia. Notably, **Serbia stands out as the sole European nation to have avoided the imposition of sanctions against Russia, sustaining robust business and political ties with Moscow amidst international tensions.**

The deep-rooted influence of Russia in Serbia, coupled with pro-Russian sentiments among the population, often serves as the backdrop for understanding this phenomenon. However, while such assertions hold sway, recent studies and analyses shed light on a contrasting reality: **Russia's actual presence in Serbia is less substantial than commonly perceived.** It becomes especially apparent considering the scale of economic and financial partnerships between Serbia and the EU. Indeed, Russia's primary leverage lies within its soft power arsenal, intricately woven into the broader context of its hybrid war strategy in the WB. Extensive research has been dedicated to unravelling the mechanisms of Russian propaganda in Serbia, dissecting the role of pro-Kremlin media in shaping anti-European sentiments and grappling with the issue of information warfare orchestrated by Russian entities in the region. However, numerous studies fall short of going beyond identifying Russian actors in Serbia and uncovering the grounds guiding their actions.

**This study delves deeper into the intricate web of Russian propaganda in Serbia, aiming to connect its core narratives and images within the country's political landscape. This study aims to explore Serbia's role in the geopolitical framework of Russian foreign policy. Specifically, it seeks to answer two key research questions: First, does Kremlin propaganda follow a clearly articulated strategic plan in its operations? Second, to what extent does this propaganda permeate Serbian political and social spheres?** These inquiries are not merely academic exercises; they hold significant implications for Serbia's future trajectory. The country's notable democratic backsliding hinders its progress towards EU accession, casting a shadow of uncertainty over its prospects. The rising autocratic tendencies within Serbia are often linked to the alliances formed by the ruling elite with authoritarian regimes such as Russia, China, and Turkey. **Therefore, this study aims to gauge the extent of Russian interference and assess Russia's role as a potential impediment to Serbia's European integration.** By shedding light on these complexities, it endeavours to provide insights that could inform decisions crucial for Serbia's future development.

**An intriguing facet setting this study apart is its examination of the proliferation of Kremlin propaganda on the relatively new digital platform, Telegram, which has attempted to make substantial inroads into the region.** Telegram, renowned for its robust data security measures and refusal to collaborate with autocratic regimes like Russia, Belarus, or Iran, has garnered global acclaim. However, despite its initial reputation, the Kremlin has adapted to the platform's dynamics, establishing a formidable information presence on social media. This trend became particularly pronounced during the onset of the conflict in Ukraine, as numerous Telegram channels fervently disseminated pro-Russian propaganda both domestically and internationally. This surge extended its reach into Serbia and the broader WB, leveraging the platform's anonymity and minimal censorship to orchestrate information



offensives and sway public opinion. **As of October 2023, this study revealed a staggering 143 pro-Russian Telegram channels operating in Serbia alone, underscoring the pressing nature of Russia's incursion into the Balkans' information sphere and the imperative for deeper contemplation on this issue.**

## 1.2 Methodology

Kremlin propaganda in Serbia paints a broad and varied picture, involving a myriad of actors ranging from marginal groups like far-right organisations to government entities such as the Russian Center for Science and Culture, also known as 'Russian House,' which operates as one of the representative offices of the Russian Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation. Employing a blend of research methodologies, this study aims to unveil the dynamics and nuances of Russian influence in Serbia.

### 1.2.1 Step 1

**The research commences with a rigorous desk analysis of the evolutionary trajectory of the Telegram messenger and its complicated relationship with Russian authorities. By spotlighting the platform's pivotal role as one of the primary conduits for Kremlin propaganda dissemination, this examination provides valuable insights into the potential extent of Russian propaganda's influence in Serbia.** The comprehensive findings derived from this inquiry are expounded upon in Chapter 2, enhancing our understanding of the nuanced interplay between digital platforms and geopolitical strategies in contemporary information warfare dynamics. **Furthermore, the study delves into an in-depth examination of Russia's multifaceted presence in Serbia while elucidating its intricate web of regional interests.** Drawing upon a diverse array of scholarly literature, including academic publications addressing pertinent issues and challenges, alongside an exhaustive review of media publications and regulatory documents, this initial exploration forms the foundation of the study's research framework. The analysis results, elaborated in Chapter 2, provide a nuanced understanding of Russia's impact on Serbia's political and socio-economic landscape.

### 1.2.2 Step 2

Unveiling a web of pro-Russian Telegram channels within Serbia presented a challenging task. Information regarding their activities was gathered using TGStat.ru,<sup>1</sup> a prevalent online service that specialises in delivering statistics and analytics for Telegram. This platform provides an array of functionalities and opportunities tailored for administrators of Telegram channels and groups. Primarily utilised in social media marketing (SMM), it evaluates the popularity of channels and chats, particularly regarding commercial activities such as advertising on social media platforms. However, the analytics service lacks constraints on data utilisation, rendering it appropriate not just for SMM professionals since **TGStat.ru's multifaceted capabilities empower researchers to scrutinise various facets of Telegram channels and groups, which align perfectly with this study's objectives.** For instance, TGStat.ru furnishes comprehensive insights into user engagement and the expansion of audiences within Telegram channels. It enables scholars to monitor metrics like posts' views and new followers across timeframes. Furthermore, the service facilitates an in-depth analysis of post effectiveness, encompassing reactions, likes, and comments. Additionally, TGStat.ru offers advanced analytics, such as geographical distribution among channel subscribers, a detailed breakdown of engagement across devices and platforms, and even the channel or chat initiation date — vital nuances for this inquiry.

---

<sup>1</sup> TGStat, *Telegram channels and groups catalog*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.ru/en>

**The initiation point for this study was the 'Sputnik Serbia' Telegram channel.**<sup>2</sup> Sputnik stands as a pivotal force in Russian propaganda within the WB, openly tied to the Kremlin and operational in the region since 2015. It has garnered a degree of recognition and popularity among the populace, often cited extensively by local media outlets.<sup>3</sup> Notably, Sputnik Serbia actively prompted readers to join its Telegram channel, featuring a link to the publication's official channel on its main webpage. In the wake of 2022, when EU sanctions targeted pro-Kremlin news agencies Sputnik and RT, their content faced removal or specialised labelling on mainstream media platforms. Consequently, these agencies strategically expanded their presence on alternative social networks. Beyond its Telegram channel, 'Sputnik Serbia' established its channel on the video hosting service Odysee, a competitor to YouTube, and also formed a public group on Viber. **Nevertheless, the Telegram channel remains a vital social media platform for 'Sputnik Serbia',<sup>4</sup> serving as a primary means to engage with followers and swiftly disseminate information.** Subsequent channel selections adhered to the 'snowball' approach, initially developed by James S. Coleman and Leo A. Goodman, for studying social network structures.<sup>5</sup> **The 'snowball' technique entails a non-probability sampling method that recruits new units into the sample through existing units, forming a progressive expansion of the sample pool. Originally designed to study hard-to-reach populations, this method proved ideal for navigating the elusive landscape of Telegram channels and collecting pertinent sources.**

In its nascent stage in 2013, Telegram emerged as an advertisement-free and non-monetised content platform. Its initial growth was propelled by a modest user base fostering author-driven channels fueled by creators' aspirations to share perspectives and beliefs with their audience. **However, mirroring the trajectories of major social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, Telegram's burgeoning global popularity subjected the platform to analogous principles of SMM.** Consequently, advertising assumed a pivotal role within this sphere. Promoting other Telegram channels or re-sharing content from other sources often transcended a mere desire by channel owners to share compelling content. Instead, it increasingly involved paid advertising, the costs of which escalated in tandem with Telegram's rising prominence. For instance, within the Russian realm of Telegram, renowned for its robust and active user base, the average expense for a single advertising integration on a popular channel had escalated to 500 euros by 2023.<sup>6</sup> Thus, reciprocal reposts and mentions ceased being a haphazard assortment of data, evolving into a methodical strategy for channel development and subscriber attraction. Thus, it became apparent that a news channel, for instance, would not casually repost content from a similar channel without justifiable cause, inadvertently advertising and fostering the other channel's audience growth. Therefore, except for paid advertising, such instances transpired primarily when the channels were 'related,' implying they were overseen by a unified consortium of authors pursuing a common objective. Thus, **reciprocal reposts function as a dependable strategy for discerning channel networks within Telegram. As a result, leveraging the TGStat application, data was collected on incoming and outgoing mentions of the 'Sputnik Serbia' Telegram channel.** Incoming mentions denote instances where 'Sputnik Serbia' posts were shared by other channels, acknowledging the original source. Contrariwise, outgoing reposts denote instances where the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel re-shared information from other Telegram channels within its feed. Employing this methodology facilitated delineating extant channel networks and the identification of pivotal information originators, distributors, and the intensity of their interactions. **The data were collated between September 25 and October 4, 2023, encompassing details about each channel's subscriber count, registration date, geographic origin, language, total post count, reader engagement, and content interaction obtained through TGStat.ru.**

<sup>2</sup> Telegram, *Спутњик Србија* | *Sputnik Srbija*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbiija>

<sup>3</sup> Tihomira Doncheva, "Tracking Russia's Narratives in the Western Balkan Media," NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020, p.6, available at: <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/tracking-russias-narratives-in-the-western-balkan-media/53>

<sup>4</sup> Telegram, *Спутњик Србија* | *Sputnik Srbija*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbiija>

<sup>5</sup> Douglas D. Heckathorn "Snowball versus respondent-driven sampling", *Sociological methodology*, no. 41(1), 2021, p.355, available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3250988/>

<sup>6</sup> Ведомости, *Стоимость рекламы в новостных Telegram-каналах в 2022 году выросла в 4,4 раза*, 2023, available at: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/media/articles/2023/05/30/977556-stoimost-reklami-v-novostnih-telegram-kanalah-virosila/>

**The TGStat service offers valuable insights into incoming and outgoing mentions, yet these data might not capture the entirety of the swiftly evolving Telegram communication landscape.** Nevertheless, it serves as a dependable indicator, establishing the minimal parameters of channel relations that align with the study's objectives. However, the actual intensity of channel interaction probably surpasses the indications provided by TGStat. Determining the precise count of reciprocal reposts among channels entails qualitative scrutiny of all publications across the sampled channels. Nonetheless, undertaking this task appears excessive due to the substantial workload involved; for instance, only the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel's publication frequency is over 500 weekly posts. Moreover, **an escalation in interaction intensity between channels would validate, rather than contradict, the conclusions drawn from the TGStat data.**

**Acknowledging that not all channels referenced within the TGStat statistics on reposts were incorporated into the analysis is pertinent. Notably, channels affiliated with right-wing radical groups** — such as 'Zentropa Serbia',<sup>7</sup> 'Serbian Action',<sup>8</sup> and 'Anti-Globalists Of Serbia',<sup>9</sup> among others — **were deliberately omitted.** Despite their occasional reposts of established pro-Russian channels' content, discerning the extent of Russian influence on their publications remains unattainable since pro-Russian narratives are inherent within the extreme right in Serbia. Thus, it is plausible that these channels' outputs do not align with contemporary Russian propaganda initiatives in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, sporadic references to Russia and its politics within these channels lack the coherence required to construct a unified information influence strategy. Given their predominant focus on right-wing ideology, Serbian politics, and history, these sources were deemed unsuitable for inclusion in the analysis. **Simultaneously, non-political Serbian channels referenced within the outgoing reposts, which posts were disseminated by pro-Russian channels, were also excluded from the sample.** For instance, the humanitarian and charitable organization channel 'Serbs for Serbs'<sup>10</sup> was recurrently cited by pro-Russian channels. Nevertheless, the content disseminated by 'Serbs for Serbs' does not endorse any particular political ideology or propaganda. **Channels that had ceased operations were also bypassed from the analysis.** Although references to these channels persisted within the TGStat database, their links were defunct, signalling the absence of these users. It is possible that some of these channels might have transitioned to private operational modes. However, considering their representation within the dataset amounts to less than 2%, it was deemed acceptable to disregard them. Their exclusion does not undermine the analysis of public channels, as the data obtained from these omitted channels neither contradict nor significantly influence the study's findings. Additionally, the challenges associated with accessing the posts from these channels mitigate their potential impact on the Serbian audience.

**Special consideration was allocated to the selection process concerning Russian channels dedicated to Serbia. The active migration of Russian citizens into Serbia has led to a substantial proliferation of such groups. However, it is crucial to underscore that only some of these channels maintain ties with the Kremlin or disseminate Russian propaganda.** The majority serve as informational hubs tailored for recently arrived migrants, offering guidance on Serbian legalisation processes, adaptation assistance, entertainment, and related content. Furthermore, within Serbia, certain Russian-language political channels represent assemblies of anti-war civil activists compelled to depart from Russia. Thus, navigating channels in Russian demanded heightened scrutiny; nevertheless, they were incorporated into the study due to the convenient translation of posts within the application, facilitating accessibility for Serbian subscribers. However, these channels underwent stringent selection criteria. For instance, despite the frequent reposts of content from Sputnik Serbia and RT Balkans by channels such as 'Serbia News'<sup>11</sup> and 'Croatia News',<sup>12</sup> they were excluded from the final analysis. Their reposts predominantly centred on disseminating official information from Russian authorities, such as

<sup>7</sup> Telegram, *Зентропа Србија*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/zentropasrb>

<sup>8</sup> Telegram, *Србска Акција*, 2024, available at: [https://t.me/srbska\\_akcija](https://t.me/srbska_akcija)

<sup>9</sup> Telegram, *Антиглобалисти Србије*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/antiglobalistisrbijeAGS>

<sup>10</sup> Telegram, *Срби за Србе*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/srbizasrbe>

<sup>11</sup> Telegram, *Србија - Новости*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/serbnews>

<sup>12</sup> Telegram, *Хорватия-Новости*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/NewsCroatia>

announcements regarding the commencement of mobilisation in Russia or the conduct of local elections. Therefore, these informational messages lacked discernible indications of Russian propaganda. Moreover, several channels, such as the Telegram channel 'Anti-war Serbia/The Russian Democratic Society,'<sup>13</sup> received multiple mentions within pro-Russian Telegram channels. However, these references were framed within the context of orchestrating information attacks aimed at "chastising traitors to the Motherland."<sup>14</sup> Consequently, despite their mentions, these channels actively counter pro-Russian propaganda and were not qualified for inclusion in this study.

As a result, **the analysis encompassed 143 Telegram channels disseminating pro-Russian propaganda, engaging an audience exceeding 800 thousand subscribers. Among them, 109 operate in Serbian or other languages popular in the WB.** However, this catalogue of channels cannot be deemed exhaustive. A potential oversight exists in utilising the snowball method, which might overlook channels actively promulgating Kremlin narratives without resorting to reposting strategies. Additionally, the inclusion of private channels into the analysis is unfeasible as their detection relies solely on acquiring individual invitation links. Nonetheless, **the final sampling database furnishes an adequate source for scrutinising the trajectory of Russian propaganda in Serbia and serves as a foundational dataset for the analysis presented in Chapter 4.**

### 1.2.3 Step 3

**In the absence of concrete statistical data concerning the extent of engagement among the Serbian populace in Telegram and their behavioural patterns in using the application, a comprehensive survey was carried out as an integral part of this research endeavour.** The survey was executed face-to-face, with questionnaires distributed within a specific demographic cohort, primarily comprising young urban residents who constituted the main user base of Telegram. The respondents mainly consisted of students from Belgrade University and the Union University School of Law, the majority aged between 18 and 24. The survey featured a questionnaire that provided general information on the subject under research, deliberately avoiding the inclusion of sensitive terminology and keywords like 'disinformation' or 'Russian propaganda.' This precaution was taken to mitigate the potential for emotional reactions among the respondents, which their political affiliations could influence, and to enhance the reliability of the data gathered. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary and anonymised; participants were notified of the purpose of the study before it began. A sample questionnaire is available in Appendix A for reference. **The survey engaged 250 participants** and was conducted incrementally, involving groups of 20-30 students, enabling a preliminary data analysis. Notably, the initial data trends observed after the first hundred respondents were consistent throughout subsequent surveys, with only marginal variations in the final results, typically within the 1-3% range, i.e., achieving theoretical saturation.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the survey was concluded, and the results acquired are deemed satisfactory regarding their validity, coverage, and accuracy.<sup>16</sup> **The data resulting from the conducted surveys are presented in Chapter 4.**

### 1.2.4 Step 4

**A case study method was applied to uncover Russian propaganda's complex dynamics in Serbia.** John Gerring defines a case study as "an intensive study of a single unit to understand a larger class of (similar) units."<sup>17</sup> This method has the unique advantage of allowing in-depth investigation of individual cases, which findings can then be extrapolated to a broader range of related phenomena. It is

<sup>13</sup> Telegram, *Антивоенная Сербия/Российское демократическое общество*, 2024, available at: [https://t.me/RDO\\_Serbia](https://t.me/RDO_Serbia)

<sup>14</sup> Telegram, *The post from the 'Злые ОрлоVu' telegram channel*, dated September 29, 2022, posted at 11:58 AM, available at: [https://t.me/orly\\_rs](https://t.me/orly_rs)

<sup>15</sup> Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson, "How Many Interviews Are Enough?: An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability", *Field Methods*, no. 18(1), 2006, p.64, available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249629660\\_How\\_Many\\_Interviews\\_Are\\_Enough](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249629660_How_Many_Interviews_Are_Enough)

<sup>16</sup> Yoshiko M. Herrera and Devesh Kapur, "Improving Data Quality: Actors, Incentives, and Capabilities", *Political Analysis* 15, no. 4, 2007, p.366, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25791902>

<sup>17</sup> John Gerring, "What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good For?", *American Political Science Review* 98, no.2, 2004, p.342, available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/abs/what-is-a-case-study-and-what-is-it-good-for/C5B2D9930B94600EC0DAC93EB2361863>



particularly pertinent in social media research, where the sheer volume of posts on Telegram channels constrains the scope of analysis data. **In the fifth chapter, a case analysis was chosen to explore how pro-Russian Telegram channels represented the war in Ukraine for the Serbian audience.** This case selection holds significance within the context of the study's objectives. Shaping the narrative of a righteous war in Ukraine and countering Western pro-Ukrainian discourse has emerged as a primary goal of Kremlin propaganda, both domestically and internationally. However, Russia tailors its propaganda narratives to suit the target country, aiming to tarnish Ukraine's image and reshape perceptions of the war. Examining which strategies and narratives Russia employed in Serbia is intriguing, as well as how the war narrative was adapted to fit the Serbian context.

Thus, the primary source of this study comprises posts within pro-Russian Telegram channels previously identified in this paper. **Four of 109 Serbian pro-Russian channels were chosen based on their substantial popularity metrics, including subscriber count, audience engagement, and active readership, i.e., channels were selected for their potential maximal outreach and anticipated significant informational impact.** Notably, channels such as 'Sputnik Serbia,' 'VOSTOK NEWS,' 'RT Balkan,' and 'IN4S - an information portal' were intentionally excluded from this research. Despite their considerable audience, these channels primarily function as distribution platforms for materials published on official media web pages. Therefore, examining them would not unveil the intricate facets of Russian propaganda within social networks, particularly Telegram. **The channel selection for analysis was diverse, encompassing those directly addressing events in Ukraine and others focusing on broader political subjects, particularly Serbian politics.** Additionally, the study encompassed channels established both before and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. **As a result, the following channels were selected for examination:**

1. 'Dejan Beric,' established on November 6, 2020, boasts the highest number of subscribers within the research sample.
2. 'HaZarder NoVosrbija,' the second most referenced channel in Serbian, witnesses its posts reposted by 14 channels within the research sample.
3. 'WAR LIVE' the biggest channel opened after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, that is solely dedicated to covering the Ukraine war events, launched on October 15, 2022.
4. 'Serbs for Russians,' the first channel opened after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, that boldly represents the pro-Russian stance within the sample, initiated on February 26, 2022.

Examining channels across various categories uncovers diverse perspectives on the war in Ukraine, reaching audiences ranging from those deeply engrossed in daily war updates to individuals avoiding any information about the conflict. However, managing the copious amount of channel information posed a significant challenge during the research process. For instance, the 'Dejan Beric' channel typically releases an average of 50 to 120 posts daily, with peaks occasionally reaching as high as 140 publications. Consequently, **judgmental (purposeful) sampling was employed to sift through the gathered posts for subsequent analytical purposes systematically.** Purposeful sampling is a method of non-probability sampling frequently utilised in discourse analysis within the political science research domain. In this approach, the researcher exercises discernment in selecting cases, drawing upon their expertise to prioritise those most pertinent to the study based on predefined criteria, such as the nature of discourse, speaker attributes, or the contextual underpinnings of communication. This method facilitates a focused exploration of the most informative cases, proving particularly advantageous when seeking a comprehensive understanding or when faced with limitations in the available sample size.<sup>18</sup> **While acknowledging the potential for researcher bias, the posts were chosen in accordance with significant events noted in recent studies on the development of the war in Ukraine.**<sup>19</sup> This method holds relevance in studying propaganda dynamics, where pivotal events

<sup>18</sup> Ilker Etikan, Sulaiman Abubakar Musa, Rukayya Sunusi Alkassim, "Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling", *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics* 5(1), 2016, p.2, available at:

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304339244\\_Comparison\\_of\\_Convenience\\_Sampling\\_and\\_Purposive\\_Sampling](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304339244_Comparison_of_Convenience_Sampling_and_Purposive_Sampling)

<sup>19</sup> Center for Preventive Action, "War in Ukraine", 2024, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>; Nigel Walker, "Conflict in Ukraine: A timeline (current conflict, 2022-present)", 2023, available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9847/>

- frontline setbacks, peace negotiation initiations, or city captures — trigger increased activity among propaganda entities. These events act as focal points, delineating new war narratives. **A span of 79 war days, from February 24, 2022, to November 2023, was selected for analysis.** Posts published on these days across each channel were collected. The analysis focused exclusively on the author's textual posts, omitting video posts, voice messages, pictures, or unaccompanied text while excluding reposts. The post's content was translated into English using the Telegram application's automatic translator. **In total, the following posts selections were made for the study:**

1. 'Dejan Beric' — 2815 posts;
2. 'HaZarder NoVosrbija' — 128 posts;
3. 'WAR LIVE' — 138 posts;
4. 'Serbs for Russians' — 516 posts;

The posts' content underwent analysis through discourse analysis, an interdisciplinary methodology delving into language and communication processes deeply embedded within socio-cultural contexts. This method intricately interlinks signs and their signifiers, contextualising their formation and thereby shaping the semiotic structure of discourse. **Within the array of discourse analysis approaches, this study adopts the framework advanced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.** Synthesising diverse theories — primarily Marxism, structuralism, and Michel Foucault's notions of knowledge and power — authors crafted a comprehensive post-structuralist perspective, examining the genesis, dominance, and evolution of ideas, symbols, and broader political representations in society. Laclau and Mouffe posit that fixing the meaning of a sign remains contingent and transitory, necessitating an analysis rooted in the overarching value system. **Consequently, discourse operates as a system within which social interactions acquire specific meanings: discourses serve as initial connectors, merging heterogeneous elements into relatively stable unities, thereby constructing systems of values and representations where elements assume contextual meanings.**<sup>20</sup> Such an approach proves particularly germane when scrutinising the dynamic nature of propaganda amidst the ever-evolving conditions of warfare. The findings from the analysis are detailed and discussed in Chapter 5.

### 1.2.5 Step 5

**Based on the widespread assertion of substantial Russian interference in Serbia's political dynamics, a case study was conducted to examine how pro-Russian Telegram channels in Serbia covered the electoral processes of 2022 and 2023.** Thus, the primary source of this study comprises posts within pro-Russian Telegram channels previously identified in this paper. **Three out of 109 pro-Russian channels were chosen based on their substantial popularity metrics, including subscriber count, audience engagement, and active readership, i.e., channels were selected for their potential outreach and anticipated informational impact.** Notably, a considerable discrepancy exists in follower count and publication frequency among these channels, leading to the inclusion of channels from both mainstream and marginal categories to ensure a comprehensive evaluation. Furthermore, while official media channels such as 'Sputnik Serbia,' 'VOSTOK NEWS,' 'RT Balkan,' and 'IN4S - an information portal' were excluded in the previous study on the portrayal of the war in Ukraine in Serbia, they were incorporated into this examination. This decision was made since Russian propaganda in the Balkans operates through both direct channels, such as news agencies and 'proxies,' predominantly extreme right-wing groups.<sup>21</sup> Including both types of sources enriches the analysis and offers a holistic understanding of Russian influence. Also, in line with literature suggesting the enduring impact of Russian influence in Serbian politics, the analysis encompasses channels established before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and still operational today. This long-term perspective increases

<sup>20</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics," 2001, p.105, available at: <https://files.libcom.org/files/ernesto-laclau-hegemony-and-socialist-strategy-towards-a-radical-democratic-politics.compressed.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Paul Stronski, "Russia in the Balkans After Ukraine: A Troubling Actor", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2022, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87959>

the likelihood of identifying established patterns and narrative frames within the pro-Russian discourse on Serbian politics. As a result, the following channels were selected for examination:

1. 'Sputnik Serbia' is an official Telegram channel of the Sputnik Srbija media. Established on February 4, 2021, it ranks as the third most popular channel within the study's sample and holds the top position as the most popular Telegram media channel, boasting 57,176 subscribers. This channel serves as the primary conduit for disseminating Russian propaganda in Serbia and the broader Western Balkans region, with its posts being reposted by 30 channels in the study sample. In total, the channel's posts were reposted by 372 channels 2,776 times.<sup>22</sup>
2. 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' — initiated on August 17, 2020, emerges as the second most popular channel across the entire study sample and claims the highest subscriber count among non-military political channels within the study, amassing 82,535 subscribers. Originally founded to cover election events in Montenegro, it later gained popularity and expanded its coverage to a wide range of political events throughout the Western Balkans. This channel actively propagates pro-Russian narratives, with its posts being reposted by 36 channels in the study sample. In total, the channel's posts were reposted by 834 channels 5,208 times.<sup>23</sup> Thus, this channel has the highest citation index in the research sample.
3. 'People's Patrol' is an official Telegram channel of a far-right anti-immigrant organisation, established on September 24, 2021. People's Patrol gained widespread recognition in both Serbia and beyond for orchestrating attacks on migrants in Serbia and championing pro-Russian activities in 2022. Despite accruing over 8,271 subscribers over its lifespan, this channel does not enjoy the same level of popularity as 'Sputnik Serbia' or 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit.' Its posts were only reposted by eight channels in the study sample, with a total of 132 channels reposting its content 673 times.<sup>24</sup>

This channel's selection provides a unique opportunity to analyse the multifaceted dynamics of Russian propaganda. **Examining the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel serves as the primary focal point for analysis, reflecting the 'gold standard' of Russian propaganda in Serbia. Meanwhile, the investigation into the narratives presented on the 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' and 'People's Patrol' channels exemplify the dissemination of pro-Russian narratives in marginal groups.** Furthermore, despite both channels boasting considerable popularity, their respective audiences vary significantly, offering valuable insights into the nuances of operating within large-scale channels and niche groups. **Additionally, while 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' and 'People's Patrol' align with right-wing ideologies prevalent in the Balkans, their idealistic underpinnings differ.** The 'People's Patrol' channel represents an anti-immigrant organisation, positioning itself within the far-right spectrum, whereas 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' leans towards a conservative right-wing stance.

Given the extensive volume of posts across the channels, a judgmental (purposeful) sampling was employed to sift through the gathered posts for subsequent analytical purposes systematically. **The analysis focused on two significant events in Serbian politics spanning the last two years: the general elections on April 3, 2022, and December 17, 2023. As a result, two distinct time frames were chosen for analysis: March 27 to April 10, 2022, and December 10 to December 24, 2023. This selection encompasses the final week of the election campaigns, the voting day, and the subsequent week post-election.** Several factors guided the establishment of this time frame. Firstly, the final week of the election campaign represents the apex of the entire campaign, marked by heightened efforts to sway undecided voters. Notably, Serbian law imposes a 'pre-election silence period' — two days before polling day, prohibiting campaign activities and disseminating election result estimations.<sup>25</sup> However, the regulation surrounding social media campaigning remains ambiguous. Therefore, unlike official media outlets, Telegram channels can publish political appeals throughout all

<sup>22</sup> TGStat, *Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@sputniksrbija/stat/citation>

<sup>23</sup> TGStat, *БУНТ је стање духа*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@buntcg/stat/citation>

<sup>24</sup> TGStat, *Народна Патрола*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@narodnapatrola/stat/citation>

<sup>25</sup> BBC News na srpskom, *Izbori u Srbiji 2023: Šta znači tišina pred glasanje*, 2023, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-67500103>

seven days leading up to the vote. Additionally, both the voting day and the post-election period were characterised by heightened tensions. In both 2022 and 2023, post-election protests erupted in Belgrade, sparked by contentious election results and allegations of electoral fraud. Following the 2022 elections in Belgrade, protests ensued,<sup>26</sup> flashing intense debates regarding the election results between the opposition and the winning coalition, culminating in a meeting between opposition leader Dragan Đilas and President Aleksandar Vučić.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in 2023, larger protests erupted in Belgrade in response to the election results led by the 'Serbia Against Violence' coalition.<sup>28</sup> Thus, **the chosen chronological framework enables tracking discourse fluctuations across the channels during the most critical and tense moments in recent Serbian political development.** Posts published on these days across each channel were collected. The analysis focused exclusively on the author's textual posts, omitting video posts, voice messages, pictures, or unaccompanied text while excluding reposts. The post's content was translated into English using the Telegram application's automatic translator. In total, the following selections were made for the study:

1. 'Sputnik Serbia' - published 1,815 posts during the April 2022 elections and 756 posts during the December 2023 elections.
2. 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' - published 1,064 posts during the April 2022 elections and 208 posts during the December 2023 elections.
3. 'People's Patrol' - published 8 posts during the April 2022 elections and 22 posts during the December 2023 elections.

**The theory of agenda setting, pioneered by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, was employed to analyse the gathered materials.** Their seminal 1972 article unveiled the results of a practical study,<sup>29</sup> demonstrating a clear correlation between media agendas and the perceptions of undecided voters on the brink of a presidential election. **Through quantitative methods, they were the first to empirically establish the influence of media coverage on shaping what the audience deems significant and noteworthy.** In essence, the topics frequently addressed by journalists over a specific period gradually become priorities for information consumers.<sup>30</sup> Notably, the agenda-setting concept was not entirely novel at that time. In 1922, Walter Lippmann discussed a similar idea in his book 'Public Opinion,' contending that 'the pictures in our heads' are primarily moulded by media influence.<sup>31</sup> Bernard Cohen further developed this notion in 1963, positing that "*the press may not be successful all the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about,*"<sup>32</sup> effectively laying the groundwork for the agenda-setting theory established later.

Over time, an increasing number of studies emerged, experimentally confirming the agenda-setting effect or shedding light on new aspects of the theory. These works delved into various agenda options, such as symbolic, substantive, informational, public, and corporate agendas. They also examined how mass media materials influence individuals with varying levels of education, the effects of different types of media on audiences, and the manifestation of the agenda-setting effect in specific domains like foreign policy, healthcare, and criminal cases, among others. Moreover, since the 1990s, researchers have expanded the concept of agenda setting to include not only prioritising events based on their overall significance but also shaping the perception of specific events or individuals. Constrained by limited

<sup>26</sup> Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Zahtev za javnim brojanjem glasova na protestu u Beogradu*, 2022, available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/protest-beograd-rik-izbori/31785451.html>

<sup>27</sup> Balkan Insight, *Suspicion in Serbia after Opposition Leader Meets President*, 2022, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/12/suspicion-in-serbia-after-opposition-leader-meets-president/>

<sup>28</sup> Associated Press, *Thousands accuse Serbia's ruling populists of election fraud at a Belgrade rally*, 2023, available at: <https://apnews.com/article/serbia-protest-election-fraud-populists-4f92e8d0e46ff7b6c8701682afbc344>

<sup>29</sup> Maxwell E. McCombs, Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media", *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2, 1972, available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747787>.

<sup>30</sup> Dietram A. Scheufele, David Tewksbury, "Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models", *Journal of Communication* 57, p.11, available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.0021-9916.2007.00326.x>

<sup>31</sup> Walter Lippmann, "Public Opinion", 1998, available at: [https://monoskop.org/images/b/bf/Lippman\\_Walter\\_Public\\_Opinion.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/b/bf/Lippman_Walter_Public_Opinion.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Patricia Moy, David Tewksbury, Eike Mark Rinke, "Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing", *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, 2016, p.2, available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect266>



print space or airtime, media outlets often focus on select aspects or attributes of an object, thereby constructing an agenda specific to that event or individual. **It is widely acknowledged that by highlighting specific attributes of an event or characteristics of a political figure, the mass media significantly shapes the audience's perception and attitudes towards the subject. These attribute agendas are referred to as 'the second level' of agenda-setting, distinguished from the traditional first level that primarily focuses on issues or objects. Thus, while the first-level agenda setting influences what individuals perceive as important, forming an attributive agenda dictates how the audience will interpret a particular phenomenon or individual.** This process establishes a set of facts that individuals will incorporate into their understanding, ultimately influencing their stance. The attributes comprising the second-level agenda encompass two dimensions:

- Substantive (cognitive): This pertains to elements such as ideological narratives, fundamental stances on specific issues, and a politician's character traits or qualifications.
- Affective (emotional): This dimension concerns the emotional tone — whether positive, negative, or neutral — with which an event or character is portrayed.

**Spiro Kiouisis introduces a comparable notion, positing that an object's salience within an agenda-setting is contingent upon its intrinsic as well as extrinsic attributes.** This perspective offers a framework for gauging an object's salience, encompassing:

- attention, quantified by the number and size of stories devoted to specific topics in media;
- prominence, which refers to the positioning of a story within a media text to communicate its importance;
- valence, indicative of the emotional vibe and nature of the message.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, drawing upon Kiouisis's conceptual framework, this study will employ quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods to examine the salience accorded to elections within the agenda of the selected Telegram channels. **The findings from the analysis are detailed and discussed in Chapter 5.**

### 1.3 Roadmap of the Study

This study is structured into six chapters, each delving into different facets of Russian propaganda and its impact. Following the introductory Chapter I, Chapter II scrutinises the evolution of Telegram and the endorsement of Russian propagandists' activities on this social media. Chapter III examines the critical aspects of Russia's presence in Serbia and the broader context of the WB region. Chapter IV explores how pro-Russian Telegram channels represented the war in Ukraine for the Serbian audience. Chapter V analyses how pro-Russian Telegram channels in Serbia covered the electoral processes of 2022 and 2023. Chapter VI presents the key results and findings of the study.

<sup>33</sup> Spiro Kiouisis, "Explicating Media Salience: A Factor Analysis of New York Times Issue Coverage During the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election", *Journal of Communication*, March 2004, p.76, available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2004.tb02614.x>

## II From a Beacon of Freedom to a Kremlin Mouthpiece: The Evolution of Telegram

As the Internet and social media platforms have evolved, their original purpose of fostering truth and leveraging the collective "*wisdom of crowds*"<sup>34</sup> has taken a sharp turn. What was once seen as a means to establish a reliable foundation of truth has now become a battleground for hybrid warfare, vulnerable to malicious attacks. The digital realm has morphed into a potent tool for influencing public opinion, with the proliferation of propaganda posing a pressing concern, particularly in light of Russian efforts to manipulate global sentiments.<sup>35</sup> **Kremlin propaganda on social media is a complex web of tactics and objectives, crafted to exploit the vulnerabilities of target audiences, employing deceptive and manipulative techniques, aiming to shape narratives, stoke division, and further Russia's strategic interests.** The infamous Russian 'Internet Research Agencies,' commonly known as the 'Troll Farm,' burst into global consciousness in 2018.<sup>36</sup> These organised groups, often backed by state or state-affiliated entities, are dedicated to moulding public opinion and advancing specific political agendas. Their systematic and coordinated activities have made them synonymous with the pervasive nature of Russian propaganda. This orchestrated manipulation of social media poses a real threat to the integrity of online information and democratic processes, highlighting the urgent need to address this issue.

Born from the visionary minds of Pavel and Nikolai Durov in August 2013, Telegram has evolved into a vital conduit of information worldwide. **As of 2023, Telegram boasts an expansive user community, encompassing nearly 9% of the global population.**<sup>37</sup> The diverse patterns contributing to its popularity in different regions and nations make it a captivating phenomenon. With a presence in 155 countries, Telegram firmly secures its position as the fourth most popular app globally, rivalling industry giants like WhatsApp, Facebook, and WeChat.<sup>38</sup> Its appeal extends beyond mere communication, offering a seamless blend of social networking and messaging features. However, **Telegram's steadfast dedication to user data security sets it apart.** This commitment to privacy resonates profoundly in regions grappling with censorship and surveillance, notably in countries like Russia, Iran, and Uzbekistan.<sup>39</sup> Telegram's importance is highlighted by its pivotal role in Iran's 2017-2018 protests<sup>40</sup> and the Belarusian resistance movement in 2020.<sup>41</sup>

However, this tale is not devoid of shadows. Telegram's robust encryption system and minimal identity verification checks make it the preferred tool for nefarious actors, including extremists and criminals who exploit the application for illicit purposes. The unique setup of public and private channels and chats has created a fertile ground for propaganda, attracting neo-Nazis, nationalists, and other radical groups. As a result, Telegram has inevitably been embroiled in a string of scandals and studies

<sup>34</sup> James Surowiecki, "The Wisdom of Crowds", 2005, available at:

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297194346\\_THE\\_WISDOM\\_OF\\_CROWDS](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297194346_THE_WISDOM_OF_CROWDS)

<sup>35</sup> Patrick Savage, "Russian Social Media Information Operations: How Russia Has Used Social Media to Influence US Politics", *American Security Project*, 2017, available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrepo6042>

<sup>36</sup> The New York Times, *Inside the Russian Troll Factory: Zombies and a Breakneck Pace*, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> World Population Review, *Telegram Users by Country*, 2023, available at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/telegram-users-by-country>

<sup>38</sup> Statista, *Most popular global mobile messenger apps as of January 2023, based on number of monthly active users*, 2023, available at:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/258749/most-popular-global-mobile-messenger-apps/>

<sup>39</sup> Maksim Yeniseyev. "Telegram, stifled in Russian and Iran, gains popularity in Central Asia", *Caravanserai*, 2018, available at: [https://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2018/05/25/feature-01](https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2018/05/25/feature-01)

<sup>40</sup> BBC, *Iran protests: Telegram under fire as Tehran clamps down*, 2018, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42558317>

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Bush, "No Modest Voices: Social Media and the Protests in Belarus", *Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies*, 2020, available at: <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/no-modest-voices-social-media-and-protests-belarus>

confirming its widespread use by far-right extremist organisations,<sup>42</sup> ISIS,<sup>43</sup> Hamas,<sup>44</sup> and others for disseminating misinformation, recruitment efforts, and even coordinating attacks. **In 2022, Telegram's reputation as a bastion of secure and private communication was overshadowed by its role as a potent instrument in the Kremlin's propaganda machinery, which actively leveraged Telegram to advance its narratives surrounding the war in Ukraine and propagate fake news.**<sup>45</sup>

Nowadays, Telegram is on the rise in Serbia. The year 2022 saw an unprecedented surge in the platform's popularity, marking a pivotal moment in the nation's digital landscape.<sup>46</sup> Against the erosion of trust in traditional media worldwide, Telegram channels are emerging as compelling alternatives for engaging substantial audiences. While Telegram may not have cemented its dominance in Serbian society, its intricacies and interaction with Russian propaganda are pressing concerns for local society and politics. This chapter delves into the origins of Telegram in Russia, explores its turbulent history of clashes with Russian authorities, and unravels the distinctive traits of the pervasive Kremlin propaganda that has found a foothold on this controversial media platform.

## 2.1 Telegram's Emergence Amid Political Perils: A Tale of Digital Resilience

As the Durov brothers tout Telegram as a global, boundary-defying tool, the undeniable truth remains: the tumultuous tides of Russian politics have cast a significant shadow over the application's evolution. **As the 2000s drew to a close, Russia's dynamic and rapidly evolving information technology sector found itself at the centre of a burgeoning governmental ambition – the drive to assert control over the vast digital expanse of the Internet.** This quest could have stemmed from the ripple effects of the Facebook and Twitter revolutions that swept through Tunisia and Egypt in 2010 and 2011,<sup>47</sup> showcasing the profound impact of social media in mobilising populations and challenging autocratic regimes. Against this backdrop, Russia was undergoing its transformation, crystallising authoritarian tendencies. On September 24, 2011, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev nominated Vladimir Putin for the 2012 presidential election,<sup>48</sup> paving the way for Putin's third term. The following State Duma elections were marred by allegations of widespread vote fraud, igniting massive protests against electoral manipulation and the ruling party 'United Russia.'<sup>49</sup> Amidst this tumultuous era, Alexey Navalny rose as a prominent figure in the opposition, harnessing the power of social media to rally supporters and stage protests. This fervent activism intensified the government's resolve to tighten its grip on the Internet.

In 2010, a formidable Federal Law № 436-FZ, "*On Protection of Children from Information Harmful to their Health and Development*," was introduced.<sup>50</sup> Initially crafted to shield young people from the dangers of drugs, self-harm, violence, and prostitution, this law emerged as a potent tool in the fight

<sup>42</sup> Lea Gerster, Richard Kuchta, Dominik Hammer, and Christian Schwieter, "Telegram as a buttress: How far-right extremists and conspiracy theorists are expanding their infrastructures via Telegram", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2022, p.4, available at: [https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Telegram-as-a-Buttress\\_How-far-right-extremists-and-conspiracy-theorists-are-expanding-their-infrastructures-via-Telegram.pdf](https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Telegram-as-a-Buttress_How-far-right-extremists-and-conspiracy-theorists-are-expanding-their-infrastructures-via-Telegram.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> Bennett Clifford and Helen Powell, "Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram", *The George Washington University Program on Extremism*, 2019, p.3, available at: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/EncryptedExtremism.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> CNN, *Hamas' social media following has skyrocketed since its attack. America is powerless to stop it*, 2023, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/16/tech/hamas-telegram/index.html>

<sup>45</sup> Insider, *A Russian Telegram channel is claiming to fact check the Kremlin's war on Ukraine. It's actually spreading disinformation to hundreds of thousands of followers*, 2022, available at: <https://www.insider.com/russian-telegram-channel-war-on-fakes-spreads-disinformation-2022-3>

<sup>46</sup> Boban Stojanović and Aleksandar Ivković, *Alternative Report on the Position and Needs of Youth in the Republic of Serbia*, National Youth Council of Serbia, 2022, p.6, available at: <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Alternative-report-2022.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> Stefano Passini, "The Facebook and Twitter revolutions: Active participation in the 21st century", *Human Affairs*, vol. 22, no.3, 2012, available at: <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.2478/s13374-012-0025-0/html>

<sup>48</sup> Brian Whitmore, "September 24, 2011: The Day That Changed Russia", *The Atlantic*, 2012, available at:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/09/september-24-2011-the-day-that-changed-russia/262807/>

<sup>49</sup> BBC, *Russia election: Hundreds rally against Putin in Moscow*, 2011, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16042797>

<sup>50</sup> Svetlana S. Huntley, "Russian Legislation on the Protection of Children Against Sexual Abuse and Sexual Exploitation: A Review", *International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children*, 2013, p.5, available at:

[https://www.icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Russian\\_Legislation\\_on\\_Protection\\_of\\_Children\\_Against\\_Sexual\\_Abuse\\_and\\_Exploitation\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Russian_Legislation_on_Protection_of_Children_Against_Sexual_Abuse_and_Exploitation_FINAL.pdf)

against any objectionable content, including political one. At its core, the legislation established a mechanism to blacklist websites, granting authorities the power to shut them down swiftly without lengthy courtroom deliberations. Thus, the crux of the matter revolved around the ambiguous definition of 'malicious content,' effectively granting Roskomnadzor, the regulatory body, unrestricted authority to censor online resources deemed unfavourable to the government. As of the present day, the registry boasts a staggering 1.3 million entries,<sup>51</sup> underscoring the expansive reach and repercussions of this legislative endeavor.

Furthermore, in 2013, the legal landscape witnessed the introduction of Federal Law № 398-FZ,<sup>52</sup> designed to tackle the persistent threats of terrorism and extremism head-on. This law did not just knock on the door of Internet freedom; it kicked it wide open, ushering in a new era where certain websites could be swiftly banned without the cumbersome cloak of judicial proceedings. The targets were clear: content that fuelled mass riots incited extremist activities or encouraged participation in public events that openly defied established norms — all earmarked for deletion and blocking as stipulated by the law. However, the devil was in the details, or rather, the lack thereof. **The law left critical concepts like 'violation of the established order' and 'extremist activity' in a haze of ambiguity, empowering government agencies with a wide array of opportunities to silence inconvenient voices, even those advocating for peaceful public actions.** A chilling censorship storm swept the digital landscape just a month after the law was enacted. A slew of crucial opposition media outlets and internet platforms, including 'Grani.ru,' 'Kasparov.ru,' 'Daily Magazine,' and Alexey Navalny's blogs on 'Livejournal' and the 'Echo of Moscow' website, fell victim to the new regulations.<sup>53</sup> The reverberations of this legislation rippled through the digital sphere, casting a long, cold shadow over online discourse and dissent.

Nonetheless, authorities were far from satisfied, driven by an urgent need to assert control over social media platforms that had become bustling hubs for opposition narratives and movements. Thus, in 2014, Vladimir Putin inked Federal Law № 97-FZ,<sup>54</sup> which reshaped online communication and blogging. This legislation introduced the novel concept of '*organisers of distribution of information*' — individuals or entities tasked with ensuring the smooth operation of information systems designed to receive, transmit, deliver, or process electronic messages from internet users. Under this comprehensive definition, social media platforms like Facebook, Vkontakte, Twitter, and others, as well as instant messengers such as Skype, Viber, and ICQ, and even email services like Gmail, Yandex, and Mail.ru, along with websites featuring feedback forms, were all subject to regulation.<sup>55</sup> **These 'organisers of distribution of information' become legally bound to retain data exclusively within the confines of Russian territory, recording details of voice information, written text, images, sounds, and various electronic messages.** This data was to be preserved for six months, with an additional obligation to furnish this data to authorised state entities upon request.<sup>56</sup> This law enforcement marked a significant shift in the digital landscape, profoundly affecting online privacy and communication within Russia. However, even with the enactment of these laws, implementing internet censorship posed a formidable challenge. Gaining control over the online activities of Russians on foreign platforms like Facebook and Twitter proved to be a complex puzzle. Consequently, VKontakte, the nation's largest and most popular social media platform, led by Pavel Durov at the time, came under intense scrutiny from

<sup>51</sup> iFreedomLab: Лаборатория свободного интернета, *Полная история регулирования интернета в России: от 80-х и до наших дней*, 2023, available at: <https://ifreedomlab.net/campaigns/istoriya-regulirovaniya-svyazi/>

<sup>52</sup> World Intermediary Liability Map, *Federal Law № 398-FZ, on Amending Federal Law on Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection*, December 28, 2013, 2014, available at: <https://wilmap.stanford.edu/entries/federal-law-no-398-fz-amending-federal-law-information-information-technologies-and>

<sup>53</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Russia: Veto Law to Restrict Online Freedom*, 2014, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/04/24/russia-veto-law-restrict-online-freedom>

<sup>54</sup> World Intermediary Liability Map, *Federal Law No. 97-FZ (Bloggers Law)*, 2014, available at: <https://wilmap.stanford.edu/entries/federal-law-no-97-fz-bloggers-law>

<sup>55</sup> ZDNET, *Facebook, Gmail, Skype face Russia ban under 'anti-terror' data snooping plan*, 2014, available at: <https://www.zdnet.com/article/facebook-gmail-skype-face-russia-ban-under-anti-terror-data-snooping-plan/>

<sup>56</sup> The Washington Post, *Russian blogger law puts new restrictions on Internet freedoms*, 2014, available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russian-blogger-law-puts-new-restrictions-on-internet-freedoms/2014/07/31/42a05924-a931-459f-acd2-6do8598c375b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russian-blogger-law-puts-new-restrictions-on-internet-freedoms/2014/07/31/42a05924-a931-459f-acd2-6do8598c375b_story.html)



security agencies. The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) quickly attempted to pressure VKontakte to shut down Alexey Navalny's page and other groups coordinating protest actions.<sup>57</sup> This pivotal moment ignited a fiery clash between Pavel Durov, VKontakte's Chief Executive Officer, and the Russian authorities, ultimately leading to his resignation from VKontakte.

The clash erupted when Durov vehemently rejected government demands for access to VKontakte users' personal data and conversations. A staunch advocate for digital privacy and user security, Durov had consistently resisted government attempts to compromise user's confidentiality. When faced with the FSB's request for data disclosure and the shutdown of Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation's pages, Durov devised a strategy to amplify Navalny's social media presence, ensuring his posts garnered widespread attention. Later, the FSB pressed to release data associated with VKontakte groups connected with Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution.<sup>58</sup> Once again, Durov stood firm in opposition. Thereafter, a squad of police officers attempted to break into Durov's residence, but he adamantly rebuffed their efforts, refusing to unlock the door. During this intense standoff, Durov had enlightenment, conceiving Telegram as a haven for secure communication, a 'digital fortress' impervious to the prying eyes of Russian police and surveillance services. Then, in April 2013, Durov embarked on a bold journey, escaping Russia for the United States,<sup>59</sup> where he laid the foundation for the Telegram development. His departure came in the wake of complex legal charges stemming from a skirmish with a police officer. In 2014, Durov yielded to mounting pressure, relinquishing his remaining ownership in VKontakte to a coalition of Kremlin-friendly investors.<sup>60</sup> This surrender marked a significant defeat and granted authorities enhanced access to user data, providing them with a significant advantage. **From 2015 to 2019, 1496 individuals faced criminal charges related to their internet activities.**<sup>61</sup> These charges ranged from calls for protests to comments, meme postings, or affiliations with various online groups. Among them, 173 individuals received substantial prison sentences, highlighting the far-reaching consequences of this new era of digital crackdown.

Amid this backdrop of heightened tension, Telegram emerged onto the scene in August 2013. Durov's unyielding stand against government pressure had already earned him a following of individuals who viewed him as a staunch defender of user privacy and data protection. Thus, Telegram's unwavering focus on data security in its marketing campaign propelled the app into the spotlight. Fortuitously for Durov, a few months following the application's launch, a significant announcement reverberated across the tech world: Facebook had acquired WhatsApp, Telegram's primary competitor. This news, coupled with concerns about Facebook's intentions regarding data monetisation, prompted a mass migration of users to alternative messaging platforms.<sup>62</sup> **As a result, Telegram experienced a rapid surge in popularity, attracting over 8 million users in a relatively short span of time.** Telegram's global appeal hinges on its independence from financial or institutional ties with the American government and tech giants. This distinct position has made the messenger especially attractive to privacy-conscious individuals and advocates of conspiracy theories.<sup>63</sup> Simultaneously, its lack of connections to the US resonates with populations in countries with strong anti-American sentiments, such as Iran.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>57</sup> The Moscow Times, *Prosecutors Call for Closure of Navalny Anti-Corruption Vkontakte Group*, 2014, available at:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/03/20/prosecutors-call-for-closure-of-navalny-anti-corruption-vkontakte-group-a33196>

<sup>58</sup> The Moscow Times, *Vkontakte Founder Flees Russia, Claims Persecution*, 2014, available at:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/04/22/vkontakte-founder-flees-russia-claims-persecution-a3448>

<sup>59</sup> The Washington Post, *How the founder of the Telegram messaging app stood up to the Kremlin — and won*, 2020, available at:

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-telegram-kremlin-pavel-durov/2020/06/27/4928ddd4-b161-11ea-98b5-279a6479a1e4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-telegram-kremlin-pavel-durov/2020/06/27/4928ddd4-b161-11ea-98b5-279a6479a1e4_story.html)

<sup>60</sup> The Guardian, *Founder of Vkontakte leaves after dispute with Kremlin-linked owners*, 2014, available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/apr/02/founder-pavel-durov-leaves-russian-social-network-site-vkontakte>

<sup>61</sup> Sarkis Darbinian, Ekaterina Abashina, and Artem Kozliuk, "Blackscreen.Report", *Роскомсвобода*, 2020, p.5, available at:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/17-2Z3\\_51FF1nmKMrH3cBPXCuPSHC05Lk/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/17-2Z3_51FF1nmKMrH3cBPXCuPSHC05Lk/edit)

<sup>62</sup> Saumya Garg, Sheryl Selouan, "Social Media Privacy: Facebook's acquisition of WhatsApp," *Queen Mary University of London*, 2021, available at:

<https://www.qmul.ac.uk/lac/our-legal-blog/items/social-media-privacy-facebooks-acquisition-of-whatsapp.html>

<sup>63</sup> Charlie Warzel, "The World's Most Important App (For Now)", *The Atlantic*, 2023, available at:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2023/06/telegram-app-encrypted-messaging-russia/674558/>

<sup>64</sup> The New York Times, *Iran Lives on This App*, 2018, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/15/opinion/iran-telegram-app.html>

Telegram's ability to flourish in these diverse environments has cemented its reputation as a formidable player in secure messaging.

## 2.2 Blocking Telegram: A Failed Attempt at Censorship

As Vladimir Putin embarked on his third presidential term, the digital landscape encountered unprecedented government scrutiny of the Internet. This period witnessed the implementation of stringent laws purportedly aimed at bolstering national security, but in practice, they restricted freedom of expression and heightened censorship. The Rubber Stamp State Duma eagerly approved laws that expanded the state's control over the digital domain. **The government gained the tools to restrain individual Internet users and IT corporations through vaguely worded legislation, mandatory registrations, and the prohibition of online anonymity.** Large corporations faced the possibility of being barred from conducting legal operations in Russia if they objected to these laws,<sup>65</sup> leading to a decline in their audience and influence. A striking example of this shift occurred on November 17, 2016, when LinkedIn, the professional networking platform, was suddenly blocked in Russia. The reason behind this action was the company's failure to comply with regulations regarding storing Russian users' personal data.<sup>66</sup> This act underscored the Russian government's resolve to hold tech giants accountable under the newly established rules, signalling their commitment to tightening their grip on the digital sphere. In this context, Telegram emerged as a powerful platform, taking an unwavering stance against state censorship and control. This moral commitment struck a chord with the Russian proponents of democracy, who fervently sought to usher in a more progressive political era for the nation. Opposition politicians and activists found solace in Telegram's secure and encrypted environment, harnessing its capabilities to maintain vital connections with their audiences and orchestrate impactful protest actions.<sup>67</sup> However, the promise of this last haven of online security faced a looming threat in the 'Yarovaya law.' As legal requirements tightened and government surveillance intensified, Telegram users' cherished freedom and privacy began to unravel, setting the stage for a crucial confrontation.

Federal Law № 374-FZ, also known as the 'Yarovaya law,' brought sweeping changes to bolster the nation's counter-terrorism efforts. While ostensibly aimed at enhancing security, it significantly expanded the authority of law enforcement agencies and imposed new obligations on telecom operators and IT companies. In addition to existing requirements like storing user data and correspondence for six months and maintaining data centres within Russia, the new law introduced a particularly contentious provision. **It demanded that 'organisers of distribution of information' using encryption methods provide the FSB with decryption keys,<sup>68</sup> granting access to the content of these communications.** This new amendment stirred controversy by infringing upon citizens' constitutional privacy rights.<sup>69</sup> Previously, such rights could only be compromised by a court decision. However, the 'Yarovaya law' allowed law enforcement agencies unrestricted access without judicial authorisation, essentially granting them round-the-clock, unrestricted, and surreptitious access. This clause sparked a major clash between Pavel Durov and Russian law enforcement agencies. Telegram vehemently refused to comply, arguing that it contradicted the principles upon which the messenger was founded and was technically unfeasible. The company saw no justification for collaboration with the authorities, a decision that would soon make Telegram a target in this unfolding digital showdown.

<sup>65</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Russia: New Legislation Attacks Internet Anonymity*, 2017, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/08/01/russia-new-legislation-attacks-internet-anonymity>

<sup>66</sup> BBC, *LinkedIn blocked by Russian authorities*, 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-38014501>

<sup>67</sup> Associated Press, *Outlawed app emerges as key tool for Russian protesters*, 2019, available at: <https://apnews.com/34df8b282f6c4fd188a33d2fb3ff381c>

<sup>68</sup> World Intermediary Liability Map, *Federal Law № 374-FZ On Amending Federal Law "On Combating Terrorism" And Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding The Establishment Of Additional Counter-Terrorism Measures And Public Security*, 2016, available at: <https://wilmap.stanford.edu/entries/federal-law-374-fz-amending-federal-law-combating-terrorism-and-certain-legislative-acts>

<sup>69</sup> Evgeni Moyakine and Alexander Tabachnik, "Struggling to strike the right balance between interests at stake: The 'Yarovaya', 'Fake news' and 'Disrespect' laws as examples of ill-conceived legislation in the age of modern technology», *Computer Law & Security Review*, vol. 40, 2021, p.3, available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0267364920301175>

The prospect of banning Telegram first arose in 2017 when Roskomnadzor initiated a request to Durov, urging Telegram's voluntary registration as an 'organiser of distribution of information.' Initially, Durov did not respond to this request, but as the situation progressed, he firmly declined to provide authorities with confidential data. Tensions escalated when Alexander Zharov, the head of Roskomnadzor, published an open letter directed at the Telegram development team, demanding that Telegram provide the required data for the registry.<sup>70</sup> The ultimatum was clear: the committee would block its operations in Russia if the messenger did not comply with the official demands. After several weeks of intense negotiations, Roskomnadzor and Telegram reached a compromise regarding the registry. Durov did furnish information to be included in the Roskomnadzor list, but he emphatically stated that no user data would be shared.<sup>71</sup> Later, the confrontation between the messenger and the government took a significant turn roughly a year after the 'Yarovaya law' came into effect. The FSB officially demanded Telegram to provide universal decryption keys for accessing messages, citing their investigation into a terrorist attack in Saint Petersburg in April 2017. The Investigation Committee claimed that criminals had utilised Telegram to coordinate their activities leading up to the attack,<sup>72</sup> providing legal grounds for the FSB's request for data about the suspects. However, Durov publicly refused to cooperate, emphasising that more than personal convictions were at stake in his denial. The issue's core was that Telegram had no data on the specific users requested by the FSB. The phone numbers associated with the criminals were either never registered or deleted due to inactivity, and the encryption method used for secret Telegram chats meant that the platform's developers did not possess the encryption keys.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, Telegram had no access to any metadata or correspondence associated with these users. In response to Telegram's refusal to provide the decryption keys, Roskomnadzor pursued legal action against the company. **In 2018, the Taganskyi Court in Moscow ruled in favour of Roskomnadzor, issuing a decree to block the Telegram messenger in Russia. The ban officially took effect on April 13, 2018.**<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> TASS, *Russia's telecom watchdog may block Telegram messenger in Russia*, 2017, available at: <https://tass.com/economy/952981>

<sup>71</sup> The Hacker News, *Telegram Agrees to Register With Russia to Avoid Ban, But Won't Share User Data*, 2017, available at: <https://thehackernews.com/2017/06/telegram-russia-partnership.html>

<sup>72</sup> The Hill, *Report: Russia says terrorists used encrypted messaging service Telegram to coordinate attack*, 2017, available at: <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/339460-report-russia-says-terrorists-used-telegram-to-coordinate-attack/>

<sup>73</sup> The Hill, *Reopen Democracy, Russia's Telegram ban is just the start of the battle over online anonymity*, 2018, available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-telegram-ban-battle-over-online-anonymity/>

<sup>74</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Telegram Loses Free Expression Battle to Russian Authorities*, 2018, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/13/telegram-loses-free-expression-battle-russian-authorities>



Image 1: Rally protesting the blocking of Telegram, held on April 30, 2018, in Moscow.



Source: Reuters.<sup>75</sup>

**Ironically, the Russian authorities' decision to ban Telegram had an unintended consequence akin to the 'Barbara Streisand effect.'** Instead of decreasing, Telegram's usage surged on the prohibition's first day. The data from the analytical platform TGStat.ru indicated that on the second day of the ban, the number of subscribers to Russian-language Telegram channels swelled by 270 thousand individuals. Another metric, provided by SimilarWeb, revealed a striking trend: the number of Telegram application downloads from Google Play, primarily by Russian users, skyrocketed, reaching 102 thousand per day.<sup>76</sup> **Telegram, long associated with the opposition, suddenly became a mainstream platform symbolizing the fight against digital oppression.** This unexpected popularity only bolstered the company's standing and influence. Furthermore, Roskomnadzor grappled with technical challenges in blocking the service. Telegram's development team demonstrated remarkable agility and proficiency, frequently changing IP addresses and employing various methods to ensure smooth operation. Moreover, Roskomnadzor's approach of blocking IP addresses proved inefficient and disrupted the Russian Internet space. In total, Russian authorities blocked access to approximately 9 thousand IP addresses associated with Telegram servers and nearly 19 million IP addresses within the subnets of major cloud hosting providers such as Amazon, Google, Microsoft, and others, where Telegram's servers migrated.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, various unrelated services encountered access issues, including other social media platforms, banks, brick-and-mortar stores, and even the Sheremetyevo Airport passenger registration system. By the end of the first week of relentless efforts to overcome Telegram's resistance, the head of Roskomnadzor openly admitted that their current blocking system was not yielding the desired results.<sup>78</sup> **Ultimately, in 2020, Russian authorities decided to unblock the messenger, marking an official capitulation.** In the explanatory note to the draft law for lifting Telegram's ban, officials stated that the messenger remained available for installation and continued to

<sup>75</sup> Reuters Pictures, *Photographer: Tatyana Makeyeva*, 2018, available at: <https://pictures.reuters.com/archive/RUSSIA-TELEGRAM-PROTESTS-RC123219FC80.html>

<sup>76</sup> Gazeta.ru, *Война против Telegram: неожиданный итог*, 2018, available at: [https://www.gazeta.ru/tech/2018/04/20/11723197/telegram\\_itcommunity.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/tech/2018/04/20/11723197/telegram_itcommunity.shtml)

<sup>77</sup> ARTICLE 19, *Russia: Telegram block leads to widespread assault on freedom of expression online*, 2018, available at: <https://www.article19.org/resources/russia-telegram-block-leads-to-widespread-assault-on-freedom-of-expression-online/>

<sup>78</sup> Lenta.ru, *В Роскомнадзоре назвали сроки победы над Telegram*, 2019, available at: <https://lenta.ru/news/2019/10/08/rkn/>



operate in Russia despite the prohibition.<sup>79</sup> Telegram's founder, Pavel Durov, congratulated users and reaffirmed the platform's commitment to privacy and the confidentiality of personal data, reassuring users that their data remained secure. Shortly after, during the COVID-19 pandemic, government officials openly embraced the Telegram messenger as one of their primary online information resources.

### 2.3 If You Cannot Defeat - Lead: The Kremlin's Dominance on Telegram

Amidst the Russian government's efforts to block Telegram, they not only aimed to disrupt its operations but also significantly expanded their presence within the platform. While the application's initial purpose was to offer secure and private messaging, it quickly became a prominent platform for public communication and information dissemination. Its unique functions and robust encryption made it an enticing tool for the Kremlin to connect with the audience while maintaining security. Consequently, from 2018 to 2020, government agencies eagerly adopted Telegram for various communication and information-sharing purposes. These ranged from routine public announcements and press releases to more strategic communication efforts, often perceived as propaganda by independent observers and the democratic opposition.<sup>80</sup> Even top-ranking Kremlin officials actively engaged with the platform despite its restrictions.<sup>81</sup> **Moreover, Russian government entities, including later the Kremlin,<sup>82</sup> established official Telegram channels where they shared news, statements, and updates, attracting substantial subscriber bases and enabling the government to disseminate propaganda.** The depth of the authorities' grip on Telegram became evident after the 2018 Russian presidential election.<sup>83</sup> During this pivotal period, the platform's largest channels showcased staunch support for Vladimir Putin, presenting the election through a distinctly pro-Kremlin perspective. Even the nation's most influential political channel at the time, 'Nezygar,' consistently promoted positive narratives about high turnout while brushing aside election fraud charges. This allegiance underscored the Kremlin's significant sway over the social media.

According to an investigation by the independent Russian media outlet PROJECT,<sup>84</sup> the Kremlin initiated proactive measures to establish control over Telegram and unmask its anonymous creators in 2016. Their primary concern encompassed not just the absence of control over the content of the publication but also the platform in general. Telegram facilitated the creation of anonymous channels that became breeding grounds for various forms of information, including disinformation and misinformation. Thus, rather than eliminating this mechanism, the Kremlin sought to incorporate it into the propaganda toolkit. **Consequently, by the turn of 2016-2017, authorities started allocating funds to develop pro-Kremlin channels on the platform, recruiting former leaders of the youth political movement 'Nashi' and other pro-Kremlin organisations to contribute.** Led by Kristina Potupchik, an extensive network of channels emerged, actively generating and reposting content to bear desired information.<sup>85</sup> Insiders within the Kremlin identify Potupchik as one of the primary contractors responsible for the Kremlin's activities on Telegram. Remarkably, she does not conceal her involvement in disseminating pro-Russian narratives on the platform and openly discusses it in interviews.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Lenta.ru, *В России разблокировали Telegram Роскомнадзор два года боролся с мессенджером, но миллионы россиян все равно им пользовались*, 2020, available at: [https://lenta.ru/brief/2020/06/18/telegram\\_unlock/](https://lenta.ru/brief/2020/06/18/telegram_unlock/)

<sup>80</sup> Medium, *How pro-Kremlin Telegram channels influence Ukrainian parliamentary decisions*, 2020, available at: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-pro-kremlin-telegram-channels-influence-ukrainian-parliamentary-decisions-791ac939cdd>

<sup>81</sup> Alexey Salikov, "Telegram as a Means of Political Communication and its use by Russia's Ruling Elite", *Politologija*, 2019, p.98, available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345390227\\_Telegram\\_as\\_a\\_Means\\_of\\_Political\\_Communication\\_and\\_its\\_use\\_by\\_Russia's\\_Ruling\\_Elite](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345390227_Telegram_as_a_Means_of_Political_Communication_and_its_use_by_Russia's_Ruling_Elite)

<sup>82</sup> Lenta.ru, *Кремль завел канал в Telegram*, 2022, available at: [https://lenta.ru/news/2022/04/11/tg\\_kreml/](https://lenta.ru/news/2022/04/11/tg_kreml/)

<sup>83</sup> The Moscow Times, *Russian Authorities to Launch 100 Anonymous Telegram Channels Ahead of Election*, 2017, available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/10/10/russian-state-launches-100-anonymous-telegram-channels-ahead-of-election-a59223>

<sup>84</sup> ПРОЕКТ, *Телега из Кремля. Рассказ о том, как власти превратили Telegram в телевизор*, 2018, available at: <https://www.proekt.media/narrative/telegram-kanaly/>

<sup>85</sup> Радио Свобода, *Глава кремлёвской группы телеграм-блогеров получила государственную награду*, 2019, available at: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29875293.html>

<sup>86</sup> Настоящее время, *Тролли: ЖЖ, бешеный принтер, Потупчик. ХОЛИВАР. ИСТОРИЯ РУНЕТА №5*, 2019, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ep4tG7fapg>

The funds and efforts invested have proven effective on Telegram in a campaign to tarnish Alexey Navalny's reputation. In the run-up to the 2018 presidential election, where Navalny attempted to enter the race as a candidate, Telegram channels were flooded with critical content aimed at the opposition leader. Discrediting Navalny became pivotal for establishing the legitimacy of the presidential election without his participation.<sup>87</sup> State influence on Telegram operated surprisingly straightforwardly: contractors received compensation and paid channel authors willing to post virtually anything for money. This scheme worked flawlessly, as the platform's credibility and oppositional image meant that even the most dubious information was widely distributed once it appeared on a major channel. Notably, various official mass media, including television, often cited Telegram channels as reliable sources of information.<sup>88</sup> For example, 'fake news' about Vladimir Putin's alleged intentions to amend the Constitution in 2018, as presented on 'Nezygar,' was quoted by 'The Echo of Moscow,'<sup>89</sup> a prominent and longstanding democratic media outlet in Russia. **Subsequent independent journalists' investigations revealed significant affiliations, vested interests, and financial ties of individuals closely associated with Putin in the Russian segment of Telegram.** Connections were drawn between the key Telegram channels at the time, such as 'Meister' and 'Boiler Room,' and Mikhail and Yuri Kovalchuk,<sup>90</sup> whose proximity to Putin has garnered widespread attention in recent years. Yuri Kovalchuk, known as one of Putin's closest confidants, holds critical assets, including Russia's largest insurance company, 'Sogaz,' and 'Russia' bank. The Wall Street Journal reported that Kovalchuk was among those who persuaded the Russian president of the necessity of military intervention in Ukraine in 2022.<sup>91</sup>

Following the presidential election, Telegram's role for the authorities evolved. With a successful electoral cycle behind them and a stabilised domestic political situation, Telegram became a battleground among officials. The Presidential Administration and the Government were keenly interested in this platform, which provided a stage for perpetual covert fights. For example, the media exposed the intense confrontation between two sets of Telegram channels. On one side, channels — 'Master of the Pen,' 'Pyar during the Plague,' and 'Nezygar,' under the control of Alexey Gromov, the First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration of Russia. On the other front, channels overseen by the Kovalchuk brothers, such as 'Boiler Room,' 'Mediatechnologist,' and 'IA Steklomoy,' were in the fray.<sup>92</sup> Thus, by the time the Telegram blockade was lifted, the Kremlin had strategically entrenched itself within the platform's complex terrain. Through persistent efforts, it developed and utilised powerful surveillance tools while shaping favorable narratives. Moreover, the Kremlin had fostered extensive networks with the diverse authors behind the channels, ensuring meticulous control over the platform's content. It demonstrates the Kremlin's adept manoeuvring within the evolving digital communication landscape and solidifies its considerable influence in this domain.

## 2.4 Telegram's Rise as Russia's Digital Battleground

**Amid the Ukrainian conflict, the Russian government launched an aggressive assault on independent media and the free flow of information online.** Major social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were swiftly banned in Russia following the invasion,<sup>93</sup> severely restricting

<sup>87</sup> ПРОЕКТ, *Телега из Кремля. Рассказ о том, как власти превратили Telegram в телевизор, 2018*, available at: <https://www.proekt.media/narrative/telegram-kanaly/>

<sup>88</sup> Alexey Salikov, "Telegram as a Means of Political Communication and its use by Russia's Ruling Elite", *Politologija*, 2019, p.94, available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345390227\\_Telegram\\_as\\_a\\_Means\\_of\\_Political\\_Communication\\_and\\_its\\_use\\_by\\_Russia's\\_Ruling\\_Elite](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345390227_Telegram_as_a_Means_of_Political_Communication_and_its_use_by_Russia's_Ruling_Elite)

<sup>89</sup> ИА Хакасия, *Как Кириенко приручил Незыгаря и откуда растут ноги "Методички"*, 2018, available at: [https://1grus.info/index.php/vlast-i-politika/item/93800-kak-kirienko-pri-ruchil-nezygarya-i-otkuda-rastut-nogi-metodichki?template=ia2021&is\\_preview=on](https://1grus.info/index.php/vlast-i-politika/item/93800-kak-kirienko-pri-ruchil-nezygarya-i-otkuda-rastut-nogi-metodichki?template=ia2021&is_preview=on)

<sup>90</sup> ПРОЕКТ, *Телега из Кремля. Рассказ о том, как власти превратили Telegram в телевизор, 2018*, available at: <https://www.proekt.media/narrative/telegram-kanaly/>

<sup>91</sup> The Wall Street Journal, *The Russian Billionaire Selling Putin's War to the Public*, 2022, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-billionaire-selling-putins-war-ukraine-11669994410>

<sup>92</sup> ПРОЕКТ, *Телега из Кремля. Рассказ о том, как власти превратили Telegram в телевизор, 2018*, available at: <https://www.proekt.media/narrative/telegram-kanaly/>

<sup>93</sup> The Guardian, *Russia blocks access to Facebook and Twitter*, 2022, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/04/russia-completely-blocks-access-to-facebook-and-twitter>

Russians' access to information and communication platforms. On March 4, Roskomnadzor initiated the blocking of independent media outlets, citing the dissemination of purported 'false information' about the 'special military operation.'<sup>94</sup> Simultaneously, Russia enacted a far-reaching 'fake news' law aimed at curtailing coverage of armed forces activities,<sup>95</sup> effectively silencing freedom of expression and information. In the aftermath of these draconian measures, numerous mass media, fearing for their journalists' safety, either ceased operations entirely or refrained from reporting on the conflict, even deleting previously published materials. Prominent names such as 'Meduza,' 'Dozhd,' 'Echo of Moscow,' BBC, Radio Liberty, Deutsche Welle, Voice of America, 'Present Time,' 'The New Times,' 'Doxa,' and The Village were among those compelled to halt their activities,<sup>96</sup> leaving a significant void in the information landscape.

In the aftermath of the social media crackdown, Telegram has seen an unprecedented surge in popularity. **Since the onset of the war in Ukraine, Telegram's user base has doubled, boasting over 57 million Russians logging onto the platform daily.**<sup>97</sup> It has rapidly become the go-to hub for sharing banned information nationwide. Independent journalists and activists have flocked to Telegram to share real-time updates about the Ukrainian war despite the government's persistent efforts to monitor and infiltrate these channels. In a twist, the Kremlin maintained a strong presence on Telegram. Its influence manifests through the acquisition of propaganda posts and collaborations with influential channel owners, as well as the personal channels of Russian politicians. An investigation conducted by The Bell uncovered that out of the top 30 leading Russian political Telegram channels, 24 endorsed the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Leading the pack is the personal Telegram channel of Ramzan Kadyrov, the Head of Chechnya, whose audience skyrocketed by a remarkable 42-fold following February 24, 2022.<sup>98</sup> Kadyrov's channel offers daily updates on 'special military operation' in Ukraine, with his posts often quoted by other Telegram channels. Meanwhile, personal pages of renowned public and political figures in Russia, like TV speaker Vladimir Solovyov, State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin, and Russian Foreign Ministry representative Maria Zakharova, have gained significant popularity. **The outbreak of the war in Ukraine saw the rapid emergence of at least 35 new Telegram channels expressly backing the conflict, ballooning to over 500 within a hundred days.**<sup>99</sup> Remarkably, among Russia's top 30 political Telegram channels, only six openly opposed the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including channels like 'Stalingulag' and the personal channels of political researcher Ekaterina Shulman and imprisoned politician Alexei Navalny. This polarisation within the Telegram sphere reflects broader divisions and tensions surrounding the conflict.

**Simultaneously, Telegram has swiftly emerged as the go-to source for breaking news in Ukraine, with 65.7% of the population relying on it for information.**<sup>100</sup> This phenomenon particularly resonates with the younger generation, with approximately 11.9 million individuals between 18 and 39 turning to Telegram as their information hub. These figures also show the shift in users' behaviour. Between February and April 2022, Ukrainians increased their daily Telegram usage by eightfold, elevating it from a mere 4 minutes to a substantial 31 minutes.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, Telegram has transformed

<sup>94</sup> The Associated Press, *Russia cracks down on dissenting media, blocks Facebook*, 2022, available at: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-vladimir-putin-business-europe-germany-d15ca4ed450d9ca67f43d3b1ac27294d>

<sup>95</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Russia Criminalizes Independent War Reporting, Anti-War Protests*, 2022, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/07/russia-criminalizes-independent-war-reporting-anti-war-protests>

<sup>96</sup> Meduza, *Российские власти за несколько дней разгромили весь медиа-рынок. Вот как это выглядит* Печальный список, 2022, available at: <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/03/05/rossiyskie-vlasti-za-neskolko-dney-razgromili-ves-media-rynok-vot-kak-eto-vyglyadit>

<sup>97</sup> Mediascope, *Аудитория Telegram. Отчет по данным Mediascope*, 2023, p.3, available at: [https://mediascope.net/upload/iblock/gfb/3nfdyfloew36u7oqs3fip8loz14yad4g/Telegram\\_Otchet\\_Mediascope.pdf](https://mediascope.net/upload/iblock/gfb/3nfdyfloew36u7oqs3fip8loz14yad4g/Telegram_Otchet_Mediascope.pdf)

<sup>98</sup> The Bell, *Война и мир в Telegram. Как патриотические каналы захватывают соцсеть Павла Дурова*, 2022, available at: <https://thebell.io/voina-i-mir-v-telegram>

<sup>99</sup> Радио Свобода, *80% крупных политических телеграм-каналов поддерживают войну*, 2022, available at: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/krupnyh-politicheskikh-telegram-kanalov-podderzhivayut-voynu/31914606.html>

<sup>100</sup> Громадянська мережа ОПОРА, *Медіаспоживання українців в умовах повномасштабної війни. Опитування ОПОРИ*, 2022, available at: [https://www.oporua.org/polit\\_ad/mediaspozhyvannia-ukrayintiv-v-umovakh-povnomashtabnoyi-viini-opituvannia-opori-24068](https://www.oporua.org/polit_ad/mediaspozhyvannia-ukrayintiv-v-umovakh-povnomashtabnoyi-viini-opituvannia-opori-24068)

<sup>101</sup> Forbes, *Инфотеррористы. У пророссийских Telegram-каналов в Украине уже 4,2 млн подписчиков, а на рост потрачено всего \$850 000. Как так получилось?* 2022, available at: <https://forbes.ua/ru/inside/kanali-propagandi-prorosyyski-telegram-kanali-virosli-do-42-mln-chitachiv-u-skillki-obkhoditsya-ikh-prosvyannya-27062022-6835>

into a lifeline for information and communication in Ukraine, filling the void left by disrupted communication networks, shuttered media outlets, and limited access to television. Despite challenges like sluggish internet connections, Telegram's agility has proven invaluable for disseminating real-time alerts about Russian troop movements and attacks. Even President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky utilises Telegram, maintaining an official channel with over 870 thousand subscribers,<sup>102</sup> underscoring the platform's significance in connecting leaders with the public during urgent times. Thus, in Ukraine's landscape of influential Telegram channels, official news outlets and government agencies dominate the top spots. However, amidst this hierarchy lies a concerning issue. Some channels leverage their influence to propagate Russian disinformation, raising alarms about spreading fake news. **While these channels cunningly masquerade as local news sources, their actual mission is to propagate Russian narratives and bolster support for Russia.** Over 120 such channels have surfaced, with 68 materialising within the first two weeks of the conflict.<sup>103</sup> The rest followed suit as Russian forces made headway into Ukrainian territory. Their collective style and the mutual reposting of content from pro-Russian channels strongly suggest that at least half of them were established as part of a coordinated effort orchestrated by the Russian government. The testimony of a captured Russian lieutenant colonel further validated this Kremlin propagandist strategy. In response, the Security Service of Ukraine maintains a watchful eye on channels perpetuating disinformation and Russian propaganda within Ukraine, successfully identifying and blocking 1,529 such channels during the initial four months of the conflict.<sup>104</sup>

However, there is more to this tale — Russian propaganda in Telegram is not confined to near abroad borders and actively targets an international audience. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the pro-Russian media faced bans<sup>105</sup> and were expelled from information spaces across Europe and the US. In response, Moscow swiftly shifted its disinformation arsenal to social media. **According to an EU report, the audience of pro-Kremlin channels within the European segment of Telegram more than tripled in 2022.**<sup>106</sup> Consequently, Telegram evolved into a pivotal battleground in information warfare, serving as a digital arena where Russia vigorously waged disinformation campaigns against Ukraine and the broader Western world. In this virtual theatre of conflict, narratives clashed, and propaganda strategies unfolded in real-time, shaping public opinion and perceptions. The platform's significance transcended mere communication, becoming a critical space where the dissemination of misinformation and manipulations played out on a global scale.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Medium, *World Leaders, War & Digital Diplomacy on Telegram*, 2022, available at: <https://medium.com/digital-diplomacy/world-leaders-war-digital-diplomacy-on-telegram-fcc33c1ec8ef>

<sup>103</sup> Texty, *Telegram Occupation. How Russia Wanted to Breed a Media Monster, but Ended up with a Paper Tiger*, 2022, available at: <https://texty.org.ua/projects/108161/telegram-occupation-how-russia-wanted-breed-media-monster-ended-paper-tiger/>

<sup>104</sup> Інститут масової інформації, *YOUTUBE BLOCKS 442 PRO-RUSSIAN CHANNELS AT UKRAINE'S REQUEST*, 2022, available at: <https://imi.org.ua/en/news/youtube-blocks-442-pro-russian-channels-at-ukraine-s-request-i46389>

<sup>105</sup> Council of the European Union, *EU imposes sanctions on state-owned outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's broadcasting in the EU*, 2022, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>

<sup>106</sup> European Commission, *Digital Services Act: Application of the Risk Management Framework to Russian disinformation campaigns*, 2023, p.11, available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c1d645do-42f5-11ee-a8b8-01aa75ed71a1>

<sup>107</sup> The Guardian, *A success for Kremlin propaganda: how pro-Putin views permeate Italian media*, 2023, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/31/a-success-for-kremlin-propaganda-how-pro-putin-views-permeate-italian-media>



### III From Origins to Impact: Mapping Russia's Influence in Serbia and the Western Balkans

Nestled in the heart of Europe, the Western Balkans (WB) form a dynamic and culturally rich mosaic. In the wake of the Yugoslav wars, these nations have made significant strides in economic development, institutional growth, and democratisation. However, beneath this facade of advancement lies an undercurrent of instability that warrants global concern. In 2023, according to the meticulous Fragile States Index—a barometer of a nation's internal socio-political cohesion—all internationally recognized World Bank states, except for Bosnia and Herzegovina, were marked as stable. Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, was placed at a warning level. Nevertheless, considering that stable states are generally rated at 60 or lower, the performance indicators for these nations may not appear impressive: Albania at 56.8, Bosnia and Herzegovina at 72.3, Montenegro at 58, North Macedonia at 60.3, and Serbia at 67.9.<sup>108</sup> These figures underscore the fragile foundation of statehood in the region, marked by internal discord and persistent challenges. Additionally, none of these nations can be classified as stable post-modern states. Furthermore, three among the WB6, specifically Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia, grapple with governance issues stemming from enduring territorial conflicts. Some experts even warn that Bosnia and Herzegovina teeters on the brink of potential state failure,<sup>109</sup> despite its recent achievement of EU candidate status and the initiation of EU accession talks.<sup>110</sup> In this delicate balance, each state in the region presents a potential threat to the others, making the Balkans Europe's powder keg and a looming danger to European security.

As instability grips the region, it becomes a ripe arena for external powers to wield their influence and shape the political trajectory of these nations. **Recent years have seen numerous studies spotlighting the WB as a battleground for global players like Russia, the US, the EU, China, and Turkey.**<sup>111</sup> Researchers identify several motives that could drive Russia's efforts to bolster its position in Serbia. Firstly, with the rejection of Serbia's support and its complete transition to the Euro-Atlantic zone, Russia stands to lose its foothold in Southeast Europe, constraining its influence in the Mediterranean region. Secondly, losing positions in Serbia and the Balkans could limit Russia's flexibility in dealing with Turkey and China, both eager to expand their regional influence. Thirdly, maintaining Russian political influence in Serbian society ensures continued control over Serbia and other Balkan countries with significant Serb minorities, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo.<sup>112</sup> Additionally, Serbia acts as a channel for Russia to influence EU security dynamics, given that the WB presents opportunities for inter-ethnic conflicts<sup>113</sup> and serves as hubs for illicit activities like weapon trafficking, drug trade, and organised crime.<sup>114</sup> As a result, Serbia emerges as an attractive prospect for the Kremlin,

<sup>108</sup> Ediye Basse, "Fragile States Index Annual report", *The Fund for Peace*, 2023, pp.60-61, available at: [https://fragilestatesindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/FSI-2023-Report\\_final.pdf](https://fragilestatesindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/FSI-2023-Report_final.pdf)

<sup>109</sup> European Conservatives and Reformists Group, *Bosnia and Herzegovina at high risk of becoming a failed state*, 2022, available at: [https://ecrgroup.eu/article/bosnia\\_and\\_herzegovina\\_at\\_high\\_risk\\_of\\_becoming\\_a\\_failed\\_state](https://ecrgroup.eu/article/bosnia_and_herzegovina_at_high_risk_of_becoming_a_failed_state)

<sup>110</sup> European Commission, *Commission proposes to open EU accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and updates on progress made by Ukraine and Moldova*, 2024, available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-proposes-open-eu-accession-negotiations-bosnia-and-herzegovina-and-updates-progress-made-2024-03-12\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-proposes-open-eu-accession-negotiations-bosnia-and-herzegovina-and-updates-progress-made-2024-03-12_en)

<sup>111</sup> Strahinja Subotić and Miloš Janjić, "Serbia at the crossroads between the West and the East", *European Policy Centre*, 2020, available at: <https://cep.org.rs/en/publications/serbia-at-the-crossroads-between-the-west-and-the-east/>; Vsevolod Samokhvalov, "Russia in the Balkans: Great Power Politics and Local Response", *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 2, 2019, available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26776081>; Petar Djukić and Darko Obradović, "The fate of the Western Balkans regional security subcomplex - the necessity of regional cooperation", *Security Science Journal* 1, no. 2, 2020, available at: <https://www.securityscience.edu.rs/index.php/journal-security-science/article/view/27>; Richard Kraemer, "Serbia on the edge", 2022, available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/serbia-on-the-edge/>

<sup>112</sup> Richard Shapiro, "Serbian and Russian Relations: The Future Implications for Serbia's Accession to the European Union", 2018, p.1, available at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/159469974.pdf>

<sup>113</sup> The Guardian, *Tensions rise at Kosovo border as number plate row escalates*, 2021, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/02/tensions-rise-at-kosovo-serbia-border-as-number-plate-row-escalates>

<sup>114</sup> Walter Kemp, "Crooked Kaleidoscope Organized Crime in the Balkans", *The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime*, 2017, available at: [https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/OC\\_balkans.pdf](https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/OC_balkans.pdf)

offering a strategic lever against the EU and the US.<sup>115</sup> Thus, amidst the ongoing international crisis sparked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, attention has shifted to the standoff between Russia and the West in the Balkans. Media outlets, politicians, and scholars alike have voiced concerns over the potential for a second front to open in the Balkans,<sup>116</sup> sounding the alarm about Russia's provocations and their far-reaching repercussions.

**However, is Russia's position truly robust in the Balkans? Can the Kremlin genuinely possess the clout to shape the region's political landscape?** In exploring these pivotal questions, this chapter delves into the Balkans' significance within Russia's global strategic ambitions, examines the factors underpinning Moscow's appeal in the region, and analyses the key narratives of Kremlin propaganda as they unfold across the Balkans.

### 3.1 The fragile soap bubble of Russia's sway in the Balkans

In the intricate world of geopolitics, Serbia and the WB are widely acknowledged as crucial elements in Russia's strategic calculus.<sup>117</sup> Political discourse is laden with talk of "strategic partnership"<sup>118</sup> between these nations, and scholars have explored the complex ties between Russia and the Balkans.<sup>119</sup> Nonetheless, delving into the convoluted web of Russia's global interests, a more nuanced perspective emerges. **While safeguarding and expanding its influence in the post-Soviet near abroad remains a cornerstone of Russia's geopolitical agenda, the Balkans have historically held a less prominent position in its geopolitical priorities.** A notable example from the 1990s illustrates this point: under Boris Yeltsin's leadership, Russia sided with international sanctions against Yugoslavia, showing limited support for Serbia despite voicing disapproval of Allied Forces operations. Furthermore, over the past three decades, neither the WB as a region nor individual Balkan states have been distinctly acknowledged as partners in Russia's foreign policy framework.<sup>120</sup> However, the unease among politicians and researchers regarding Russia's burgeoning presence in the Balkans is justified. The primary connection between Orthodox nations in the Balkans and Moscow has centred around cooperation in the energy sector, giving rise to complex political dynamics that deserve closer examination.

The Balkans have emerged as a pivotal arena in Russia's grand energy strategy, and the reasons behind this manoeuvre are deeply rooted in geography and geopolitics. **Situated at the crossroads of Europe, the Balkan Peninsula presented Russia with an opportunity to carve out a strategic energy transit route towards Western and Central Europe.** The scene was further set in the aftermath of Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004-2005, when Russia commenced crafting projects for gas and oil pipelines that would bypass Ukraine, elevating the region's significance and marking the genesis of Russia's proactive foray into the energy landscape of the Balkans. The journey began in 2003 when Lukoil seized a commanding 79.5% stake in Beopetrol,<sup>121</sup> Serbia's second-largest network of gas

<sup>115</sup> Dimitar Bechev, Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans, *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, 2019, p.7, available at: [https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias\\_strategic\\_interests\\_in\\_balkans\\_11dec.pdf](https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias_strategic_interests_in_balkans_11dec.pdf)

<sup>116</sup> The Hill, *How to stop Russia's second front in the Balkans*, 2023, available at: <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3996141-how-to-stop-russias-second-front-in-the-balkans/>; Maxim Samorukov, "Why Is All Quiet on Russia's Western Balkan Front", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2022, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88547>; Dejana Saric, Pierre Morcos, "The War in Ukraine: Aftershocks in the Balkans," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2022, available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-ukraine-aftershocks-balkans>

<sup>117</sup> Andrew Alimov and Filipović Aleksa, "Russian-Serbian relations - challenges and perspectives", *Society, environment, development*, no. 4, 2018, available at: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/russian-serbian-relations-challenges-and-perspectives>; Yelena Ponomareva and Miroslav Mladenović, "Multi-vector approach as a way out of the impasse of strategic vulnerability", *Comparative politics Russia*, vol.11, 2020, available at: [https://mgimo.ru/upload/2022/07/zhurnal\\_sravnitelnaya\\_politika\\_38.pdf](https://mgimo.ru/upload/2022/07/zhurnal_sravnitelnaya_politika_38.pdf)

<sup>118</sup> Exit News, *Russia Lauds Strategic Partnership with Serbia*, 2021, available at: <https://exit.al/en/russia-lauds-strategic-partnership-with-serbia/>

<sup>119</sup> Žarko Petrović, "Russian – Serbian Strategic Partnership: Scope and Content," *The International and Security Affairs Centre*, 2009, available at: <https://www.isac-fund.org/download/Russian%20-%20Serbian%20Strategic%20Partnership%20-%20Scope%20and%20Content.pdf>

<sup>120</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, 2023, available at: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/fundamental\\_documents/1860586/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/)

<sup>121</sup> SeeNews, *Bulgarian LPG Trader Kalvacha's Serbian Unit Eyes Building Petrol Stations in Serbia, Montenegro*, 2007, available at: <https://www.girodivite.it/Centro-Studi-Europa-dell-Est-news,6757.html>

stations. This move marked the initial step in Russia's concerted effort to solidify its foothold in the region. Gazprom Neft followed suit in 2008, acquiring 51% of Petroleum Industry of Serbia (NIS) at a bargain price of 400 million euros.<sup>122</sup> Gazprom also claimed the sole gas storage facility in Serbia, Banatski Dvor,<sup>123</sup> while securing a monopoly with favourable terms for gas and oil production in Serbia.

Expanding its reach across the region, Gazprom Neft's investments in NIS extended into neighbouring countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, and Romania, firmly entrenching Russian commercial interests throughout Southeastern Europe.<sup>124</sup> Other Russian companies did not fall behind. For instance, Lukoil inked a memorandum of cooperation with the Macedonian government in 2005, outlining joint investment projects in the oil products market. By 2021, Lukoil had established its presence by opening the 33rd gas station in the country.<sup>125</sup> Meanwhile, the Russian state entity Zarubezhneft bolstered the Kremlin's presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 2007 and 2009, acquiring the Brod and Modric oil refineries,<sup>126</sup> among other critical energy infrastructure assets. Montenegro, too, became a focus for Russian energy interests as Lukoil sought to solidify its standing in Montenegro Bonus,<sup>127</sup> eventually transitioning to an independent role. **Russia's stronghold in Southeastern Europe's energy market is particularly evident in the natural gas sector, where it overwhelmingly dominates, covering 100% of the gas needs for countries like Serbia, Northern Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.**<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless, the Russian presence in the oil sector is considerably smaller, supplying just 17% of Serbia's overall oil requirements.<sup>129</sup>

Russia's fervent pursuit of energy assets in the WB has certainly caught attention. However, it is essential to underline that this oil and gas-centric strategy does not solely define the region as an exclusive focus in Russia's foreign policy playbook. **Acquiring deposits, oil refineries, and company shares by state and semi-state entities is a well-trodden tactic within Russian political circles, extending well beyond the Balkans.** The giants of Russia's oil and gas domain — Gazprom, Lukoil, Rosneft, Surgutneftegas, TNK-BP, and Gazpromneft - have always been vigorously expanding their reach on a global scale. From Egypt to the US, Finland to France, Great Britain to Venezuela, Croatia to China, and Iraq to Algeria, they have inked deals far and wide, securing assets across continents.<sup>130</sup> Therefore, their investments in the Balkan energy sector are simply part of a broader oil and gas expansion strategy rather than indicating exclusive regional interest. Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight that the major acquisitions contributing to Russia's significant energy presence in the region occurred during the planning stages of the South Stream gas pipeline project, where the Balkans were slated to play a pivotal role. However, with the project's abandonment and the Turkish Stream's emergence, the Balkans' allure for Russia has diminished considerably. This shift in dynamics has led to a decrease in investment inflow, which peaked in the mid-2010s.

<sup>122</sup> Marta Szpala, "Russia in Serbia – soft power and hard interests", *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, 2014, p.4, available at:

<https://aei.pitt.edu/58198/>

<sup>123</sup> Reuters, *Serbia, Gazprom sign deal for South Stream storage*, 2010, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/serbia-gas-idUKLDE6141L20100205>

<sup>124</sup> Paul Stronski and Annie Himes, "Russia's Game in the Balkans", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2019, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235>

<sup>125</sup> Балканист, *Российская нефтяная компания расширяет свою сеть в Северной Македонии*, 2021, available at: <https://balkanist.ru/rossijskaya-neftyayaya-kompaniya-rasshiraet-svoyu-set-v-severnoj-makedonii/>

<sup>126</sup> Зарубежнефть, *Фокус на опережающие тренды*, 2020, p.275, available at: <https://www.nestro.ru/upload/iblock/232/ixej5912mjkqw5t18qv1hd48gohvvsb9.pdf>

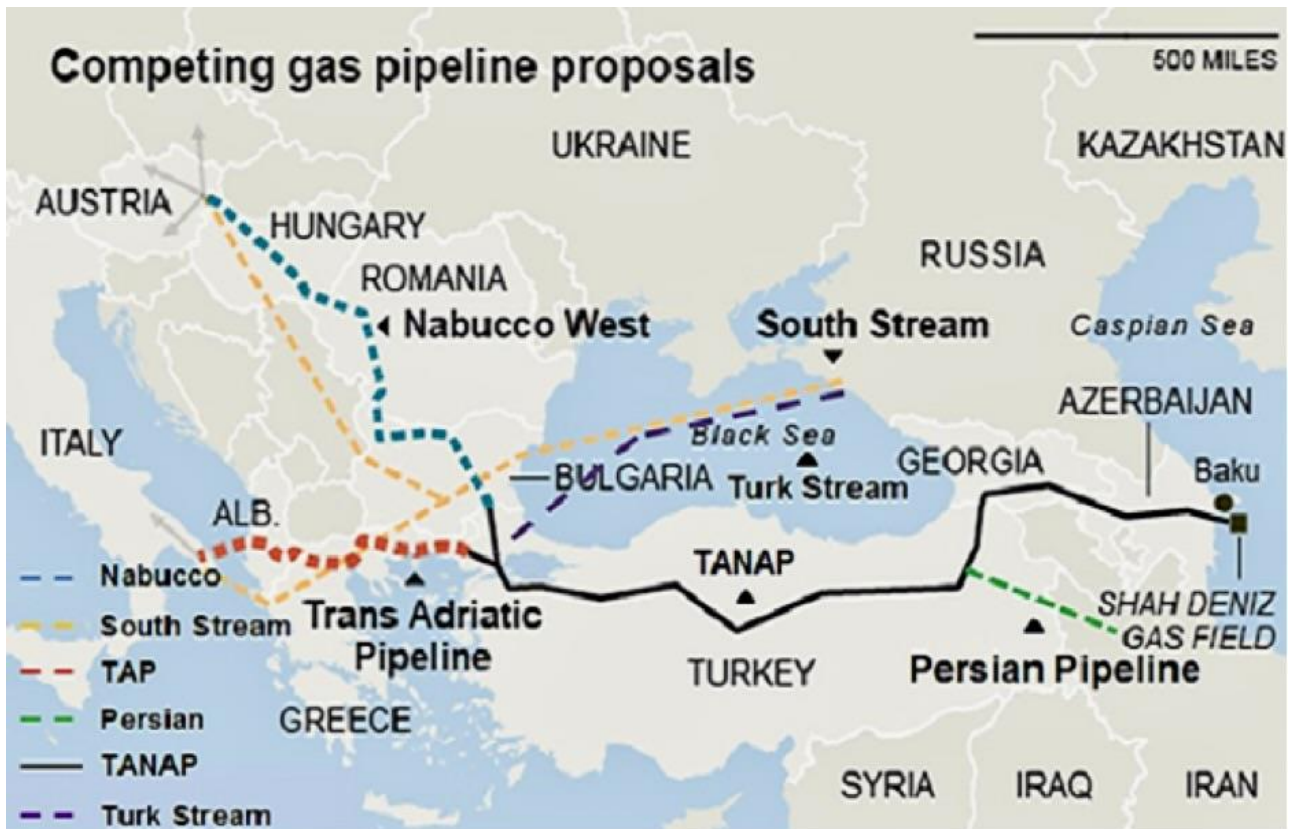
<sup>127</sup> Finance, *Lukoil se je umaknil iz tekme proti Petrolu*, 2007, available at: <https://www.finance.si/finance/lukoil-se-je-umaknil-iz-tekme-proti-petrolu/a/182410>

<sup>128</sup> Branislav Stanicek, "Russia's influence in the Western Balkans", *European Parliamentary Research Service*, 2022, p.1, available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/733523/EPRS\\_ATA\(2022\)733523\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/733523/EPRS_ATA(2022)733523_EN.pdf)

<sup>129</sup> Marta Szpala, "Serbia: the forced abandonment of Russian oil", *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, 2022, available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2022-10-13/serbia-forced-abandonment-russian-oil>

<sup>130</sup> Nina Poussenkova, "The Global Expansion of Russia's Energy Giants", *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2010, available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24384337>

Image 2: Southern Gas Pipeline Projects



Source: *ENERPO Journal*.<sup>131</sup>

Beyond the energy sector, Russia's economic presence in the Balkans is on shaky ground, lagging significantly behind the influence exerted by Western powers and China. Over the past decades, the EU has made substantial investments across the Balkans, funding infrastructure development, initiatives for democratic reform, and economic modernisation efforts. This steadfast commitment not only strengthens the economic foundations of Balkan countries but also solidifies their European economic and political integration. Moreover, Western nations are not merely investing but actively forging economic ties and negotiating trade agreements, systematically expanding their influence throughout the region. The EU, in particular, holds significant sway as the primary financial partner in the WB, boasting a staggering 70% of total foreign direct investment and an impressive 81% share of exports.<sup>132</sup> Meanwhile, the Balkans play a crucial role in implementing China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to enhance transport infrastructure and expand access to European markets. This interest is evident in Serbia, where China is heavily involved in significant projects like the high-speed Belgrade-Budapest railway or Belgrade-South Adriatic highway.<sup>133</sup> **Thus, despite the EU's longstanding position as the region's leading investor, China undeniably holds the Western Balkans' primary creditor title,<sup>134</sup> offering substantial loans without strict requirements for reforms and democratisation.**

<sup>131</sup> Daniel Tsvetanov, "Gazprom signs a contract for the construction of the second string of Turkish Stream. What's next?", *ENERPO Journal*, 2017, available at: <https://enerpojournaleusp.org/gazprom-signs-a-contract-for-the-construction-of-the-second-string-of-turkish-stream-whats-next/>

<sup>132</sup> Branislav Stanicek and Simona Tarpova, "China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans", *European Parliamentary Research Service*, 2022, available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)733558\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf)

<sup>133</sup> The Diplomat, *China and the Budapest-Belgrade Railway Saga*, 2020, available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/china-and-the-budapest-belgrade-railway-saga/>

<sup>134</sup> Elena Ponomareva and Dmitry Krykanov, "Balkan Breath of Beijing (Strategy and Tactics of Chinese Presence in the Western Balkans)", *ПОЛИТИЯ* no.1(96), 2020, p.122, available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340562871\\_Balkan\\_Breath\\_of\\_Beijing\\_Strategy\\_and\\_Tactics\\_of\\_Chinese\\_Presence\\_in\\_the\\_Western\\_Balkans](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340562871_Balkan_Breath_of_Beijing_Strategy_and_Tactics_of_Chinese_Presence_in_the_Western_Balkans)



Examining the presence of the Russian military in the Balkans reveals an ambiguous picture as well. Serbian media often paint Russia as Serbia's primary military ally, supporting the myth of Russian superiority in the region. However, the actual situation is far from being favourable to the Kremlin. To begin with, three out of the region's five internationally recognised countries — Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro — are members of NATO. However, even fostering collaboration with the relatively Russia-friendly nations of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly the Republika Srpska, has been challenging for Moscow. **While Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu proclaimed in 2020 that cooperation with Belgrade had reached a "fundamentally new level,"<sup>135</sup> the reality tells a different story.** Since Russia withdrew its troops from the peninsula in 2003,<sup>136</sup> its regional military influence has waned.

Russia initially made strides in building a military partnership with Serbia. In 2013, Serbia secured observer status in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and signed several intergovernmental agreements on military cooperation, spanning the modernisation of armed forces, mutual consultations, training, and information exchange. Commencing in 2014, Serbia engaged in joint military exercises with Russia and Belarus on six occasions.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, in late 2021, representatives from Russia and Serbia signed an agreement to establish a representative office of the Russian Ministry of Defense within the Ministry of Defense of Serbia.<sup>138</sup> Also, Russia employs a more subtle, indirect strategy to strengthen its military presence in the Western Balkans through humanitarian aid. While ostensibly aimed at assisting, their resource often supports separatist groups<sup>139</sup> and prolongs simmering conflicts. **A notable example is establishing the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Center in Niš in 2011, initially created for disaster relief but raising suspicions of intelligence activities and concerns about the potential for a Russian military base in Serbia.**<sup>140</sup> Additionally, arms purchases play a significant role in the military collaboration between Russia and Serbia. In the early 2000s, Serbia's defence capabilities were severely weakened by human and equipment losses during the 1990s conflicts. Consequently, revitalising and modernising the military became a top priority for the Serbian government. Between 2016 and 2019, Serbia invested over 830 million euros in acquiring new military equipment,<sup>141</sup> making it Europe's largest importer of Russian weapons and military gear by the end of 2020.<sup>142</sup>

However, upon closer examination, Russia's achievements might lose some of their luster, and doubts arise regarding the strength of the countries' alliance. For instance, acquiring new military equipment was presented as a benevolent gift from Russia to bolster the Serbian army. However, Serbia often receives ageing Soviet equipment from Russia, which can only be maintained and repaired with the involvement of Russian companies.<sup>143</sup> Thus, this 'supply' of weaponry strains the Serbian budget; for example, the acquisition of Russian gear in 2017, including the MiG-29, came with a hefty price tag, with

<sup>135</sup> The Associated Press, *Russian defense minister visits Serbia amid Balkan tensions*, 2020, available at:

<https://apnews.com/151639b341d903174a44613d2bbf25b7/gallery/9cfo48a0b9cd4c76899b5d187130bba7>

<sup>136</sup> Stars and Stripes, *Russian peacekeepers leave Balkans*, 2003, available at: <https://www.stripes.com/news/russian-peacekeepers-leave-balkans-1.4902>

<sup>137</sup> Dániel Harangozó, "A Balancing Act? Serbia's Military Neutrality: Concept and Implementation", 2021, p.16, available at:

[https://www.academia.edu/71480134/A\\_Balancing\\_Act\\_Serbia\\_s\\_Military\\_Neutrality\\_Concept\\_and\\_Implementation](https://www.academia.edu/71480134/A_Balancing_Act_Serbia_s_Military_Neutrality_Concept_and_Implementation)

<sup>138</sup> Anadolu Agency, *Russia, Serbia vow to strengthen military cooperation*, 2021, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/russia-serbia-vow-to-strengthen-military-cooperation/2436869>

<sup>139</sup> Dimitar Bechev, "Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans", *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, 2019, p.16, available at: [https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias\\_strategic\\_interests\\_in\\_balkans\\_11dec.pdf](https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias_strategic_interests_in_balkans_11dec.pdf)

<sup>140</sup> Srbija Danas, *Niš postaje vojni centar Balkana! Gleda pravo na Kosovo! Lazanski: Strateški važno! Ameri paniče: Ruska baza?*, 2019, available at:

<https://www.sd.rs/vesti/info/nis-postaje-vojni-centar-na-balkanu-gleda-pravo-na-kosovo-lazanski-strateski-vazno-ameri-panice-2019-02-25>

<sup>141</sup> Balkanska bezbednosna mreža, *U modernizaciju Vojske Srbije od kraja 2016 do danas uloženo oko 830 miliona evra*, 2019, available at:

<https://www.balkansec.net/post/vojska-srbije-od-kraja-2016-do-danas-u-modernizaciju-ulo%C5%BEeno-oko-830-miliona-evra>

<sup>142</sup> Vuk Vuksanović and Marija Ignjatijević, "A quasi-arms race: Serbia and Croatia", *Belgrade Centre for Security Policy*, 2021, p.4, available at: <https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/a-quasi-arms-race-serbia-and-croatia/>

<sup>143</sup> Dimitar Bechev, "Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans", *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, 2019, p.16, available at: [https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias\\_strategic\\_interests\\_in\\_balkans\\_11dec.pdf](https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias_strategic_interests_in_balkans_11dec.pdf)

the Serbian government shelling out 185 million euros<sup>144</sup> for its overhaul and modernisation. Moreover, amid the complex interactions of international relations, Serbia's military partnerships with Western nations frequently take the spotlight, often overshadowing its connections with Russia in both quantity and quality. **In 2006, Serbia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program, and in 2014, it signed its first Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO, marking the pinnacle of cooperation between NATO and non-member nations.** Consequently, Serbia's joint manoeuvres with NATO have gained remarkable momentum. For instance, by 2016, the Serbian military had participated in 200 joint operations with NATO and the US, dwarfing the 17 joint actions with Russia.<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, Serbia's observer status in the CSTO Parliamentary Assembly remains largely symbolic, as the organisation lacks regular and substantial mechanisms for collaboration between member and non-member states. **Additionally, Serbia's penchant for acquiring weaponry from Western nations, like France, stands out.** Procuring nine H145M helicopters from Airbus in 2016 and 18 units of Mistral short-range anti-aircraft missile systems in 2019 underscores the nation's tilt toward the West.<sup>146</sup> The US also donated \$25 million between 2007 and 2018 for Serbia's military development. As a result, the top five investors in this sector include Norway, Denmark, and the United Kingdom.<sup>147</sup> Thus, Serbia aligns its foreign policy trajectory with Western interests, as illustrated by its decision not to purchase the Russian S-300 long-range missile system<sup>148</sup> due to the looming threat of US sanctions.<sup>149</sup> Also, Serbia yielded to pressure from the EU in 2020,<sup>150</sup> refraining from participating in the annual joint exercises 'Slavic Brotherhood' with Eastern partners since they were held in Belarus, where widespread mass protests emerged.

**Meanwhile, one of the most striking discrepancies with Russia's strategic interests in the Balkans came with its reaction to Montenegro and Macedonia's NATO accession.** In Montenegro's case, Russia had various means to pressure the Montenegrin authorities. However, despite the failed coup attempt in 2016, Russia did not take decisive action to intercept Montenegro's NATO membership. For instance, Russia refrained from imposing sanctions on Russian tourist visits to Montenegro, a sector heavily dependent on Russian visitors who make significant real estate investments along the coast. This response differed from the measures taken against Turkey in 2015, where Russian tourism to Turkish shores was restricted following the downing of a Russian SU-24 bomber by the Turkish Air Force in Syrian airspace.<sup>151</sup> Likewise, Russia's reaction to North Macedonia joining NATO was comparatively mild. Such composure is not typical for Russia, which has shown a wide array of strategies and tactics to exert influence in countries it deems important. Rather, this suggests that the Balkans do not hold a significant place in the Kremlin's strategic priorities.

As a result, despite media narratives amplifying Russia's influence in the WB, its sway has diminished over the years. **Even with seemingly friendly states like Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia does not appear eager to foster lasting and promising economic or military bonds.** This aspect holds paramount significance as various international players, including China, Turkey, and the UAE, actively expand their footprint in the Balkans, highlighting the region's open markets and engagement possibilities, especially in the context of prolonged waiting on the EU membership. Thus, Russia faces no limitations in the Balkans but deliberately refrains from pursuing deeper involvement in the region, confining its presence to rhetorical expressions about the fraternity of Orthodox nations. Surprisingly,

<sup>144</sup> Balkan Insight, *Serbia Arms Experts Query Value of Russia's 'Gifts'*, 2016, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/12/23/serbian-arms-deal-with-russia-may-be-too-expensive-12-22-2016/>

<sup>145</sup> Dimitar Bechev, "Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans", *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, 2019, p.15, available at: [https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias\\_strategic\\_interests\\_in\\_balkans\\_11dec.pdf](https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias_strategic_interests_in_balkans_11dec.pdf)

<sup>146</sup> Richard Kraemer, "Serbia on the edge", 2022, p.6, available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/serbia-on-the-edge/>

<sup>147</sup> Dániel Harangozó, "A Balancing Act? Serbia's Military Neutrality: Concept and Implementation", 2021, p.13, available at: [https://www.academia.edu/71480134/A\\_Balancing\\_Act\\_Serbia\\_s\\_Military\\_Neutrality\\_Concept\\_and\\_Implementation](https://www.academia.edu/71480134/A_Balancing_Act_Serbia_s_Military_Neutrality_Concept_and_Implementation)

<sup>148</sup> Maxim Samorukov, "Last Friend in Europe: How Far Will Russia Go to Preserve Its Alliance With Serbia?", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2022, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87303>

<sup>149</sup> Reuters, *Serbia faces risk of U.S. sanctions over Russian arms deal*, 2019, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1Xl19U/>

<sup>150</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Serbia Withdraws From Belarus Military Exercise, Citing EU Pressure*, 2020, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-withdraws-from-belarus-military-exercise-citing-eu-pressure/30829735.html>

<sup>151</sup> The Christian Science Monitor, *Russia ends visa-free travel with Turkey in escalation over plane downing*, 2015, available at: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/2015/1127/Russia-ends-visa-free-travel-with-Turkey-in-escalation-over-plane-downing>

this strategy has proven successful. Paradoxically, within the collective mindset, especially among Serbian societies deeply intertwined with Russia historically and culturally, Russia is still considered the primary friend and ally.<sup>152</sup>

### 3.2 Russian Soft Power in Serbia and Beyond

Russia's economic and military presence in the WB is often exaggerated and falls short of Balkan nations' extensive collaboration with Western counterparts. Nonetheless, Moscow has effectively ingrained itself in the region as a 'key partner' and the 'primary ally,' leveraging soft power tactics, particularly through its cultural policies in the WB. Serbia stands as the pivotal point for the dissemination of Kremlin influence across the region, utilising Serbian minorities in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Northern Macedonia as strategic channels for pro-Russian actors to connect with their target audience. In a carefully directed campaign, Russian forces have skilfully crafted an image of Russia as a formidable partner and staunch protector of Serbs, particularly championing the cause of Orthodox communities. This narrative has taken root in Serbian society, fueled by a widespread network of pro-Russian institutions committed to advancing the Russian language and culture. **As far back as 2016, researchers documented 109 such organisations actively fostering various aspects of Serbian-Russian relations.**<sup>153</sup> Among the prominent entities within this network are the Russkiy Mir Foundation and the Russian House Cultural Center,<sup>154</sup> ostensibly established to facilitate intercultural dialogue and enhance cooperation between nations. This mission gained renewed significance with the outbreak of conflict in eastern Ukraine. One striking example is the 'Children of Donbas' exhibition, unveiled in 2019,<sup>155</sup> which featured poignant photographs depicting the harrowing lives of children enduring ceaseless shelling in wartime conditions. These images aimed to underscore Ukraine's genocide of Russians in the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics, evoking empathy and support for Russia's backing of the separatists.

**At the same time, the Kremlin proudly showcases a network of cultural and educational organisations within Russian borders dedicated explicitly to nurturing and promoting international cooperation.** Some have been operating for several years, such as the Center for International Cooperation 'Russian-Balkan Dialogue,' established in 2017.<sup>156</sup> However, there has been a notable surge in the number of such centres' activities since the eruption of the Ukraine war in 2022. For instance, the 'Russian-Balkan Center for Business Cooperation and Culture' emerged, swiftly opening representative offices in various Russian cities, including Ivanovo,<sup>157</sup> Saint Petersburg,<sup>158</sup> and Kaliningrad.<sup>159</sup> Additionally, in 2023, the inaugural edition of the 'Balkan Diplomat' journal was released, aiming to meet the "demand for positive and objective information about Serbia in the Balkans from [Russian] regional leaders and representatives of large and medium-sized businesses."<sup>160</sup> **These entities primarily promote cultural ties with Serbia and Republika Srpska, which involves coordinating international festivals, conferences, sports events, student exchange programs, guest visits, and assisting pro-Russian researchers and journalists in the WB.** Notably, many of

<sup>152</sup> Demostat, *Demostat: Građani prepoznaju EU kao najvećeg donatora i investitora, emotivno više vezani za Rusiju*, 2022, available at:

<https://demostat.rs/sr/vesti/ekskluziva/demostat-gradani-prepoznaju-eu-kao-najveceg-donatora-i-investitora-emotivno-vise-vezani-za-rusiju/1513>

<sup>153</sup> Eyes Wide Shut. Strengthening of Russian Soft Power in Serbia – Goals, Instruments and Effects, *Center for Euro-Atlantic studies*, 2016, p.4, available at: [https://issuu.com/disinfoportal/docs/eyes\\_wide\\_shut](https://issuu.com/disinfoportal/docs/eyes_wide_shut)

<sup>154</sup> Marta Szpala, *Russia in Serbia – soft power and hard interests*, *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, 2014, p.4, available at: <https://aei.pitt.edu/58198/>

<sup>155</sup> СРБИН.ИНФО, *Дођите–потресно: Изложба фотографија 'Деца Донбаса' у Београду*, 2019, available at: <https://srbin.info/kultura/dodjite-potresno-izlozba-fotografija-deca-donbasa-u-beogradu/>

<sup>156</sup> Центр международного сотрудничества 'Российско-Балканский Диалог', *В Сербском Ресурсном Центре в Белгороде состоялась День памяти жертв агрессии НАТО*, 2017, available at: <https://dialogrs.ru/news/2017/03-4.html/>

<sup>157</sup> Российско-Балканский центр делового сотрудничества и культуры, *В Иваново открылся Российско-Балканский центр делового сотрудничества и культуры*, 2022, available at: <https://balkancenter.ru/news/2022/2411/>

<sup>158</sup> Российско-Балканский центр делового сотрудничества и культуры, *В Санкт-Петербурге откроют представительство Российско-Балканского центра делового сотрудничества и культуры*, 2023, available at: <http://surl.li/qmacu>

<sup>159</sup> Российско-Балканский центр делового сотрудничества и культуры, *В Калининграде откроют представительство Российско-Балканского центра делового сотрудничества и культуры*, 2023, available at: <https://balkancenter.ru/news/2023/kaliningrad-preds/>

<sup>160</sup> Российско-Балканский Диалог, *Вышел первый номер журнала "Балканский дипломат"*, 2023, available at:

<https://dialogrs.ru/news/2023/zhurnal-balkanskij-diplomat.html/>

their major events and meetings take place on the periphery of western Balkan countries. For instance, the Russian-Balkan Center for Business Cooperation and Culture partner office is located in Požega, Serbia,<sup>161</sup> a municipality with fewer than 26 thousand residents<sup>162</sup>, according to the 2022 census. Similar examples include Gradiška, a municipality in Republika Srpska with fewer than 50 thousand residents,<sup>163</sup> and Derwenta a town with fewer than 12 thousand residents.<sup>164</sup> These instances underscore the extensive reach of Russian agents beyond major urban centres and administrative hubs.

In Serbia and the broader Balkans, Russia's influence is not just a matter of political manoeuvring or economic ties — it is also deeply intertwined with its collaboration with extreme right-wing groups. These groups, often espousing pro-Russian narratives, form an essential foundation for Moscow's efforts to expand its sway in the region, leveraging shared anti-European, anti-NATO, and anti-Kosovo sentiments. Russian and Serbian right-wing extremists operate across a spectrum of formal and informal channels. For instance, the 'Night Wolves' (Russian motorcycle club) got prominence among researchers and is widely known for its intimate connections with Russian President Vladimir Putin and its significant engagement in the political landscape of Republika Srpska.<sup>165</sup> **Furthermore, the support from Russia to Serbian right-wing extremist groups is multifaceted, ranging from bolstering online propaganda campaigns to providing military training.** Moreover, Russian entities in Serbia have occasionally thrown their weight behind official far-right and nationalist movements, such as 'Serbian Party Oathkeepers',<sup>166</sup> which emerged during the 2016 protests against NATO and the EU. What is particularly concerning is the active collaboration between extreme right groups from Russia and Serbia, including even the most marginalised factions. This partnership goes beyond mere ideological alignment, involving coordinating joint events and meetings in both countries.<sup>167</sup> Notably, these right-wing groups organised public actions in support of Russia following the onset of the war in Ukraine,<sup>168</sup> underscoring the profoundness of their cooperation and the extent of Russia's influence within these circles.

Russian influence in Serbia extends deep into the media landscape, as evidenced by the 2015 launch of a Serbian news service 'Sputnik.' Sputnik's content, disseminated via its website and radio station, enjoys widespread distribution across various Serbian media platforms, including Blic, Kurir, Informer, B92, and Pink.<sup>169</sup> Notably, at the end of 2022, RT Balkans set up an office in Serbia,<sup>170</sup> securing a broadcasting license and launching its operations after the closure of RT offices across Europe.<sup>171</sup> **These media outlets, often criticised as key purveyors of Russian propaganda, play a crucial role in spreading pro-Russian narratives throughout Serbia and the wider WB.** Criticism from Western

<sup>161</sup> Российско-Балканский центр делового сотрудничества и культуры, *Подписано соглашение о гуманитарном сотрудничестве между Национальной библиотекой Пожеги и Российско-Балканским центром делового сотрудничества и культуры*, 2023, available at: <http://surl.li/qmafi>

<sup>162</sup> Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, *2022 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings*, 2023, p.40, available at: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2023/pdf/G20234003.pdf>

<sup>163</sup> Град Градишка, *Демографија*, 2024, available at: [https://www.gradgradiska.com/o\\_gradisci/](https://www.gradgradiska.com/o_gradisci/)

<sup>164</sup> Derventa Cafe, *Mr. Željko Asentić: De/populacija, demografija i demokratija*, 2021, available at: <https://www.derventacafe.com/mr-zeljko-asentic-de-populacija-demografija-i-demokratija/>

<sup>165</sup> Mirza Buljubašić, "Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE", *Radicalisation Awareness Network*, 2022, p.7, available at: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran\\_vrwe\\_in\\_western\\_balkans\\_overview\\_072022\\_en.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran_vrwe_in_western_balkans_overview_072022_en.pdf)

<sup>166</sup> Dimitar Bechev, "Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans", *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence* 2019, p.23, available at: [https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias\\_strategic\\_interests\\_in\\_balkans\\_11dec.pdf](https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias_strategic_interests_in_balkans_11dec.pdf)

<sup>167</sup> Mirza Buljubašić, "Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE", *Radicalisation Awareness Network*, 2022, p.6, available at: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran\\_vrwe\\_in\\_western\\_balkans\\_overview\\_072022\\_en.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran_vrwe_in_western_balkans_overview_072022_en.pdf)

<sup>168</sup> Balkan Insight, *At Pro-Russian Balkan Rallies, a Who's Who of the Far-Right*, 2022, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/10/at-pro-russian-balkan-rallies-a-whos-who-of-the-far-right/>

<sup>169</sup> Asya Metodieva, "Russian narrative proxies in the Western Balkans," *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 2019, available at: <https://www.gmfus.org/news/russian-narrative-proxies-western-balkans>

<sup>170</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Russian State's RT Media Group Starts Online Project In Serbian*, 2022, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-rt-serbia-project/32131872.html>

<sup>171</sup> Council of the European Union, *EU imposes sanctions on state-owned outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's broadcasting in the EU*, 2022, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>



nations, condemning Russian news agencies abroad for engaging in information warfare and disseminating disinformation,<sup>172</sup> underscores the significance of Russia's media presence in Serbia. **Additionally, the Russian Orthodox Church plays a pivotal role in Russia's cultural influence in Serbia.** Their respective leaders and the Russian International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Peoples facilitate direct cooperation between the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches. This foundation actively promotes the concept of Slavic unity, and several churches in Serbia operate under the direct jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church, such as the Church of the Holy Trinity in Belgrade. Consequently, the Kremlin's pervasive presence manifests across various aspects of Serbian society, from captivating audiences with Russian films and TV shows to prime-time news reports from channels like 'Rossiya-1' and 'Russia Today,' often presented in Russian with Serbian titles. Notably, since 2010, Gazprom has been the principal sponsor of Serbia's most prominent football club, 'Red Star.' This intricate network of influence unveils a captivating paradox within Serbian society. While many young Serbs may primarily look towards the West regarding career and life perspectives, they simultaneously support Serbia's alliance with Moscow, highlighting the results and multifaceted nature of Russia's cultural, political, and media penetration in the region.<sup>173</sup> From its strategic foothold in Serbia, Russian soft power extends its influence to neighbouring Western Balkan nations. Yet, the impact of Russian actors is significantly influenced by the degree of Russian presence acceptance and the unique attributes of the political environment within each nation. For example, in Albania and Kosovo, where pro-European and pro-NATO sentiments prevail, the reception of pro-Russian narratives and actions is less favorable<sup>174</sup>.

### 3.3 Under the Kremlin's Shadow: Russia's Political Reach in Serbia

The extent of Russia's involvement in Serbian politics has always been a subject of intense scrutiny and debate. Since the late 2000s, characterised by escalating tensions between Russia and the West, further exacerbated by the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, scholars<sup>175</sup> and media<sup>176</sup> have shifted their attention to comprehending Russia's political influence in the WB and the activities of alleged "Russian proxies"<sup>177</sup> in the region. This interest only heightened in 2022 against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. The recent elections in Serbia, held in 2022 and 2023, sparked significant discussion in the media about Russia's potential sway over the political landscape<sup>178</sup> and its attempts to manipulate public opinion.<sup>179</sup> Concerns voiced by journalists and experts are not groundless, as **several critical Serbian politicians have openly expressed pro-Russian<sup>180</sup> sentiments or even Russophile<sup>181</sup> sentiments for decades.** Furthermore, in 2010, the Russian ruling party, 'United Russia,' forged a cooperation agreement with Serbia's 'Serbian Progressive Party'<sup>182</sup> (SNS), maintaining the alliance as a

<sup>172</sup> U.S. Department of State, *GEC Special Report: Russia's Pillars of Disinformation and Propaganda*, 2020, available at:

<https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>

<sup>173</sup> Dimitar Bechev, Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans, *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, 2019, p.26, available at: [https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias\\_strategic\\_interests\\_in\\_balkans\\_11dec.pdf](https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias_strategic_interests_in_balkans_11dec.pdf)

<sup>174</sup> Mark Galeotti, "Do the Western Balkans face a coming Russian storm?", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2018, available at:

[https://ecfr.eu/publication/do\\_the\\_western\\_balkans\\_face\\_a\\_coming\\_russian\\_storm/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/do_the_western_balkans_face_a_coming_russian_storm/)

<sup>175</sup> David Clark, Andrew Foxall, "Russia's Role in the Balkans – Cause for Concern?", *Henry Jackson Society*, 2014, available at:

<https://www.henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Russias-Role-in-the-Balkans.pdf>

<sup>176</sup> CTV News, *Serbia likely to get pro-Russian nationalist government*, 2012, available at: <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/serbia-likely-to-get-pro-russian-nationalist-government-1.855834>

<sup>177</sup> Wouter Zweers, Niels Drost, Baptiste Henry, "Little substance, considerable impact. Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro", *Clingendael Institute*, 2023, p.34, available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/little-substance-considerable-impact.pdf>

<sup>178</sup> European Western Balkans, *RT Balkan assists Serbian regime in discrediting findings of foreign election observers*, 2023, available at:

<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/12/22/rt-balkan-assists-serbian-regime-in-discrediting-findings-of-foreign-election-observers/>

<sup>179</sup> Associated Press, *In Serbia, pro-Russia is seen as the winning election stance*, 2022, available at: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-presidential-elections-moscow-elections-d20d885ffd7a86605b05ef97b3e1c4bc>

<sup>180</sup> Euronews, *Serbia appoints pro-Russian politician as new spy chief*, 2022, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/12/02/serbia-appoints-pro-russian-politician-as-new-spy-chief>

<sup>181</sup> B92, *'I love Russia - because I love Serbia,' says Serbian PM*, 2018, available at:

[https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2018&mm=02&dd=22&nav\\_id=103558](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2018&mm=02&dd=22&nav_id=103558)

<sup>182</sup> Zaks.ru, *'Единая Россия' договорилась о сотрудничестве с Сербской прогрессивной партией*, 2010, available at:

<https://www.zaks.ru/new/archive/view/74854>

minimum until 2021.<sup>183</sup> Public statements from Serbian officials also suggest ongoing cooperation between security services. For instance, in 2022, Aleksandar Vulin, Serbian Minister of the Interior and head of the Serbian Security and Information Agency, visited Russia, meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.<sup>184</sup> **Also, in January 2023, the Russian Federal Security Service Director awarded Aleksandar Vulin for exceptional professionalism and contribution to fostering cooperation between national services.**<sup>185</sup> Moreover, during the post-election protests in December 2023, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić expressed gratitude to the "Russian special services for providing intelligence on opposition activities."<sup>186</sup> However, the story of Russian political entanglements in the Western Balkans has a dimmer side, too. In 2017, two alleged Russian intelligence operatives faced accusations of attempting to orchestrate a coup in Montenegro.<sup>187</sup> **In 2019, a spy scandal unfolded in Serbia when President Aleksandar Vučić publicly disclosed information implicating over ten Serbian officers in bribery schemes involving the Russian military attaché.**<sup>188</sup> In the summer of 2020, Serbian officials accused pro-Russian nationalists of orchestrating violence and mass protests in Belgrade.<sup>189</sup> This scandal received extensive coverage in the Serbian media, capturing widespread attention. The situation intensified when Aleksandar Vučić cancelled his meeting with the Ambassador of the Russian Federation, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko,<sup>190</sup> further escalating tensions between Russia and Serbia. At the same time, the 2023 elections in Serbia were marred not only by misconduct but also by suspicions of active influence from Russian interests,<sup>191</sup> sparking increased interest in the issue of Russian influence in the country.

The enduring relevance of Russian influence in Serbian politics stems from its perception not merely as a variable but rather as a constant fixture established during Ottoman rule over the region. **While cultural and religious ties, along with Russia's support for Balkan liberation movements, are often cited as driving forces for Russophilia in Serbia,**<sup>192</sup> **this narrative oversimplifies a rich tapestry of historical complexities.** In the 19th century, the Russian influence evoked varied reactions among Serbian political factions. After the Berlin Congress agreements, where Russia shifted its focus from supporting Serbian statehood to Bulgaria, cooperation with Russia became contentious. While liberals and later radicals embraced pro-Russian sentiments, conservative Serbs within the progressive party viewed Russian politics with apprehension, arguing that Serbian and Russian interests were fundamentally different.<sup>193</sup> Moreover, in 1881, Serbia entered a secret convention with Austro-Hungary, significantly aligning its foreign policy with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This agreement, often seen as turning Serbia into a quasi-client state, limited its diplomatic independence and closely tied its political fortunes to Austro-Hungarian interests. This alignment persisted throughout the reign of the Obrenović dynasty, which lasted until 1903, reflecting about 23 years when Serbian sovereignty was

<sup>183</sup> Единая Россия, *Единая Россия* "проводит Международную межпартийную видеоконференцию "Глобальные вызовы XXI века: межпартийное измерение", 2021, available at: <https://er.ru/activity/news/edinaya-rossiya-provodit-mezhdunarodnuyu-mezhpartijnuyu-videokonferenciyu-globalnye-vyzovy-xxi-veka-mezhpartijnoe-izmerenie>

<sup>184</sup> France24, *Serbian minister visits Moscow, accuses EU of 'anti-Russian hysteria'*, 2022, available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220823-serbian-minister-visits-moscow-accuses-eu-of-anti-russian-hysteria>

<sup>185</sup> N1, *Head of Russia's FSB awards former Serbian intelligence chief Aleksandar Vulin*, 2023, available at: <https://n1info.rs/english/news/head-of-russia-s-fsb-awards-former-serbian-intelligence-chief-aleksandar-vulin/>

<sup>186</sup> Euractiv, *Russia accuses West of fomenting trouble in Serbia*, 2023, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement-neighbourhood/news/russia-accuses-west-of-fomenting-trouble-in-serbia/>

<sup>187</sup> BBC, *Montenegro jails 'Russian coup plot' leaders*, 2019, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48212435>

<sup>188</sup> The Guardian, *Serbian president accuses Russia of spy plot involving army*, 2019, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/21/serbia-investigates-video-claiming-to-show-russian-spy-paying-off-official>

<sup>189</sup> Kurir, *Udar na Srbiju: Desničarske proruske snage stoje iza protesta!*, 2020, available at: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3494521/udar-na-srbiju-desnicarske-proruske-snage-stoje-iza-protesta>

<sup>190</sup> Nedeljnik, *Vučić otkazao sastanak sa ruskim ambasadorom Bocan-Harčekom*, 2020, available at: <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/vucic-otkazao-sastanak-sa-ruskim-ambasadorom-bocan-harcekom/>

<sup>191</sup> Deutsche Welle, *Russia's influence overshadows Serbia's election*, 2023, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-influence-overshadows-serbias-election/a-67744235>

<sup>192</sup> Jelena Subotić, "Europe Is a State of Mind: Identity and Europeanization in the Balkans." *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no.2, 2011, available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23019690>

<sup>193</sup> Nikola Mladenović, Dušan Dostanić, "Odnos srpskih stranaka prema Rusiji od XIX do XXI veka", 2022, pp.135 - 143, available at: <https://ips.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/%D0%97%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA-%D0%A0%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%Bo-%D0%B8-%D0%91%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BD.pdf>

notably constrained under this influence.<sup>194</sup> Furthermore, the trajectory of Yugoslavia-USSR relations in the 20th century echoes a complex interplay of cooperation and discord shaped by the ebbs and flows of the Cold War and the evolving domestic and international policies of both nations.

In the early 2000s, a surge in pro-European sentiment swept through Serbia, particularly among the Democratic Party, which garnered substantial public support during this period of political transition. Following the ousting of Slobodan Milošević, leaders such as Zoran Đinđić<sup>195</sup> and Zoran Živković<sup>196</sup> made European integration a primary national goal. However, with the escalation of the Kosovo status issue and increasing tensions between Russia and the West in the late 2010s, Serbian political parties experienced a noticeable change in their stance towards foreign actors. **The declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008 and its subsequent ramifications represent a pivotal event that fueled this transformation in Serbian party politics.** Notably, Vojislav Koštunica underscored Russia's role, advocating for a principled resolution of the Kosovo issue in accordance with international law. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party under Boris Tadić, previously vocal in its support for swift EU accession, adopted a more nuanced approach. They balanced aspirations for EU membership with efforts to strengthen ties with Russia in alignment with perceived national interests. Subsequently, Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vuk Jeremić, representing the Democratic Party, frequently consulted with Moscow officials on Kosovo's status.<sup>197</sup>

A parallel shift unfolded within the SNS. Originating in 2008, the party emerged when a faction of deputies from the Serbian Radical Party, led by Tomislav Nikolić, splintered from its parent party in the National Assembly of Serbia. Initially conceived as a conduit bridging the EU and Russia,<sup>198</sup> the party also championed the preservation of Serbia's sovereignty over Kosovo. However, upon assuming power, discrepancies emerged in the party's priorities concerning relations with the West and Russia. Initially, the coalition government comprising the Socialist Party and the Progressive Party prioritised engagement with the EU. Negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina began shortly after assuming power, facilitated by EU mediation, leading to the signing of the Brussels Agreement in 2013. The genesis of this deal can be traced to the EU's steadfast stance, which tied Serbia's continued European integration to the resolution of the Kosovo issue. Meanwhile, the draft agreement on strategic partnership between Russia and Serbia announced with great fanfare during Vladimir Putin's visit to Belgrade in 2011,<sup>199</sup> remained stalled and had no progress over the years. However, the evolving dynamics surrounding Kosovo provoked a strong reaction from Serbia. **The ruling coalition gradually distanced itself from the West in subsequent years, while sentiment toward Russia notably warmed.** Moreover, the Serbian political establishment publicly underscored the significance of fostering ties with Russia. By May 2013, the Serbian and Russian presidents finally solidified their countries' friendship by signing a Declaration on Strategic Partnership,<sup>200</sup> followed by a defence cooperation agreement inked by the defence ministers of both nations in November of the same year.<sup>201</sup>

<sup>194</sup> Gale Stokes, "Politics as Development. The Emergence of Political Parties in Nineteenth-Century Serbia", 1990, p. 175, available at:

<https://books.google.ru/books?id=pokNAQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=ru#v=onepage&q&f=false>

<sup>195</sup> Deutsche Welle, *Djindjic's ideas live on*, 2013, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/has-djindjic-won-posthumously-in-serbia/a-16664501>

<sup>196</sup> Euractiv, *Zoran Zivkovic, Prime Minister of Serbia*, 2003, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/interview/zoran-zivkovic-prime-minister-of-serbia/>

<sup>197</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Transcript of Remarks and Replies by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Media Questions at Joint Press Conference Following Talks with Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic, Belgrade, April 19, 2011*, 2011, available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/1701838/](https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/1701838/)

<sup>198</sup> Nikola Mladenović, Dušan Dostanić, "Odnos srpskih stranaka prema Rusiji od XIX do XXI veka", 2022, p.148, available at: <https://ips.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/%D0%97%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA-%D0%A0%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%Bo-%D0%B8-%D0%91%D0%Bo%D0%BB%D0%BA%D0%Bo%D0%BD.pdf>

<sup>199</sup> Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Tadić: Uskoro ugovor o starteškom partnerstvu sa Rusijom*, 2011, available at:

[https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/putin\\_stize\\_u\\_srbiju/2346947.html](https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/putin_stize_u_srbiju/2346947.html)

<sup>200</sup> President of Russia, *Meeting with President of Serbia Tomislav Nikolic*, 2013, available at:

<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/catalog/keywords/82/events/18178>

<sup>201</sup> Ministry of defence Republic of Serbia, *Agreement on defence signed between Serbia and the Russian Federation*, 2013, available at:

<https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/tekst/5824/potpisan-sporazum-o-saradnji-srbije-i-ruske-federacije-u-oblasti-odbrane-5824>

In subsequent years, Serbia's faltering democratic transition and increasing government control over the media<sup>202</sup> solidified a pro-Russian discourse led by political elites. Their narratives fostered a near-reverential admiration for Russia and Vladimir Putin. Presenting Russia as Serbia's 'most important partner' and the 'closest European country,' they tapped into feelings of camaraderie. **The national government actively propagated the notion of an 'Orthodox-Slavic' brotherhood, leveraging the image of Russia and Putin, particularly during election cycles.** For example, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić frequently held meetings with the Russian President as part of his campaign.<sup>203</sup> Concurrently, in 2018, the leader of the Socialist Party of Serbia, Ivica Dačić, publicly proclaimed an "eternal love between Russia and Serbia,"<sup>204</sup> further cementing the narrative of unwavering solidarity. As a result, admiration for Putin as a global leader soared among the Serbian populace,<sup>205</sup> highlighting the deepening ties and perceived alignment between Serbia and Russia.

Despite not recognising Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and consistently supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, Serbian political discourse over the past decade has prominently featured narratives that highlight Russian military prowess and the effectiveness of its foreign policy maneuvers. Headlines boldly proclaiming, "This is how Russians destroy Islamists: 200 jihadists were eliminated in Syria in one blow"<sup>206</sup> served to underscore the formidable strength of the Russian armed forces. **Given the deep cultural ties between Serbia and Russia, these military triumphs were embraced by Serbian society as their own victories, evoking a profound sense of involvement.** This narrative resonated particularly strongly in a society that had grappled with recent defeats in conflicts, reigniting a yearning for past glory. Consequently, every military collaboration between Serbia and Russia was hailed as a remarkable national achievement. For example, Russia's transfer of fighter aircraft to Serbia swiftly became a powerful propaganda tool for Serbian leaders. Pro-government tabloids seized the opportunity, running headlines that exaggerated the significance of these deliveries, painting a vivid picture of Serbia's indomitability: "Mig on F-35: This is what NATO generals' worst nightmare looks like."<sup>207</sup> This headline, in one fell swoop, reinforced multiple narratives — the perpetuation of a standoff with the West, the unyielding strength of Russia, and the vital alliance between Russia and Serbia as the primary bulwark against NATO aggression.

<sup>202</sup> Dragana Bajić and Wouter Zweers, "Declining media freedom and biased reporting on foreign actors in Serbia. Prospects for an enhanced EU approach", *Clingendael Institute & European Policy Centre*, 2020, available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2020/declining-media-freedom-and-biased-reporting-in-serbia/>

<sup>203</sup> Blic, *Danas se rešava ključno pitanje. Vučić sa Putinom u Sočiju pregovara o ceni gasa za Srbiju, a na stolu su još četiri bitne teme*, 2021, available at: <https://www.blic.rs/biznis/danas-se-resava-kljucno-pitanje-vucic-sa-putinom-u-sociju-pregovara-o-ceni-gasa-za/y38mfqy>

<sup>204</sup> B92, "I love Russia - because I love Serbia," says Serbian PM", 2021, available at: [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2018&mm=02&dd=22&nav\\_id=103558](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2018&mm=02&dd=22&nav_id=103558)

<sup>205</sup> Artem Patalakh, "Emotions and Identity as Foreign Policy Determinants: Serbian Approach to Relations with Russia", *Chinese Political Science Review*, no. 4, 2018, p.500, available at:

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325120394\\_Emotions\\_and\\_Identity\\_as\\_Foreign\\_Policy\\_Determinants\\_Serbian\\_Approach\\_to\\_Relations\\_with\\_Russia](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325120394_Emotions_and_Identity_as_Foreign_Policy_Determinants_Serbian_Approach_to_Relations_with_Russia)

<sup>206</sup> Kurir, *Ovako rusi tamane islamiste: u jednom udaru u Siriji likvidirano 200 džihadista*, 2021, available at:

<https://www.kurir.rs/planeta/3670499/ovako-rusi-tamane-islamiste-u-jednom-udaru-u-siriji-likvidirano-200-dzihadista-video>

<sup>207</sup> Blic, "MIGOM" na F-35: Ovako izgleda najgora noćna mora NATO generala, 2017, available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/svet/migom-na-f-35-ovako-izgleda-najgora-nocna-mora-nato-generalacshjh3>



Image 3: An advertising billboard of the 'Dveri-POKS' coalition during the 2022 election campaign.



Source: Serbian movement Dveri.<sup>208</sup>

Researchers highlight a notable trend in local Serbian media, characterised by a significant bias and a pro-Russian orientation.<sup>209</sup> Striking examples of pro-Russian headlines include "Vučić side by side with Putin," "God's justice thundered in Moscow,"<sup>210</sup> and "Putin's Bulletproof vest is salvation for Serbia."<sup>211</sup> **These headlines, coupled with the complexities and obstacles on the path to European integration, contribute to bolstering Russia's favourable image in Serbia.** This portrayal frames international relations as an emotional issue rooted in identity, encompassing national, cultural, and religious factors. The overwhelming prevalence of pro-Russian discourse in Serbian media culminated in the emergence of articles in Serbian tabloids by the end of February 2022 with titles like "Putin's Lightning War" and "Ukraine's Attack on Russia."<sup>212</sup> These pieces not only glorified but also justified Russian aggression, shedding light on the prevailing 'Putinophilia' and 'Russophilia' deeply ingrained within Serbian society that has been formed by official political discourse.

Similarly, Republika Srpska leader Milorad Dodik strategically leverages his purported friendship with Russia as a formidable weapon in his election campaigns. **Beyond merely seeking personal popularity, Dodik aims to rally more voters to his cause by emphasising his close ties with the Kremlin.** The strength of this association was vividly showcased during Dodik's October 2023 visit to Moscow, where he met with Vladimir Putin,<sup>213</sup> marking a significant move in international politics. His close relationship with Russia bolsters the perception of him as a steadfast and determined leader, implying that he holds influential allies on the global stage. This narrative encourages the belief that Dodik can secure economic and diplomatic growth for Republika Srpska. Therefore, he strategically

<sup>208</sup> Српски покрет Двери, 2024, available at: [https://dveri.rs/saopstenja/dveri-najostrije-osudjuju-odluku-aleksandra-vucica-da-srbija-glasa-za-suspendovanje-rusije-iz-saveta-za-ljudska-prava-un/attachment/276142315\\_5273858562626207\\_5500343843258059614\\_n](https://dveri.rs/saopstenja/dveri-najostrije-osudjuju-odluku-aleksandra-vucica-da-srbija-glasa-za-suspendovanje-rusije-iz-saveta-za-ljudska-prava-un/attachment/276142315_5273858562626207_5500343843258059614_n)

<sup>209</sup> Talas, *Proruski narativ u srpskim medijima – Zašto su domaći mediji emotivniji od ruskih?*, 2019, available at: <https://talas.rs/2019/05/22/pro-ruski-narativ-drugi-deo/>

<sup>210</sup> Kurir, *Bože pravde grmelo Moskvom: Vučić i Putin položili vence i cveće uz himnu Srbije na Crvenom trgu*, 2018, available at: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3045829/boze-pravde-grmelo-moskvom-vucic-i-putin-polozili-vence-i-cvece-uz-himnu-srbije-na-crvenom-trgu-video>

<sup>211</sup> Informer, *Putin dolazi i donosi raketni sistem 'Pancir': Srbija postaje jedina zemlja u ovom delu Evrope, koja ima tako moćno oružje!*, 2018, available at: <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/387559/video-putin-dolazi-i-donosi-raketni-sistem-pancir-srbija-postaje-jedina-zemlja-u-ovom-delu-evrope-koja-ima-tako-mocno-oruzje>

<sup>212</sup> Dinko Gruhonjić, "Serbia's Media Caught Between Putinophilia and the New World Reality", *ResPublica*, 2022, available at: <https://republica.edu.mk/blog-en/politics/serbias-media-caught-between-putinophilia-and-the-new-world-reality/?lang=en>

<sup>213</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Dodik Travels To Moscow For Meeting With Putin Ahead Of Elections*, 2022, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/dodik-moscow-putin-elections-republika-srpska/32043995.html>

utilises the notion of friendship with Russia as a critical tool in his election campaign, tapping into its appeal to specific voter segments while igniting heated debates among political elites.

Hence, the deepening political cooperation with Russia and its amplified presence in the region can be perceived as a reaction to escalating EU demands regarding resolving the Kosovo status issue. **Therefore, branding Serbia or its politicians as 'Russian proxies' or depicting Serbia as a 'hostage to Russian interests' seems misplaced.**<sup>214</sup> Russia strategically capitalises on its close ties with Belgrade to enhance its image as a global power. It employs the Kosovo precedent as a pivotal argument in negotiations concerning Ukraine and utilises its influence in the Balkans as a tool that could potentially destabilise European security. However, in the intricate world of Serbian politics, cooperation with Russia has also evolved into a strategic manoeuvre used by local elites to gain an edge over their rivals and to assert Serbia's position in dialogue with the EU. Thus, the dynamics of the Russian-Serbian relationship are not one-sided; instead, they are characterised by mutual benefits and shared interests between Russia and Serbia.

In summarising this chapter and the broader analysis of Russian influence in the Balkans, it is evident that the situation remains complex and ambiguous. **On the one hand, the Kremlin is keen to assert its position, leveraging its ties with Serbia and Serbian communities in other WB countries.** Fostering anti-European sentiment, impeding national reconciliation, and maintaining the potential for conflict in the region align with Moscow's interests, creating a strategic buffer in Russia's relations with Western countries. **On the other hand, Russia does not seem intent on significantly expanding or strengthening its presence in the WB.** While economic and military cooperation between Moscow and Belgrade holds significance, they are surpassed by Serbia's trade and investment relationships with EU countries and its relations with NATO. **Moreover, upon closer examination, the key pillars of Russia's influence in Serbia do not appear as imposing as they initially seem.** Serbia's reliance on Russian energy resources, especially gas, is a common and shared reality among many European nations. This dependency is evident since the prohibition on pipeline gas supplies was not included in any of the 12 packages of sanctions issued during the study period,<sup>215</sup> reflecting the widespread reliance on these resources across the continent. Thus, even countries that fiercely criticise Russia continue to purchase gas from Russia. For example, in January 2024, the share of Russian gas in Czech imports exceeded 60%.<sup>216</sup> Also, Russia's stance of non-recognition towards Kosovo does not pose a substantial hurdle in the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. Russia is neither a party to this process nor one of its mediators nor a side's official representative.

Despite Russia's efforts to bolster soft power mechanisms in the Balkans, which still trail behind the EU's influence, the primary factor driving its growing impact in the region is the welcoming stance of local political elites. The Russian factor has become a significant tool in domestic and international political struggles. **As the Balkans' progress toward European integration has notably stalled, and many countries in the region are witnessing democratic backslides, constructing an image of Russia as an alternative to EU dominance in the WB becomes a valuable card in accession negotiations.** Even if it remains largely symbolic at this stage, the prospect of collaboration with Russia allows Balkan nations to assert their autonomy and seek more favourable terms and conditions from the EU. The WB are well-acquainted with this strategy of balancing Western and Eastern interests and playing on their divergent goals, a tactic reminiscent of Yugoslavia's approach half a century ago. In this fertile ground, the Kremlin has effectively established a strong foothold in Serbia and the wider Balkans, positioning itself as a major power in the WB without incurring substantial material costs. **Presently, the state of Serbian-Russian relations appears satisfactory, with aligned interests concerning the regional situation. However, the looming question persists: what occurs when the parties' interests diverge?**

<sup>214</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, "Russia Remains the Trump Card of Serbian Politics", *Carnegie Moscow*, 2020, available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/82090>

<sup>215</sup> Politico, *EU balks at adding Russian gas pipeline ban to sanctions package*, 2023, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-balks-add-russia-natural-gas-pipeline-ban-sanctions-package-g7/>

<sup>216</sup> Prague Morning, *Czechia Imported Over 60% of the Gas from Russia in January*, 2024, available at: <https://praguemorning.cz/czechia-imported-over-60-of-the-gas-from-russia-in-january/>



## IV Unveiling Russia's Narrative Web: Propaganda Crafting and Telegram's Influence in Serbia

Soft power and propaganda are distinct academic concepts within the realm of international relations, each employing unique strategies to shape perceptions and influence outcomes. Joseph Nye defines **soft power** as the ability to shape the preferences of others, which are usually associated with intangible assets, such as an attractive culture, political values, and institutions, as well as policies that others view as legitimate and having moral authority.<sup>217</sup> In contrast, **propaganda** is a form of communication designed to sway opinions, beliefs, or behaviours by disseminating one-sided messages, often with the intent to manipulate or mislead. Unlike soft power, propaganda relies on coercion and lacks legitimacy if not based on reliable information. This brief explanation reveals that **Russian soft power in the Balkans is inferior to Western counterparts**, who boast large-scale cultural, social and educational cooperation programs in the region. **However, Russia has asserted dominance in the region's propaganda landscape.** While local politicians adeptly weave pro-Russian narratives into their domestic political manoeuvres, Kremlin actors actively disseminate their narratives throughout the region and orchestrate disinformation campaigns, underscoring the multifaceted nature of Russian influence in the Balkans. Thus, this chapter delves into the analysis of the primary objectives of Russian propaganda in the region and elucidates the key Kremlin narratives employed in Serbia. Furthermore, it analyses the evolving landscape of Russian propaganda in Serbia amid escalating tensions with the West, including Moscow's growing influence in Serbian Telegram.

### 4.1 Crafting Russian Propaganda in Serbia and Beyond

**Sputnik Serbia news agency and RT Balkans, openly affiliated with the Kremlin, serve as the primary vehicle for Russian propaganda in the region. With the onset of the war in Ukraine, their informational footprint in the WB has experienced fluctuations, both diminishing and expanding.** Initially, from 2015 to 2022, Sputnik Serbia held sole sway in the Balkans, delivering comprehensive coverage throughout the region. However, the media landscape transformed by the close of 2022, as the Russian news agency Russia Today established its presence in Serbia,<sup>218</sup> unveiling the RT Balkan online platform. Also, amid a lavish advertising campaign,<sup>219</sup> plans were unveiled to launch Serbian-language RT Balkan television broadcasting until 2024.<sup>220</sup> Furthermore, in late 2023, Margarita Simonyan, Russia Today's chief editor, revealed intentions to extend RT Balkans' reach into Republika Srpska and across Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>221</sup> **However, beyond Serbia, the situation for Russian media is less fortunate.** On February 26, 2022, before the EU's ban on broadcasting Russia-affiliated media within its territory, Kosovo took the initiative to prohibit the Russian channels, a move later echoed by Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. Nonetheless, these mainstream news agencies represent merely the tip of the iceberg of Russian propaganda in the region, concealing lesser-known actors who contribute to the information warfare. As highlighted in the previous chapter, Serbia alone hosts over a hundred institutions and organisations enlisted in the sphere of Russian influence, facilitating the dissemination of Russian propaganda. This network spans from marginal near-criminal groups like 'Narodna Patrola' to government entities such as the Russian Center for Science and Culture, also known as 'Russian House,' which operates as one of the representative offices of the Russian

<sup>217</sup> Joseph S Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, 2008, p.95, available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25097996>.

<sup>218</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Russian State's RT Media Group Starts Online Project In Serbian*, 2022, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-rt-serbia-project/32131872.html>

<sup>219</sup> HOBOCTИ, *RT Balkan informativna služba je pokrenula reklamnu kampanju "Protrljaj oči!"*, 2023, available at:

<https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/1302842/balkan-informativna-sluzba-pokrenula-reklamnu-kampanju-protrljaj-oci>

<sup>220</sup> RT, *Serbian-language RT Balkans goes online*, 2023, available at: <https://www.rt.com/russia/566567-rt-balkan-news-portal/>

<sup>221</sup> N1, *RT programme coming to Bosnia from 2024, Simonyan confirms*, 2023, available at: <https://n1info.ba/english/news/rt-programme-coming-to-bosnia-from-2024-simonyan-confirms/>



Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation.

Image 4: RT Balkan advertising campaign in Serbia — "Clear your vision. Find out more."



Source: RT.<sup>222</sup>

Indeed, despite the involvement of various actors, Russian propaganda in the WB remains relatively constrained and repetitive. As one study on Russian propaganda subtly observed, it is characterised by "little substance, but considerable impact."<sup>223</sup> **Over the past decade, Russian propaganda has centred around several vital narratives, including - "The WB region is a playground for the clash of interests between East and West," "NATO is aggressive and provocative," and "EU is weak and treacherous."**<sup>224</sup> The rest of the discourse unfolds around these foundational elements. For example, regarding tarnishing the EU's reputation, Russian disinformation efforts aim to bolster local grievances against the EU, including its policies, objectives, and motivations. The strategy hinges on inundating the local information landscape with falsehoods and skewed interpretations that have the potential to inflame political debates. Particularly regarding the EU, Russia employs a dual-pronged approach. On the one hand, Kremlin propagandists work to depict the EU as an 'authoritarian, overbearing, oppressive' entity that tramples upon the freedom and sovereignty of the WB. Also, within this framework, discourses emphasise Western culture's foreignness and incompatibility with the Balkans' 'spiritual and resilient' society. These narratives, often emphasising issues related to LGBTQ+ rights, are prominently featured. Furthermore, Russia occasionally resorts to historical analogies, such as the recent popular campaign accusing Western nations of deploying depleted uranium shells during the Yugoslav bombings, purportedly leading to a cancer epidemic in present-day Serbia. Contrariwise, Russia portrays the EU as a 'feeble, ineffectual organisation entirely beholden to the US.' Any internal discord within the EU or difficulties in reaching a consensus are seized upon as evidence to predict its imminent collapse.

Despite its apparent simplicity and straightforwardness, this multifaceted approach enables propagandists to appeal to both 'Europhiles' and 'Eurosceptics,' undermining the trust of the former while providing rhetorical ammunition to the latter. This adaptability allows Moscow to tailor its disinformation campaigns to exploit the specific grievances of each WB nation in its relations with the EU. **By manipulating local political discourse, Russia's ploys escalate regional tensions, seeking to impede further integration and cast doubt on the EU's credibility.** For instance, Russia also

<sup>222</sup> RT, *RT promo: hall of fame*, 2024, available at: <https://www.rt.com/rt-promo-2022-en/%23RTBalkan2023>

<sup>223</sup> Wouter Zweers, Niels Drost, Baptiste Henry, "Little substance, considerable impact. Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro", *Clingendael Institute*, 2023, available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/little-substance-considerable-impact/>

<sup>224</sup> Branislav Stanicek and Anna Caprile, "Russia and the Western Balkans. Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference", European Parliamentary Research Service, 2023, p.5, available at:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS\\_BRI\(2023\)747096\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf)

exploits the 'Greater Albania' narrative<sup>225</sup> to sow discord and impair the EU's reputation. This tactic is particularly prominent in Serbia and among Serbian communities in Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. An illustrative example occurred in Skopje in 2017 when the appointment of Talat Džaferi, an ethnic Albanian, as Speaker of Parliament and the passage of legislation expanding the official use of the Albanian language sparked heated debates from media affiliated with Russia and Hungary, among others. These outlets suggested that such political development signalled the resurgence of the 'Greater Albania' ideology,<sup>226</sup> insinuating that the EU and NATO were backing this endeavour.

**However, even utilising a sophisticated approach and adapting discourses to suit the national contexts of WB nations, the success of Russian propaganda varies depending on each state's political and socio-economic stability.** For example, in Albania, foreign disinformation comprises a relatively small portion of the information landscape. In 2019, efforts to combat pro-Russian influences were emphasised in a resolution addressing foreign interference in Albanian politics, singling out Russia as a particular concern.<sup>227</sup> As a result, Russian efforts in Tirana have experienced reduced effectiveness and engagement. Meanwhile, in Kosovo, Russia managed to execute a targeted set of actions involving direct misinformation. One included spreading false reports about Kosovo being disconnected from Serbia's electricity grid<sup>228</sup> and distorting EU statements. An example involved extracting a phrase from an EU speaker, taking it out of context, and propagating it in a pro-Serbian manner: "Kosovo is a responsibility of Serbia during the crisis."<sup>229</sup>

At the same time, the situation in Republika Srpska within Bosnia and Herzegovina unfolds differently, mainly because many of the major disinformation campaigns in this region have international dimensions. For instance, in 2017, various Serbian-language media outlets spread rumours about alleged US and British plans for a terrorist act in Republika Srpska,<sup>230</sup> intended to bolster anti-Western sentiments ahead of the 2018 presidential elections. **Concurrently, with robust social media backing, Sputnik Serbia embarked on a mission to discredit the reputation of presidential candidate Mladen Ivanić, portraying him as a 'Western agent,' thus contributing to Milorad Dodik's victory. Additionally, Russian actors orchestrated elaborate disinformation campaigns targeting Milo Đukanović while backing the coalition 'For the Future of Montenegro.'**<sup>231</sup> These campaigns utilised a variety of deceptive tactics, such as spreading false narratives, manipulating information, and disseminating misleading content across various media platforms, all aimed at undermining Đukanović's political standing. This example reflects Russia's broader strategy of influencing political outcomes in the region.

**However, it is difficult to assess the extent of Russia's involvement and, more importantly, the consequences of the influence exerted by Russian propaganda and information attacks.** First of all, it is challenging to pinpoint the ultimate orchestrator of these information attacks, given the saturation of the region with disinformation, fake news, and other information security threats. **Local**

<sup>225</sup> Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them", *European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 2021, p.13, available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO\\_STU\(2020\)653621\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf)

<sup>226</sup> Sputnik Србија, Џафери почео седницу на албанском, 2017, available at: <https://sputnikportal.rs/20170530/makedonija-dzaferi-sednica-albanski-jezik-1111374173.html>

<sup>227</sup> Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them", *European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 2021, p.23, available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO\\_STU\(2020\)653621\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf)

<sup>228</sup> Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development, *Kosovo Disinformation Alerts. Russian Media*, 2020, p.3, available at: [https://kipred.org/repository/docs/D\\_-\\_Alert\\_-\\_Russian\\_Media\\_-\\_April\\_2020\\_536416.pdf](https://kipred.org/repository/docs/D_-_Alert_-_Russian_Media_-_April_2020_536416.pdf)

<sup>229</sup> Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development, *Kosovo Disinformation Alerts. Russian Media*, 2020, p.6, available at: [https://kipred.org/repository/docs/D\\_-\\_Alert\\_-\\_Russian\\_Media\\_-\\_April\\_2020\\_536416.pdf](https://kipred.org/repository/docs/D_-_Alert_-_Russian_Media_-_April_2020_536416.pdf)

<sup>230</sup> Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them", *European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 2021, p.24, available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO\\_STU\(2020\)653621\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf)

<sup>231</sup> Vijesti online, Kremlin: *The authorities in Montenegro will bear responsibility for their anti-Russian attitude*, 2016, available at: <https://en.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/121059/kremlj-vlast-u-crnoj-gori-ce-snositi-odgovornost-za-svoji-anti-ruski-stav>

**political elites wield misinformation for internal power struggles, while foreign players like Hungary, the Czech Republic, and the US also have a stake in the field.**<sup>232</sup> The WB's precarious political, economic, social, and security situation makes them fertile ground for information manipulation. Russian disinformation campaigns, in this context, simultaneously aim to destabilise these nations, stoking local key divisions while eroding the EU's image as a stabilising force in the region. Additionally, Russian disinformation attacks in the WB are intertwined with others, creating a mess from disinformation attacks directed against NATO, the EU, and various local religious, ethnic, political, and economic entities.

Secondly, in its bid to foster instability and maintain conflict potential in the region, **Russian propaganda usually capitalises on narratives circulating long before Russia's 'appearance' in the WB in the early 2000s.** For instance, the seeds of anti-Western sentiments deeply rooted in Serbia sprouted from the tumultuous events of the Yugoslav wars and disillusionment regarding swift European integration. Grieving for the past and dashed hopes for the future in the future are the critical locomotives of Serbian national discourse, which Kremlin propaganda amplifies rather than creates. Furthermore, this assertion is supported by the popularity and widespread dissemination of articles from Sputnik Serbia in local media, particularly those focusing on the roles of the EU and NATO in regional tensions, social unrest, and other pressing challenges.<sup>233</sup> **Thus, while Russian propaganda undeniably has its objectives in the WB and Serbia, with the potential to reach a broad audience and carry out information attacks through disinformation and misinformation, the extent of its success and its influence on shaping public and political discourse in the region remains a subject of discussion and vigorous debate.**

Nevertheless, following the eruption of war in Ukraine, there has been a notable shift in the landscape of Russian propaganda abroad, particularly in Serbia and the WB.<sup>234</sup> Now, more than ever, the Kremlin is actively pushing its pro-Russian stance and perspective on international relations on a global scale. Recent investigations into Russian propaganda activities in Northern Macedonia<sup>235</sup> have revealed a sprawling network dedicated to disseminating Kremlin narratives within the country. This web, stretching well beyond the confines of Northern Macedonia, utilises a diverse array of tactics to propagate false narratives in line with Moscow's agenda. Similar trends have been observed in Serbia,<sup>236</sup> indicating a consistent pattern of intensified and assertive actions by Moscow amidst escalating tensions between Russia and the West.

## 4.2 The Telegram's Journey in Serbia

Telegram's standing in Serbia continues to be a puzzle. While 2022 saw a rapid surge in Telegram's popularity,<sup>237</sup> the WB region has its reigning champions. According to SimilarWeb's data as of October 9, 2023, Telegram holds third in the 'Communication' category of the Serbian Google Play Store,<sup>238</sup> trailing behind the giants WhatsApp and Viber. However, things take a surprising turn in the 'Social' category. Despite its meteoric rise, Telegram fails even to crack the top 50 applications and services. Also, the Telegram X client<sup>239</sup> holds the 18th position despite its support being discontinued in 2019.

<sup>232</sup> Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them", *European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 2021, p.86, available at:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO\\_STU\(2020\)653621\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf)

<sup>233</sup> Tihomira Doncheva, "Tracking Russia's Narratives in the Western Balkan Media", *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, 2020, p.38, available at: <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/tracking-russias-narratives-in-the-western-balkan-media/53>

<sup>234</sup> Mondo Internazionale, *Russia's "information warfare" against the "West" in Serbia and the Western Balkans*, 2022, available at:

<https://mondointernazionale.org/focus-allegati/russias-information-warfare-against-the-west-in-serbia-and-the-western-balkans>

<sup>235</sup> Euronews Albania, *The battle with Russia's disinformation campaign in North Macedonia*, 2023, available at: <https://euronews.al/en/the-battle-with-russias-disinformation-campaign-in-north-macedonia/>

<sup>236</sup> Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Kako su proruski i ruski Telegram kanali širili dezinformacije o Kosovu*, 2022, available at:

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kosovo-rusija-telegram-proruski-drustvene-mreze-dezinformacije/31969041.html>

<sup>237</sup> Boban Stojanović and Aleksandar Ivković, "Alternative Report on the Position and Needs of Youth in the Republic of Serbia", *National Youth Council of Serbia*, 2022, p.6, available at: <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Alternative-report-2022.pdf>

<sup>238</sup> SimilarWeb, *Rating of top apps*, 2023, available at: <https://www.similarweb.com/ru/apps/top/google/store-rank/rs/communication/top-free/>

<sup>239</sup> SimilarWeb, *Rating of top apps*, 2023, available at: <https://www.similarweb.com/ru/apps/top/google/store-rank/rs/social/top-free/>

Diving deeper into Telegram analytics, the picture becomes more perplexing and murky. While some tools like TGStat offer limited insights into Serbia, **Telemetrio** shines more light on the situation. It reveals **143 public Telegram channels operating in Serbian, boasting an impressive combined follower count of over 800 thousand.**<sup>240</sup> However, these numbers come with a caveat – they might not capture the full extent of Telegram's influence. Private channels, hidden from the average user and accessible only by invitation, remain a blind spot in this data. Additionally, not all channel creators specify the language, further complicating the analysis. Moreover, there is the lingering question of the authenticity of subscribers; some might be automated bots or online trolls rather than genuine Serbian users. Nevertheless, amidst this complexity, there are glimpses of Telegram's dominance in Serbia, albeit tainted by a less-than-stellar reputation.

Telegram has existed since 2013 in Serbian cyberspace, largely unnoticed by the majority until recent years. **A string of alarming scandals revolving around Telegram channels disseminating harmful content propelled the app into the national spotlight.** The saga unfolded in March 2021 when media investigated channels specialising in 'revenge porn,' i.e., sharing of explicit sexual content obtained without the consent of the individuals involved, either through theft or unauthorised distribution.<sup>241</sup> With tens of thousands of subscribers, these channels shamelessly shared intimate photos of young women alongside divulging their personal data. **Shockingly, journalists revealed that this nefarious network had been operating in Serbia for years, with some groups amassing a staggering 50,000 followers.**<sup>242</sup> The scandal reached a fever pitch in May, as intrepid reporters uncovered an even larger web of channels publishing explicit material along with the victim's social media profiles.<sup>243</sup> Although the groups exposed by the media have since been closed, their administrators have created new channels<sup>244</sup> that continue distributing offensive content. A recent Balkan Investigative Reporting Network study exposed a glaring legal loophole in Serbian legislation regarding this issue. There is no specific criminal law addressing 'revenge porn' unless elements of blackmail or harassment are involved. This regulatory gap provides fertile ground for the proliferation of such groups, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation and impunity.

The application's reputation took another hit in September 2021 when journalists uncovered channels openly sharing pornographic materials involving children and minors daily.<sup>245</sup> Then, in January 2022, a drug scandal occurred as dealers used Telegram to attract customers and sell illicit substances, using QR codes on flyers as invitations to their channels.<sup>246</sup> Some of these leaflets were found in the heart of the city. However, by March 2022, the Serbian government-controlled media conspicuously ceased reporting on scandalous incidents related to Telegram. This timing coincided with the end of two waves of protests in the country – one opposing COVID-19 containment measures<sup>247</sup> and the other focusing on environmental concerns.<sup>248</sup> Speculation arose that government officials might have been wary of the

<sup>240</sup> Telemetrio, *Rating of Telegram Channels in the Country of Serbia*, 2023, available at:

[https://telemetr.io/en/country/serbia?languages=sr&sort=participants\\_count&page=1](https://telemetr.io/en/country/serbia?languages=sr&sort=participants_count&page=1)

<sup>241</sup> CNN, *What is 'revenge porn' and are there laws to protect you? Here's what you need to know*, 2021, available

at: <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/asequals/revenge-porn-protect-yourself-as-equals-intl-cmd/>

<sup>242</sup> Blic, *Policija: Izdat nalog UKP-u da istraži slučaj objave fotografija i snimaka na Telegramu, krivci će biti nađeni i kažnjeni*, 2021, available at:

<https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/policija-izdat-nalog-ukp-u-da-istrazi-slucaj-objave-fotografija-i-snimaka-na/65ecxyj>

<sup>243</sup> Blic, *Sramnu grupu na telegramu napravila devojka?! Jeziv čet u kom učestvuje više 26.000 ljudi i deli intimne fotografije devojaka iz Srbije nije jedini, tužilaštvo istražuje više ovakvih grupa*, 2021, available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/sramnu-grupu-na-telegramu-napravila-devojka-jeziv-cet-u-kom-ucestvuje-vise-26000/39cr3yt>

<sup>244</sup> Balkan Insight, *Telegram Shuts Serbian 'Revenge Porn' Groups Exposed by BIRN*, 2023, available at:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/27/telegram-shuts-serbian-revenge-porn-groups-exposed-by-birn/>

<sup>245</sup> Blic, *Horor na Telegramu. Otkrivena grupa u kojoj se dele pornografski snimci dece, objavljena i slika golog petogodišnjaka kom muškarac postavlja jezivo pitanje*, 2021, available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/horor-na-telegramu-otkrivena-grupa-u-kojoj-se-dele-pornografski-snimci-dece/19p1vos>

<sup>246</sup> Blic, *Skandal. Na aplikaciji za dopisivanje pojavile se grupe u kojima se nude kokain, spid i drugi narkotici: Reklamiraju se čak i na autobuskoj stanici*, 2021, available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/beograd/skandal-na-aplikaciji-za-dopisivanje-pojavile-se-grupe-u-kojima-se-nude-kokain-spid-i/81s1djj>

<sup>247</sup> N1, *Protests against COVID passes in Serbia*, 2021, available at: <https://n1info.rs/english/news/protests-against-covid-passes-in-serbia/>

<sup>248</sup> The Guardian, *Rio Tinto lithium mine: thousands of protesters block roads across Serbia*, 2021, available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/05/rio-tinto-lithium-mine-thousands-of-protesters-block-roads-across-serbia>



app's potential to mobilise the populace for protests, akin to situations in Iran<sup>249</sup> or Belarus.<sup>250</sup> It was especially pertinent during the COVID-19 protests, which witnessed active participation from extreme right-wing groups entrenched on Telegram worldwide. While these speculations remain conjecture, it is intriguing that Serbia's largest tabloids ceased publishing critical commentary about Telegram after March 2022. For example, in its last mention, Blic reported that all 'revenge porn' channels had been blocked, conveniently omitting any reference to the emergence of new ones.<sup>251</sup> Thus, **Telegram's marketing journey in Serbia has diverged significantly from its intended narrative as a bastion of anonymity and privacy. Instead, it has gained notoriety as a platform for unsavoury activities, tarnishing its reputation.** As a result, understanding the extent of Telegram's integration into the daily lives of Serbs becomes a perplexing endeavour.

**To determine the actual popularity of Telegram in Serbia, a survey was conducted among 250 Serbian youths as part of this study.** The results reveal a nuanced picture: while 82% of respondents were aware of Telegram, actual usage statistics paint a different story. **Only 31% reported having the application installed on their computers or mobile devices, with a mere 22% using it.** Meanwhile, just over 17% of participants were previous users of Telegram. As for the frequency with which active users engage with the application, the data shows significant variation: **19% of users open the application daily, 20% several times a week, 26% several times a month, and the majority (35%) less than once a month.** Interestingly, the survey highlights a relative lack of popularity for the messenger function among Serbian users. **A significant 66% primarily use Telegram for content consumption, with only 42% utilising it for communication.** Among those who do not use the application, 34% cited the lack of potential contacts for communication in Telegram as a deterrent. Within the active user base, there is a clear preference for channels delivering news content (53%) and political affairs (49%). Overall, these findings underscore limited traction for Telegram in the Serbian community, especially within the targeted demographic, which suggests the potential for even lower adoption rates among older population groups.

This observation gains further credence when considering the level of engagement observed within Serbian Telegram channels. Unlike the diverse array of channels found in Russian society and other CIS countries covering culture, sports, lifestyle, beauty, health, and personal blogs of public figures, Serbian Telegram lacks diversity in content. A notable Serbian Telegram channel, 'List of Serbian channels',<sup>252</sup> with 2,262 subscribers, regularly compiles a list of Serbian channels across various categories. However, apart from political channels, many struggle to attract an audience, often with follower counts hovering below a hundred, indicating limited audience engagement. One of the most popular non-political channels in the Serbian Telegram sphere is the humanitarian and charity organisation's channel, 'Serbs for Serbs',<sup>253</sup> boasting 3,711 subscribers. However, its relative insignificance becomes apparent compared to the organisation's presence on Instagram and Facebook. The official Facebook group<sup>254</sup> boasts 339 thousand subscribers, while the Instagram page<sup>255</sup> has 143 thousand followers, highlighting that Telegram is not the primary social media platform for the organisation's activities.

However, it is crucial to underline that Telegram has gained substantial traction among specific ideological factions. In recent years, this **instant messaging platform has become a favourite among far-right movements worldwide.** These groups actively utilise public Telegram channels and group chats as platforms for spreading hate speech, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. A significant factor driving the expansion of this audience on Telegram was the suspension of Twitter and Facebook

<sup>249</sup> BBC, *Iran protests: Telegram under fire as Tehran clamps down*, 2018, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42558317>

<sup>250</sup> Daniel Bush, "No Modest Voices: Social Media and the Protests in Belarus", *Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies*, 2020, available at: <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/no-modest-voices-social-media-and-protests-belarus>

<sup>251</sup> Blic, *Ugašena sramna grupa "perverzije Balkan"?! Jezivi čet u kojem je učestvovalo 48.000 članova, objavljivali intimne fotografije i snimke devojaka*, 2023, available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/kraj-za-jezivu-grupu-perverzije-balkan-objavljivali-intimne-slike-zena/vgbfv19>

<sup>252</sup> TGStat, *Списак српских канала*, 2024, available at: [https://tgstat.com/channel/@spisak\\_kanala/stat](https://tgstat.com/channel/@spisak_kanala/stat)

<sup>253</sup> TGStat, *Срби за Србе*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@srbizasrbe/stat>

<sup>254</sup> Facebook, *Srbi Za Srbe*, 2024, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/srbizasrbe>

<sup>255</sup> Instagram, *XO Срби за Србе*, 2024, available at: <https://www.instagram.com/srbizasrbe/>

accounts linked to extreme right-wing elements and proponents of the QAnon conspiracy theory after the attempted breach of the US Capitol.<sup>256</sup> **Serbian right-wing radicals, who are actively building their communication platforms and establishing connections with international allies,<sup>257</sup> are no exception to this trend.** Furthermore, the increased involvement of far-right elements on Serbian Telegram is supported by TGStat analytics, demonstrating the significant popularity of such channels among subscribers. For example, the channel associated with the far-right anti-immigrant group 'People's Patrol'<sup>258</sup> boasts over 8,000 subscribers, while the channel of the nationalist organisation 'Zentropa Serbia'<sup>259</sup> has around 2,000 subscribers. However, it is essential to note that regardless of the number of participants, these groups exhibit high subscriber engagement with their channel's content. Notably, 83% of the 'People's Patrol' channel subscribers actively read the posts, and 47% of 'Zentropa Serbia' subscribers engage with the content by commenting, reacting, and liking publications. Thus, as of the time of this study, Telegram had not entirely captured the attention of the Serbian general population. Instead, it had garnered a dedicated following among passionate supporters of various political causes and radical groups.

**Thus, despite its initial lack of popularity in Serbia, Telegram has managed to carve out a niche within the information services market.** While the messenger may not have found favour among the general populace, who often prefer Meta applications and Viber, it has gained significant traction among radical groups. The 'compelled digital migration' of adherents to far-right and extremist ideologies has provided a fertile breeding ground for the dissemination of pro-Russian propaganda. **The platform's inherent characteristics, including unbridled freedom of operation, anonymity, and the cloak of secrecy from the public's prying eyes, have granted propagandists boundless opportunities to foster further radicalization among their followers.** These dynamics underscore the imperative need for continued research into the Telegram ecosystem in Serbia.

### 4.3 Russian Telegram Broadcasting Network in Serbia and Western Balkans

**The dynamics within the Serbian Telegram platform saw a significant upheaval post-February 2022.** The onset of the war in Ukraine fuelled a surge in Russian propaganda's endeavours to promote pro-Russian narratives on a global scale, Serbia not exempted from its focus. In a twist of events, efforts were made to boost the application's popularity in the country, with May 2022 seeing two influential Serbian media platforms publish favourable articles about Telegram. B92, for one, regaled readers with tales of the application's unique and unparalleled features, setting it apart from its competitors.<sup>260</sup> Also, the portal Новости took a more pragmatic approach by furnishing step-by-step guides on Telegram installation, touted as a 'shortcut to accessing up-to-the-minute information.'<sup>261</sup> Subsequently, in July, Kurir delivered a trifecta of publications, informing readers about new premium subscriptions in Telegram and providing insights into its novel functionalities.<sup>262</sup> Also, Russian propaganda efforts have been laser-focused on enticing Serbian audiences onto Telegram. In March 2023, Sputnik Serbia launched advertisements promising Serbian readers an "uncensored news experience" underscored by a "commitment to privacy within the application."<sup>263</sup> This targeted approach has paid off, as Telegram channels disseminating pro-Russian propaganda in Serbia have amassed significant followings, reflecting the platform's rich tapestry of engagement.

<sup>256</sup> Lea Gerster, Richard Kuchta, Dominik Hammer and Christian Schwieter, "Telegram as a Buttress: How far-right extremists and conspiracy theorists are expanding their infrastructures via Telegram", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2022, available at: <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/telegram-as-a-buttress-how-far-right-extremists-and-conspiracy-theorists-are-expanding-their-infrastructures-via-telegram/>

<sup>257</sup> Balkan Insight, *The 'Awakening': American Right-Wing Extremist Finds Allies in the Balkans*, 2022, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/13/the-awakening-american-right-wing-extremist-finds-allies-in-the-balkans/>

<sup>258</sup> TGStat, *Народна Патрола*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@narodnapatrola/stat>

<sup>259</sup> TGStat, *Зентропа Србија*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@zentropasrb/stat>

<sup>260</sup> B92, *Ako koristite Telegram, morate znati ove trikove*, 2022, available at: <https://www.b92.net/tehnopolis/internet/ako-koristite-telegram-morate-znati-ove-trikove-2157147>

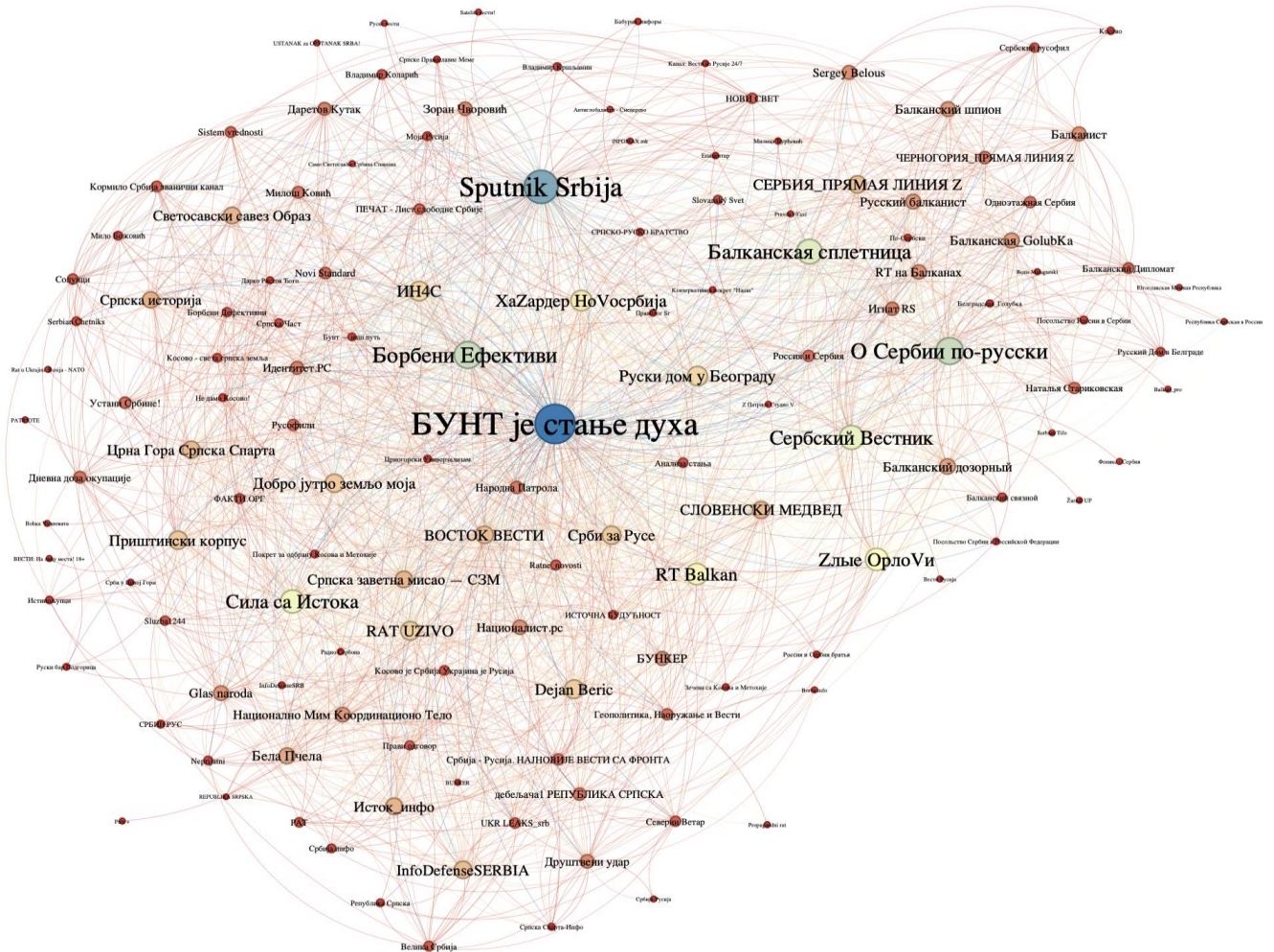
<sup>261</sup> Новости, *Корак по корак: Како да је инсталирате и користите - Уз апликацију "Телеграм" брзо до актуелих информација*, 2022, available at: <https://www.novosti.rs/cj/drustvo/vesti/1118369/korak-korak-kako-instalirate-koristite-aplikaciju-telegram-brzo-aktuelih-informacija>

<sup>262</sup> Blic, *Telegram uvodi pretplatu: Teret im finansiranje oglašivača, ovim potezom žele da ga izbegnu*, 2022, available at: <https://www.blic.rs/biznis/tehnologija/telegram-uvodi-pretplatu-teret-im-finansiranje-oglasivaca-ovim-potezom-zele-da-ga-izbegnu>

<sup>263</sup> Sputnik Србија, *На овој апликацији не могу да вас шпијунирају, а можете да читате нецензурисане вести*, 2023, available at: <https://sputnikportal.rs/20230325/na-ovoj-aplikaciji-ne-mogu-da-vas-spjuniiraju-a-mozete-da-citate-necenzurisane-vesti-1152908572.html>

The research encompassed within this study unveiled 143 Telegram channels disseminating pro-Russian propaganda, engaging an audience exceeding 800 thousand subscribers. This list is curated from diverse channels, ranging from groups boasting over 100 thousand to a mere eight subscribers. Notably, only 62 channels were established prior to February 24, 2022, whereas the remaining 82 channels emerged after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Figure 1: Scheme of mutual contacts within the network of pro-Kremlin Telegram channels in Serbia.



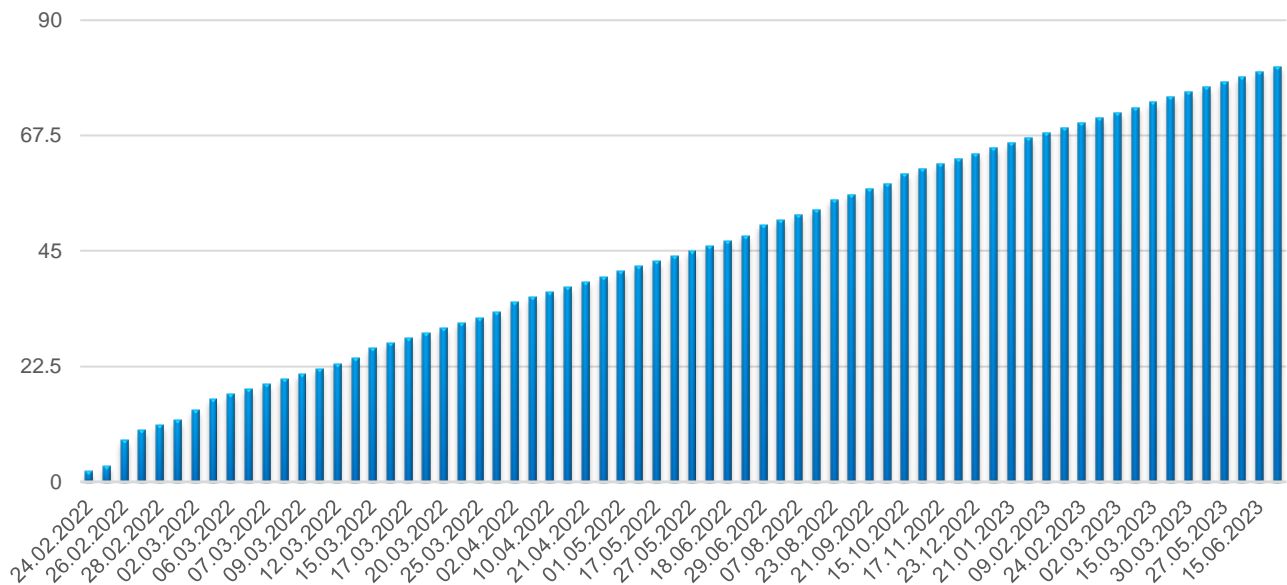
Source: Author's calculations based on data obtained, powered by Gephi.

Of particular interest is the chronological sequence of channel establishment post-February 24. Except for February 26, 2022, when five channels commenced simultaneously, subsequent channel formations transpired gradually. From February to April 2022, a new channel espousing pro-Russian narratives emerged nearly daily, except for sporadic instances. Subsequently, the frequency of new channel appearances diminished. From mid-April to late July, the emergence of one new channel weekly was typical, after which, until July 2023, new channel registrations tapered to 1-3 per month. Notably, no channels were opened between July and October 2023. The absence of new channels during this period might suggest several interpretations. It could signify the saturation of the Serbian information sphere with Russian propaganda, diminishing the necessity for new sources. Alternatively, it might indicate a waning interest from the Kremlin in the WB region. Fluctuations among recently opened channels illustrate these distinct dynamics. For instance, the 'BUNKER' channel,



established in March 2023, accrued a substantial subscriber base of almost 6,500<sup>264</sup> over a relatively short period. Conversely, the 'WAR' channel, initiated two days after 'BUNKER's' inception, attracted only 20 subscribers.<sup>265</sup> Collectively, 17 channels registered between January and June 2023 exhibited analogous erratic dynamics, aggregating more than 68 thousand subscribers.

Figure 2: Surge in pro-Russian Telegram channel growth post Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.



Source: Author's calculations based on data obtained.

**Intriguingly, the emergence patterns of pro-Kremlin channels did not correlate with significant events in Russian or international politics.** Despite the potency of Russian propaganda in promptly responding to crisis events, such as the dissemination of disinformation following images depicting victims of Russian aggression in Bucha, no corresponding upsurge in channel formations was observed. Similarly, **no correlations were established between channel emergence and events within Serbian politics. An impactful instance occurred with the escalation between Serbia and Kosovo in early August 2022.** The catalyst for this crisis was the decision of the Kosovo government to start issuing a declaration sheet to Serbian citizens entering Kosovo with ID documents issued by the Serbian authorities.<sup>266</sup> The decision made in late June ignited significant controversy and discord, leading to increased media coverage. Additionally, the escalation itself, characterised by Serbian troops being put on high alert, startled the global community, prompting discussions about the potential resurgence of conflict in the Balkans. **Notably, the discourse surrounding this escalation included references to Russia.** For instance, a member of the ruling SNS, Vladimir Đukanović, advocated for the "denazification of the Balkans"<sup>267</sup> on his Twitter account, a phrase reminiscent of Russia's justification for invading Ukraine using the term 'denazification.' Moreover, Russian government officials have voiced their protest against the violation of Serbs' rights in the region.<sup>268</sup> At the same time, the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence remains a crucial pillar of Russia's influence in Serbia.<sup>269</sup> Russia's unwavering

<sup>264</sup> Telegram, БУНКЕР, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/BunkerSrb>

<sup>265</sup> Telegram, PAT, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/bratoubilackiratuukrajini>

<sup>266</sup> KoSSev, KP: Preparations completed, Serb citizens entering Kosovo to be issued a declaration sheet starting from August 1st, 2022, available at: <https://kossev.info/kp-preparations-completed-serb-citizens-entering-kosovo-to-be-issued-a-declaration-sheet-starting-from-august-1st/>

<sup>267</sup> Samet Dalipi, Nazim Haliti, Naser Shabani, "Peace in Balkans: Behind Serbian-Russian Policy of Peace with Thorns", *Universum International College*, 2023, p.80, available at: <https://universum-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Books-of-Proceedings-Print-Copy-Final.pdf>

<sup>268</sup> Anadolu Agency, Russia calls on Kosovo, US, EU to stop 'provocations,' respect Serbs in Kosovo, 2022, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/russia-calls-on-kosovo-us-eu-to-stop-provocations-respect-serbs-in-kosovo/2650192>

<sup>269</sup> Sonja Biserko, Izabela Kisić, "How is Russia locally perceived on both societal and political levels in Serbia?", *Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia*, 2023, p.4, available at: <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/doc/I.Kisic%20%20S.Biserko%20%20Perception%20of%20Russia%20in%20Serbia.pdf>



support for Serbia's stance significantly contributed to Russia's and Vladimir Putin's popularity in Serbia. However, **despite the conducive environment for Kremlin propagandists in July-August 2022 amidst heightened tensions, there was no increase in the growth of Telegram channels.** According to the data analysed in this study, not a single Telegram channel was registered in July 2022. **Thus, the observed patterns in the systematic emergence of pro-Russian Telegram channels suggest that Serbia hold a strategic priority in the Kremlin's propaganda efforts, especially after the outbreak of the 2022 war in Ukraine.** However, the Kremlin operates in the region according to a preconceived plan detached from immediate political circumstances concerning establishing an information foothold in the WB.

**Within the selected channels for analysis, the dominant majority, constituting 109 (76,2% of the total sample), comprised Serbian-language channels.** Specifically, 67 channels were established post-Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while 42 channels were founded before the war but no later than July 2017. **These channels span various categories, ranging from humour to global politics. Primarily, a notable category includes channels openly dedicated to fostering Russian-Serbian relations.** This group encompasses channels referencing Russia directly, sometimes displaying both Russian and Serbian flags in their names and advocating for the 'brotherhood and love' between Russia and Serbia. Examples of such channels include 'Serbia-Russia,'<sup>270</sup> 'Serbs for Russians,'<sup>271</sup> или 'Russia and Serbia.'<sup>272</sup> Altogether, there are 19 channels within this category, amassing a total audience of slightly over 14 thousand followers. Remarkably, all except two of these channels were established post-Russia's invasion of Ukraine. **Additionally, Orthodox channels actively partake in disseminating Russian propaganda.** Four such channels were identified among the Serbian channels in the sample, collectively reaching an audience of approximately one and a half thousand subscribers. **Also, alongside prominent pro-Russian outlets like 'Sputnik Serbia' and 'RT Balkans,' some Serbian media entities maintain active official Telegram accounts, serving as significant distributors of Kremlin narratives.** These entities include 'Novi Svet,'<sup>273</sup> 'Borba.info,'<sup>274</sup> 'Novi Standard,'<sup>275</sup> 'IN4S - an information portal'<sup>276</sup> and 'VOSTOK NEWS.'<sup>277</sup> At the same time, despite geopolitics serving as a pivotal theme among Serbian channels (24 channels exclusively devoted to this topic), **the war in Ukraine has also prompted the emergence of specialised channels solely or predominantly focused on the conflict.** Eleven such channels consistently publish materials about the conflict, with one channel actively emulating Ukrainian intelligence leaks while promoting a pro-Russian agenda.

A distinctive occurrence in the modern Russian media landscape was the emergence of a distinct cohort of military bloggers — 'voyenkory,' divided into official propagandists and independent voices discussing the Ukrainian front via personal Telegram channels.<sup>278</sup> Even being affiliated with the Kremlin, they often go beyond official narratives, freely expressing opinions, occasionally veering into harsher expressions. The significance of these military bloggers is underscored by their official encounters with Vladimir Putin<sup>279</sup> and their subsequent targeting by Ukrainian intelligence services. For example, the murder of one of the most famous military bloggers, Vladlen Tatarsky, was widely discussed globally.<sup>280</sup> **This 'voyenkory' phenomenon has not eluded the Serbian Telegram sphere.** 'Dejan Berić,' a Serbian

<sup>270</sup> Telegram, *Србија-Русија*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/SerbiaRussia>

<sup>271</sup> Telegram, *Срби за Русе | Србы за русских*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>272</sup> Telegram, *Россия и Сербия*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/ruskosrpski>

<sup>273</sup> Telegram, *НОВИ СВЕТ*, 2024, available at: [https://t.me/novi\\_svet](https://t.me/novi_svet)

<sup>274</sup> Telegram, *Borba.info*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/borbainf>

<sup>275</sup> Telegram, *Нови Стандард | Novi Standard*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/novistandard>

<sup>276</sup> Telegram, *ИН4С - информативни портал*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/in4sportal>

<sup>277</sup> Telegram, *ВОСТОК ВЕСТИ*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/vostokvesti>

<sup>278</sup> Donald N. Jensen, Angela Howard, "How Russia's Military Bloggers Shape the Course of Putin's War", *United States Institute of Peace*, 2023, available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/how-russias-military-bloggers-shape-course-putins-war>

<sup>279</sup> openDemocracy, *Russia's war influencers get their audience with Putin*, 2023, available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russias-war-influencers-get-their-audience-with-putin/>

<sup>280</sup> France 24, *Russian offensive inspires golden age of military bloggers*, 2023, available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230512-russian-offensive-inspires-golden-age-of-military-bloggers>

volunteer sniper who joined pro-Russian forces in Donbas in early 2014,<sup>281</sup> emerged as a critical information source about the war in Ukraine for the Serbian audience. His channel, in existence since 2020, stands as the most popular channel in Serbia, not just within the 'war in Ukraine' category but overall, boasting a subscriber count exceeding 100 thousand.<sup>282</sup> Apart from that, Russian-aligned narratives have proliferated across several channels dedicated to Kosovo (7 channels), as well as those focusing on related subjects like Serbian history (6 channels) and public movements, notably the Telegram channel of the student organization 'Sistem vrednosti'<sup>283</sup> and 'Helm Of Serbia.'<sup>284</sup> **Also, pro-Russian vibes have found resonance within official political circles and figures.** Within this landscape of Kremlin-aligned narratives, notable mentions include the 'Conservative movement 'Nashi'<sup>285</sup> and the leader of the 'Serbian Party Oathkeepers' Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski.<sup>286</sup> **Thus, beyond the conflict in Ukraine, Russian propaganda extends its reach through critiques of Serbia's policies. Approximately 10 Serbian channels scrutinize local politics, criticizing the actions of political elites from pro-Russian and anti-Western perspectives.** Additionally, noteworthy are author-driven Telegram channels actively advocating Kremlin narratives. These channels involve diverse public figures, spanning from artists to respected lawyers and professors at the University of Belgrade. While many of these channels maintain a modest subscriber count, some, like the channel of Serbian-Canadian filmmaker, producer, and writer Boris Malagurski,<sup>287</sup> have achieved considerable success, boasting over 7 thousand subscribers.

**These channels exhibit a closely-knit network, engaging in active reposting and mutual dissemination of content, fostering reciprocal growth in subscribers and overall popularity.** Among the Serbian Telegram channels propagating Russian content, five channels stand out as primary sources: 'Sputnik Serbia,'<sup>288</sup> 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit,'<sup>289</sup> 'Combat Effectiveness Telegram Channel,'<sup>290</sup> 'Force from the East'<sup>291</sup> and 'HaZarder NoVosrbija.'<sup>292</sup> All of them demonstrate notable citation rates and extensive reposting activities. However, the patterns among these channels manifest nuances. 'Sputnik Serbia,' for instance, predominantly generates original content, sporadically acknowledging other contributors, yet its materials disseminate widely across the pro-Kremlin channel network. **Out of the 109 Serbian channels in the study sample, 69 channels systematically share Sputnik's content. Conversely, 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit,' despite lacking official ties to the Kremlin, enjoys an equally robust presence, with 59% of Serbian pro-Russian channels reposting its materials.** Moreover, the channel actively engages in cross-promotion with 'related' channels, referencing their content and publicly advertising 47 other channels. Remarkably, while 'Sputnik Serbia' boasts just over 50 thousand subscribers, 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit,' established six months earlier, has accumulated more than 82 thousand followers, indicating its accelerated growth and influence within this network. However, it's not only the major channels that hold significance. Channels with a moderate yet impactful audience of 1,000 to 5,000 subscribers, amassing a combined total exceeding 90,000 followers, emerge as prominent disseminators of Russian propaganda. **The combined audience across all 109 Serbian channels exceeds the 659,000 subscriber mark, emphasising the potentially extensive influence of these platforms.**

However, the veil over the identities of users engaging with these channels remains tightly drawn. It strains credulity to suggest that one in every ten inhabitants of Serbia actively participates on Telegram.

<sup>281</sup> Balkan Insight, *Serb Volunteers Answer Call to Fight in Ukraine*, 2022, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/08/serb-volunteers-answer-call-to-fight-in-ukraine/>

<sup>282</sup> Telegram, *Dejan Berić*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>283</sup> Telegram, *Систем вредности | Sistem vrednosti*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/sistemvrednosti>

<sup>284</sup> Telegram, *Кормило Србија званични канал*, 2024, available at: [https://t.me/kormilo\\_srbija](https://t.me/kormilo_srbija)

<sup>285</sup> Telegram, *Конзервативни покрет "Наши"*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/konzervativnipokretnasi>

<sup>286</sup> Telegram, *Милица Ђурђевић - Телеграм канал*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/milicadjurdjevic>

<sup>287</sup> Telegram, *Boris Malagurski*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/malagurski>

<sup>288</sup> TGStat, *Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@sputniksrbiija/stat>

<sup>289</sup> TGStat, *БУНТ је стање духа*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@buntcg/stat>

<sup>290</sup> TGStat, *# тк Борбени Ефективи [БЕФ]*, 2024, available at: [https://tgstat.com/channel/@borbeni\\_efektivi/stat](https://tgstat.com/channel/@borbeni_efektivi/stat)

<sup>291</sup> TGStat, *Сила са Истока*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@silasaistoka/stat>

<sup>292</sup> TGStat, *ХаЗардер НоВосрбија*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@hazardernoVoserbia/stat>

**The realm of social networks is rife with instances of 'subscriber manipulation,' and the notoriety of the Russian 'troll factory'<sup>293</sup> has sent shockwaves across the globe.** To unveil the actual count of 'active followers,' an in-depth analysis of statistical metrics linked to audience engagement with the channel's content was conducted. The findings offer a multifaceted view. **Within the diverse array of channels explored in this study, 20 demonstrate robust audience engagement rates, with over 50% of subscribers regularly reading the channel's content.** In the case of 29 channels, this metric falls within the range of 50% to 25% of subscribers actively check published materials. However, this metric plummets for the remaining 60 channels, with 51 channels registering such negligible levels that quantification becomes daunting. A similarly subdued picture emerges when assessing the extent of audience interaction with the published content, including actions such as commenting, reacting, and sharing posts. Only two channels manage to surpass a meagre 10% of their overall audience in this regard. For half of the channels, this indicator hovers between 0.5% to 9%, while 38,5% grapple with levels so infinitesimal that measurement proves elusive.

While these statistics might initially hint at a limited infiltration of Russian propaganda within the Serbian Telegram space, one must exercise caution not to be misled. **The power of social media in disseminating disinformation and propaganda is formidable, with repercussions that can ripple far and wide.** Furthermore, these metrics carry weight when viewed through the lens of individual impact. For instance, the leading Serbian Telegram channel belongs to Dejan Berić, a Serbian sniper who joined Russian troops in Ukraine in 2014,<sup>294</sup> boasting an impressive following of over 102 thousand followers. Within this audience, 2.37%, or 2,420 readers of his page, actively engage with the content, including sharing it with other chats, friends, and family. Consequently, the narratives of Russian propaganda gain momentum, extending their influence to a much broader audience beyond the direct subscribers of the group. **Moreover, data from the survey conducted among Serbian youth confirms that Russian propaganda finds its way to Telegram users, regardless of their original intentions.** Among active application users, 34% purposely seek information about the war in Ukraine on Telegram, while 22,5% inadvertently encounter such content. As a result, **nearly one in six survey participants have, in some capacity, come across channels dedicated to the topic of the war in Ukraine.** Additionally, according to the survey findings, one in ten respondents has encountered channels identified in this study as conduits for pro-Russian propaganda, with some participants even designating these channels as their preferred media sources. Furthermore, information obtained from often anonymous and unverified Telegram channels is overwhelmingly considered objective by respondents, with 43% holding this view. **Moreover, 52% of respondents regard Telegram channels as more pertinent sources for information and news regarding national and global politics than traditional media like television and newspapers.**

**However, akin to disseminating Russian propaganda through conventional information conduits, the Serbian Telegram represents the initial Kremlin engagement phase in the WB.** The shared history and linguistic proximity enable a broad audience across the peninsula — especially in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbian diasporas in other countries like North Macedonia and Kosovo — to read and follow Serbian Telegram channels. **The data collected for this analysis enables the establishment of both the regional and specific orientation of the channels, which can be discerned through the prevailing content and channel names.** However, this approach demands careful consideration. For instance, among the numerous channels dedicated to Kosovo, only a subset provides current information regarding local politics and incidents tailored for local followers. Thus, most channels focused on supporters of nationalist movements in Serbia rather than the Kosovo population. Similarly, in the case of Slovak-language channels identified during the analysis, the 'Slovanský Svet.'<sup>295</sup> Telegram channel frequently references Serbian politics, suggesting an aim to engage the Slovak minority in Serbia and the broader WB. However, most of this channel's

<sup>293</sup> The Guardian, 'Troll factory' spreading Russian pro-war lies online, says UK, 2022, available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/01/troll-factory-spreading-russian-pro-war-lies-online-says-uk>

<sup>294</sup> Balkan Insight, Sniper's Video Shows Serb Volunteers Training to Fight Ukraine, 2022, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/12/16/serbian-snipers-video-reveals-foreign-fighters-in-ukraine/>

<sup>295</sup> Telegram, Slovanský Svet, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/smebratia>

content centres on Slovak and European politics, indicating its primary audience is the Slovak populace. As a result, despite its linkage to channels such as 'RT Balkan,' 'Sputnik Serbia,' 'About Serbia in Russian,' и 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' which highlights 'Slovanský Svet's connection with the network of pro-Russian telegram channels, its actual relations with WB remains nebulous. Consequently, within this study's framework, it was possible to delineate the extent of Russian propaganda's influence in the region. **Most of the channels connected with Serbian groups distributing pro-Russian propaganda were found in Bosnia and Herzegovina** — among them 'The Republic of Serbian Krajina,'<sup>296</sup> 'Self-esteem,'<sup>297</sup> 'THE ARMY OF THE REPUBLIKA SRPSKA,'<sup>298</sup> and 'Republika Srpska.'<sup>299</sup> **In Kosovo**, channels tied to Serbian platforms disseminating pro-Russian narratives include 'The Pristina Corps,'<sup>300</sup> 'Rabbits from Kosovo and Metohija'<sup>301</sup> and 'SERBIAN SPITE.'<sup>302</sup> Meanwhile, **Montenegro** hosts channels 'Montenegro Serbian Sparta,'<sup>303</sup> 'Milo Božović Telegram channel,'<sup>304</sup> 'Montenegrin Universalism,'<sup>305</sup> 'Russian bar Podgorica,'<sup>306</sup> 'Montenegro Straight Line Z,'<sup>307</sup> and 'Serbs in Montenegro.' In **North Macedonia**, pro-Russian channels tied to Serbian channels operate under 'iNFOMAX.mk.'<sup>308</sup> **Notably, Albania was the sole country where pro-Russian channels were not found.**

As a result, the examination of 143 pro-Russian channels offered insights into the diverse network operating across Serbia and the broader WB. Leveraging the widespread comprehension of the Serbo-Croatian language, Serbian channels took precedence, covering themes like pro-Russian relations, Orthodox subjects, and geopolitical discussions. Similar to Russia, military-focused channels and bloggers wielded substantial influence, shaping public discourse within the Serbian audience surrounding the war in Ukraine. Among the channels scrutinised, specific sources such as 'Sputnik Serbia' and 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' emerged as principal content generators, stimulating extensive reposting activities. Moreover, **the 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit,' lacking official ties to the Kremlin, notably outstripped the pro-Russian media 'Sputnik Serbia' in citation ratings. This observation underscores the adaptability of Russian propaganda to assimilate into regional contexts and engage with local actors. Once more, it demonstrates that while policymakers and scholars concentrate on assessing and restricting the influence of authorised pro-Russian media, their local counterparts operate with unrestricted freedom, capable of garnering substantial success by presenting themselves as the genuine regional 'voice of truth.'** However, the array of Serbian channels only represents the nascent phase of Kremlin engagement in the WB. The regional emphasis apparent in content and channel titles underscores multifaceted directions, ranging from local political affairs to minority engagement within the region. Channels affiliated with Serbian platforms disseminating pro-Russian content have been identified in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Northern Macedonia. Furthermore, the systematic timing of establishing these channels accentuates targeted strategies for proliferating Russian propaganda. **Consequently, while the WB might not align with Russia's primary foreign policy focus, the region remains within the sphere of influence of Russia's 'far near abroad,' presenting opportunities for substantial expansion if deemed necessary.**

<sup>296</sup> Telegram, *Република Српска Крајина*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/republikasrpskakrayina>

<sup>297</sup> Telegram, *Самопоштовање*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/samopostovanje>

<sup>298</sup> Telegram, *Војска Републике Српске*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/debeljacai1vrs>

<sup>299</sup> Telegram, *Република Српска*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/RepublikaSrpska22>

<sup>300</sup> Telegram, *Приштински корпус*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/pristinskikorpus>

<sup>301</sup> Telegram, *Зечеви са Косова и Метохије*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/zeceviKiM>

<sup>302</sup> Telegram, *Српски Инат*, 2024, available at: [https://t.me/INAT\\_SRPSKI](https://t.me/INAT_SRPSKI)

<sup>303</sup> Telegram, *Црна Гора Српска Спарта*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/crnagorasrpskasparta>

<sup>304</sup> Telegram, *Мило Божовић - Телеграм канал*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/milobozovic>

<sup>305</sup> Telegram, *Црногорски Универзализам*, 2024, available at: [https://t.me/cg\\_universal](https://t.me/cg_universal)

<sup>306</sup> Telegram, *Руски бар Подгорица*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/ruskibar>

<sup>307</sup> Telegram, *Черногория Прямая Линия Z*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/crnagoraline>

<sup>308</sup> Telegram, *iNFOMAX.mk*, 2024, available at: [https://t.me/iNFOMAX\\_MK](https://t.me/iNFOMAX_MK)



# V Russian Propaganda Tactics in Serbia: A Case Study of the War in Ukraine

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, pro-Kremlin entities have unleashed an extensive disinformation campaign spanning both domestic and international fronts.<sup>309</sup> The battleground of information warfare has emerged as a decisive factor in shaping the conflict, wielding a profound impact on strategic calculations and actual military operations. Within Russia, the Kremlin's propaganda machinery is working overtime to drum up domestic support for the war. It explicitly targets and rallies young men to defend the nation while stoking animosity towards Ukrainians. Simultaneously, there is a concerted effort to export Russian propaganda beyond national borders, with a primary goal of undermining Western Allies' support for Ukraine and fuelling Ukrainophobia. Notably, the most intense barrage of information assaults has been observed in European nations such as Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic,<sup>310</sup> which have absorbed a substantial influx of Ukrainian refugees.<sup>311</sup> **However, what precisely constitutes the strategic approach of pro-Russian propaganda in Serbia?** This chapter delves into this question, shedding light on the official Serbian discourse surrounding the war in Ukraine that has paved the way for the proliferation of Russian propaganda. Furthermore, the analysis aims to pinpoint and elucidate the unique characteristics defining Russian propaganda efforts within the Serbian context.

## 5.1 Contours of Serbian Public Discourse: The Ukrainian Conflict

While most Western nations swiftly embraced a pro-Ukrainian stance at the war's outset, Serbia's position remains ambiguous and distinct. **On the one hand, Serbia censured the Russian aggression and the annexation of Eastern Ukrainian territories, affirming its stance by voting in favour of the adoption of pertinent UN resolutions on these matters.<sup>312</sup> On the other hand, Serbia stands firm in its refusal to apply sanctions against Russia. Until November 2023, it remained the only European candidate state allowing direct flights to Russia.<sup>313</sup>** The evolution of diplomatic relations between states further complicates this stance. In 2022, Aleksandar Vulin, then Interior Minister, took an official visit to Russia, engaging in discussions with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.<sup>314</sup> Further entrenching this trajectory, in May 2023, Aleksandar Vulin, then the Head of the Serbian Intelligence Agency, alongside Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić, participated in an international security conference hosted in Moscow.<sup>315</sup> This nuanced approach greatly strains Serbia's relations with the EU. However, it harmonises with Serbia's foreign policy doctrine encapsulated in the 'four pillars of diplomacy',<sup>316</sup> where the nation endeavours to sustain amicable relations both with Western powers and Eastern counterparts, reflecting a delicate balancing act in its international engagements. As a result, from the onset of the war, Serbia has steered a deliberate and cautious course in its portrayal of the unfolding events.

<sup>309</sup> Adam Kowalski, "Disinformation and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine Threats and governance responses", *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, 2022, p.1, available at: <https://www.oecd.org/ukraine-hub/policy-responses/disinformation-and-russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-37186bde/>

<sup>310</sup> Vox Ukraine, *Propaganda Diary 2022-2023: VoxCheck presents the database of Russian propaganda in the European mass media*, 2023, available at: <https://voxukraine.org/en/propaganda-diary-2022-2023-voxcheck-presents-the-database-of-russian-propaganda-in-the-european-mass-media>

<sup>311</sup> EuroNews, *War in Ukraine: which European countries host the most refugees?*, 2023, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2023/09/20/war-in-ukraine-which-european-countries-host-the-most-refugees>

<sup>312</sup> Balkan Insight, *Serbia Backs UN Resolution Against Russian Annexations in Ukraine*, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/13/serbia-backs-un-resolution-against-russian-annexations-in-ukraine/>

<sup>313</sup> N1, *Vucic at MSC 2023: Serbia criticised for not introducing sanctions on Russia*, 2023, available at: <https://n1info.rs/english/news/vucic-at-msc-2023-serbia-criticised-for-not-introducing-sanctions-on-russia/>

<sup>314</sup> Aljazeera, *Serb official visits Moscow, calls sanctions EU 'hysteria'*, 2022, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/22/serb-official-visits-moscow-calls-sanctions-eu-hysteria>

<sup>315</sup> N1, *FM Dacic, BIA director Vulin attend conference in Moscow*, 2023, available at: <https://n1info.rs/english/news/fm-dacic-bia-director-vulin-attend-conference-in-moscow/>

<sup>316</sup> Stefan Vladislavljev, "Steel Friendship — Forging of the Perception of China by the Serbian Political Elite", *Prague Security Studies Institute*, 2021, available at: <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/40-steel-friendship-forging-of-the-perception-of-china-by-the-serbian-political-elite>

Notably, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, keen on preserving a delicate equilibrium between opposing factions, purposefully abstained from adopting either the Russian term 'special military operation' or the Western discourse of 'war' in his public speeches. Instead, Vučić consistently employed broad phrases such as "the conflict in Ukraine,"<sup>317</sup> "The Ukrainian crisis,"<sup>318</sup> "the situation in the world,"<sup>319</sup> or "what is happening between Russia and Ukraine."<sup>320</sup> Moreover, **the president's efforts in upholding Russia's former amiable and allied image were particularly conspicuous, preceding Serbia's general elections** on April 3, 2022. In response to international pressure over Serbia's hesitance to impose sanctions on Russia and the economic implications resulting from the conflict, Vučić portrayed Serbia's stance as an expression of 'reciprocal gratitude' for Russia's support. **During the initial months of the conflict, the president exclusively hailed Russia as "the guarantor of Serbia's security" and a "traditional partner,"**<sup>321</sup> **highlighting Russia's consistent support for Serbia within the global political arena.** Consequently, Serbia has emerged as one of the few countries that witnessed widespread displays of support for Russian actions,<sup>322</sup> notably marked by individuals proudly displaying symbols of Russian aggression in Ukraine, such as the letter 'Z.' However, the public discourse in Serbia is more than just shaped by political rhetoric. It draws from a tumultuous recent history encompassing the Balkan wars, the imposition of sanctions against Yugoslavia, and the NATO bombardment of Belgrade. These events have cultivated strong anti-European and anti-NATO sentiments within Serbian society.<sup>323</sup> Thus, **a significant aspect shaping pro-Russian sentiments among Serbs stems less from an affinity for Russia and more from a deep-rooted antipathy towards the West, influencing perceptions of the ongoing war in Ukraine and reawakening ghosts of the past.**

**Drawing formal parallels between Kosovo and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR)/Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) cases unveils several shared features.** Initially, regional separatist forces declared independence, a move unacknowledged by central authorities. Subsequently, conflict erupted, with the aspiring independent republic receiving support from a great power that intervened militarily, citing genocide and mass extermination in the separatist regions. From this vantage point, the situations in Ukraine and Serbia appear similar, as do the statuses of the unrecognised republics: Kosovo, the LPR, and the DPR. However, the actual similarities between Kosovo and the LPR/DPR are minute. The Kosovo situation unfolded over an extended period, with Kosovo's recognition as an independent state emerging after decades of conflict and failed diplomatic resolutions. Furthermore, Kosovo's case embodies interethnic strife, a facet distinctly absent in Donbas, where political and ideological disparities rather than ethnic tension ignited the turmoil.<sup>324</sup> Thus, **the LPR/DPR and Kosovo cases diverge significantly. Nonetheless, Serbian society found enough common ground to interpret the evolving war in Ukraine through its historical lens,** which reflects Serbia's own experience of ostracism due to its stance on Kosovo's independence. This **'betrayal' of the West that supported Ukraine while neglecting Serbia in its fight against separatists fosters anti-European sentiments** and shapes a distinct Serbian viewpoint regarding the war in Ukraine. Aleksandar Vučić's statements,

<sup>317</sup> Kurir, *Vučić poručio u Paraćinu: Na izborima se glasa za ozbiljnost i odgovornost! Idemo da ih pobedimo ubedljivije nego ikada*, 2022, available at: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/izbori-2022/3903015/paracinci-svecano-docekali-vucica-i-cekaju-njegovo-obracanje-sportski-centar-7-juli-pun-gradjani-pruzaju-podrsku-listi-sns>

<sup>318</sup> Kurir, *Vučić odbio ucenu: Tražili su da Srbija prizna Kosovo! To nećemo da prihvatimo ni po koju cenu!*, 2022, available at:

<https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3897147/vucic-trazili-su-da-srbija-prizna-kosovo-to-necemo-da-prihvatimo-ni-po-koju-cenu-drzava-nam-je-vaznija-od-glasova>

<sup>319</sup> Pink, *Predsednik Vučić posle razgovora sa Šolcom: Prvi put smo od Evrope čuli da se traži međusobno priznavanje. Onoliko koliko vi volite teritorijalni integritet Ukrajine, toliko Srbija voli svoj teritorijalni integritet!*, 2022, available at: <https://pink.rs/politika/409432/vucic-nakon-sastanka-sa-solcom-prvi-put-smo-od-evrope-culi-da-se-trazi-medjusobno-priznavanje-onoliko-koliko-vi-volite-teritorijalni-integritet-ukrajini>

<sup>320</sup> Kurir, *Vučić bio u Kikindi, Opovu i Padinskoj Skeli: Brinućemo o Srbiji, vama i vašoj deci! Hoćemo sami da čuvamo svoje nebo*, 2022, available at:

<https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/izbori-2022/3895961/kikinda-ceka-vucica-predizborni-skup>

<sup>321</sup> Kurir, *Vučić predstavio predizborni program: Ukoliko mi ukažete poverenje, boriću se za vas i za našu Srbiju, zajedno možemo sve*, 2022, available at:

<https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3899537/aleksandar-vucic-predstavlja-predizborni-program-na-rts>

<sup>322</sup> Euractiv, *Thousands of Serbs march in support of Russia in Belgrade*, 2022, available at:

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/thousands-of-serbs-march-in-support-of-russia-in-belgrade/>

<sup>323</sup> Roberto Belloni, "Serbia between East and West: ontological security, vicarious identity and the problem of sanctions against Russia", *European Security*, 2023, p. 4, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09662839.2023.2290048?src=exp-la>

<sup>324</sup> Idel.Pearuu, *Kosovo and Donbas: what can and cannot be a precedent for Russia*, 2022, available at: <https://www.idelreal.org/a/31825094.html>

such as "We Serbs will never understand how we were deceived about Ukraine's territorial integrity while ours was disregarded"<sup>325</sup> or "Everyone with their mouth full of talk about territorial integrity forgets about resolution 1244,"<sup>326</sup> depict Serbia as a victim of global politics.

At the same time, this perspective has fostered a contrasting image of Ukraine in Serbian discourse compared to the West, serving divergent purposes. **In the addresses of Aleksandar Vučić, Ukraine does not appear as a victim of aggression. Instead, Serbia's suffering and pain, notably obscured and forgotten, take centre stage.** He remarks, "no one in the West showed the empty stroller of the murdered Milica Rakić and the murdered Serbian children during the NATO aggression, as they do today in Ukraine."<sup>327</sup> As a result, despite references to child deaths in Ukraine, his words fail to evoke empathy or compassion for the Ukrainians. Instead, the events of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, portrayed through the lens of NATO's aggression against Serbia in 1999, rekindle sentiments of national bitterness, resentment, loss, and injustice that remain unresolved in Serbian society. Simultaneously, the ominous role of a 'great power intervening in the conflict' is assigned to NATO and the broader Western alliance and transferred to the current conflict in Ukraine. **Thus, revisiting the structural resemblance between Kosovo and the LPR/DPR cases, in Serbian discourse, the role of the aggressor remains not for Russia but for the West.**

Furthermore, the resurrection of **Serbian sentiments regarding past grievances and perceived betrayals by the West has been facilitated by the narrative framing Ukraine as a competitor in future development prospects.** In the early stages of the conflict, amidst Western media broadcasting harrowing footage of civilian facility bombings in Ukraine, Vučić referenced Macron's statement: "neither Ukraine nor any other nation should gain EU admission before Serbia."<sup>328</sup> This positioning strips Ukraine of its victim status, portraying it as a rival to Serbia in the journey toward European integration. This narrative shift does not cultivate a sense of support or empathy for Ukraine within Serbian society. Later, Vučić's words express indignation and frustration: "we have been told for decades that they do not need a new Cyprus in Europe. And now you [Serbs] see that they can get three Cypriots, four Cypriots."<sup>329</sup> This matter is profoundly relevant to Serbia, a candidate for EU membership since 2012. Western nations have long viewed the territorial conflict between Serbia and Kosovo as a significant obstacle to Serbia's EU accession.<sup>330</sup> **Therefore, Serbian politicians presented the further consideration of Ukraine and Moldova as EU candidates, not as a strategic measure to counter Russia but once again as a 'betrayal by the West,' fostering anti-Western sentiments and a negative disposition towards Ukraine in Serbian society.**

Thus, the historical analogies and collective memories that shape Serbian public discourse function as a temporal vessel, carrying Serbian society back to the tumultuous events of the past decades. In addition, the Serbian political rhetoric on current events restricted public freedom in interpreting and evaluating the situation. Consequently, the Russian-Ukrainian crisis evoked a sense of detachment among the Serbs. Instead, Serbian society relives the emotions and feelings of defeat from the Yugoslav war. In this context, the widely covered pro-Russian demonstrations and marches in Belgrade, often perceived by Western media as support for Russia, actually serve as a declaration against the Western world. **The stance of Serbian society is not merely pro-Russian but equally anti-Western, denouncing countries that acknowledged Kosovo's independence and perpetrated aggression against Yugoslavia.** Crucially, it is not solely the direct influence of Russian media and propaganda but

<sup>325</sup> Kurir, Vučić: prosečna plata može da dostigne 750 evra do kraja godine! Imaćemo tešku zimu, 2022, available at:

<https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3972055/da-li-srbija-uvodi-vanredno-stanje-predsednik-vucic-veceras-objavljuje-vazne-vesti>

<sup>326</sup> Kurir, Vučić posle sastanka sa nemačkom ministarkom odbrane: Imali smo sadržajne i otvorene razgovore! Srbija čuva mir i stabilnost, 2022, available at: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3926631/predsednik-vucic-danas-s-nemackom-ministarkom-odbrane>

<sup>327</sup> Kurir, Vučić: Zašto nisu pokazivali prazna kolica ubijene srpske dece!?, 2022, available at: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3894393/vucic-zasto-nisu-pokazivali-prazna-kolica-ubijene-srpske-dece>

<sup>328</sup> Kurir, Predsednik Vučić otkrio: Makron rekao da Ukrajina neće u EU pre Srbije, 2022, available at:

<https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3885497/predsednik-vucic-otkrio-makron-rekao-da-ukrajina-nevere-u-eu-pre-srbije>

<sup>329</sup> Kurir, Vučić: Dobio sam svoje prisluskiwane razgovore, to se zaista desilo, verujem u državne institucije! Hrane ćemo imati dovoljno, 2022, available at: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3960075/predsednik-srbije-se-obraca-gradjanima>

<sup>330</sup> Dimitar Bechev, "Hedging Its Bets: Serbia Between Russia and the EU", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2023, available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/01/19/hedging-its-bets-serbia-between-russia-and-eu-pub-88819>

predominantly the Serbian political elites shaping this anti-Western narrative through their speeches. **Serbian leadership's rhetoric against NATO and the EU, used in their interests, propels Serbian society towards the opposing pole — Russia, which makes it considerably easier for propagandists to disseminate Kremlin narratives within Serbia.**

## 5.2 The Ukrainian Conflict Under the Spotlight of Serbian Telegram Channels

Since the inception of heightened tensions along the Russian-Ukrainian border in November 2021, the emergence of Telegram channels dedicated to the Ukrainian conflict in Serbian discourse has become apparent. This trend has notably escalated, with 64 identified channels actively propagating pro-Russian narratives since the war's onset. These channels exhibit a diverse array of focal issues. Some are centred on religious inclinations, like 'Orthodox Blog Serbia'<sup>331</sup> while others concentrate on Kosovo reunification efforts, such as 'We will not give Kosovo!'<sup>332</sup> or 'The Pristina Corps.'<sup>333</sup> Additionally, channels delving into Serbian political analysis, like 'Stand up for Serbia's survival'<sup>334</sup> or 'Serbian Honor'<sup>335</sup> have featured pro-Russian content. Post-February 24, 2022, the Serbian segment of Telegram witnessed a surge in overtly pro-Russian channels espousing a theme of enduring Russian-Serbian solidarity, evident in channels like 'Serbs for Russians,'<sup>336</sup> 'Russia and Serbia'<sup>337</sup> and 'Serbian-Russian Brotherhood.'<sup>338</sup> Significantly, a substantial portion of these channels focuses solely on frontline coverage, exemplified by 'War LIVE,'<sup>339</sup> 'Serbia | Russia. Latest news from the front,'<sup>340</sup> and 'War in Ukraine | Russia-NATO.'<sup>341</sup> This interconnected network of channels actively cross-promotes content, fostering mutual subscriber growth. However, their success is disparate, with some channels amassing substantial followings, while almost half of them struggled to exceed one thousand subscribers. Channel development trajectories also vary. Some channels sustain ongoing activity, while others, like 'Channel: News from Russia 24/7'<sup>342</sup> or 'Satelita news!'<sup>343</sup> ceased posting after a few months, remaining accessible but inactive. The following sections offer a comprehensive analysis of narratives disseminated across several channels. The first subsection will delve into the output of Serbian war correspondents ('voyenkory'), followed by the second, examining military-centric channel in Serbian. The final subsection will examine the war narrative within the political far-right Serbian group, offering an insightful overview of the prevailing discourse.

### 5.2.1 Serbian Military Correspondents: Reporting on the Ukrainian Conflict

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a wide-ranging network of Telegram channels of self-proclaimed 'voyenkory' (war correspondents) emerged. They actively disseminate hate speech and a skewed version of reality, portraying Russia as engaged in a "righteous war, achieving historic triumphs."<sup>344</sup> Certain individuals among them have acquired substantial popularity, amassing millions of subscribers and being granted a personal audience with Vladimir Putin. While they support Kremlin propaganda narratives and endorse the necessity of the war, they paradoxically often evolve into vehement critics of Russia's army and strategy. Their direct interaction with Russian soldiers, and at times, direct participation in the conflict, gives them insights that elude official media, thereby

<sup>331</sup> Telegram, *Правблог Sr*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/pravblogs>

<sup>332</sup> Telegram, *Не дамо Косово!*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/nedamokosovo>

<sup>333</sup> Telegram, *Приштински корпус*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/pristinskikorpus>

<sup>334</sup> Telegram, *Ustanak za opstanak Srbije*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/ustanakzaopstanak>

<sup>335</sup> Telegram, *Српска Част*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/srpskacast>

<sup>336</sup> Telegram, *Срби за Русе | Србы за русских*, 2024, available <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>337</sup> Telegram, *Россия и Сербия*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/ruskosrpski>

<sup>338</sup> Telegram, *Српско-руско братство*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/srbratstvo>

<sup>339</sup> Telegram, *РАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/ratauzivo>

<sup>340</sup> Telegram, *Србија | Русуја. Најновије вести са фронта*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusi>

<sup>341</sup> Telegram, *Rat u Ukrajini | Rusija - NATO*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/ratrusijaukrajina>

<sup>342</sup> Telegram, *Канал: Вести из Русује 24/7*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/KanalVestilzRusije>

<sup>343</sup> Telegram, *Satelita vesti! (без цензуре!)*, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/vpntesterSatelitaSrbija>

<sup>344</sup> Meduza, *В телеграме — сотни "военкоров" и кремлевских пропагандистов. Зачем читать эти каналы — и как не сойти с ума в процессе чтения? Объясняет исследователь Z-наблюдков Иван Филиппов*, 2023, available at: <https://meduza.io/cards/v-telegrame-sotni-voenkorov-i-kremlevskih-propagandistov-zachem-chitat-eti-kanaly-i-kak-ne-soyti-s-uma-v-protsesse-chteniya>



amplifying their popularity and readership. In Serbia, 'voyenkory' has not assumed an equally robust and impactful role in supporting war-related information. However, channels with similar undertones have surfaced in the Balkans. Since 2014, Serbian mercenaries actively engaged in the Ukrainian conflict on Russia's side, many transitioning into journalistic roles. Among the prominent figures are Filip Egeljic, an independent journalist managing the YouTube channel M-TV Podcast, Nikola Jović, a war correspondent for 'The Seal',<sup>345</sup> and Dejan Berić, who garnered fame not only in Serbia but also in Russia. The latter two channels were included in the study sample and merited closer examination in this context.

### 5.2.1.1 Dejan Berić: The Voice of Russian Propaganda in Serbia

Dejan Berić's journey from a Serbian conscript in the 1990s to a prominent figure in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine is a tale marked by twists and turns amidst the tumult of war. Enlisted initially in Slobodan Milošević's army during the turbulent Yugoslav wars, Berić's exact involvement in the hostilities remains ambiguous.<sup>346</sup> However, in the early months of 2014, Berić's life took a dramatic turn. Like some of his compatriots,<sup>347</sup> he was drawn to the Donbas, where he swiftly ascended the ranks to become a captain in the people's militia. The separatist authorities recognised Berić's dedication and service, granting him a DPR passport and bestowed upon him the rank of major. However, despite his accolades abroad, Berić's actions put him in a legally precarious position back home in Serbia. **Serbian Security Intelligence Agency has labelled him a military mercenary, citing him as a potential threat to Serbia's national security.**<sup>348</sup> **Therefore, following the Minsk agreements of February 2015, which aimed to de-escalate the conflict, Berić transitioned away from active frontline duty, redirecting his efforts towards propagandist activities in Russia.** Today, he is a familiar face on both Russian<sup>349</sup> and Serbian<sup>350</sup> political talk shows, where he fervently espouses pro-Russian narratives regarding Ukraine and champions the notion of a deep-seated Russian-Serbian brotherhood. In 2017, drawing upon his experiences in Donbas, Berić penned the book 'When the Dead Speak',<sup>351</sup> which was followed in 2019 by the release of the documentary 'The Sniper's War,' where Berić takes centre stage as the renowned sniper known as 'Deki' from the Donetsk People's Republic,<sup>352</sup> offering viewers a firsthand account of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. In January 2024, Dejan Berić was officially admitted as one of Putin's confidants in the presidential elections, underscoring his elevated stature within the Kremlin propaganda machine.<sup>353</sup>

As of the study's latest data, **Dejan Berić's Telegram channel stands out with over 102 thousand subscribers, making it a notable presence not only within the study's channel sample but across various segments of Serbian Telegram.** Serving as a vital source of frontline updates, Berić launched the channel on November 6, 2020. During its initial run from November 6 to November 26, 2020, the channel published 58 posts, with a primary focus on exposing the brutality of Azerbaijani troops in Nagorno-Karabakh and providing updates on the ongoing conflict. Notably, following the ending of the Second Karabakh War and the commencement of the establishment of new demarcation lines, the channel ceases to release any content until the year's end. While at that time content related to Ukraine

<sup>345</sup> Руски Дом, Трибина "СВО уживо", 2022, available at: <https://ruskidom.rs/sr/2022/09/07/tribina-svo-uzhivo/>

<sup>346</sup> Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Sve uloge srpskog plaćenika Dejana Berića*, 2019, available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29810578.html>

<sup>347</sup> Balkan Insight, *Donbass Brothers: How Serbian Fighters Were Deployed in Ukraine*, 2018, available at:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/13/donbass-brothers-how-serbian-fighters-were-deployed-in-ukraine-12-12-2018/>

<sup>348</sup> Хронограф, *Берић: Кијев је хтео да се преда још у априлу – Американци им нису дали*, 2022, available at:

[https://hronograf.net/2022/05/27/beric-kijev-je-hteo-da-se-preda-jos-u-aprilu-amerikanci-im-nisu-dali-video/#google\\_vignette](https://hronograf.net/2022/05/27/beric-kijev-je-hteo-da-se-preda-jos-u-aprilu-amerikanci-im-nisu-dali-video/#google_vignette)

<sup>349</sup> RT на русском, *Любовь к России мне привили дедушки: сербский снайпер — о деревенской жизни после войны в ДНР*, 2020, available at:

<https://russian.rt.com/world/article/756750-snaiper-serbiya-donbass?ysclid=lqa05l6eiu533493511>

<sup>350</sup> TV Happy, *Aktuelnosti - Ukrajina gubi na frontovima — Konacno se uvidja da je zapad nasamario Kijev*, 2022, available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thCLA1x5wQo>

<sup>351</sup> The Geopost, *Serbian mercenary Beric fights alongside Putin's army*, 2022, available at: <https://thegeopost.com/en/news/serbian-mercenary-beric-fights-alongside-putins-army/>

<sup>352</sup> Военный Эксперт, *Эксклюзив: документальный фильм "Война снайпера"*, 2019, available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5FAE1Pd0g>

<sup>353</sup> Center for Western Balkans Studies, *Why Serbs don't want to die for Russia*, 2024, available at: <https://cfwbs.org/why-serbs-dont-want-to-die-for-russia>

was scarce, the channel's narrative took a significant turn in February 2021 when it was reactivated with a renewed mission: "The Telegram channel resumed operation. Here, I will post about the events in Donbas."<sup>354</sup> This resurgence continued until early April 2021, with materials aligning closely with Russia's dominant narrative on Ukraine. The channel showcased various content, including photos portraying Ukrainian soldiers with Nazi symbols, videos revealing casualties in Donbas (some featuring graphic imagery of deceased and mutilated bodies), and footage capturing the destruction of facilities within DPR territory. Throughout 2021, sporadic postings persisted until April 8, totalling 22 posts for the entire year. **However, the bulk of the channel's activity, comprising 32,030 posts, occurred following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022.** Sixteen channels within the study's sample reposted materials from Berić's channel, contributing to its widespread visibility. According to TGStat data, the Dejan Berić channel garnered mentions from 309 channels, amounting to nearly 3,000 references.<sup>355</sup> Despite its extensive reach, audience engagement metrics for the channel hover around moderate levels. The average post-reach rate to the channel's subscriber count for November 2023 stands at 26%, indicating a medium level of interaction despite its broad exposure.

Furthermore, **assessing the channel's management reveals likely an initial Berić involvement in crafting the content.** Posts spanning November 2020 to April 8, 2022, exhibit a consistent writing style characterised by brevity, often accompanied by a separately published video. Notably, emojis, post structure, and headlines are absent. Post scheduling appears erratic, with sporadic intervals of no postings, extending for months at times. Remarkably, during the most active phase of the conflict following the Russian invasion, no posts were issued until March 18, 2022, signalling the channel's apparent disengagement from Russian propaganda activities. **However, a distinct shift emerged starting April 15, 2022, altering the posting style noticeably. A unified style emerges, incorporating active emoji usage, structured post formats with headlines, and the consolidation of video and text within a single post.** Notably, a surge in daily post-frequency commences. This period witnesses a surge in channel activity and substantial audience growth. Yet, the content of the posts warrants particular attention, as it progressively incorporates phrases, designations, metaphors, and established expressions that may be unfamiliar to Serbian readers.

For instance, the posts start mentioning that some particular organisations, such as the Azov Brigade, are prohibited in Russia.<sup>356</sup> This remark - 'prohibited in Russia,' is relevant only for the publication of materials in Russia and for Russian-speaking readers since on August 2, 2022, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation recognised the 'Azov battalion' as a "terrorist and extremist organisation,"<sup>357</sup> thus obliging the media to indicate this information every time noting 'Azov' (according to the law, the mark must be added to previously published materials as well). **For the Serbian reader, this information is unnecessary and can be misleading.** Additionally, one post featured the phrase: "Perhaps instead of a swastika on your shoulders, you might have a quote from Leopold the Cat."<sup>358</sup> Such a reference is unknown to Serbian followers. 'Leopold the Cat' is a series of Soviet animated movies about the kind cat Leopold, where the main character always says: 'Guys, let us all get along,'<sup>359</sup> which is familiar to every resident of Russia and most CIS countries. However, this movie was not so popular in Yugoslavia, suggesting that **Serbs could not understand the initial meaning.** Furthermore, posts are beginning to incorporate slang that is only understandable in Russia and the CIS countries. For instance, one post included the phrase, "... The rest are '200,' while a few '300' escaped ..." <sup>360</sup> The slang '200' and '300' gained popularity in the USSR during the Afghan War. 'Cargo 200' serves as a coded term utilised when transporting the body of a deceased serviceman to their final resting place. It also serves as a substitute term for the bodies of soldiers who have been killed in action. On the other hand, 'cargo 300' refers to

<sup>354</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated February 16, 2022, posted at 10:03 AM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>355</sup> TGStat.ru, *Dejan Berić. Incoming and outgoing mentions*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@SrbijaRusija/stat/citation>

<sup>356</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated May 31, 2022, posted at 9:25 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>357</sup> Reuters, *Russia's supreme court designates Ukraine's Azov Regiment a 'terrorist' group*, 2022, available at:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-supreme-court-designates-ukraines-azov-regiment-terrorist-group-2022-08-02/>

<sup>358</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated April 26, 2022, posted at 8:15 AM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>359</sup> TV tropes, *Animation / Leopold the Cat*, 2024, available at: <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Animation/LeopoldTheCat>

<sup>360</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated June 18, 2022, posted at 9:47 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

transporting wounded soldiers from the battlefield.<sup>361</sup> **These euphemisms might be unfamiliar to a broad spectrum of Serbian subscribers.** This assertion finds backing in an article disseminated through Serbian media, clarifying these expressions for the audience.<sup>362</sup> **Moreover, there are grammatical and stylistic errors in writing posts in Serbian.**<sup>363</sup> All this has raised doubts about whether Dejan Berić or the Serbs have anything to do with content creation. De facto, the channel's posts represent a direct translation of Russian propaganda messages distributed in Russia, without any adaptation and localisation of narratives. These suspicions were confirmed by a post in which the channel administrators admitted that they do not speak Serbian and apologised for making mistakes.<sup>364</sup> **Hence, it is evident that since April 15, 2022, the channel has been under the administration of Russian individuals who, using the guise of a well-known Serbian mercenary's name, disseminated pro-Russian narratives regarding the war in Ukraine.**

In the initial phase of hostilities, the scrutiny encompassed a modest compilation of 20 channel posts released on March 29, 2022. However, within this short span, it became evident that **before the foreign administration team officially took charge of the channel's content, Berić had already commenced actively disseminating Kremlin-endorsed narratives that Vladimir Putin declared at the beginning of the 'special military operation.'** Within a mere day, the contours of forthcoming discourse emerged, depicting the "population of Ukraine yearning for the arrival of the Russian army,"<sup>365</sup> "inhumanity and cruelty of the Ukrainian military"<sup>366</sup> - purportedly comprised of "criminals released by Zelensky,"<sup>367</sup> and betrayal by the West, which geared up for an assault on Russia in March 2022. These narratives deliberately diverted attention from tangible developments unfolding on the frontline. Instead, the focus of the posts was on isolated, minor incidents aimed solely at reinforcing the perceived righteousness of the conflict. Consequently, significant events such as the Russian Federation forces' missile strike on Nikolaev on March 29 or the diplomatic negotiations in Istanbul did not appear on the channel. Instead, the reader's attention was directed towards abstract occurrences detached from temporal and spatial contexts — for instance, "the abduction of a priest who refused to denounce Russia's actions"<sup>368</sup> or "the treacherous stabbing of a restrained Russian soldier by a Ukrainian."<sup>369</sup> The timing and location of these events remain ambiguous - whether they occurred in the past 'eight years?' Does this happen in Ukraine, LPR/DPR, or elsewhere? These questions remain unclear. **Such a narrative approach denies readers the chance to assess current events, redirecting focus away from present actions. Instead, the channel's posts aim to stir emotional responses and engage their audience, fostering a perception of injustice and the righteousness of opposing the perceived aggressor.**

Subsequently, the channel experienced an upsurge in Kremlin propaganda. **As a cadre of authors joined and commenced publishing posts, the amount of information disseminated on the channel expanded.** For example, in early April, about 5-10 text posts per day were published on the channel, while by the end of July, their number had increased to 20-30, excluding reposts, as well as publications containing exclusively video and photo materials. Not only is the number of posts increasing, but also their content. Since April 28, extensive publications containing comprehensive summaries of the 'special military operation' have been consistently issued. These posts offer detailed updates regarding the frontline situation and highlight events entwined with Russian and international politics. It includes European leader's speeches, the implementation of new sanctions against Russia, and reports concerning Russia's activities in occupied territories. Multiple daily publications encompass similar comprehensive summaries and key highlights from the Russian Defense Ministry briefings. Thus, the

<sup>361</sup> Top war, *The origin of the terms "cargo 200", "cargo 300" and others: facts and versions*, 2020, available at: <https://en.topwar.ru/174092-proishozhdenie-terminov-gruz-200-gruz-300-i-prochih-fakty-i-versii.html>

<sup>362</sup> Nedeljnik, *Šta u ruskom vojnom govoru znači "teret 200", a šta "teret 300"?*, 2022, available at: <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/sta-u-ruskom-vojnomo-govoru-znaci-teret-200-a-sta-teret-300/>

<sup>363</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated June 18, 2022, posted at 6:15 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>364</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated August 24, 2022, posted at 10:21 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>365</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated March 29, 2022, posted at 6:55 AM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>366</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated March 29, 2022, posted at 7:04 AM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>367</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated March 29, 2022, posted at 7:47 AM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>368</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated March 29, 2022, posted at 3:21 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>369</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated March 29, 2022, posted at 6:15 AM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

channel initiates an inundation of subscribers with unmitigated information. **This inundation, comprising many facts alongside misinformation, where data are proffered without accompanying commentary or elucidation, constructs a dynamic and rapidly evolving portrayal of unfolding events. By fostering such circumstances, the authors of the channel effectively deprive readers of the chance to comprehend the situation holistically, deliberate upon it, and critically process or assimilate what they have witnessed or read.**

**From now until the conclusion of the study period, the narratives on the channel are notably aligned with the Russian domestic agenda, following a strategy of propagandistic dissemination primarily aimed at the Russian audience rather than appealing to an international viewership.** Remarkably, within Russia, propaganda actively countered anti-military narratives and the inflow of information from Western nations, which, despite restrictions on independent media, managed to permeate the country. However, such dynamics observed in Russia are notably absent within the content disseminated on the Berić's channel. For instance, the dissemination of photographs depicting the victims of Russian aggression in Bucha and the subsequent global outcry they elicited triggered a flurry of publications by Kremlin propagandists, who proffered an array of narratives denying the Russian army's involvement in the civilian casualties.<sup>370</sup> However, in Berić's channel, only one unremarkable post addressing this matter appeared,<sup>371</sup> notably devoid of any mention or utilisation to debunk Western 'falsehoods and stratagems,' a stark contrast to the narrative tactics observed within Russia. Hence, **the channel forges its narrative autonomously, devoid of distraction or response to concurrent discourses.** It could perhaps be attributed to the prevalent anti-Western and anti-NATO sentiments pervasive in Serbia and among Serbs. In contrast, within Russia, Western rhetoric has garnered traction among adversaries of the war.

Simultaneously, the channel's disseminated information fosters a sense of Serb participation in the ongoing events. Occasionally, the verbal expression 'Russian army' finds usage in the posts. However, far more frequently, the posts refer to the Russian armed forces as "our army,"<sup>372</sup> "our fighters,"<sup>373</sup> and similar designations. This approach engenders a sense of involvement and emotional attachment. **Within the channel's rhetoric, the war in Ukraine is not represented as an abstract conflict unfolding beyond Serbia's borders; instead, it is defined as proximate - where 'our guys' are fighting and perishing, creating an impression that Serbia stands as an equal participant in the conflict.** Furthermore, the actions undertaken by the Russian army are frequently denoted as those of the "allied forces."<sup>374</sup> This particular terminology diverges notably from the speech patterns observed in Russian media and Telegram channels, where such usage, if present, is accompanied by the specification "allied forces of Russia, the DPR, and the LPR."<sup>375</sup> However, within Berić's narrative, the allied forces remain nebulous; specifics regarding their composition and the participants' identities in this 'union' remain undisclosed. Paradoxically, this ambiguity further amplifies the sense of Serb involvement in the evolving conflict. Ultimately, these are our 'allies'; they represent a significant collective force destined for triumph. The term 'allies' symbolises the cohesive strength of collaboration, partnership, support, and inclusivity. **Embracing the role of an 'ally' entails proactive engagement, assuming responsibility for dismantling obstacles, fostering unity, and underscoring the potency of unified endeavours.** The portrayal of the Russian army and its soldiers, delineating their feats and actions, reaches a culmination with statements such as, "Russian soldiers from the group 'O' aided a Ukrainian soldier who inadvertently stepped on a mine laid during their retreat."<sup>376</sup> This narrative accentuates the honourable actions of a Russian soldier even in assisting an adversary. Notably, this post

<sup>370</sup> Associated Press, *Russian media campaign falsely claims Bucha deaths are fakes*, 2022, available at: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-kyiv-business-media-facebook-21d36ea4370bab98b1cc93baao815dd8>

<sup>371</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated April 3, 2022, posted at 1:49 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>372</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated July 21, 2022, posted at 10:43 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>373</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated July 21, 2022, posted at 7:26 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>374</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated June 3, 2022, posted at 8:27 AM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>375</sup> Rossiyskaya Gazeta, *The allied troops of the Russian Federation, the DPR and the LPR entered the city limits of Artemovsk*, 2022, available at: <https://rg.ru/2022/08/05/soiuznye-vojska-vedut-boi-v-gorodskoj-cherte-artemovska.html>

<sup>376</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated July 5, 2022, posted at 5:18 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>



is promptly succeeded by the assertion, "The 'Fighters' of the Armed Forces of Ukraine shoot at a civilian object for entertainment,"<sup>377</sup> thereby crafting a stark contrast in imagery, magnifying the valour of the Russian army even further.

Narratives portraying the Ukrainian army also align with the fundamental narratives of Russian propaganda prevalent within Russia. Labels such as "Nazis,"<sup>378</sup> "fascists,"<sup>379</sup> and "Ukronazis"<sup>380</sup> are consistently employed. Equally, the political entities within Ukraine, including the ruling elites, are referred to as the "military junta,"<sup>381</sup> and the local governors are labelled as "gauleiters."<sup>382</sup> **The derogatory language initially directed solely at the Ukrainian Armed Forces and politicians at the onset of the conflict is gradually expanding beyond, encompassing all Ukrainians who oppose Russia.** Once more, this labelling distinctly delineates people into distinct categories of 'us' versus 'them,' 'ours' versus 'strangers.' However, this distinction does not necessarily align with ethnic lines, as all adversaries are considered enemies, regardless of their origins. Conversely, a distinct terminology is employed when referring to the populace in occupied territories. They are not identified as 'Ukrainians' or 'Russians'; instead, they are universally termed as "residents"<sup>383</sup> — residents or local inhabitants of Mykolaiv, Lysychansk, or Donetsk. Consequently, **the entire population of Ukraine is stratified into two distinct groups: the 'Ukronazis,' who deserve elimination, and the locals, perceived as 'awaiting liberation by Russian troops.'** Simultaneously, it is noteworthy that the objectives initially heralded as the 'denazification of Ukraine' at the war's onset gradually faded into obscurity. Thus, from April to July 2022, 'denazification' was barely mentioned, appearing occasionally in an advertising message. Yet, the term 'Ukronazis' swiftly permeates society and becomes a conventional practice. The utilisation of the term 'nazi' holds deep significance owing to its historical context and the collective memory tied to Great Patriotic War in Russia, which stands as a profoundly poignant yet valorised period in the nation's chronicles. The atrocities perpetrated by the Nazi regime are extensively taught in schools, engendering widespread consciousness regarding the harrowing events of that era. Many Russian families maintain a personal link to the war, commemorating relatives who made ultimate sacrifices during the conflict. Thus, attributing the label of 'nazi' to any individual or entity in Russian society evokes profound sentiments and connections with the tragedy and suffering endured during that period. Hence, the narrative of continuity in the war in Ukraine is being constructed, invoking sentiments akin to "Let us perpetuate and accomplish the endeavours initiated by our forefathers."<sup>384</sup> **Likewise, within Serbian discourse, the attribution of the label 'nazi' evokes similar sentiments deeply entwined with the struggle, sacrifices, and enduring legacy of this tragic chapter in the country's history.**

An influential element in the evolution of the channel's narrative during this phase is the emergence of content concerning Serbia. However, **discussions of tangible political events are absent, ranging from significant escalations and disputes in Kosovo to major political events in Serbian politics, such as the nationwide elections held on April 3, 2022.** Notably, the sole event pertinent to the Serbian agenda, absent from the Russian information sphere, pertained to Croatian President Zoran Milanović's decoration of a general accused of military transgressions committed during the Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s. Conversely, the posts addressed Serbian developments with relevance to the context of the Ukrainian war, encompassing instances like the refusal to impose sanctions and an incident involving an assault on the Serbian flag, mistakenly identified as the Russian flag. **However, despite the apparent focus of the disseminated content on the Serbian audience, the primary narratives previously employed by Russian propaganda in Serbia were not used. In a compilation of 224 analysed posts during the second phase, only three touches upon the**

<sup>377</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated July 5, 2022, posted at 5:19 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>378</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated August 5, 2022, posted at 9:40 AM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>379</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated April 15, 2022, posted at 9:28 AM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>380</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated June 5, 2022, posted at 11:23 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>381</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated June 23, 2022, posted at 20:05 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>382</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated June 27, 2022, posted at 20:28 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>383</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated May 27, 2022, posted at 13:17 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>384</sup> Zabaykal'skiy rabochiy, *We have one homeland*, 2022, available at: <https://zabrab75.ru/articles/politika/rodina-u-nas-odna/>

**cherished theme of 'Russian-Serbian brotherhood.'** Despite the pro-Russian discourse aiming to evoke a sense of Serb engagement in the conflict, a pivotal argument often employed in official Serbian discourse, emphasising "we [Serbs] cannot leave the only country that we have,"<sup>385</sup> finds no place in the rhetoric on the Berić's channel. Moreover, while countering the perceived threat of NATO stood as one of the critical propaganda narratives in Russia during the war, highlighting the potential menace posed by Ukraine's NATO accession and warranting military intervention,<sup>386</sup> **NATO is scarcely mentioned in posts on the channel**, except for formal news reports, that do not represent NATO as a threat. Furthermore, the posts refrain from addressing the topic of Kosovo, omitting slogans like 'Crimea is Russia, Kosovo is Serbia'<sup>387</sup> or 'Crimea is Russia, Ukraine is Russia, Alaska is Russia. Everything Is Russia, except Kosovo. Kosovo is Serbia!'<sup>388</sup> that gained prominence in Serbia as early as 2014. **There is also an absence of narratives concerning the Slavjanoserbija** - a cluster of settlements established within the Russian Empire in the mid-18th century in modern-day Ukraine territories, specifically in Donbas. These settlements facilitated the relocation of Serbs and other Balkan peoples to safeguard borders and cultivate the southern steppes. Many supporters of the war in Serbia articulate their backing for Russia by framing the conflict as a struggle for the independence of Donbas, akin to the freedom of Slavjanoserbija.<sup>389</sup> **Thus, by the end of July 2022, five months after the war's onset, pro-Russian propaganda had yet to devise a strategy to fortify its influence and bolster support for the war in Serbia.**

Later, a marked increase in coverage regarding events in Serbia became evident. Primarily, this surge is attributed to the escalation in Kosovo from the night of July 31 to August 1, 2022. However, precise details merit attention. The mounting border tension had been incrementally intensifying, with Serbian media preempting a potential escalation long before its actual occurrence. This anticipation stemmed from the decision made by Kosovo authorities to change license plates, a move that instigated mutual pressures a month before the unfolding events. Nonetheless, coverage of the situation in Kosovo on the channel only materialised on July 31. Noteworthy, on August 2, the channel's narrative entirely shifted focus from events concerning the visit of the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, to Taiwan, and on August 3, it turned to the events in Nagorno-Karabakh, where the Azerbaijani armed forces initiated aggression. **Thus, while Serbian society, the media, and even telegram channels had been reflecting on the events in Kosovo, Berić's channel swiftly — and completely redirected attention to other international events on the agenda. This alignment mirrored the Russian perspective on escalation in Kosovo rather than the Serbian one.** Furthermore, when describing the events developing in Kosovo, the channel predominantly cited remarks from Russian politicians and officials. These include individuals such as Maria Zakharova,<sup>390</sup> Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation; Ramzan Kadyrov,<sup>391</sup> Head of the Chechen Republic; Alexei Mukhin,<sup>392</sup> General Director of the Russian Center for Political Information; and Andrei Alshevsky,<sup>393</sup> Deputy of the Russian State Duma. Moreover, one of the posts identifies not local but the Russian telegram channel<sup>394</sup> as a source of information about the events in Kosovska Mitrovica. **Initially broadcasted in Russian for a Russian audience, the messages from Russian politicians contain narratives significant to Serbia regarding the 'incitement of evil NATO.' Yet, they serve Russia's interests by portraying NATO's actions as solely aimed at**

<sup>385</sup> Kurir, *Počeli radovi na deonici Sremska Rača-Kuzmin Predsednik Vučić: Ovo je još jedno veliko delo koje ostaje iza nas*, 2022, available at: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3882125/uzivo-vucic-na-pocetku-radova-na-deonici-sremska-raca-kuzmin>

<sup>386</sup> Anadolu Agency, *Ukraine's accession to NATO 'fundamental threat' to Russia's security, says Putin*, 2023, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/ukraines-accession-to-nato-fundamental-threat-to-russias-security-says-putin/2957383>

<sup>387</sup> Српски покрет Двери, *Boško Obradović na Jalti: Krim je Rusija, Kosovo je Srbija*, 2018, available at: <https://dveri.rs/saopstenja/bosko-obradovic-na-jalti-krim-je-rusija-kosovo-je-srbija>

<sup>388</sup> RTS, *Sve je Rusija, osim Kosova, Kosovo je Srbija*, 2015, available at: <https://www.rts.rs/lat/sport/ostali-sportovi/2138952/sve-je-rusija-osim-kosova-kosovo-je-srbija.html>

<sup>389</sup> РАСЕН, *Славјаносербија: земља војничког братства*, 2023, available at: <https://www.rasen.rs/2018/10/slavjanoserbija-zemlja-vojniskog-bratstva/>

<sup>390</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated July 31, 2022, posted at 10:03 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>391</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated August 1, 2022, posted at 12:00 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>392</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated August 1, 2022, posted at 8:15 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>393</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated August 1, 2022, posted at 9:17 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>394</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated July 31, 2022, posted at 9:19 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

**provoking Russia.** This sentiment is echoed in Alshevsky's speech regarding the 'fraternal people.' With Russia facing international isolation, the Kremlin needs to seek allies. Hence, the 'brotherhood' between Russia and Serbia, previously extensively covered only in Serbia, has also gained relevance in Russia. Thus, the coverage of the escalation in Kosovo can hardly be considered a 'proper work' of Russian propaganda in Serbia.

**At the same time, extensive coverage was given to confrontation and the struggle against conducting the Europride in Belgrade.** Numerous posts were published throughout the widespread public discourse about this event in Serbia, including calls to attend rallies and other protests against pride.<sup>395</sup> **Notably, at that time, these posts contained content specific to Serbia and were unrelated to Russia.** It is noteworthy as anti-LGBT sentiment remains active in Russia, and the opposition of a 'holy and traditional Russia' against the 'perverse West' stands as a critical narrative in Russian propaganda, both domestically and internationally.<sup>396</sup> Apart from this aspect, Berić's channel's primary narratives remained unchanged. The only notable difference is the refusal to label Ukrainians as 'fascists' and 'nazis.' Previously, the term 'Ukrainians' was not used, but now, within a relatively short period, it has been employed more than 200 times in describing the war actions. However, this shift aligns with the evolving dynamics of Russian discourse. Moreover, in the following phase, the prior rhetoric regarding 'Ukrainian nazis' will resurface in both Russian discussions and in posts on Berić's channel. **Consequently, despite incorporating events from Serbian politics and public life into the channel's narrative, there remains a lack of a unified, coherent strategy for Russian propaganda tailored explicitly for the Serbian audience.**

The specific approach did not emerge in the fourth phase of the war. During this period, amidst Ukraine's successful counteroffensive and the withdrawal of Russian troops from Kharkiv, the channel witnessed a surge in posting, peaking at 74 text-based posts per day, excluding posts that contain only video or photo materials. The volume of disseminated information also notably escalates, including detailed reports from multiple front sectors and concurrent battles for Kherson,<sup>397</sup> Balakleya,<sup>398</sup> and Kharkiv.<sup>399</sup> **Despite the retreat and defeat of Russian forces, these facts are effectively obscured by a multitude of posts detailing changes in each front.** The vitriolic rhetoric against Ukrainians intensified significantly, especially compared to earlier periods. Previously, Russian propaganda aimed to conceal violence during the war and often accused Ukraine of shelling its territories. However, the approach has shifted. Posts now portray a disturbing narrative of dehumanisation and hatred towards Ukrainians: "... a tank is working in Ukrainians positions ... gays and pigs are killed,"<sup>400</sup> "Very beautiful. Shelling of AFU positions with incendiary ammunition."<sup>401</sup> Such posts revel in hatred, aiming to brutalise Ukrainians. Appealing to primitive hunting instincts, the channel regularly shares images of killed Ukrainian soldiers with their faces crossed out.

**Nevertheless, there are still no signs of tailoring narratives about the war specifically for the Serbian audience.** For instance, the post from September 10: "... And thankfully, despite significant territorial losses, our human losses are minimal, especially considering the operation's scale. Great defeats mark our history; some made us stronger, retaliating against the enemy manifold, while others plunged the country into ruin. It is crucial to recognise that the Iziium and Balakleya battles are akin to Narva, not Tsushima or Mukden."<sup>402</sup> Clearly, these references are unfamiliar to most Serbs, and these analogies might not resonate with them. To foster a stronger sense of connection, referencing Serbian battles like the Battle of Kozara in 1942 or the historic Battle of Kosovo in 1389 could have been more

<sup>395</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated August 29, 2022, posted at 5:28 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>396</sup> Wall Street Journal, *Putin's New Strategy: Laying Claim to Traditional Values*, 2022, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/putins-new-strategy-laying-claim-to-traditional-values-11671253263>

<sup>397</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated October 8, 2022, posted at 4:59 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>398</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated September 7, 2022, posted at 10:17 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>399</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated September 10, 2022, posted at 7:50 AM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>400</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated September 6, 2022, posted at 9:17 AM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>401</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated September 21, 2022, posted at 8:15 AM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>402</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated September 10, 2022, posted at 11:22 AM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

impactful. However, this was overlooked, underscoring once again the disregard of Russian propaganda for the Balkans and Serbia.

However, it is essential to highlight that discrepancies emerge between the primary stream of Russian propaganda and the content on Berić's channel for the first time in this phase. Significant setbacks of the Russian army have triggered heightened criticism directed at the military itself, its leadership, equipment, experience, and tactics. **During this period, notable critics emerged, particularly among war correspondents, who, through their telegram channels and frequent appearances on political talk shows on TV, became the public voice representing widespread dissatisfaction with the front-line situation. Yet, this trend does not manifest on the Berić channel. Instead, the posts persist in cultivating the narrative of a robust and unbeatable Russian army.** Despite the reality of retreat and defensive manoeuvres, the narrative portrays the military as "holding the line,"<sup>403</sup> "rearranging the front,"<sup>404</sup> and "resisting the Ukrainian counteroffensive."<sup>405</sup> References to 'our guys' and 'our fighters' continue, depicting an unyielding struggle against the enemy. Additionally, amid the backdrop of defeat, there is a shift in focus within Russian public discourse. The conflict with Ukraine assumes a secondary position, giving way to a broader "civilisational" clash between Russia and NATO,<sup>406</sup> the West and the East. This apocalyptic rhetoric heralds an all-encompassing war where those not aligned with us are deemed adversaries. However, this narrative again does not appear in Berić's posts. Consequently, Russian propaganda disseminated through the Serbian sniper's channel remains exceptionally constrained. It seems to be trapped in isolation, avoiding engagement with other narratives and persisting as a direct mouthpiece of the Kremlin. This status quo continues until June 2023, with changes emerging at the onset of Ukraine's second counteroffensive.

Only since June 2023 has the channel's discourse started to unite Russians and Serbs around the war. Resurrecting echoes of the Yugoslav conflict, the AFU units began to be portrayed as "Serbian enemies," fuelling this narrative by alleging the presence of Croatian mercenaries among them.<sup>407</sup> The notion of Serbian-Russian brotherhood<sup>408</sup> and the fight of Orthodox Slavs against the "decaying collective West" gained active promotion. Nationalistic sentiments surged,<sup>409</sup> accompanied by mounting criticism of Serbian politics and Aleksandar Vučić.<sup>410</sup> Posts regarding ongoing events in Belgrade, Kosovo, and Serbia at large took centre stage, accusing the Serbian elites of inaction and betrayal.<sup>411</sup> **Amid a barrage of posts steeped in Dugin's ideology and conspiracy theories<sup>412</sup> — reaching a maximum of 90 daily posts - the narrative about the Ukrainian war gradually faded from their public discourse.** However, this shift also aligns with the trajectory of Russian propaganda within Russia, seeking a less aggressive tone in the lead-up to the 2024 elections.

Hence, portraying the Ukrainian war on Dejan Berić's channel unveils a complex case. On one hand, the channel has long been steered by pro-Russian, if not explicitly Russian, influences. **Despite ample opportunities to frame Ukrainian events for a Serbian audience, the channel's creators and administrators displayed minimal interest in contextualising propaganda narratives within the local setting.** Initially, their discourse remained exclusively centred on the Ukrainian conflict, neglecting attempts to incorporate local events or phenomena. **Despite the channel's active operation, resulting in over 30 thousand posts within nearly two years since the Russia-Ukraine war outbreak, the creators scarcely endeavoured to disseminate their propaganda within Serbia to garner support for the conflict or Russia among local society.** Their focus primarily involved translating Russian-language propaganda materials, failing to deploy propaganda strategies that at least Sputnik Србија's ones. **Consequently, while global media highlighted Russia's burgeoning**

<sup>403</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated September 11, 2022, posted at 3:56 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>404</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated September 11, 2022, posted at 2:31 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>405</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated September 21, 2022, posted at 2:47 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>406</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated September 21, 2022, posted at 9:54 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>407</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated July 29, 2023, posted at 7:51 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>408</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated July 8, 2023, posted at 3:24 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>409</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated October 7, 2023, posted at 7:15 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>410</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated October 30, 2023, posted at 9:56 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>411</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated November 2, 2023, posted at 2:32 PM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

<sup>412</sup> The post from the 'Dejan Berić' telegram channel, dated July 8, 2023, posted at 1:27 AM, available at: <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>



**influence in Serbia, Kremlin propaganda surprisingly made limited concerted efforts toward this end.** Only in the summer of 2023 did a little shift occur in the strategy concerning posts' publication and content. However, within such a brief period, pinpointing the exact cause of these changes — an appointment of new channel's authors, the forthcoming Serbian parliamentary elections, or heightened peace rhetoric from the West — is challenging to determine definitively.

### 5.2.1.2 *HaZarder NoVosrbija: Witness of the Russian Spring*

The Telegram channel 'HaZarder NoVosrbija' is attributed to Nikola Jović, a recent graduate holding a Master's degree in Political Science from the University of Belgrade. **In 2015, at 19 years old, Jović voluntarily enlisted in the DPR army. Upon his return to Serbia, he received a three-year probationary sentence for his involvement in an unauthorised capacity on a foreign battlefield.** Nevertheless, his firsthand experience proved instrumental in shaping his professional path, leading him to become a prominent expert on the war in Ukraine within right-leaning and pro-Russian media circles. **Today, he actively contributes to various online platforms such as 'Novi Standard,' 'Novi Polis,' 'IN4S,' 'Patmos,' 'Etos,' 'Vidovdan,' 'Balkan Focus.'** Moreover, **Jović holds the position of deputy editor at the weekly journal 'The Seal.'**<sup>413</sup> Furthermore, he has authored poetry collections 'Over Death, Sin, and Life' and 'Arsen.' His latest book, 'Witness to the Russian Spring — Memories of Donbas,' delved into the events unfolding in Ukraine and was published in 2022.<sup>414</sup>

The Telegram channel debuted in June 2022, purportedly focusing on providing updates on the developments of the war in Ukraine. However, **it becomes apparent that its launch was intricately tied to the promotional campaign for his book.** This inference is substantiated by the sole presence of advertising materials on June 23, 2022, a date marked by an inundation of disparaging articles and menacing ultimatums from Russian propaganda in response to Ukraine and Moldova's obtaining EU candidate status.<sup>415</sup> 'HaZarder NoVosrbija' lacks the reach and engagement of the Dejan Berić channel, as evidenced by its fewer published posts and lower number of followers. Nevertheless, amassing just over 3,000 subscribers as of November 2023, this channel boasts higher audience engagement rates, with 64% of its subscribers actively reading its content. The materials disseminated through this channel have been reposted by 14 channels within the scope of this study. Overall, Jović's posts have been referenced by approximately 70 channels, totalling slightly over 400 mentions.<sup>416</sup> Consequently, **despite its comparatively modest subscriber count, Jović's channel commands more significant audience interaction, affording it a heightened potential for influence.**

**The analysis of posts within the channel begins in the second phase of the Ukrainian conflict, where its unique lyrical style, moderation, and departure from typical Russian propaganda techniques immediately stand out.** Notably, the content within the channel aligns with crucial Russian narratives. Efforts are apparent in crafting an image of the 'benevolent and compassionate Russian soldier.' At the same time, the rationale for Russia's incursion into Ukraine is framed around the premise of "Russians residing there."<sup>417</sup> However, these narratives unfold in a nuanced manner, devoid of hyperbole and overtly emotional messaging. For instance, portraying the Russian soldier's persona was crafted using images and techniques deeply resonant and familiar within Serbian society. References to Dostoevsky's quotes, such as "If you only knew how cute, cute, good guys they are!" were employed. **Additionally, a gradual spiritual connection between Serbians and the Ukrainian conflict is fostered, drawing upon historical memory myths of Slavjanoserbija, linking the ongoing conflict to modern Serbia:** "... we are [Serbs and Russians] still one nation, and that the Serbs once again contributed to the liberation of these former (and today!) Serbian regions, ... mentioned Stefan

<sup>413</sup> Etos, *Сведок руског пролећа – успомене из Донбаса*, 2022, available at: <https://etos.press/post/6465>

<sup>414</sup> Delfi knjizare, *Svedok ruskog proleća*, 2024, available at: [https://delfi.rs/knjige/189351\\_svedok\\_ruskog\\_proleca\\_knjiga\\_delfi\\_knjizare.html](https://delfi.rs/knjige/189351_svedok_ruskog_proleca_knjiga_delfi_knjizare.html)

<sup>415</sup> Reuters, *Russia says EU candidate status for Ukraine, Moldova will have negative consequences*, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-eu-candidate-status-ukraine-moldova-will-have-negative-consequences-2022-06-24/>

<sup>416</sup> TGStat, *ХаЗардер НоВосрбија*, 2023, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@haZardernoVoserbia/stat>

<sup>417</sup> The post from the 'ХаЗардер НоВосрбија' telegram channel, dated July 5, 2022, posted at 1:56 PM, available at: <https://t.me/haZardernoVoserbia>

Dimitrijević, who died on the territory of the LPR, as a worthy descendant of the Serbian border guards and all the Isakovićs who went to Russia, dreaming and waiting for the freedom of Serbia."<sup>418</sup> Consequently, the distant conflict between Russia and Ukraine becomes intricately woven into the Serbian agenda, characterised as a struggle to liberate Serbian territories. This thematic linkage is further echoed in the channel's name itself. **While Berić's channel consistently centres on the narrative of 'struggle and death,' providing continuous updates on casualties, losses, destruction, and the demise of Ukrainian soldiers, Jovića's discourse diverges from present events, transporting the audience into the ephemeral realm of the future:** "Perhaps one-day Azovstal will become 'merely' a tourist attraction ..."<sup>419</sup> Consequently, prevailing occurrences - destruction, fatalities, the plight of individuals and communities - lose relevance within the channel's coverage, attempting to redirect attention toward contemplation about the evolution of the "new world."<sup>420</sup>

In this context, the channel remarkably lacks substantial references to the actual events unfolding in the war. In summer 2022, the prevailing tranquil tone of the narrative is disrupted solely by the shelling of Donetsk on August 4, an event personally witnessed by Jović. Apart from that, the main emphasis within the channel's discourse centred on fostering a sense of "brotherhood" and "enduring camaraderie"<sup>421</sup> between Serbs and Russians. Within this rhetoric of fraternal ties, the portrayal of the Ukrainian conflict mirrors the prism of the 1990s Yugoslav wars: "The same form, the same scheme, the same performers, and the same patrons: there are Croatian Ustashe, here are Ukrainian Banderas. An attack on civilians, cities, funeral processions - with the same NATO weapons, the same Western instructors, the same war against the Orthodox - there with the Serbs, here with the Russians: a new attempt at genocide and extermination ..."<sup>422</sup> These words evoke empathy for the Russian side of the conflict, which, like Serbia, suffers from NATO aggression. Additionally, **the historical lens rekindles memories of Yugoslavia's anguish, bitterness, and humiliation in 1999, thereby fostering Russia's compassion and reinforcing its involvement in opposition to the West. Consequently, the formation of pro-Russian sentiments derives not from a direct pro-Russian stance but rather from an anti-Western rhetoric.** This narrative deliberately omits any discussion regarding the justifications or rationale behind Russia's incursion into Ukraine, steering instead towards overt manipulation of historical memory.

During the fourth phase of the conflict, amidst a series of setbacks, Jović's channel subtly critiques the Russian army's actions. However, this critique maintains a measured and cautious tone, concurrently instilling confidence in an eventual triumph.<sup>423</sup> Notably, the author refrains from delving deeply into frontline developments. **Again, his discourse extends far beyond the immediacy of present events, projecting toward a future:** "After this is the complete liberation of Donbas and the entirety of Ukraine from internal Nazism and external globalism, marking the conclusion of this arduous and tragic chapter in Russian and global history. This event heralds the dawn of a new phase in the quest for a superior world, emancipated from the grip of Anglo-American dominance and hegemony. The Russian World reemerges following the "dormant" twentieth century; Russia reclaims its historical territories, returning to its essence. Simultaneously, after the ostensibly "lost" twentieth century, the Serbian World is foreseen to be rejuvenated through divine intervention, thus welcoming a liberated and unified Serbianness."<sup>424</sup> This post illustrates a parallelism between the fates of Russia and Serbia. **Thus, the**

<sup>418</sup> The post from the 'ХаЗардер НоВосрбија' telegram channel, dated June 25, 2022, posted at 5:14 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/haZardernoVoserbia>

<sup>419</sup> The post from the 'ХаЗардер НоВосрбија' telegram channel, dated July 5, 2022, posted at 9:10 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/haZardernoVoserbia>

<sup>420</sup> The post from the 'ХаЗардер НоВосрбија' telegram channel, dated June 28, 2022, posted at 11:34 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/haZardernoVoserbia>

<sup>421</sup> The post from the 'ХаЗардер НоВосрбија' telegram channel, dated July 31, 2022, posted at 9:46 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/haZardernoVoserbia>

<sup>422</sup> The post from the 'ХаЗардер НоВосрбија' telegram channel, dated August 4, 2022, posted at 2:29 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/haZardernoVoserbia>

<sup>423</sup> The post from the 'ХаЗардер НоВосрбија' telegram channel, dated September 10, 2022, posted at 10:24 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/haZardernoVoserbia>

<sup>424</sup> The post from the 'ХаЗардер НоВосрбија' telegram channel, dated September 30, 2022, posted at 5:14 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/haZardernoVoserbia>

**picture of the Ukrainian conflict assumes a secondary role in this narrative, serving merely as a prelude to the rebirth of Greater Serbia.**<sup>425</sup> As such, Russia's support in the Ukrainian war becomes intricately linked to the ambition of reclaiming and uniting Serbian lands. This transformative paradigm shift in interpreting the conflict underscores the escalating insignificance of events in Ukraine. It is no longer framed as a mere clash between Russia and Ukraine. Still, it is articulated as a broader confrontation between Russia and the Western powers, indicative of a struggle to establish a novel global order. **Consequently, the prospective triumph of Russia assumes heightened significance, postulated as "even more crucial for us, the Serbs, than for the Russians themselves."**<sup>426</sup>

The narrative concerning the war in Ukraine culminates on this resounding note. **Remarkably, no posts addressing the conflict emerged after November 10, 2022.** The channel completely refrained from delving into immediate conflict actions. Nevertheless, Prigozhin's coup attempt stood as a conspicuous exception, eliciting a narrative notably distinct from the content disseminated on, for example, Dejan Berić's channel. Despite Jović's censure of Prigozhin's actions, the focus of his critique shifted conspicuously toward Russia's governmental issues. He underscored prevailing concerns such as corruption within the army, the incompetence exhibited by commanding officers, and the regrettable loss of Russian soldiers' lives.<sup>427</sup> Furthermore, Jović denounced the political persecution and apprehension of Igor Strelkov and Pavel Gubarev, with the latter hailed as heroes, irrespective of the allegations of extremism levelled against them: "Whatever accusations they face (even if verifiable, a premise I question), these pale in comparison to the inactivity evident among many high-ranking figures within Russia's leadership cadre."<sup>428</sup> It once again accentuates a nuanced perspective regarding the purportedly unrestrained and unwavering support for Russia, a perception often attributed to the Serbs by Western researchers. **Despite the channel's symbolic allusions to Russian aggression in Ukraine, manifested through the inclusion of the letters Z and V in its name, along with the description 'Stories, reports and pictures from Novorossiia' - the entire narrative does not aim at Russia or Ukraine but instead at Serbia and the ideology of Greater Serbia.** Nikola Jović's discourse portrays the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a vehicle aimed at dismantling the unilateral dominance and hegemony of the Western world. Within this framework, Russia's triumph in this conflict is envisioned as the catalyst for the resurgence of Greater Serbia and the amalgamation of Serbian territories. Hence, the channel predominantly presents narratives concerning the future rather than focusing on the present. Minute-by-minute accounts of war events are conspicuously absent on the channel; their significance is inconsequential compared to the conflict's eventual outcome. Moreover, the channel avoids emotive and hyperbolic statements concerning Ukrainians, redirecting attention towards the West as the primary global adversary. Consequently, within the channel's context, Russia's support, despite occasional references to the 'brotherhood of peoples,' derives not from a sense of unity and fraternity but rather from a common adversary — precisely, Europe and the Western World.

#### 4.2.2 Igor Damjanović: War in Real Time

The 'War LIVE' emerged as the most significant Telegram channel created after February 24, 2022, exclusively for reporting events in Ukraine. Before 'War LIVE,' established on October 15, 2022, various channels focusing on conflict aspects appeared, capturing an audience interested in the war's events. However, **'War LIVE' stands out with its superior engagement metrics with its audience, suggesting a potentially more influential impact through its messages.** This channel's posts have been reposted by 17 channels within the study sample, cumulatively featuring across 89 channels in over 800 instances. Moreover, the channel maintains a notably high audience engagement rate, with

<sup>425</sup> The post from the 'ХаЗардер НоВосрбија' telegram channel, dated September 21, 2022, posted at 14:24 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/haZardernoVoserbia>

<sup>426</sup> The post from the 'ХаЗардер НоВосрбија' telegram channel, dated October 5, 2022, posted at 11:15 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/haZardernoVoserbia>

<sup>427</sup> The post from the 'ХаЗардер НоВосрбија' telegram channel, dated June 24, 2023, posted at 17:33 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/haZardernoVoserbia>

<sup>428</sup> The post from the 'ХаЗардер НоВосрбија' telegram channel, dated July 21, 2023, posted at 23:52 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/haZardernoVoserbia>

54% of subscribers actively reading its posts, amassing a total audience of over 19 thousand followers.<sup>429</sup> What is intriguing is the revelation of the channel's anonymous author, who disclosed their identity in a post referencing his interview with IN4S — a Montenegrin media outlet known for active propagation of pro-Russian narratives.<sup>430</sup> Furthermore, the IN4S telegram channel, also identified within the study sample as pro-Russian, shares posts across 15 channels, including distinctly pro-Kremlin channels such as 'Balkan Gossip Girl'.<sup>431</sup> **The interview link, attached to one of the posts,<sup>432</sup> demonstrates the channel's proprietor as a military columnist and analyst, Igor Damjanović, recognized for participating in events at the Russian House in Belgrade to cover the 'special military operation' events.** Moreover, Damjanović received the 'For Friendship and Cooperation' badge of honour from the Russian Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation,<sup>433</sup> a key outpost of Russian influence in the Balkans.<sup>434</sup>

The channel's narrative and posting design presents a captivating exploration. **On the one hand, the author adheres to Russian propaganda narratives,** publishing content about "Nazism in Ukraine"<sup>435</sup> while satirically criticising Western discourse on Ukraine<sup>436</sup> and labelling Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a mere "US puppet".<sup>437</sup> **On the other hand,** despite Russian news channels focusing solely on attacks targeting military strategic zones in Ukraine, **the channel's materials counter this narrative** with reports such as: "Nikolaev was bombed massively, an apartment building was damaged, five civilians were killed."<sup>438</sup> Moreover, **the channel includes links to Ukrainian telegram channels, arguments about Ukraine's offensive needs,<sup>439</sup> and statements from Ukrainian politicians with a pro-Ukrainian stance.<sup>440</sup>** The channel's author claims objectivity in their posts,<sup>441</sup> highlighting inconsistencies in incoming information,<sup>442</sup> as evident in a January 14, 2023 post: "Tragedy! During today's rocket attacks in the city of Dnipro ... The government in Kyiv claims that a [Russian] missile destroyed the building, and the [Russian] army claims that a faulty [Ukrainian] air defence missile fell on the building."<sup>443</sup> Thus, the author intentionally presents both Russian and Ukrainian viewpoints. **Simultaneously, employing emoji flags instead of country names imparts a gamified tone to the evolving circumstances.** Also, the channel discusses Russia's alleged attack on Ukraine with Iranian drones,<sup>444</sup> an assertion officially denied by Russia. Moreover, the posts critique not military officials, as Russian voyenkory's channels do, but political elites: "The interests of the oligarchy and the liberal elite, who fled to London with the money looted in [Russia], still seem to be above national dignity."<sup>445</sup> **Thus, the channel's discourse is multifaceted. While predominantly pro-Russian, the occasional inclusion of pro-Ukrainian rhetoric aims to foster a more comprehensive perspective within Serbian society about the war in Ukraine.** Notably, the channel's publications avoid references to the 'Russian-Serbian brotherhood' or anti-NATO sentiments, omitting mentions of

<sup>429</sup> TGStat, ПАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@ratuzivo/stat>

<sup>430</sup> Tihomira Doncheva, "Tracking Russia's Narratives in the Western Balkan Media", NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020, p.36, available at: <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/tracking-russias-narratives-in-the-western-balkan-media/53>

<sup>431</sup> Telegram, Балканская сплетница, 2024, available at: <https://t.me/balkanossip>

<sup>432</sup> The post from the 'ПАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated April 2, 2023, posted at 11:26 AM, available at: <https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>433</sup> Ruski dom, Игор Дамјановић одликован почасним знаком 'За пријатељство и сарадњу', 2023, available at:

<https://ruskidom.rs/sr/2023/04/11/igor-dam-anovi-odlikovan-pochasnim-znakom-za-pri-ate-stvo-i-sarad-u/>

<sup>434</sup> Marta Szpala, "Russia in Serbia – soft power and hard interests", OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, 2014, p.4, available at:

<https://aei.pitt.edu/58198/>

<sup>435</sup> The post from the 'ПАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated November 11, 2022, posted at 3:09 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>436</sup> The post from the 'ПАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated March 2, 2023, posted at 5:08 PM, available at: <https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>437</sup> The post from the 'ПАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated May 3, 2023, posted at 11:09 PM, available at: <https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>438</sup> The post from the 'ПАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated November 11, 2022, posted at 11:29 AM, available at:

<https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>439</sup> The post from the 'ПАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated May 5, 2023, posted at 12:12 PM, available at: <https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>440</sup> The post from the 'ПАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated November 11, 2023, posted at 2:27 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>441</sup> The post from the 'ПАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated May 5, 2023, posted at 9:55 PM, available at: <https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>442</sup> The post from the 'ПАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated March 2, 2023, posted at 2:22 PM, available at: <https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>443</sup> The post from the 'ПАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated January 14, 2023, posted at 8:05 PM, available at: <https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>444</sup> The post from the 'ПАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated March 17, 2023, posted at 12:22 AM, available at: <https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>445</sup> The post from the 'ПАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated June 6, 2023, posted at 10:23 AM, available at: <https://t.me/ratuzivo>



Slavjanoserbija or other historical memory myths. The channel's main narrative primarily revolves around opposition to Milo Đukanović,<sup>446</sup> which is unrelated to the Ukrainian war narrative at this stage.

Later, a more pronounced pro-Russian narrative takes precedence. Russia is portrayed as a potent and just geopolitical player,<sup>447</sup> steadily bolstering its arsenal with formidable weaponry.<sup>448</sup> An influential gauge of the channel's alignment lies in its coverage of Yevgeny Prigozhin's coup attempt, depicted by the author as "treachery",<sup>449</sup> aligning closely with the Kremlin's narrative. However, again, despite the heightened dissemination of pro-Russian content, the channel strives for objectivity and parity, trying to present both Ukrainian and Russian versions of the events.<sup>450</sup> **Moreover, the portrayal of the war events remains entirely neutral and devoid of emotion, providing only a factual account:** "There were no serious movements at the front over the previous ten days, several settlements and villages (none with a population of more than 1,000 people) moved from the control of one of the belligerents to a neutral zone and vice versa."<sup>451</sup>

Thus, the image of the conflict on Serbia's most popular channel about the war in Ukraine remains ambiguous. It predominantly represents the war and global politics favourably towards Russia, fostering perceptions of Russia as a 'robust military power' unswayed by sanctions, Ukraine, or NATO. Concurrently, sporadic Ukrainian perspectives inserted into the narrative can sow scepticism among readers, prompting a critical examination of unfolding events. **However, within the scope of this study, the most important thing is that the war appears on the channel as distant and indifferent to Serbia, Montenegro (frequently referenced in posts), and the broader Balkans.** Notably, the channel's rhetoric refrains from employing techniques inciting allegiance to any involved party. Phrases like 'our boys,' 'our army,' or the 'ukrofascist,' typical for Russian propaganda, are notably absent. **Thus, the war's events are depicted as remote and insignificant to subscribers, akin to observing a reality show on television without direct personal involvement.**

#### 4.2.3 'Serbs for Russians': A Right-Wing Perspective on the war

The channel 'Serbs for Russians' emerged as the inaugural channel opened after the commencement of war in Ukraine within the study sample, openly advocating a pro-Russian stance and endorsing Russia's actions in the region. Its inception on February 26, 2022, was marked by a dual-language slogan in Serbian and Russian — "Serbs and Russians are brothers forever!"<sup>452</sup> The channel persists in its operation, currently maintaining an audience of slightly over 1,800 subscribers. **Mladen Obradović, the chief leader of the far-right group 'Obraz', heads the editorial oversight.** Established in 1993 and acknowledged as a clero-fascist organization in 2005, the 'Fatherland Movement 'Obraz' was banned by Serbia's Constitutional Court in 2012. However, the organization effectively prevails under the re-registered entity 'Saint Sava Association 'Obraz'.<sup>453</sup> In comparison to prominent channels such as 'Dejan Berić', 'HaZarder NoVosrbija', and 'War LIVE', **'Serbs for Russians' maintains a lower popularity and primarily serves as an information disseminator, sharing posts from the other 16 channels in the study sample.** However, it distinguishes itself by unequivocally stating its standpoint on the conflict - an aspect that warrants scrutiny. Notably, unlike other channels under examination, 'Serbs for Russians' aligns with a political movement that has consistently championed its ideologies over decades. The historical alliance between right-wing forces in Serbia and Russia is significant, generating interest in examining how the Ukrainian conflict is articulated within the channel's posts.

<sup>446</sup> The post from the 'РАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated April 2, 2023, posted at 1:11 PM, available at: <https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>447</sup> The post from the 'РАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated June 23, 2023, posted at 4:07 PM, available at: <https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>448</sup> The post from the 'РАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated June 23, 2023, posted at 12:21 PM, available at: <https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>449</sup> The post from the 'РАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated June 24, 2023, posted at 1:19 PM, available at: <https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>450</sup> The post from the 'РАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated July 29, 2023, posted at 9:51 AM, available at: <https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>451</sup> The post from the 'РАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO' telegram channel, dated September 20, 2023, posted at 5:17 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/ratuzivo>

<sup>452</sup> TGStat, *Срби за Русе | Србы за русских*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@srbizaruse/stat>

<sup>453</sup> Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Desničarska organizacija Obraz zaobišla ustavnu zabranu*, 2020, available at:

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/desnicarska-organizacija-obraz-zabrana-ustav-srbije/30646117.html>

From the onset and throughout the war's initial stages, the channel consistently disseminated posts chronicling the unfolding war in Ukraine. **These posts persistently echoed the primary narratives of Russian domestic propaganda, displaying a resolute dedication and nuanced implementation.** The conflict in Ukraine was portrayed as a "drastic measure compelled upon Russia,"<sup>454</sup> undertaken in defence of the Donbas populace enduring prolonged "suffering under the governance of the Kyiv regime,"<sup>455</sup> along with accusations of eight years of "genocidal oppression."<sup>456</sup> Ultimately, in stark contrast to the Western perception of Russia as an aggressor against a sovereign state, the narrative positioned Russia as the force "liberating Ukraine from a Nazi regime."<sup>457</sup> Consequently, Russia's portrayal as a salvaging army refrained from bombing cities and civilian sites, attributing such actions to "Ukraine itself shelling its civilian objects."<sup>458</sup> Meanwhile, the Russian military limited its fire solely to military targets, utilising "high-precision weapons."<sup>459</sup> At the same time, the channel's posts exult in the assistance and prowess of the unbeatable Russian army. **They express firm conviction in Russia's inevitable triumph, suggesting that the Western world, in its opposition to Russia, will ultimately bear the consequences.**<sup>460</sup> The narrative implies that Russia remains undeterred by any potential sanctions, projecting an air of fearlessness. Moreover, the channel boldly disseminates conspiracy theories that gained traction in Russia during that period, including notions such as "the US developing biological weapons targeted at Russia in Ukraine."<sup>461</sup> Even the setbacks Russian troops faced were portrayed as a "deliberate decision of the political and military leadership,"<sup>462</sup> with retreats occurring solely "in the face of overwhelming enemy forces after intense confrontations."<sup>463</sup> **Notably, authors create posts with meticulous attention to localising Russian narratives for the Serbian audience.** While the Dejan Berić channel often includes allegories and references unfamiliar to Serbs or utilises Russian public figures obscure to the broader international audience, the 'Serbs for Russians' channel makes a point to explain all details thoroughly. For instance, when referencing the widely circulated Russian internet prank by Vovan and Lexus involving George W. Bush,<sup>464</sup> 'Serbs for Russians' not only presented the content but also elucidated the nature of the comedians' actions, ensuring a high-quality translation of the dialogue into Serbian to prevent confusion among the followers.

Amidst the multitude of posts advocating a pro-Russian perspective on ongoing events and endeavouring to bolster support for the war, two critical aspects merit attention. **Primarily, while the content of these posts mirrors Russian propaganda disseminated within Russia, a significant distinction lies in the absence of hate-driven rhetoric directed toward Ukraine.** Although terms like 'Nazis' or 'Ukronazis' sporadically appear in the post texts, their usage remains notably restrained. Furthermore, if these terms are employed, they are exclusively directed toward depicting the Ukrainian army and the Kyiv regime. Additionally, in most instances, these emotionally charged terms are sourced from reprinted reports by the Russian Ministry of Defense or other Russian news outlets. Within the

<sup>454</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated July 5, 2022, posted at 9:59 AM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>455</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated March 3, 2022, posted at 7:59 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>456</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated March 15, 2022, posted at 9:14 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>457</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated March 7, 2022, posted at 10:55 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>458</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated March 10, 2022, posted at 8:28 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>459</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated July 5, 2022, posted at 3:49 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>460</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated April 2, 2022, posted at 11:21 AM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>461</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated March 10, 2022, posted at 11:08 AM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>462</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated April 5, 2022, posted at 1:15 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>463</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated September 8, 2022, posted at 10:56 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>464</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated May 20, 2022, posted at 12:58 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

channel author's posts, the utilisation of these terms is minimal. Moreover, there is an absence of incitement to harm Ukrainians, such as referring to them as pigs or employing other derogatory language. **The rationale behind this stance lies in the channel's discourse that downplays the significance of Ukraine since, from the outset, Russia has been engaged in a conflict primarily directed against NATO and the Western world.** Consequently, some posts even express sympathy for Ukrainians who are portrayed as "misled victims of the West's deceitful schemes."<sup>465</sup> The channel's narrative about Russia is built upon opposition to Western nations, incorporating familiar anti-NATO rhetoric: "The world is tired of the NATO pact, Western lies and pressure."<sup>466</sup> Emphasising a desire for Russia to curb NATO's influence, the channel portrays Russia as a global saviour and, specifically, the protector of the Serbian populace. "We want Russia to blunt the fangs of the NATO predator"<sup>467</sup> — in channel discourse, Russia articulated akin to Saint George slaying the Dragon, capable of vanquishing malevolence. Thus, the conflict is framed as a clash of civilisations and cultures between Russia and the West. **In this discourse, righteous Russia confronts a "civilisation of death, deceit, and moral decline"**<sup>468</sup> in pursuit of genuine objectives — Orthodoxy and family values — that resonate deeply within Serbian society. **Therefore, the conflict in Ukraine transformed into a battle aligned with Serbia's national interests.** Nevertheless, in Russia, NATO was similarly cited as a rationale for the commencement of hostilities. However, unlike in Russia, where NATO was depicted as an existential threat to national security, Serbia articulates its confrontation with NATO from an idealistic and moral standpoint.

Within this context emerges the narrative of enduring and reciprocal affection and love between Serbia and Russia. Beyond numerous posts presenting a pro-Russian perspective on the war, the shaping of pro-Russian sentiments in Serbian society stems from content emphasising "the brotherhood and unity"<sup>469</sup> shared by the Serbian and Russian peoples. A pivotal aspect of this narrative revolves around fostering a closer alignment between Serbian and Russian identities, reinforcing the indissoluble bonds between these fraternal peoples - encapsulated in the expression: "The Serbian heart beats under one Kosovo and within two Russias."<sup>470</sup> **The channel adeptly reinforces the spiritual and moral kinship between the Serbs and Russians by drawing upon historical events.** Reminiscent of the Second World War<sup>471</sup> and the brutal 1990s, the channel underscores Russia's solitary support of the Serbs against the Western destructive forces.<sup>472</sup> These historical instances ingrain the notion of the Serbs' moral indebtedness to Russia, fostering a discourse highlighting Russia's past merits. Consequently, this engenders a resolute determination to stand by their "brother" and ally until the end, despite the Western stratagems penalising the Serbs<sup>473</sup> for their unwavering allegiance to truth and Russia. Simultaneously, this narrative shapes an idealised image of the Serb, reinforcing that only those aligned with Russia embody honesty and truthfulness.<sup>474</sup> The Serbs' commitment to Russia is articulated with sacred fervour, encapsulated in the fervent proclamation: "God is with us, Russia and truth are with us.

<sup>465</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Сербы за русских' telegram channel, dated March 14, 2022, posted at 11:00 AM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>466</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Сербы за русских' telegram channel, dated March 14, 2022, posted at 3:54 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>467</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Сербы за русских' telegram channel, dated March 14, 2022, posted at 3:54 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>468</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Сербы за русских' telegram channel, dated April 28, 2022, posted at 10:08 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>469</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Сербы за русских' telegram channel, dated March 3, 2022, posted at 8:51 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>470</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Сербы за русских' telegram channel, dated March 14, 2022, posted at 3:54 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>471</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Сербы за русских' telegram channel, dated May 8, 2022, posted at 10:01 AM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>472</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Сербы за русских' telegram channel, dated May 20, 2022, posted at 10:53 AM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>473</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Сербы за русских' telegram channel, dated August 2, 2022, posted at 6:22 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>474</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Сербы за русских' telegram channel, dated February 27, 2022, posted at 3:39 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

Hence, victory shall be ours."<sup>475</sup> **This narrative effectively harnesses a crucial bond uniting Russians and Serbs — the religious unity.**

**At the same time, the imperative for unquestioning allegiance to Russia serves as the primary basis for criticising the Serbian political establishment.** The channel launched an attack on Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who voiced concerns about Russia's betrayal and Russia's possible recognition of Kosovo, widely disseminated in government-controlled media. Furthermore, a broader spectrum of ruling elites faced censure for endorsing a UN resolution denouncing Russia's actions, a move deemed "nothing short of Vučić's disgrace."<sup>476</sup> The left and centrist opposition also drew fire for deliberating the imposition of sanctions against Russia. The channel underscored: "Such statements by the highest state leader clearly indicate the direction in which Vučić and his counterparts from the pro-Western "opposition" aim to steer Serbia. In such circumstances, it is imperative for all patriotic forces in Serbia and across the homeland to unite and staunchly declare that they will not permit any Belgrade government to sever the fraternal ties between Serbs and Russians."<sup>477</sup> This context highlights the potential for conceptual substitution and distortion of meanings within the channel's discourse. **Within this rhetoric, patriotism shifts from concern for Serbia's interests to a call for unwavering loyalty to Russia,** which prompts contemplation regarding which nation's patriots the channel author intends to engage in dialogue.

Thus, before November 2022, the 'Serbs for Russians' channel exhibited unwavering support for Russia. However, the channel's rhetoric transformed as the Ukrainian army began to succeed. Posts detailing the front-line situation diminished significantly, becoming sporadic and scarce. **Notably, since September 6, 2022, a single-authored post on the channel has not focused on the 'Serb-Russian brotherhood.'** The channel refocused its emphasis on international and Serbian political affairs, explicitly highlighting the dynamics within Kosovo. A noteworthy observation arose during the escalation at the Kosovo-Serbia administrative line on the night of July 31 to August 1, 2022, where the channel largely overlooked these unfolding events, focusing solely on updates related to Ukraine and Russia. However, commencing autumn 2022, each escalation in Kosovo became a focal point on the channel, extensively covered across multiple posts. Curiously, the channel's criticism of authorities, previously centred on the 'betrayal of Russia,' changed as well. Despite official discourse intermittently revisiting the topic of imposing sanctions during this period, the channel's focus shifted to critiquing the 'betrayal of the Serbs in Kosovo.'<sup>478</sup>

Hence, Russia's backing of the 'Serbs for Russians' channel goes to waste in its culmination. The channel's architects aimed to craft the most effective strategy for bolstering and popularising Russia's support in Serbia, seeking to forge a spiritual and moral rapport between the Russian and Serbian peoples. However, the primary impetus fuelling support for the war in the channel's rhetoric rested upon cultivated antipathy towards NATO and the West, coupled with a propensity to disparage political adversaries. **As Russian troops began to retreat from Ukraine, the narrative surrounding the 'Slavic Orthodox brotherhood' swiftly vanished from the arsenal of propaganda tools.** This deliberate omission aimed to shield the channel's audience from sharing the bitterness and ignominy of setbacks with the 'big brother.' **Thus, this channel development reiterates that support for the war in Serbia is a situational instrument wielded by local political and ideological elites to achieve their political ends.**

<sup>475</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated September 30, 2022, posted at 6:26 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>476</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated March 2, 2022, posted at 9:09 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>477</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated May 20, 2022, posted at 9:36 AM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>

<sup>478</sup> The post from the 'Срби за Русе | Србы за русских' telegram channel, dated September 9, 2022, posted at 10:47 PM, available at: <https://t.me/srbizaruse>



### 4.3 Findings: Russian Propaganda Tactics in Serbia

Addressing the central inquiry of this study, it is imperative to assert that Russia lacks a sophisticated propaganda strategy in Serbia. In stark contrast to Western nations like Germany<sup>479</sup> or Poland,<sup>480</sup> where Kremlin propagandists deploy intricate mechanisms to shape public opinion, **Serbia remains at the periphery of Russian information warfare.** This deduction stems from a comprehensive analysis of four pro-military Telegram channels, particularly emphasising the influential Dejan Berić's account. Berić, a prominent figure in both Russian and Serbian contexts, renowned for his presence on federal television in both nations, commands authority within pro-military circles. His official channel, curated by third-party Russian authors and administrators, exhibited a noteworthy absence of endeavours to fortify or expand support for the war in Serbia until the summer of 2023. **Although inundated with a plethora of posts presenting a pro-Russian perspective on the conflict, these messages poorly contribute to fostering affection and support within Serbian society.** Notably, they deviate from the primary narratives associated with Russian information warfare in Serbia and the Balkans, namely 'Slavic and Orthodox brotherhood,' 'anti-NATO,' and 'anti-Western' sentiments. Furthermore, the channel's narrative fails to unite the identities of Serbs and Russians, portraying the war as an 'external,' 'distant phenomenon' that can be observed from a detached standpoint. The content lacks localisation and contextual adaptation to Serbia's political and social milieu. **Essentially, the channel's posts seem to be exact replicas of Russian domestic propaganda messages, lacking appropriate translation.**

In contrast, channels such as 'Serbs for Russians' and 'HaZarder NoVosrbija' adopt a distinct narrative framework. **Aligned with right-wing ideologies, their authors leverage the war in Ukraine as a platform to propagate their views and pursue individual objectives.** Remarkably, both channels diverge from the critical narrative of Russian propaganda - 'the denazification of Ukraine.' Instead, from the very beginning, the channels' rhetoric framed the war in Ukraine as a battle between Russia and the West, presenting it as a gateway to resurrecting Serbia's former eminence. Within this narrative, Russia assumes the pragmatic role of a facilitator, poised to liberate Serbia from Western constraints post-victory, thereby initiating the reunification of Serbs and their historical lands. **Hence, during the war's initial phases, these channels featured posts on 'Serbian-Russian brotherhood and unity.' This deliberate emphasis aims to engage Serbs in Russia's triumphs, sharing the satisfaction of rectifying past grievances and defeats.** Consequently, the channels notably lack detailed information about the actual events of the war in Ukraine, particularly in comparison to Dejan Berić's channel. The scant coverage stems from a perception that the war's specific events hold minimal significance. Instead, the paramount importance lies in the broader narrative of a 'civilisational confrontation' between the East and the West. **Therefore, as the prospect of a resounding and rapid Russian success wanes, both channels gradually disengage from the conflict.** They revert to familiar and customary rhetoric, epitomised by phrases like 'next year in Prizren,' representing a distant and spectral hope for Great Serbia's resurgence.

**The analysis of the 'War LIVE' channel presents another intriguing departure.** Despite disseminating pro-Russian content about the war in Ukraine, the author refrains from employing narratives typically associated with Russian information warfare in Serbia and the Balkans. **The channel abstains from invoking the notions of 'Slavic or Orthodox brotherhood,' opting for a factual depiction of victories and setbacks.** Furthermore, the deliberate inclusion of Ukrainian perspectives, alongside pointedly indifferent statements, detaches readers from the unfolding events. This approach transforms the conflict into a kind of disconnected spectacle akin to a TV reality show. While captivating to observe, it is an experience that cannot be met with deep emotional investment or unwavering loyalty.

<sup>479</sup> Pia Lamberty and Lea Frühwirth, "Pro-Russian Disinformation and Propaganda in Germany: Russia's full-scale Invasion of Ukraine", *Center for Monitoring, Analysis and Strategy*, 2023, available at: [https://cemas.io/en/publications/pro-russian-disinformation-and-propaganda-in-germany/2023-02-24\\_ProRussianDisinformationAndPropagandaInGermanyRussiasFullScaleInvasionInUkraine.pdf](https://cemas.io/en/publications/pro-russian-disinformation-and-propaganda-in-germany/2023-02-24_ProRussianDisinformationAndPropagandaInGermanyRussiasFullScaleInvasionInUkraine.pdf)

<sup>480</sup> Andrzej Kozłowski, "Disinformation in Poland on the war in Ukraine", *Fundacja im. Kazimierza Pułaskiego*, 2022, available at: <https://pulaski.pl/pulaski-policy-paper-disinformation-in-poland-on-the-war-in-ukraine/>

Hence, this further substantiates the inaccuracy of prevailing notions regarding Russian influence in the Balkans. Despite staunch assertions by Western media and researchers<sup>481</sup> about Russia fortifying its informational foothold in Serbia and escalating the information warfare in the Balkans, the Kremlin has taken no active measures in this direction. **The dissemination of unaltered translations of Russian domestic propaganda by pro-Russian channels in Serbia signals a lack of any distinct strategy by Russia to expand its influence in Serbian society.** However, the question remains: From where did the extensive network of pro-Russian channels originate? **There is a strong indication that allows to assume that their proliferation does not stem from the strength of Russia's positioning in Serbia; instead, it derives from the pervasive anti-Western and anti-NATO sentiments deeply embedded in society since the 1990s.** The robustness of these anti-Western sentiments propels widespread participation in rallies supporting Russia. However, the underlying motivation of the populace in these demonstrations is not necessarily to endorse the Kremlin; instead, it primarily serves as a platform to voice discontentment with the West.

---

<sup>481</sup> Wouter Zweers, Niels Drost, Baptiste Henry, "Little substance, considerable impact. Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro", *Clingendael Institute*, 2023, available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/russian-influence-serbia-bosnia-and-herzegovina-and-montenegro>; Agon Maliqi, "Russian Information Warfare in the Balkans: How Identity and Religion are Instrumentalized in the Kosovo-Serbia Dispute", *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs*, 2023, available at: <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/russian-information-warfare-in-the-balkans-how-identity-and-religion-are-instrumentalized-in-the-kosovo-serbia-dispute>

## VI Russian Propaganda Tactics in Serbia: A Case Study of the Election Campaigns

Since the late 2000s, marked by escalating tensions between Russia and the West, which were further exacerbated by the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, scholars<sup>482</sup> and media<sup>483</sup> alike have turned their focus to understanding Russia's political influence in the WB and the actions of purported "Russian proxies"<sup>484</sup> in the region. This interest only heightened in 2022 against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. The recent elections in Serbia, held in 2022 and 2023, stirred considerable discussion in the media regarding Russia's potential sway over the political landscape<sup>485</sup> and its attempts to manipulate public opinion.<sup>486</sup> Thus, the central inquiry driving this chapter aims to ascertain the influence exerted by pro-Russian Telegram channels on Serbia's political sphere. It seeks to determine whether these channels employ a coherent strategy and, if so, what specific objectives guide their actions. Additionally, the study explores the extent to which these channels endorse and support particular candidates and political parties.

### 5.1 Serbian Elections Reflected in the 'Sputnik Serbia's' Mirror

'Sputnik Serbia' is a pivotal force in Russian propaganda within the WB, openly tied to the Kremlin and operational in the region since 2015. It has garnered much recognition and popularity among the populace, often cited extensively by local media outlets.<sup>487</sup> Notably, 'Sputnik Serbia' actively prompted readers to join its Telegram channel, featuring a link to the publication's official channel on its main webpage. In the wake of 2022, when EU sanctions targeted pro-Kremlin news agencies like Sputnik and RT, their content faced removal or specialised labelling on mainstream media platforms. Consequently, these news agencies expanded their presence on alternative social media. However, despite these efforts, Sputnik Serbia's Telegram channel has not achieved only moderate success. With over 57 thousand subscribers, it is one of the largest channels in the Serbian Telegram community. Yet, only 17% of subscribers read the channel's posts, and the subscriber engagement rate stands at a mere 2.22%,<sup>488</sup> indicating the channel's limited influence in Serbia and the wider region.

#### 5.1.1 April 2022 elections

During the period spanning from **March 27 to April 10, 2022, a total of 1,815 posts were collected from the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel.** However, despite an average daily publication rate of about 120 posts, Serbia is only sporadically featured in the content of these messages. **The primary focus of Russian propaganda centred on disseminating pro-Russian narratives concerning the war in Ukraine and cultivating support for military actions within Serbian society.** A substantial majority, 1,424 posts, i.e., 78% of the channel's content analysed during this timeframe, exclusively addressed the

<sup>482</sup> David Clark, Andrew Foxall, "Russia's Role in the Balkans – Cause for Concern?", *Henry Jackson Society*, 2014, available at: <https://www.henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Russias-Role-in-the-Balkans.pdf>

<sup>483</sup> CTV News, *Serbia likely to get pro-Russian nationalist government*, 2012, available at: <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/serbia-likely-to-get-pro-russian-nationalist-government-1.855834>

<sup>484</sup> Wouter Zweers, Niels Drost, Baptiste Henry, "Little substance, considerable impact. Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro", *Clingendael Institute*, 2023, p.34, available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/little-substance-considerable-impact.pdf>

<sup>485</sup> Deutsche Welle, *Russia's influence overshadows Serbia's election*, 2023, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-influence-overshadows-serbias-election/a-67744235>; European Western Balkans, *RT Balkan assists Serbian regime in discrediting findings of foreign election observers*, 2023, available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/12/22/rt-balkan-assists-serbian-regime-in-discrediting-findings-of-foreign-election-observers/>

<sup>486</sup> Associated Press, *In Serbia, pro-Russia is seen as the winning election stance*, 2022, available at: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-presidential-elections-moscow-elections-d20d885ffd7a86605b05ef97b3e1c4bc>

<sup>487</sup> Branislav Stanicek and Anna Caprile, "Russia and the Western Balkans. Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference", *European Parliamentary Research Service*, 2023, p.5, available at:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS\\_BRI\(2023\)747096\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf)

<sup>488</sup> TGStat, *Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@sputniksrbija/stat>

dynamics of the conflict, international responses to it, and developments in Russia's domestic policy, particularly those intertwined with an ongoing 'special military operation.' Such events encompassed fluctuations in the ruble exchange rate, the closure of liberal Russian media outlets, and prominent Russian figures' public endorsements of military endeavours. Notably, this timeframe also witnessed the release of terrifying photos from Bucha on April 1, 2022, underscoring war crimes perpetrated by the Russian armed forces and precipitating widespread censure of Russia across Western discourse. Thus, despite the backdrop of general elections, 'Sputnik Serbia' predominantly directed its attention towards advancing a counter-narrative concerning Russia's actions in Ukraine, relegating electoral developments to a secondary role. Hence, within 58 posts, there was room to propagate the Kremlin narratives that the events in "Bucha was a provocation of the West,"<sup>489</sup> and that the "events were staged by Zelenskyy,"<sup>490</sup> "since the people in the video were moving,"<sup>491</sup> and that "Ukrainian armed forces killed the people in the footage."<sup>492</sup> **By contrast, a relatively modest portion of 258 posts addressed Serbia and Serbia's unfolding electoral landscape.** The notable prominence of the war in Ukraine on the channel's discourse may ostensibly be attributed to the significant relevance and widespread public concern regarding this war among the Serbian population. However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that this coverage serves as a veiled mechanism to divert attention from the current political agenda. **Infrequent and humble references to the impending elections sideline this crucial topic, diminishing its importance and societal impact.** Therefore, placing the Ukraine conflict at the forefront of the agenda effectively shifts focus away from conversations regarding the approaching polls. This assertion finds support in the analysis.

In the lead-up to the April 3 elections, the channel's coverage of Serbia is notably sparse within its publications. **Between March 27 and April 2, a mere 46 out of 852 posts broached Serbia.** Moreover, a **substantial portion of this restricted scope — 12 posts, centres around sports events.** However, this presentation of sports life focuses on reporting game results or match occurrences, which fails to meet sports fans' expectations. Furthermore, the channel primarily emphasises the accomplishments of the 'Red Star' football club, which has been sponsored by Gazprom since 2010. **Of the remaining posts, 11 address current events in Serbia.** Specifically, seven of these posts highlight the sorrowful events surrounding the fatalities of workers at the Soko coal mine. Additionally, two posts extend congratulations to renowned Serbian filmmaker Emir Kusturica for his recognition as the esteemed Saint Sava Charter recipient. Also, one post offers detailed information regarding the passing of a Serbian army lieutenant colonel during a UN mission in the Congo, while another explores an incident in Kosovo. **The 23 posts left discuss Serbia solely within the context of the Ukrainian conflict** and the prospective development of Serbian-Russian relations. Consequently, the local and regional political agendas were absolutely absent from 'Sputnik Serbia' news coverage. Even the widely circulated incident involving the Serbian president's whimsical appearance from a refrigerator on a Pink TV show on March 31, 2022<sup>493</sup> — promptly becoming a meme and a source of jokes - did not appear on the channel. **Hence, it is evident that the narrative put forth by 'Sputnik Serbia' regarding the 2022 Serbian elections is characterised by its deliberate neglect. This willful disregard is crucial to underscore, as it effectively strips the elections of any emotional or even neutral evaluation, implying its lack of prominence, thus rendering them outside the realm of readers' interest.**

<sup>489</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' telegram channel, dated April 3rd, 2022, posted at 8:09 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>490</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' telegram channel, dated April 9th, 2022, posted at 12:14 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>491</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' telegram channel, dated April 3rd, 2022, posted at 8:24 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

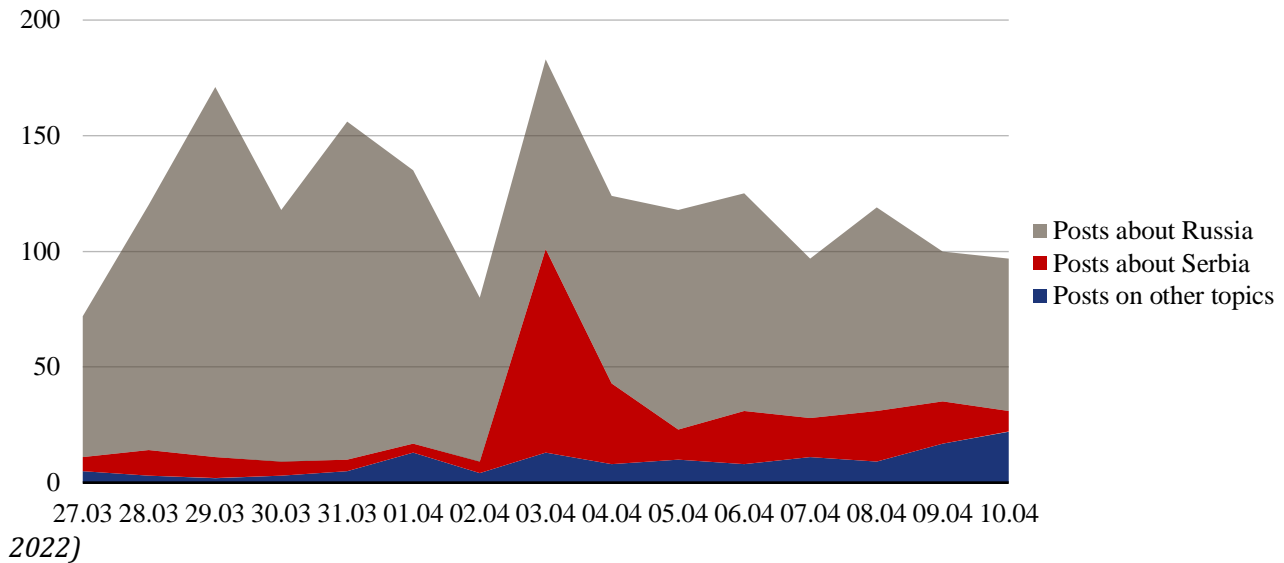
<sup>492</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' telegram channel, dated April 7th, 2022, posted at 7:44 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>493</sup> N1, *Pink TV faces charges over Vucic's refrigerator stunt*, 2022, available at: <https://n1info.rs/english/news/pink-tv-faces-charges-over-vucics-refrigerator-stunt/>



Figure 3: Distribution of content topics on the Telegram channel 'Sputnik Serbia' (March 27 - April 10,



Source: Author's calculations based on data obtained.

However, the agenda on war in Ukraine not only sought to dominate the channel's discourse quantitatively but also aimed to place the armed conflict at the core of all Serbian socio-economic development. This inclination is discernible through the lexical characteristics of posts concerning Serbia and the war. Notably, despite endeavours to engage the audience in a pro-Russian stance and propagate Kremlin narratives, there are no familiar moral and spiritual tropes associated with Russia's historical relationship with Serbia, such as the notions of 'Serbian-Russian brotherhood,' 'Russia as an 'older brother' who has always safeguarded Serbs' or at least notions of 'cultural, historical, and religious unity.' Sparse mentions of individuals expressing support for the conflict lack any substantive argumentation or even cursory references to clichés like 'Serbs and Russians brothers forever.' Conversely, **the discourse on Serbia's support for Russia emphasises pragmatic rationale.** While the official Serbian discourse portrays the outbreak of the war in Ukraine as a threat, characterising it as "a challenge that Serbia will confront with considerable difficulties",<sup>494</sup> **the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel draws the conflict in a markedly different light, framing it positively, as an opportunity for Serbia's growth.** For instance, resistance against imposing sanctions on Russia is articulated as providing Serbia with "a significant opportunity — direct flights to Russia,"<sup>495</sup> thereby positioning Serbia as a potential mediator for Russia and the West or even "a potential platform for future peace negotiations."<sup>496</sup> Also, the benefits of the military conflict for Serbia are underscored, including the prospect of "increased funding for Serbia's most prominent football club, 'Red Star,' following Gazprom's cessation of funding for the German club 'Schalke.'"<sup>497</sup> **The activation of economic benefits, coupled with the vision of future advancement and growth, fosters a favourable disposition towards the ongoing conflict in Serbia, heightens engagement with the war agenda, and consequently distances elections from the forefront of public discourse.** Therefore, the clear objective of the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel was to remove the election topic from the agenda, suppress the political discussion, stripping it of its importance, public relevance, and attention is evident.

<sup>494</sup> Kurir, Vučić sa Patrijarhom: Na jesen stiže mnogo teže stanje nego u vreme Drugog svetskog rata, ovo u životu nisam, 2022, available at:

<https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3935525/vucic-danas-sa-patrijarhom-i-episkopima-spc-okupili-se-na-arhijerejskom-saboru>

<sup>495</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated March 29, 2022, posted at 11:37 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>496</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated March 28, 2022, posted at 12:31 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>497</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 1, 2022, posted at 6:38 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

Consequently, Russian influence in Serbia did not merely "overshadow the electoral process"<sup>498</sup> but completely drowned the election agenda and any discourse about the elections.

On the voting day, a significant shift in the election narrative occurred. There was a marked increase in the number of posts about Serbia; however, even on election day, these publications constitute less than half of the total content. Specifically, **on April 3, 183 posts were published, of which 88 were related to Serbia**, 82 focused on Russia and the war in Ukraine, and 13 covered global and international political events, primarily elections in Hungary, which were also held on April 3, 2022. However, even though the elections occupied a significant part of the channel's agenda, their comprehensive coverage depicted them as routine rather than substantial multi-tiered elections. A substantial portion of the publications — 22 posts — constitute simple updates on voter turnout or reports on voting by the Serbian diaspora abroad. **There is a notable absence of any calls for participation in the elections or the highlighting of the importance of the moment that will shape Serbia's future development for years to come.** Furthermore, **the overall neutral tone of the posts regarding the election was interspersed with a series of messages fostering a negative perception and potentially deterring citizens from participation.** Specifically, these include reports on long queues at polling stations<sup>499</sup> and election manipulation,<sup>500</sup> totalling eight posts. Additionally, five posts were published on violent incidents near voting locations,<sup>501</sup> including assaults targeting politicians. Together, this rhetoric constitutes 15% of the total number of posts published, which is quite substantial. **This discourse creates a discouraging picture of engaging in the electoral process, linking it with wasted time, concerns about personal safety, and the futility of the endeavour due to the high number of violations.**

While there is a degree of bias in the coverage of the voting process, with posts featuring prominent politicians casting their votes, a pattern emerges in the dominance of posts concerning members of the SNS (10 posts), pro-Russian politicians (4 posts), or public figures known for their neutrality towards Russia (3 posts). Conversely, politicians openly opposing Russia are notably less represented. However, given the omission of a significant segment of the political establishment, it is challenging to assert bias in these materials conclusively. For instance, 'Sputnik Serbia' failed to mention the appearance at polling stations of politicians like Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski or Vojislav Mihailović, known for their significant pro-Russian views. Additionally, among the SNS leaders noted on the channel, the majority held positions as acting ministers and civil servants during the elections. Consequently, their mention is likely attributable more to their official capacities than the channel's propaganda motives.

Towards the end of the day, as leaders congregated at party and coalition headquarters in anticipation of the election results, some semblance of support for parties resisting the imposition of sanctions against Russia became apparent. Reports surfaced regarding public statements from parties like 'Oathkeepers',<sup>502</sup> 'Dveri',<sup>503</sup> and coalition NADA,<sup>504</sup> boasting about their electoral successes and securing parliamentary seats even before the final results from the Republic Electoral Commission (RIK) were tallied and released. However, these posts were disseminated after polling stations had closed and thus were unlikely to sway voter behaviour. Additionally, statements from the opposition claiming victory in

<sup>498</sup> Deutsche Welle, *Russia's influence overshadows Serbia's election*, 2023, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-influence-overshadows-serbias-election/a-67744235>

<sup>499</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 3, 2022, posted at 1:22 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>500</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 3, 2022, posted at 12:39 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>501</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 3, 2022, posted at 2:52 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>502</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 3, 2022, posted at 11:43 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>503</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 3, 2022, posted at 11:08 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>504</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 3, 2022, posted at 11:35 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

Belgrade<sup>505</sup> were also shared. An intriguing observation emerges from this situation: the ruling party and the opposition declared victory in the elections even before official results were announced. Yet, their opposing narratives were not pitted against one another. On the contrary, **all political factions - left, right, or centrist - within the channel's news feed expressed contentment with the voting day and highlighted their successes, thus concluding a harmonious, consensus-driven agenda.**

**After the elections**, there was a notable decline in the volume of publications concerning Serbia. The 'Sputnik Serbia' channel issued 780 posts throughout the post-election week, with only 137 directly related to Serbia. Again, **the overwhelming majority of posts — 558, were focused on Russian politics**, the ongoing conflict, and the ensuing international responses. This observation underscores the sustained primacy of the war in Ukraine as the predominant agenda on the Telegram channel. Moreover, **only 54 posts regarding Serbia addressed local political matters**, comprising slightly less than 7% of all posts published during the week after the elections. 27 of them were issued on April 4th, the day of the vote tally announcement. The primary theme of these posts revolved around summarising the outcomes of the parliamentary and presidential elections, drawing upon data from CeSID, IPSOS, and RIK. However, **reporting the presidential and parliamentary elections was notably formal and restrained. Essentially, their coverage was punctuated by a 'notable event' around 2 p.m. on April 4th: a post extending congratulations to Aleksandar Vučić on his election victory by Vladimir Putin.**<sup>506</sup> This pivotal moment was further emphasised by a series of posts on April 6th detailing a telephone conversation between Putin and Vučić,<sup>507</sup> effectively serving as the final culmination of this electoral discourse. **Given Putin's significant popularity in Serbia, as evidenced by social polls showing higher favorability ratings compared to Vučić,**<sup>508</sup> **this interaction can be seen as an attempt to legitimise Vučić's electoral triumph.**

Simultaneously, the elections in Belgrade, which hold significant importance for the opposition and where the opposition has succeeded, received minimal and unclear coverage. **Data regarding voting in Belgrade, whether preliminary or based on partial vote tabulation, was notably absent from the channel for a long time.** Consequently, conflicting reports emerged, with "CeSID and IPSOS announcing the results of the first elections in Belgrade: The SNS is closest to forming a city government,"<sup>509</sup> despite these findings being considerably distant from reality. Moreover, upon conducting a Google search, it was found that this information was only published on four websites: Nportal.rs,<sup>510</sup> Republica.rs,<sup>511</sup> Novosti.rs,<sup>512</sup> and the official website of Sputnik Serbia,<sup>513</sup> **thereby raising doubts concerning its reliability and suggesting potential fake news dissemination.** Moreover, two media — Republica.rs and Novosti.rs - are widely acknowledged in Serbia as state-controlled entities.<sup>514</sup> Furthermore, the list of party and coalition results in that publication was disorganized, with the SNS leading in mandates placed on the first line, while the second result of the coalition 'United for the Victory of Serbia' was placed only on the 4th line. The results of the

<sup>505</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 3, 2022, posted at 11:46 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>506</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 4, 2022, posted at 1:43 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>507</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 6, 2022, posted at 1:26 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>508</sup> Florian Bieber, "Serbia's Staged Balancing Act", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 2023, available at: <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/08/07/serbias-staged-balancing-act/>

<sup>509</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 4, 2022, posted at 12:45 AM and is available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>510</sup> Nportal, *Први резултати београдских избора: нико нема већину*, 2022, available at: <https://www.nportal.rs/sr/vesti/18481/vesti/politika/prvi-rezultati-beogradskih-izbora-niko-nema-vecinu>

<sup>511</sup> Republika, *Prvi rezultati izbora u Beogradu: sns ipak najbliži formiranju gradske vlasti*, 2022, available at: <https://www.republika.rs/vesti/politika/351924/izbori-2022-beogradski-izbori-prvi-rezultati-sns>

<sup>512</sup> Novosti, *Први резултати избора у Београду: снс најближи формирању градске власти*, 2022, available at: <https://www.novosti.rs/cj/vesti/politika/1103489/beogradski-izbori-prvi-rezultati-najnovije-vesti-aleksandar-vucic>

<sup>513</sup> Sputnik Србија, *Први резултати избора у Београду: СНС и СПС имају већину*, 2022, available at: <https://sputnikportal.rs/20220403/prvi-rezultati-izbora-u-beogradu--sns-najblizi-formiranju-gradske-vlade-1136124494.html>

<sup>514</sup> Danas, *Savo Manojlović dobio na sudu Informer, Novosti i još dva režimska tabloida*, 2024, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/savo-manojlovic-dobio-na-sudu-informer-novosti-i-jos-dva-rezimska-tabloida/>

'Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) - United Serbia' coalition, which received only four mandates, and the Serbian Radical Party, which did not get a single seat in the city parliament, were inserted between them on the second and third lines, respectively. Indeed, this **irregular sequencing complicates information processing and generates a skewed depiction of the election outcomes for followers**. At the same time, the channel featured statements from opposition leaders of 'United for the Victory of Serbia,' wherein they claimed victory in Belgrade and highlighted numerous electoral frauds.<sup>515</sup> However, later on, more data from CRTA and CeSID revealed that the disparity between the SNS and 'United for the Victory of Serbia' is merely 16.8%. Nevertheless, despite this update, the channel proceeded to disseminate information asserting that "The opposition in Belgrade is far from the majority."<sup>516</sup> In the same chaotic manner, RIK's data for Belgrade were published with the headline "the SNS received the most votes — 43.64 percent."<sup>517</sup> After that, the discourse surrounding the city elections in Belgrade stagnated further. Notably, it ceased abruptly, with only one post appearing on April 9th regarding the "commencement of work by the RIK New Commission to evaluate electoral materials, following over 350 objections raised by the Belgrade opposition."<sup>518</sup> Also, on the same day, a post announced Aleksandar Vučić's intention to engage in dialogue with liberal opposition's leader Dragan Đilas,<sup>519</sup> the latter agreeing to discuss "the resolution of the political crisis in Belgrade"<sup>520</sup> in a subsequent post on April 10th. However, **within the narrative constructed by the 'Sputnik Serbia' agenda, there is no crisis in Belgrade since neither the opposition's activities, protests, nor the internal and external debates among political parties garnered any coverage on the channel**. Consequently, akin to the election week, the current political discourse was subsumed within the Ukraine conflict narrative. Evidently, the channel's strategy does not involve painting a negative portrayal of the opposition or diminishing the significance of its activities; rather, it entails complete disregard. As such, **the issues surrounding the election recap in Belgrade and the opposition's resistance have been sidelined from the agenda**, relegated to a blind spot, which the channel's readers are seemingly discouraged from contemplating.

One more interesting detail. **Subsequent to the electoral period, there is a notable surge in the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel's focus on local affairs**. The coverage expands to encompass many events in Serbia, ranging from criminal accidents and traffic collisions to economic and cultural developments. Prominent historical narratives depicting Europe's aggression against Serbia, evident in World War II and the 1990s, resurface. Likewise, issues concerning Kosovo and the perceived resurgence of a 'Greater Albania' are reintroduced into the discourse. Furthermore, rhetoric emphasising the fraternal bond between Serbs and Russians experiences a rebirth. **Consequently, the post-electoral phase witnesses a return to the channel's customary propaganda narratives, underscoring the calculated sidelining of the Serbian agenda during the pre-election period**.

Thus, during the April 2022 elections, 'Sputnik Serbia' strategically aimed to marginalise the Serbian political agenda from the public discourse. **Before and after the elections, the channel allocated minimal coverage to Serbian national politics and its evolving dynamics**. Therefore, the electoral process was portrayed as an inconsequential and routine affair lacking significance. This trend persisted the week after the elections amidst fervent debates and confrontations between the ruling establishment and the opposition. **The channel effectively diminished these processes' perceived importance, impact, and legitimacy by omitting discussions on contested election outcomes and the intricate coalition-building mechanisms. This dichotomy presents a nuanced perspective:**

<sup>515</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 4, 2022, posted at 1:39 AM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>516</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 4, 2022, posted at 3:15 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>517</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 4, 2022, posted at 11:06 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>518</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 9, 2022, posted at 11:20 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>519</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 9, 2022, posted at 11:27 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>520</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated April 10, 2022, posted at 2:00 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>



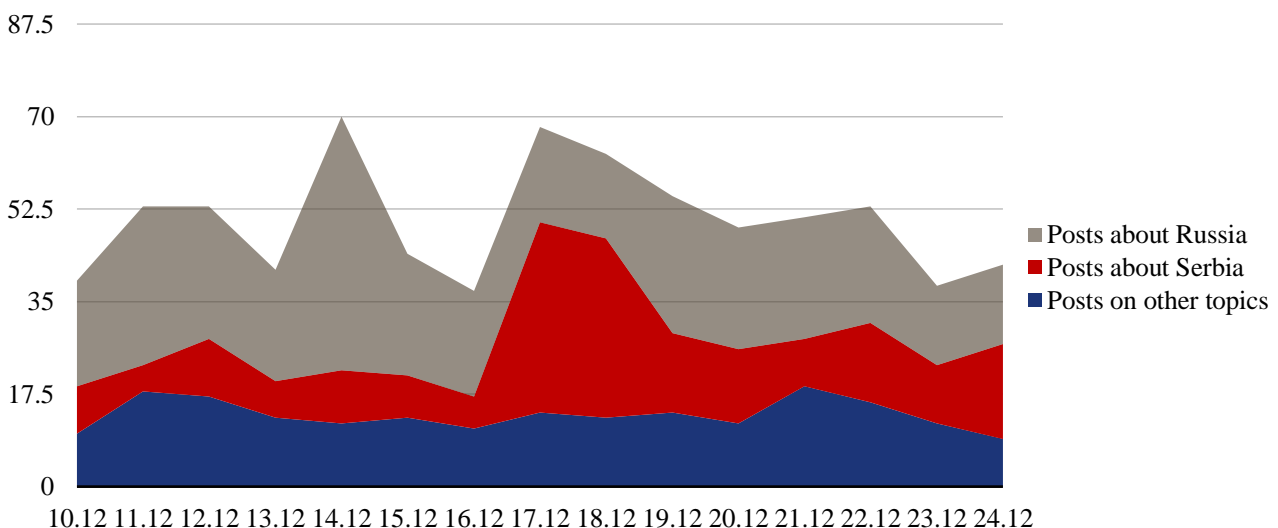
while 'Sputnik Serbia' maintained a semblance of neutrality by abstaining from explicit support for any candidate, refraining from disseminating overtly fabricated news and featuring content on both ruling and opposition figures, closer scrutiny reveals a meticulously crafted strategy in its election coverage.

### 5.1.2 December 2023 elections

From December 10 to 24, 2023, the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel published 756 posts. Among these, 208 posts referenced Serbia or Serbian public figures, constituting the focus of subsequent analysis. **Notably, despite the lower numerical count compared to the April 2022 elections, the proportion of posts concerning Serbia substantially increased. These posts accounted for 14.2% of the published materials in April, whereas they comprised 27.5% in December.** This surge in Serbian-focused content coincided with a heightened engagement of the channel with local affairs, ranging from weather forecasts to criminal incidents and reports from Kosovo. Simultaneously, the channel demonstrated an enhanced interest in global events and international politics in connection with the invasion of Hamas terrorists in Israel and the further escalation in the Middle East. However, Russia and the war in Ukraine remained the prevailing agenda in the channel's rhetoric, constituting 345 posts (45.6%) on this issue.

Throughout the pre-election week from December 10 to December 16, 337 posts were issued on the channel. Among these, 187 posts were dedicated to developments in Russian politics, the ongoing war in Ukraine, and the global response to it, while merely 56 posts mentioned Serbia. However, despite relatively modest representation, these publications were instrumental in delineating the primary framing of the December 2023 elections. In contrast to the April 2022 campaign, the topic of elections was openly discussed on the channel. This shift was particularly evident on December 12, with an unequivocal post, setting the tone and boosting the significance of the 2023 elections. **'Sputnik Serbia's rhetoric articulated the main value of the upcoming elections as the choice of Serbia's geopolitical trajectory between "the American" and a new emerging geopolitical order.'**<sup>521</sup> Consequently, domestic political events were eclipsed in importance, overshadowed by the overarching narrative of this existential decision confronting the nation. This strategic approach not only accorded elections a place in the channel's agenda but also imbued them with paramount importance.

Figure 4: Distribution of content topics on the Telegram channel 'Sputnik Serbia' (December 10 - December 24, 2023)



Source: Author's calculations based on data obtained.

<sup>521</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 12, 2023, posted at 9:56 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbiija>

Despite the relatively limited mentions of the elections, the channel's rhetoric exuded a sense of urgency and salience, elevating the electoral discourse to the forefront of public attention. **This narrative framework facilitated the dissemination of anti-European and anti-NATO sentiments, which are popular in Serbia.** Within this discourse, descriptions of the perceived 'enemy' were characterised by emotive language aimed at instilling fear, fostering a sense of estrangement, and cultivating hostility towards the West. Expressions such as "America behaves like an arsonist,"<sup>522</sup> "The purpose of the monster from Davos is the war between Christians and Muslims,"<sup>523</sup> and "If Serbia joins the EU, it will have to fight for its national identity"<sup>524</sup> were employed to evoke negative attitudes towards Western entities. **Concurrently, an image of Russia as a formidable global leader and an indomitable force is being cultivated.** Posts such as "Did anyone actually believe that they could defeat Russia?,"<sup>525</sup> "Moscow bypassed sanctions"<sup>526</sup> and "Russia dealt America the strongest slap in the face"<sup>527</sup> underscore this notion of strength and resilience. Notably, mentions that emphasise 'Slavic friendship and brotherhood' are absent. Instead, the narrative on Russia is characterised by its harsh and unyielding tone. Thus, it appears that Moscow does not seek Serbia's support but instead presents Serbia with an opportunity to align itself with the winning side. **Moreover, since Serbia's geopolitical choice became the main focus of the election campaign, the anti-Western rhetoric used on the channel to narrate the war in Ukraine also contributed to shaping the desired agenda for the channel.**

Also, it is noteworthy that during the 2023 elections, **Serbian experts espousing anti-Western and often extreme right-wing views emerged as prominent advocates of Russian propaganda. This localisation of Kremlin narratives transformed it from an external, artificial construct into an organic component ingrained in the local context, seamlessly interwoven into the fabric of Serbian public discourse, and engendered a sense of widespread endorsement for the pro-Russian stance.** For instance, Aleksandar Mitić, a researcher at the Institute for International Politics and Economics who has long participated in Russian scientific forums and associations,<sup>528</sup> made statements characterising "NATO as a cancer of European security."<sup>529</sup> Similarly, Aleksandar Lukić, a researcher at the Institute for Political Studies in Belgrade, authored articles on the RT Balkan website<sup>530</sup> asserting that "France is not our friend ... but it is better to negotiate with the French than with the Germans and the British."<sup>531</sup> Moreover, even the Russian agenda on Serbian elections was presented on the channel by Đorđe Vukadinović, whom the Ukrainian Center Against Misinformation had previously accused in spreading Kremlin propaganda,<sup>532</sup> and Dragoslav Bokan, a representative of the DPR in Serbia in 2014.<sup>533</sup>

**However, a pivotal aspect in analysing 'Sputnik Serbia's' rhetoric during the December 2023 elections is the channel's apparent favouritism toward Aleksandar Vučić as its explicitly**

<sup>522</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 16, 2023, posted at 1:11 AM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>523</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 10, 2023, posted at 9:08 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>524</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 10, 2023, posted at 3:00 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>525</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 14, 2023, posted at 12:52 AM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>526</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 16, 2023, posted at 10:02 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>527</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 13, 2023, posted at 11:01 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>528</sup> RT на русском, *На конференцији RE:UNION саопштили о стварању учредитељног комитета Хришћанске правозащитне мисије*, 2023, available at: <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/1177119-konferenciya-hristianskaya-missiya>

<sup>529</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 10, 2023, was posted at 12:07 AM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>530</sup> RT Balkan, *Александар Лукић*, 2024, available at: <https://rt.rs/author/25162-aleksandar-lukic/>

<sup>531</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 11, 2023, posted at 12:02 AM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>532</sup> Antidot, *Response from the East: Invasion of Kremlin media in the Balkan*, 2018, available at: <https://www.anti.media/en/mediji/analizes-media/odgovor-sa-istoka-balkanska-ofanziva-kremaljskih-paramedija/>

<sup>533</sup> Senica.ru, *В Србији открито представителство Донецкой Народной Республики*, 2014, available at: <http://www.senica.ru/serbia/news/v-serbii-otkrylos-predstavitelstvo-doneckoy-narodnoy-respubliki>

**endorsed candidate.** While the channel refrains from direct calls to support Vučić's party, its portrayal of him is almost reverential. The channel positively frames the actions of the ruling coalition, especially those of Vučić, depicting them as efforts to safeguard Serbia's cooperation with other nations, notably Russia. Even contentious events, such as the launch of the Serbia-Bulgaria gas pipeline, are welcomed since Serbia does not diversify its energy sources, thereby reducing its dependence on Russia, but "from today, Serbia will buy gas from both Russia and Azerbaijan."<sup>534</sup> **Throughout its posts, the channel consistently presents Vučić in a positive light, aligning with key themes of his election campaign that resonate with Kremlin rhetoric.** These themes include his stance on Kosovo, resistance to Western sanctions against Russia, and perceived threats to Serbia from the West. One might speculate that this is merely a coincidence, as Vučić and the Kremlin typically steer clear of populist rhetoric. However, the significance lies in the timing of events. **On the final day of the election campaign, just before the commencement of the pre-election silence period, Aleksandar Vučić chose to visit the 'Sputnik Serbia' office<sup>535</sup> rather than any national or independent media outlet.** This 'occasion' hints at a coordinated effort between Russian propaganda and the ruling coalition. Close cooperation between SNS and 'Sputnik Serbia' is further supported by the lack of support for other right-wing parties like 'Oathkeepers' or 'Dveri,' which espouse similar rhetoric, and the omission of mention of Dragan Stanojević, one of the leaders of the 'We - The Voice from the People' party, who was presented in the independent media as a pro-Russian candidate because of his proximity to Viktor Medvedchuk, famous for his ties with Vladimir Putin and his pro-Russian activities in Ukraine.<sup>536</sup>

Hence, the elections have emerged as a central, first-line agenda on the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel. However, their discourse was characterised by a certain exaggeration and theatricality. Whereas the April elections were conspicuously downplayed, those in December 2023 are elevated to an outsized importance. Furthermore, the discussion is steered away from concrete socio-economic development issues towards abstract concepts of global politics and the choice of a civilisational trajectory. Consequently, **there is a notable displacement of the genuine prominence and substance of the elections with speculative constructs.**

On voting day, the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel published 36 posts related to the electoral process, a notable decrease compared to the 88 posts observed on April 3, 2022. However, when considering the proportion of election-related posts to the total number of publications, December 2023 saw a slight advantage. Specifically, **on December 17, 52.9% of all posts were dedicated to elections;** in April 2022, this figure stood at 48%. Thus, this marks the first instance in this study when the election topic achieved a quantitative edge in coverage on the channel. Nevertheless, the narrative maintained a formal and subdued tone, contrasting with the preceding week's examples, where posts featured unabashed use of insults and conspiracy theories. The channel primarily provided dry statistical updates on voter turnout and incident reports throughout the voting day. Additionally, emphasis was placed on the presence of over 400 international observers to legitimise the electoral process.<sup>537</sup>

**Until the closure of polling stations, Aleksandar Vučić was the sole politician mentioned.** Also, the SNS was noted once in connection with him. While this could be perceived as a mere coincidence and inadvertent focus on the country's president, considering the context of the study and Vučić's recent visit to the 'Sputnik Serbia' office, such an interpretation appears dubious. Following the closure of polling stations, the parties referenced on the channel included the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and the coalition 'Serbia must not stop' (6 posts), the SPS (1 post), the right-wing coalition 'National Gathering' (2 posts), and the democratic coalition 'Serbia against Violence' (2 posts). Notably, the latter

<sup>534</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 10, 2023, posted at 1:01 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>535</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 15, 2023, posted at 9:00 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>536</sup> Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Uporišta Kremļa u novom sazivu Skupštine Srbije*, 2023, available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rusija-srbija-skupstina-izbori/32740509.html>

<sup>537</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 17, 2023, posted at 1:33 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

received no mention of its politicians or leaders, and one of the posts concerning them displayed a mocking and derogatory tone.<sup>538</sup> Also, it is imperative to highlight that on election day, there was a conspicuous absence of posts presenting any preliminary vote counts, reports on election fraud or data released by the CeSID/IPSOS or RIK on the channel. Instead, **the first announcement of election results came from Aleksandar Vučić himself, who declared the impending victory of his coalition.**<sup>539</sup> Notably, this announcement lacked reference to any specific data or results from other parties. Subsequently, two additional posts were published, in which the SNS, specifically Ana Brnabić,<sup>540</sup> summarised the results. Of significance is how this SNS's assumption of the election outcome, made when vote counting had just commenced, was stylistically presented as data from CeSID/IPSOS or RIK, i.e., as official results. The first preliminary election results by CeSID/IPSOS were published only later that day.<sup>541</sup>

Thus, on election day, the narrative presented by 'Sputnik Serbia' remained notably subdued. While continued support for Aleksandar Vučić was evident, there was a prominent absence of expected backing for Branimir Nestorović or other right-wing blocs. Furthermore, substantial coverage was lacking regarding the opposition's activities. However, **the overarching narrative on election day was deliberately dispassionate and aloof. There was a remarkable absence of political fervour, competition, or eager anticipation of results. Instead, the narrative portrayed the elections as a ceremonial event, emphasising adherence to formalities rather than the significance of the results.**

During the week following the elections, the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel published 351 posts, with 116 dedicated to Serbian topics. At the same time, 140 posts were allocated to cover the war in Ukraine and Russian politics. Consequently, Serbia remained a prominent feature on the channel's agenda regarding the frequency of mention. On December 18, the process of summarising voting results persisted, akin to election day itself, where parties, notably the SNS and the coalition 'Serbia against Violence,' announced results before official declarations from authorised bodies. Notably, the presented data varied, often based on differing metrics such as the number of concluded vote counts at polling stations<sup>542</sup> or the total number of processed ballots,<sup>543</sup> rendering comparisons or verification impracticable. **This presentation of election results engenders confusion and ambiguity among readers, precluding their ability to track voting dynamics accurately.**

Regarding the personalities, the mention of Aleksandar Vučić decreased to only 11 posts. While he remained one of the most often cited politicians, Branimir Nestorović was mentioned more often than Vučić in 15 posts. **In the channel's discourse, he appeared as a 'true fighter,' a newcomer who refuses to join other coalitions.** Interestingly, during the pre-election period, the 'We - The Voice from the People' party was widely discussed in the press for having ties with Russia, yet 'Sputnik Serbia' did not mention it during the pre-election period. However, after the election, the channel published the material "Is it true that the 'We - The Voice from the People' is most similar to Putin's United Russia,"<sup>544</sup> thereby legitimising the party's ties with the Kremlin and strengthening its support among the pro-Russian electorate. **Perhaps this tactic was used in anticipation of a possible re-election in Belgrade against the background of significant opposition protests.**

<sup>538</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 17, 2023, posted at 10:45 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>539</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 17, 2023, posted at 10:17 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>540</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 17, 2023, posted at 10:30 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>541</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 17, 2023, posted at 10:42 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>542</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 18, 2023, posted at 12:16 AM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>543</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 18, 2023, posted at 12:31 AM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>544</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 18, 2023, posted at 3:29 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>



Simultaneously, the issue of coalition formation and opposition dissatisfaction emerged as significant focal points in the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel's narrative even before the vote count's conclusion. The subsequent protests took centre stage in the channel's agenda, receiving over 21 publications. **Since its inception on December 18, the channel adopted a stance focusing on examples of violence in its reporting of protest activities.** For instance, protesters' removal of barriers in front of the Belgrade Assembly was articulated as "a group of young people attempting to breach the protective fence forcibly."<sup>545</sup> The posts omitted details such as the approximate number of protesters, the duration of the protest, and information regarding street blockades, thereby obscuring the magnitude of the rally. Subsequently, on December 19, attention shifted to the assault on Miladin Kovačević, the director of the Republican Statistical Bureau and a member of the RIK, described as "a lynching,"<sup>546</sup> highlighting the hostile nature of events — "knives and sticks were found."<sup>547</sup> Notably, the demands of the 'Serbia against Violence' coalition, advocating for a rally, were only announced towards the end of December 19, while a hunger strike by the two coalition members did not appear. **This selective coverage of protest events contributed to a negative portrayal of its leaders and participants.** Furthermore, the absence of representation of political demands diminished their significance, as the objectives and goals of the protests remained unclear. Consequently, the protests assumed a hideous, averse image on the channel's agenda.

Also, **it is imperative to highlight the utilisation of the Russian narrative about the Ukrainian Maidan in the context of the protests in Serbia.** Before delving further into this matter, it is pertinent to provide context regarding the Maidan Revolution, also known as the Revolution of Dignity, which unfolded as a series of protests and civil unrest in Ukraine commencing on November 21, 2013. These protests originated from President Viktor Yanukovich's abrupt decision to forego signing an association agreement with the EU, instead favouring closer ties with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union. Subsequently, demonstrations expanded, advocating for the resignation of Yanukovich and the government. The ensuing clashes between law enforcement and protesters resulted in numerous casualties on both sides. On February 22, 2014, the Ukrainian Parliament marked a crucial moment in the nation's history by electing an acting Prime Minister and President, who promptly announced their intention to sign an association agreement with the EU. This pivotal juncture signified Ukraine's declaration of intent to pursue European integration.<sup>548</sup> The subsequent repercussions of Ukraine's political turbulence, including territorial losses and the outbreak of conflict in Donbas, are attributed not directly to the revolution but instead to Russia's incursion into Ukrainian territory. Consequently, **within Ukrainian and Western discourse, the Maidan is depicted as a triumph, emblematic of a struggle for freedom and justice.**

Conversely, in Russian discourse, the term 'Maidan' assumes negative connotations and serves as a powerful element of contemporary political discourse, often employed with pejorative undertones.<sup>549</sup> **Russian media utilise 'Maidan,' emphasising the destructive and perilous aspects of the Maidan, employing vivid military metaphors to dissuade readers and caution against similar occurrences in Russia.** Thus, the term 'Maidan,' originally denoting a quarry in Serbian, has permeated Serbian discourse through the lens of Russian interpretation, connoting Ukrainian nationalism and Russophobia. In this vein, **'Maidan' has been associated with any protests or opposition actions in Serbia, serving as a propagandistic trope to delegitimise protests and frame them as foreign-**

<sup>545</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 18, 2023, posted at 8:45 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>546</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 19, 2023, posted at 3:20 AM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>547</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 19, 2023, posted at 2:51 AM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>548</sup> Ukrainian World Congress, *UWC honours tenth anniversary of Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity*, 2023, available at: <https://www.ukrainianworldcongress.org/uwc-honours-tenth-anniversary-of-ukraines-revolution-of-dignity/>

<sup>549</sup> Arel, Dominique, Jesse Driscoll, "Regime Change (Maidan)", 2022, p.97, available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/ukraines-unnamed-war/regime-change-maidan/BEEA67BB188AC655A1EFDC142D77C664>

**instigated conspiracies against Serbia**, akin to the term 'colour revolution.' However, while the 'colour revolution' holds academic legitimacy, 'Maidan' manifests Russian discourse, underscoring its ideological propagation.<sup>550</sup>

It is important to emphasise this since **Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić<sup>551</sup> was the first to mention "The Maidan was planned in Belgrade" on the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel.** Subsequently, the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, echoed this rhetoric in her speech titled "West wants a Maidan in Serbia,"<sup>552</sup> which was also published on the channel the next day. **However, the opposition's protest was initially framed as 'Maidan' by Branimir Nestorović** on December 18, the day following the elections, three hours prior to the commencement of the protest. Yet, 'Sputnik Serbia' did not publish that even though Nestorović's speech appeared on 'friendly' RT Balkan.<sup>553</sup> Therefore, based on the channel's representation, Serbia's governing political establishment introduced Russian rhetoric into the discourse surrounding the protests. **The channel supported the desire of the ruling coalition to strategically polarise Serbian society by amplifying pre-existing pro-Russian and anti-European sentiments, portraying the protests as a manifestation of 'Western conspiracy,' a purported attempt to encroach upon Serbia's sovereignty, and an existential threat to the nation.** Conversely, by aligning with Kremlin propaganda clichés and adopting an adversarial stance against the West, the ruling elite positions itself as a champion of Serbian interests, thereby legitimising its authority and policy decisions. Consequently, with these joint efforts, the protests were marginalised and delegitimised on the channel's discourse, depicted as the handiwork of 'bandits, traitors, hooligans, enemies of the country,' effectively minimising their significance and casting them in a negative light.

**Thus, in the whirlwind of Serbia's December 2023 elections, the 'Sputnik Serbia' Telegram channel emerged as an important player, actively moulding public opinion and steering the electoral narrative.** Framing the elections as a pivotal "choice between Russia and the West," the channel deftly redirected focus away from domestic issues and concerns. **It is essential to highlight that the spread of disinformation, often attributed to the Kremlin media in the Balkans, was not identified with the channel's posts.** Instead, the favoured strategy of Sputnik Serbia was characterised by selective, one-sided, and incomplete coverage of the prevailing political agenda, a trait that is common among all media. By amplifying speeches from Serbian ruling elites, Sputnik Serbia effectively championed a pro-Russian agenda in the region without requiring extensive original content creation.

## 5.2 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' in Election Campaigns

The channel 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' was established by opposition supporters on August 17, 2020, on the background of the upcoming parliamentary elections in Montenegro. Before that, the 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' page was active on Instagram. Concerns regarding a potential internet blackout in response to anticipated mass protests following the elections prompted the decision to change the primary social media platform from Instagram to Telegram.<sup>554</sup> In a rare interview, **the channel's anonymous founder attributed the movement's genesis to Montenegro's passage of the new 'Law on the Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities'** in 2019, which threatened to expropriate property belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. Described as representing the collective grievances of Montenegrin citizens aggrieved by

<sup>550</sup> European Western Balkans, *The narrative of the "new Maidan" an old tool of Serbian authorities to discredit anti-regime protests*, 2023, available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/12/28/the-narrative-of-the-new-maidan-an-old-tool-of-serbian-authorities-to-discredit-anti-regime-protests/>

<sup>551</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 19, 2023, posted at 9:49 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>552</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated December 20, 2023, posted at 6:00 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>553</sup> RT Balkan, *Несторовић: У Београду смо тас на ваги, "Србија против насиља" прави атмосферу Мајдана*, 2023, available at: <https://rt.rs/srbija-i-balkan/67619-izbori-branimir-nestorovic/>

<sup>554</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated August 17, 2020, posted at 3:35 PM, available at: <https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

the legislation above, the founder stated, 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' resonated with those "who opposed the encroachment upon sacred sites."<sup>555</sup> **Despite disavowing affiliations with political entities, the channel's discourse overwhelmingly reflects right-wing viewpoints and ideas of Serbian nationalism.** Channel's posts glorify the convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić and assert that "Serbism in Montenegro is under threat."<sup>556</sup> **Furthermore, 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' demonstrated an interest in broadening its audience among Russian-speaking users.** On October 28, 2021, amidst escalating tensions between Russia and Ukraine, the channel launched the 'Rebellion - Our Way' channel to publish posts in Russian language. However, as of October 2022, the Russian-language channel has ceased posting new content, amassing a modest, by Russian Telegram standards, 804 followers within its two-year tenure.<sup>557</sup>

**Later on, the channel underwent a process of radicalization, expanding its influence from Montenegro to encompass the broader WB region.** Notably, in early February 2022, the Montenegro Police Department initiated an inquiry into the channel's activities following the dissemination of calls for chaos on social media platforms, including explicit calls for violence.<sup>558</sup> However, the channel persists and remains prominent. Over three years and five months, the channel amassed over 82,000 subscribers and published more than 31,000 posts, **solidifying its position as one of the largest channels in the realm of Serbian Telegram.** Notably, a substantial surge in its followers coincided with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. For instance, on February 23, 2022, the channel boasted 17,636 subscribers, surging to over 60,000 by May 1 of the same year. The channel's influence is further underscored by its extensive citation. Posts from 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' were cited by 36 channels within the study sample, while in total, the channel's posts were shared by 834 channels 5,208 times. Moreover, the channel exhibits robust levels of audience engagement, with approximately 28% of its subscribers, equivalent to 22,500 users, reading its posts.<sup>559</sup>

### 5.2.1 April 2022 elections

**Between March 27 and April 10, 1,071 posts were published on the channel, reflecting a diverse array of topics.** Notably, 559 posts, or 52.1% of all materials, focused on Russia and the ongoing war in Ukraine. Additionally, **the channel covered regional and international affairs extensively, with 145 posts dedicated to these issues, particularly emphasising the WB.** During this period, 43 posts discussed Montenegro, 11 addressed Bosnia and Herzegovina, and one touched upon Albania. **Thus, the channel could be a critical source of political news for followers.** In the Serbian context, topics ranged from the tragic death of miners to the inauguration of a high-speed train from Belgrade to Novi Sad. Corruption scandals, local controversies, and even viral memes — such as the Serbian president's whimsical appearance from a refrigerator - were also featured. Additionally, the channel highlighted the response of the University of Belgrade Student Parliament to insults against Serbian students on one of the Serbian TV shows.

<sup>555</sup> Pogled, *Ексклузивно: БУНТ.цг са инстаграма се на тренутак преселио на информативни портал Поглед*, 2020, available at: <https://pogled.me/ekskluzivno-bunt-cg-sa-instagram-a-se-na-trenutak-preselio-na-informativni-portal-pogled/>

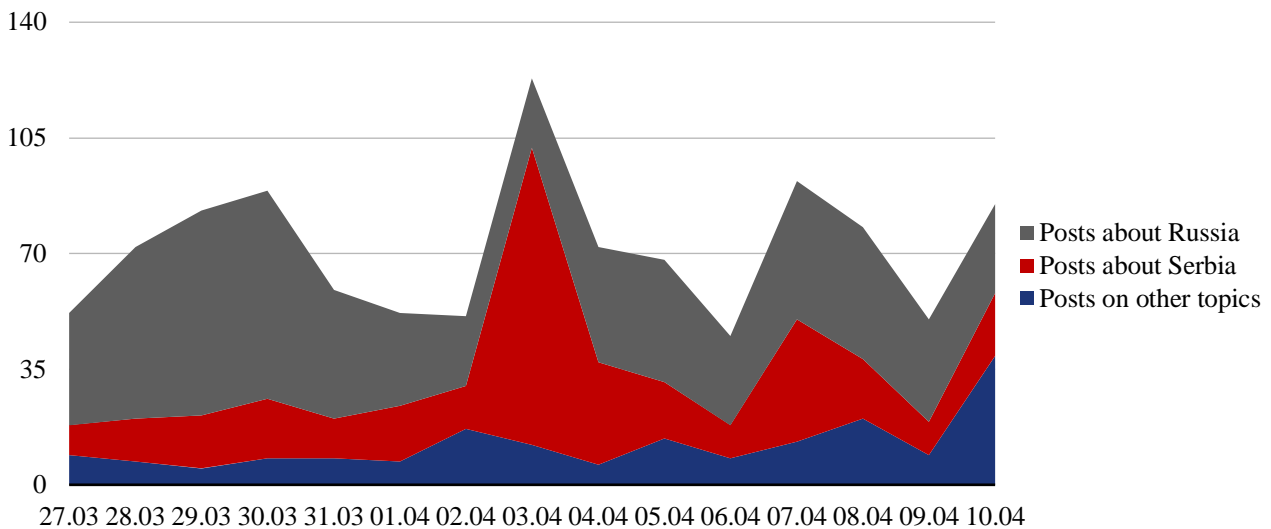
<sup>556</sup> Danas, "Telegrami" lažnih vesti za Zapadni Balkan, 2022, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/telegrami-laznih-vesti-za-zapadni-balkan/>

<sup>557</sup> TGStat, *Бунт — наш пут*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@buntru>

<sup>558</sup> Radio Slobodna Evropa, "Telegrami" lažnih vesti za Zapadni Balkan, 2022, available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rusija-telegram-kanali/31808637.html?fbclid=IwAR1SfHq3ecUW6sX4pMsUO2yyxJN-LuopTP189h-8IZZE7LN6Hj1aH4zsXY>

<sup>559</sup> TGStat, *БУНТ је стање духа*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@buntcg/stat>

Figure 5: Distribution of content topics on the Telegram channel 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' (March 27 - April 10, 2022)



Source: Author's calculations based on data obtained.

Amidst such rhetoric, the channel's authors frame the elections as an existential dilemma confronting voters in Serbia - "whether to cede sovereignty to the EU, WHO, and NATO or to uphold an independent policy."<sup>560</sup> This portrayal underscores the significance of the elections on the agenda, positioning them as a pivotal political event demanding severe consideration. Notably, the electoral dilemma in the channel's rhetoric is unipolar. **While the Western perspective is depicted negatively, Russia is not portrayed as a 'good power.'** Furthermore, the Russian dimension did not emerge as a central theme in the channel's political discourse. There is an apparent absence of expressions of a 'fraternal alliance between Serbia and Russia.' Even in the dissemination of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's speeches in the channel's posts, the discourse primarily emphasizes "a strong and independent Serbia,"<sup>561</sup> "pressure [on Serbia] from the United States and the West,"<sup>562</sup> and the "quasi-independence of Kosovo."<sup>563</sup> At the same time, the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel published posts about Lavrov's speeches highlighting the "historical friendship between Russia and Serbia,"<sup>564</sup> as well as their "collaborative efforts to address challenges created by the West."<sup>565</sup> These mentions did not appear on the 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' channel.

**Channel's authors endeavour to elevate the prestige and importance of the electoral process.** Numerous posts emphasise that "voting is not merely a right but also a civic duty,"<sup>566</sup> thereby advocating for public participation. Moreover, they do not urge voters to eschew support for parties endorsed by the channel, instead advising them to "thoroughly scrutinise the biographies of presidential candidates, evaluating their life paths, political trajectories, consistency, and seriousness."<sup>567</sup> **The channel's posts further encouraged followers to resist electoral coercion.** In Serbia, a common practice has emerged where voters photograph their ballots as proof of voting for the preferred candidate in exchange for

<sup>560</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated March 31, 2022, posted at 6:29 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>561</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated March 28, 2022, posted at 2:33 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>562</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated March 28, 2022, posted at 12:00 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>563</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated March 28, 2022, posted at 12:21 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>564</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated March 28, 2022, posted at 12:02 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>565</sup> The post from the 'Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija' Telegram channel, dated March 28, 2022, posted at 12:49 PM, available at:

<https://t.me/sputniksrbija>

<sup>566</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated March 31, 2022, posted at 6:15 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>567</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated March 30, 2022, posted at 7:17 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>



financial incentives.<sup>568</sup> Also, employees often are compelled to vote for a specific candidate within public institutions. In response, the channel, along with opposition leaders, disseminated strategies to navigate such pressures, emphasising the importance of independently exercising one's voting rights.<sup>569</sup> Ultimately, the channel's rhetoric frames elections as an expression of freedom and independence.

Consequently, **the electoral process and the pre-election campaign of candidates are portrayed as dynamic and competitive within the channel's rhetoric.** Elections are presented on the channel's agenda as a chance, an opportunity characterised by uncertainty. For instance, a post indicated that "Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has commenced filming videos for the second round of presidential elections,"<sup>570</sup> intended to inspire confidence in the opposition's capacity to contest the ruling coalition. This narrative implies that even Vučić is not assured of victory, urging supporters to keep hope. At the same time, **the channel appears to favour the candidate National Democratic Alternative (NADA) coalition,** as mentions of NADA surpass those of other right-wing parties. In a survey of over 7,000 followers, NADA's presidential candidate, Miloš Jovanović, garnered significantly more support (73%) than Aleksandar Vučić (27%).<sup>571</sup> Nevertheless, **the primary focus of the channel's forthcoming election agenda is to oppose the ruling regime.** Therefore, the channel's authors promote and advocate for other predominantly right-wing parties, such as the 'Dveri-POKS' coalition or 'Oathkeepers.' Surprisingly, positive posts about the liberal democratic opposition are also found. For instance, the channel several times supported the 'United for the Victory of Serbia' coalition and their presidential candidate Zdravko Ponoš.

**Nevertheless, despite the robust opposition to the ruling party, the discourse surrounding presidential candidates and their criticisms was mainly shaped through the lens of the Kosovo issue.** For instance, one post cited Zdravko Ponoš's remarks during an interview with RTS, where he suggested discussing "standards rather than status with Kosovo," the channel's authors responded sharply, stating, "My personal opinion, which aligns with the constitution of the Republic of Serbia and historical facts, is that the status of Kosovo and Metohija is AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE TERRITORY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA. A person running for president of the country should know this and not express such views publicly."<sup>572</sup> Consequently, despite Ponoš's statement lacking any indication of intent to recognise Kosovo, his cautious phrasing failed to garner approval on the channel. At the same time, **when Vučić articulated ideological sentiments consistent with the channel's overarching rhetoric, his statements were shared without accompanying the channel's commentary or headlines.** For instance, a post featuring Vučić's criticism of Kurti and Đukanović - "their only task is to slander Serbia and say that Vučić is 'little Putin'"<sup>573</sup> — was presented without additional editorial input. Additionally, in another speech, Vučić said: "It is easier for me [Vučić] to talk with Putin than with Biden because there is no pressure on Kosovo."<sup>574</sup> This post was published on the channel without supplementary editorial annotations, too.

Hence, throughout the pre-election phase, the channel aligns with the fundamental narratives of the far-right factions in Serbia, aiming to stoke and fortify anti-NATO and anti-European sentiments while elevating the Kosovo issue as its primary agenda. Consequently, **ideological convictions rather than political propositions dictate the channel's discourse.** Despite its support for right-wing entities, the channel did not espouse allegiance to a single party — 'The Socialist Movement,' 'NADA,' 'Oathkeepers,' and the 'Dveri-POKS' coalition featured prominently. Depending on the prevailing context and the pronouncements of political figures, the assessment of their remarks fluctuates. Should there be discord between public declarations and ideological stances, the channel's authors refrain from offering

<sup>568</sup> Danas, *Šta da radite kada vam je naloženo da fotografirate listić ili učestvujete u "bugarskom vozu"*, 2020, available at:

<https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/sta-da-radite-kada-vam-je-nalozeno-da-fotografirate-listic-ili-ucestvujete-u-bugarskom-vozu/>

<sup>569</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 1, 2022, posted at 2:04 AM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>570</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 1, 2022, posted at 1:08 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>571</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated March 27, 2022, posted at 2:02 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>572</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated March 28, 2022, posted at 10:33 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>573</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated March 27, 2022, posted at 10:33 AM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>574</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated March 30, 2022, posted at 2:07 AM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

exoneration, opting for overt criticism and marginalisation of the perceived 'traitors.' Nonetheless, their critique remains relatively tempered. Except for a solitary post that targeted a personal insult at the Serbian presidential candidate from the 'MORAMO' coalition, Biljana Stojković,<sup>575</sup> the authors endeavour to uphold a degree of control in their rhetoric.

On election day, the channel issued a total of 123 posts, with 89 of these dedicated to political themes. April 3rd marked a pivotal moment for electoral discussions on the channel, which exhibited a dynamic, competitive, and intense narrative surrounding the elections. Notably, at least 39 posts featured statistical data regarding voter turnout domestically within Serbia and abroad. **This meticulous presentation of information, coupled with the continual updates on increasing voter participation percentages, fosters a favourable perception of the electoral process and may motivate individuals to engage in civil participation.** As on the pre-election week, **on April 3rd, 'the ruling coalition vs the opposition' becomes the critical axis of confrontation,** marked by elements of extremity, **depicting the situation as the final battle and an irreconcilable struggle.** Statements such as "If the government attempts to obstruct voting or manipulate the people's will, whatever the outcome may be, the streets will respond,"<sup>576</sup> "The military is on alert as of 14:30... Are we anticipating an adverse outcome for the government and subsequent riots?"<sup>577</sup> or "the battles for Belgrade"<sup>578</sup> illustrate the heightened tensions. Consequently, **elections are portrayed not merely as a choice but as an act of fray and liberation.**

**During the day, the channel highlighted certain leaders at the polling stations, notably NADA's members** and Serbian Patriarch Porfirije. At the same time, other right politicians like Boško Obradović or Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski were not mentioned. **However, coverage of the democratic opposition was comprehensive,** featuring posts on the voting of the 'Freedom and Justice Party' leader, Dragan Đilas,<sup>579</sup> and a leader from the 'Together' coalition, Nebojša Zelenović.<sup>580</sup> The channel also extensively reported an attack against Pavle Grbović from the 'Movement of Free Citizens' (6 posts) and SNS member Bratislav Jugović (3 posts). The least attention was paid to SNS, the coalition 'Together We Can Do Everything,' and Aleksandar Vučić as the main antagonist of the channel's authors. Overall, the tone of the posts on the channel throughout the day remained relatively restrained despite the elevated anticipation. **There were no explicit calls for protests or violence, insults, or the dissemination of disinformation,** which are often attributed to the authors of the channel by the media. This restraint is particularly noteworthy given the channel's anonymous nature and status as a non-official media platform. The dynamic nature of describing the unfolding events prevented a clear conclusion or summary of the voting day. The ongoing discussion persisted immediately after midnight, marked by the publication of the first post on April 4 at 12:01 AM.

**During the week following the election, 490 posts were published, among which 142 posts were dedicated to Serbia, marking a noticeable decrease in local political discourse on the channel.** At the same time, the coverage of the unfolding political landscape and discourse on the channel post-election was ambiguous. On the one hand, **the issue of coalition formation gained prominence, with consistent reporting on the activities of various political factions.** Initially, the channel preferred coverage of right-wing forces, aligning with its ideological orientation.<sup>581</sup> However, this narrative evolved into a chaotic exchange of accusations and reproaches among opposition coalition members,<sup>582</sup> as well as criticisms levelled by right-wing factions against pro-Western opposition elements<sup>583</sup> and the ruling elites. Later, the channel selectively reported on the dynamics of coalition negotiations,

<sup>575</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated March 30, 2022, posted at 5:10 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>576</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 3, 2022, posted at 10:21 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>577</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 3, 2022, posted at 9:42 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>578</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 3, 2022, posted at 10:42 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>579</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 3, 2022, posted at 11:53 AM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>580</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 3, 2022, posted at 11:57 AM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>581</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 7, 2022, posted at 3:05 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>582</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 7, 2022, posted at 1:19 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>583</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 5, 2022, posted at 10:43 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

portraying a narrative of internal discord and conflict within the political landscape. This disjointed approach to coverage, coupled with the absence of authorial commentary, diminished the significance of the post-election political struggle. **Towards the end of the analysed period, the topic of coalition formation gradually receded from the first-level agenda, overshadowed by increasing discussions surrounding Serbia's vote in the UN to exclude Russia from the Human Rights Council.**<sup>584</sup> Moreover, although the opposition advocated for a reassessment of the election results and orchestrated a protest in response, the channel refrained from disseminating calls to participate in the rally. Instead, it merely acknowledged the event's occurrence after it had commenced. Additionally, the issue of electoral malpractice and the demand for a review of its outcomes did not feature prominently on the channel's agenda.

It is noteworthy that initially, the channel expressed solid and critical views toward the SNS and Vučić, as evidenced by statements such as "The SNS lost to Belgrade,"<sup>585</sup> along with the publication of opposition leaders asserting that "These elections are the beginning of the end of Alexander Vučić's rule"<sup>586</sup> and "We almost certainly won in Belgrade."<sup>587</sup> However, Vladimir Putin's early congratulations to Vučić on his electoral victory, issued even before the final vote count, were promptly featured on the channel.<sup>588</sup> Congratulations from Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia,<sup>589</sup> a figure with significant popularity in Serbia, followed it. Consequently, these posts contributed to legitimising the election and affirming the ruling coalition's victory. In general, **criticism of the SNS waned following the elections**, resurfacing briefly only during Serbia's vote against Russia at the UN. Nonetheless, this objection was fleeting and directed not precisely at the SNS but at the broader ruling elites in Serbia.

Furthermore, **NADA and Miloš Jovanović, ostensibly favoured candidates of the 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit,' conspicuously vanished from the channel's agenda.** A mere eight posts mentioning them were published in the entire week following the election. **It may be attributed to NADA's notably inconsistent rhetoric.** Immediately after the election results were tallied, Jovanović asserted in a post: "The Belgrade result indicates to us that we will be a decisive factor for the future government in Belgrade."<sup>590</sup> He then dismissed the possibility of forming a coalition with the SNS and the SPS in the City Assembly of Belgrade while expressing willingness to collaborate with the SNS in Parliament, stating, "Those in power are much less my ideological opponents."<sup>591</sup> Also, he initially voiced support for negotiations between Dragan Đilas and Aleksandar Vučić, only to retract his endorsement later. **This incoherence and fluctuation in NADA's rhetoric may stem from the fact that deputies elected on the NADA list underwent a political shift.** For instance, Vuk Stanić departed from the POKS of the NADA coalition in June 2022 after voting for the ruling coalition, which secured SNS a slim majority in the City Assembly of Belgrade.<sup>592</sup> Furthermore, last but not least, on April 10, despite indicating a willingness to cooperate with other opposition parties, such as the 'United for the Victory of Serbia' and 'We Must' coalitions, to unseat the progressive government in Belgrade, the **NADA coalition voted against opposition objections in the City Election Commission, i.e. NADA coalition aligned with the SNS, thwarting any prospect of a change in government in Belgrade.**<sup>593</sup> Notably, this information was not published on the channel.

**Thus, despite post-election discussions initially dominating the channel's agenda, their prominence diminished over time, with attempts to downplay or conceal them towards the end**

<sup>584</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 8, 2022, posted at 1:31 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>585</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 4, 2022, posted at 12:48 AM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>586</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 4, 2022, posted at 1:31 AM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>587</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 4, 2022, posted at 12:59 AM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>588</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 4, 2022, posted at 2:02 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>589</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 4, 2022, posted at 1:39 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>590</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 4, 2022, posted at 12:33 AM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>591</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated April 5, 2022, posted at 6:32 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>592</sup> Danas, *Ko su troje odbornika koji su prešli u SNS: Odavno napustili Zavetnike i POKS*, 2022, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/ko-su-troje-odbornika-koja-su-presla-u-sns-odavno-napustili-zavetnike-i-poks/>

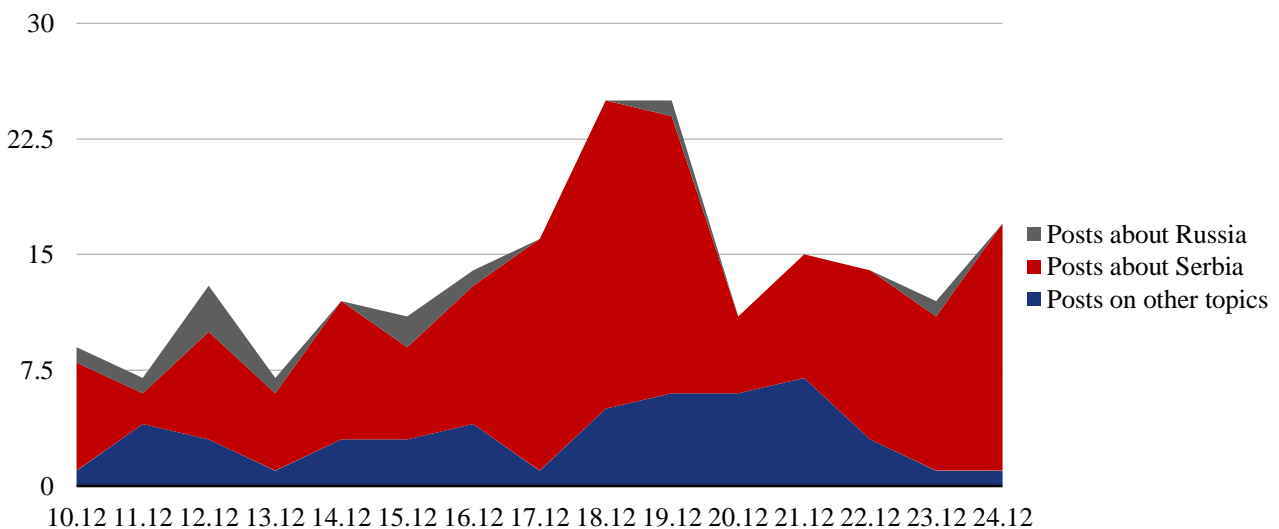
<sup>593</sup> Danas, *Miloš Jovanović o tome zašto je NADA glasala u GIK-u kao SNS: Dosta mi je fatamorgana opozicije, naprednjaci su pobedili na izborima*, 2022, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/milos-jovanovic-o-tome-zasto-je-nada-glasala-u-gik-u-kao-sns-dosta-mi-je-fatamorgana-i-fasada-opozicije-naprednjaci-su-pobedili-na-izborima>

**of the study period.** Notably, the channel's overarching narrative remained unchanged, characterised by far-right rhetoric, the perpetuation of historical myths surrounding Kosovo, and anti-European and anti-NATO sentiments. These issues were consistently reflected in 45% of all published content related to Serbia, which continued to focus on these enduring topics without significant updates in response to current events within Serbian politics. **The fervour of rebellion, the yearning for disobedience and freedom, seemed to dissipate at the stroke of midnight on April 3.** The themes of election significance, determination, and opportunity, discussed before the elections, faded away. Furthermore, its disappearance is noteworthy. There are no posts on the channel expressing regret over defeat or a desire to continue the struggle in the future, no celebration of the relative success of right-wing forces, and no reflection on the implications of the election outcomes for Serbia.

### 5.2.2 December 2023 elections

**Despite the heightened tension surrounding the December 2023 elections and exacerbated global circumstances due to another conflict erupting in the Middle East, the channel's activity level noticeably declined.** Over the entire period from December 10 to December 24, only 208 posts were published. During this period, there was a significant decrease in attention towards Russia's domestic policy and the ongoing war in Ukraine, with only 11 posts dedicated to these topics. Likewise, interest in international political events has slipped, with only 20 posts. Moreover, attention towards the Balkan agenda has diminished, with only 11 posts focusing on Bosnia and Herzegovina, three on Montenegro, one on Macedonia, and one on Albania.

Figure 6: Distribution of content topics on the Telegram channel 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' (December 10 - December 24, 2023)



Source: Author's calculations based on data obtained.

Throughout the pre-election week in December, 73 posts were published, with 45 focusing on Serbian politics. Interestingly, despite the noticeable support for the NADA and elections by 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' during the April 2022 campaign, December 2023 witnessed a notable shift in the channel's focus. Instead of highlighting the electoral race or party debates, the channel predominantly concentrated on current events in Kosovo — car numberplates issue, normalisation efforts, and changes in electricity supply in Northern Kosovo were extensively covered. Remarkably, **amidst posts signalling the growing autonomy of Kosovo, there was a notable absence of blame attribution on ruling political elites or scapegoating.** Furthermore, rather than delving into the intricacies of the political landscape or election dynamics, the channel preferred to spotlight instances of violence by Albanians in Kosovo, both in the present and the past. Thus, the discourse had a prevalent presence of anti-European and anti-NATO rhetoric. Surprisingly, **the election-related content on the channel was**



**minimal, with only a few attacks directed towards towards leaders of the 'Liberal Democrat Party'<sup>594</sup> and the 'Green Left Front.'<sup>595</sup> Notably, the sole mention of right-wing forces was Branimir Nestorović, although the coverage of his candidacy lacked sufficient depth to be considered comprehensive election campaigning. Also, there was an apparent lack of references to other right-wing parties. Similarly, **no criticism was directed towards the SNS, 'Serbia Must Not Stop' coalition, Aleksandar Vučić, or the ruling government in general.** Consequently, **the December 2023 elections failed to dominate the channel's agenda.** This departure from the expected focus on electoral affairs was noteworthy, especially considering the channel's exclusive dedication to political topics. While the elections were not entirely sidelined, the escalating tensions in Kosovo overshadowed their significance, relegating them to a lesser role in the channel's narrative.**

On the day of the vote, a mere 16 posts were published on the channel, with 13 explicitly addressing the elections. It departed from the April 2022 elections, where the channel actively encouraged voter participation. Notably, **the publications on voting day lacked the same fervour and urgency observed before; there were no explicit calls to action urging people to head to the polls.** As a result, there were no detailed updates on voter turnout, and the tone of the posts adopted a more informal and cheeky style, occasionally resorting to insults. **This shift diminished the significance of the elections, representing them as mundane events devoid of the usual excitement and anticipation seen before.** Moreover, the focus on election-related content was limited, with only passing mentions of two political figures: an insult directed at the leader of the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina<sup>596</sup> and the preliminary election results released by the SNS. This lack of comprehensive coverage further contributed to the perception of the elections as inconsequential, devoid of the sense of importance and tension typically associated with electoral events.

**During the post-election week,** there was a prominent shift in the dynamics of the channel's publications. From December 18 to 24, 119 posts were published, with 88 posts dedicated to Serbian politics, averaging around 12 daily posts. This number appears relatively low despite the intensity of the political landscape during this period and the continuous opposition rallies. However, considering the channel's evolution and its quantitative metrics, it is evident that **electoral processes have emerged as the first-level agenda.** Amidst the political discourse, the **unexpected success of the Branimir Nestorović and 'We - The Voice from the People' party appeared as a major topic,** capturing the attention of the 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit.' Notably, the channel's coverage admired Nestorović's assertive statements, portraying him as a steadfast advocate for Serbian interests, particularly regarding Kosovo, opposition to sanctions against Russia, and preserving traditional values.<sup>597</sup> At the same time, **the defeat of right-wing parties was absent from the discussion.** Moreover, Nestorović's victory served as a basis for ridiculing other right-wing political factions like the 'Dveri' and 'Oathkeepers'.<sup>598</sup> Furthermore, **the SNS received no mention on the channel, neither in a positive nor negative light.** Conversely, **the liberal opposition coalition was presented in a derogatory manner.** Despite the channel's purported rebellious spirit, **the coverage of protests was selective and fragmentary, painting them in a negative light as 'unruly and criminal activities.'** The focus was primarily on the initial two days of the rally and the Sunday demonstration, which was also articulated as violent actions without purpose and reason, with ridicule of protest leaders, with little condemnation of police actions during the crackdown.

**Thus, while mainstream media focused on coalition confrontations during the post-election week, the channel diverged its attention towards exacerbating tensions in Kosovo.** Beyond the traditional right-wing discourse surrounding Serbian stands in Kosovo and the infringement of their rights, the channel adopted heightened rhetoric concerning the potential outbreak of war in the region

<sup>594</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated December 16, 2023, posted at 7:11 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>595</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated December 14, 2023, posted at 9:30 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>596</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated December 17, 2023, posted at 1:15 AM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>597</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated December 18, 2023, posted at 5:45 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>598</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated December 19, 2023, posted at 2:15 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

— "If you do not have time to watch the video, I will sum it up for you - the introduction of military conscription is urgently needed."<sup>599</sup> The escalation of arrests, fires, and explosions in Kosovo, coinciding with the expiration of the Normalization Agreement, further intensified the channel's discourse on the matter, pushing Serbian domestic policy matters off their agenda.

### 5.3 Serbian Elections in the Rhetoric of 'People's Patrol' Telegram Channel

The 'People's Patrol' Telegram channel is the official communication platform for the People's Patrol, an extreme right-wing group founded in 2020. **The People's Patrol has been characterised as an ultranationalist organisation and has promoted anti-immigrant sentiments, as well as opposing vaccination and exhibiting nationalist and anti-feminist ideologies.**<sup>600</sup> They have garnered attention for their hostile actions, including incidents where threats and violence were directed at migrants and those assisting them.<sup>601</sup> Furthermore, they have organised protests against Kosovo's independence and the recently discussed Ohrid Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia.<sup>602</sup> **Also, in 2022, 'People's Patrol' has been linked to far-right groups in Russia,** with allegations of involvement in the war in Ukraine.<sup>603</sup> Accusations of inciting hatred and intolerance have been levelled against the organisation's leader, Damnjan Knežević, who has also been associated with the infamous Wagner private military company.<sup>604</sup>

The 'People's Patrol' Telegram channel, established on September 24, 2021, has garnered over 8,271 subscribers and published approximately 1,800 posts. In general, the channel does not enjoy the same level of popularity as 'Sputnik Serbia' and 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit,' its posts were shared by just eight channels within the study sample. However, **the channel garnered a total of 673 reposts across 132 channels, and its engagement metrics with the audience are notably high.** A significant majority of subscribers, approximately 88%, actively read the channel's content, with 5.38% engaging further by leaving comments, reacting to posts, or sharing them with others.<sup>605</sup>

#### 5.3.1 April 2022 elections

**Between March 27 and April 10, the 'People's Patrol' channel displayed minimal activity, publishing only eight posts during this timeframe.** Among these, five were issued prior to the election, no posts were made on the voting day, and only three posts emerged in the week following the election.

<sup>599</sup> The post from the 'БУНТ је стање духа' Telegram channel, dated December 21, 2023, posted at 3:19 PM, available at: <https://t.me/buntcg>

<sup>600</sup> Mirza Buljubašić, "Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE", *Radicalisation Awareness Network*, 2022, p.13, available at: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran\\_vrwe\\_in\\_western\\_balkans\\_overview\\_072022\\_en.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran_vrwe_in_western_balkans_overview_072022_en.pdf)

<sup>601</sup> Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Zašto je dozvoljen skup antimigrantskih desničara u Beogradu?*, 2020, available at:

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/za%C5%A1to-je-dozvoljen-skup-antimigrantskih-desničara-u-beogradu/30919602.html>

<sup>602</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Serbian Far-Right Leader Arrested After Nationalists Try To Storm Presidency In Belgrade*, 2023, available at:

<https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-far-right-knezevic-arrested-vucic-kosovo/32274304.html>

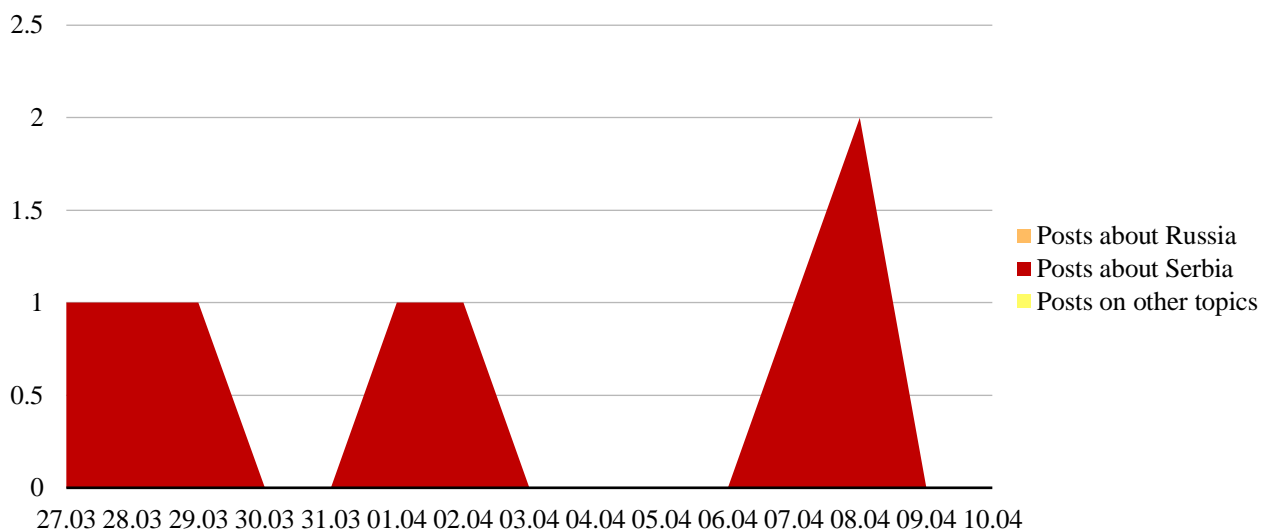
<sup>603</sup> Balkan Insight, *Serbian Far-Right Group to Hold Pro-Russia Rally*, 2022, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/01/serbian-far-right-group-to-hold-pro-russia-rally/>

<sup>604</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Serbian Right-Winger Says Vagner Ties Could Help If There's 'Conflict In Kosovo'*, 2022, available at:

<https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-russia-vagner-kosovo-ultranationalists-/32164146.html>

<sup>605</sup> TGStat, *Народна Патрола*, 2024, available at: <https://tgstat.com/channel/@narodnapatrola>

Figure 7: Distribution of content topics on the Telegram channel 'People's Patrol' (March 27 - April 10, 2022)



Source: Author's calculations based on data obtained.

Curiously, despite the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the channel abstained from reporting on these events, opting instead to maintain its primary focus on anti-migrant discourse. **Noteworthy is the presence of pro-Russian narrative within the channel's content**, exemplified by statements such as "You vote for the brothers to be kicked out of the UN ... We will always be brothers with the Russians, sharing both good and evil." **However, it is crucial to underscore that these posts primarily served as critiques directed at Serbian elites and were not explicitly linked to the People's Patrol's endorsement of the war in Ukraine.** As reflected in these posts, the channel's emphasis on Serbia's vote against Russia at the UN is more closely tied to the perceived threat of Russia's potential expulsion from the UN, thereby highlighting implications for Kosovo's independence rather than a direct expression of support for Russia.

Throughout the observed period, the 'People's Patrol' channel refrained from endorsing any specific candidates, including those affiliated with right-wing parties sharing ideological proximity with the 'People's Patrol.' Notably, the channel issued only one call advising "voting against politicians associated with the Soros Foundation,"<sup>606</sup> which, according to the channel, includes not the liberal pro-Western opposition but the SNS. **Within the channel's discourse, the SNS emerges as the primary antagonist, depicted as a 'sect' responsible for Serbia's tribulations.** Furthermore, the channel extends its condemnation beyond the SNS to encompass the ruling elites, including figures like Aleksandar Vulin,<sup>607</sup> the ex-head of the BIA, whose ideological alignment resonates with the 'People's Patrol'.

**Following the elections, the channel unleashed a barrage of criticism aimed at the ruling coalition and Aleksandar Vučić over Serbia's vote against Russia at the UN.** The discourse escalated to include scathing remarks targeting Serbian political elites and a call to action urging citizens to join protests.<sup>608</sup> **Strikingly absent, however, were any mentions of actions taken in Serbia regarding alleged election result manipulation, which the opposition vehemently pushed for, and any semblance of public political discourse.** Thus, despite the organization's established activities and a sizable platform for engaging with followers, the channel did not prioritize elections as a topical agenda. Instead, it published only one post critiquing the ruling coalition, demonstrating a limited engagement with the electoral process.

<sup>606</sup> The post from the "Народна Патрола" Telegram channel, dated April 2, 2022, posted at 9:25 PM, available at: <https://t.me/narodnapatrola>

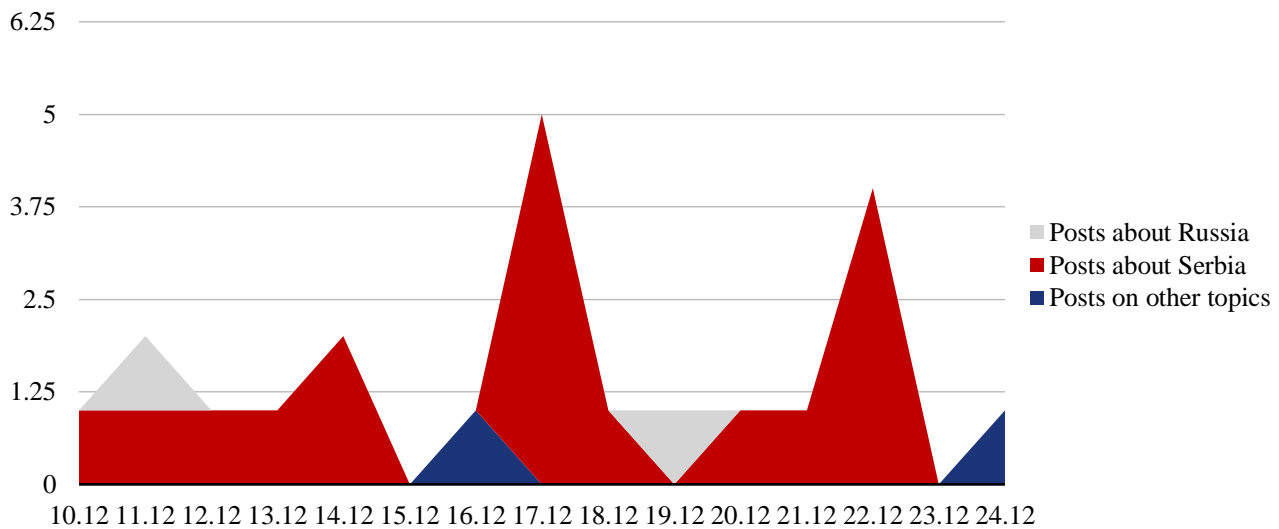
<sup>607</sup> The post from the "Народна Патрола" Telegram channel, dated March 27, 2022, posted at 10:20 PM, available at: <https://t.me/narodnapatrola>

<sup>608</sup> The post from the "Народна Патрола" Telegram channel, dated April 8, 2022, posted at 4:59 PM, available at: <https://t.me/narodnapatrola>

### 5.3.2 December 2023 elections

The trend observed above slightly persisted during the December 2023 elections. Between December 10 and December 27, 22 posts were published. Also, like during the April 2022 elections, the channel's rhetoric remained untouched by topics such as Russia, the war in Ukraine, or events in the Middle East.

Figure 8: Distribution of content topics on the Telegram channel 'People's Patrol' (December 10 - December 24, 2023)



Source: Author's calculations based on data obtained.

Throughout the pre-election week, six posts were published, with Kosovo and migration emerging as critical topics. However, a notable focus was countering the ruling coalition and SNS, which gained equal relevance to the election on the channel's agenda. **Surprisingly, the 'People's Patrol' supported cooperation with the pro-European opposition coalition 'Serbia against Violence' to prevent election fraud.**<sup>609</sup> However, **similar to the April elections, the channel primarily campaigned against voting for the SNS without endorsing any specific candidate.** Later, during the voting day, the channel published five posts, including calls to vote against the SNS (1 post) and evidence of election fraud and manipulation (3 posts).

Following post-election week, eight posts were published. Surprisingly, the channel did not feature the anticipated support for Branimir Nestorović or expressions of regret for the loss of right-wing parties. Instead, **'People's Patrol' advocated support for the 'Serbia against Violence' protest and the ongoing struggle against the SNS and the SNS-SPS coalition.**<sup>610</sup> Regardless, it is essential to note that this support was not comprehensive and based on the eternal principle: 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.' Nonetheless, protest coverage on the channel was limited; for example, there were no posts of the largest opposition rally on Sunday. However, this aligns with the channel's typical pattern of material publication, indicating it may not be intentional information concealment. Of particular significance was the publication of three posts supporting the discourse of the liberal opposition in Serbia in their rhetoric.

Therefore, while the appearance of elections as a resistance agenda against the ruling regime was only nascent in April 2022, it gained momentum in December 2023. **Notably, the channel refrains from**

<sup>609</sup> The post from the "Народна Патрола" Telegram channel, dated December 12, 2023, posted at 9:04 PM, available at: <https://t.me/narodnapatrola>

<sup>610</sup> The post from the "Народна Патрола" Telegram channel, dated December 18, 2023, posted at 10:07 PM, available at: <https://t.me/narodnapatrola>



**actively participating in political struggles and does not portray elections as a significant direct democracy action. Instead, elections on the channel's agenda are presented as acts of struggle. Unlike the 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' channel, where ideological attitudes dominate, the nature of resistance on this channel is determined by political confrontation.**

## 5.4 Findings

The conducted analysis paints a complex picture of how Russian propaganda influences the political landscape in Serbia. **Delving into the role of the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel, it becomes evident that Kremlin propaganda employs a sophisticated approach in shaping the narrative surrounding Serbian political events during elections. In April 2022, the channel strategically manipulated election coverage, downplaying the significance of the electoral process.** Instead of focusing on candidates, their platforms, or debates, the channel minimised the attention given to the elections, effectively blurring their importance. Despite the simultaneous presidential, parliamentary, and local elections across various regions, the competitive aspect was conspicuously absent in the channel's rhetoric. Moreover, 'Sputnik Serbia's coverage adopted a neutral or even negative tone, portraying the electoral process in an unappealing light. Post-election discussions and opposition confrontations were notably mislaid from their agenda, diverting attention from the electoral aftermath. Interestingly, the channel's narrative swiftly shifted back to everyday Serbian life post-election, with increased social, economic, and cultural coverage. **This deliberate silence on political events suggests a strategic agenda, highlighting a coordinated effort to control the public discourse.** However, while this analysis underscores the coordinated nature of the 'Sputnik Serbia' channel's election coverage, the specific motives behind this strategy still need to be determined. This study refrains from speculating about the channel's goals or preferred political candidates due to insufficient evidence.

**Russian propaganda tactics underwent a noticeable shift during the December 2023 elections.** There was a surge in attention and importance placed on the electoral process, painting it not just as a routine democratic exercise but as a defining moment in Serbia's path toward civilisation. **The channel's rhetoric morphed the elections into a stark choice between competing ideologies, framing them as a battle between 'good and evil' rather than a clash of political coalitions.** Amidst this charged atmosphere, the channel unabashedly threw its weight behind Aleksandar Vučić's candidacy and the ruling coalition, openly endorsing them before, during, and after the elections. Not stopping there, it actively worked to undermine post-election protests by portraying them in a relentlessly negative light, stripping away any semblance of significance and branding them as violent acts of opposition. **This brazen display of support and manipulation underscores a consistent pattern in the channel's approach to elections – a coordinated strategy to further its political agenda. It is a clear signal of pro-Russian forces' ambition to sway political dynamics in the Balkans. However, despite claims of close ties between right-wing Serbian parties and the Kremlin, they surprisingly did not garner much attention on the channel.** Even those overtly courting Russian favour failed to dent the narrative significantly. Similarly, the democratic opposition, while not spared criticism, did not face outright demonisation, often receiving a more neutral portrayal. **However, the channel's coverage of Serbian affairs was generally rather lacklustre – thin, incomplete, and far from comprehensive.** Despite its name, 'Sputnik Serbia' did not aspire to be the go-to source for daily updates on the country. Instead, Russia remained the focal point, catering primarily to an audience already predisposed to pro-Russian views and Kremlin-endorsed narratives. **This narrow focus suggests that while the channel may be adept at preaching to the choir, its potential to sway a broader audience is definitely limited.**

Furthermore, the channel lacks original content from its authors, relying instead on a strategy of half-truths and selective event coverage. **By amplifying speeches from the Serbian political establishment, which serves as a critical conduit for Russian propaganda in the Balkans, the channel effectively shapes a pro-Russian narrative in Serbia without investing in substantial original content.** In essence, apart from coverage related to Russia and Ukraine, the rhetoric of the 'Sputnik Serbia' Telegram channel closely mirrors that of Serbian government-controlled media.

**Moreover, the assertion that right-wing groups serve as 'Russian proxies' in disseminating pro-Russian propaganda, a claim frequently made by the media and researchers, is dubious.** Channels like 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit' and 'People's Patrol' stand apart from the patterns observed in 'Sputnik Serbia.' They develop their narrative about elections within their ideological frameworks, refraining from adopting the dominant pro-Russian rhetoric seen in 'Sputnik Serbia's' coverage. Instead, they focus on their agendas, often portraying the opposition's viewpoint against the ruling elite. Thus, **while all three channels share an anti-Western stance, this alone may not suffice to categorize them as 'Russian agents.'** The absence of a cohesive pro-Russian narrative in their election coverage suggests a more nuanced picture of their motivations and affiliations.

**Therefore, it is evident that Russian influence on the Serbian elections, at least in terms of public discourse, appears to be exaggerated.** It is not to discount Russia's interests in the WB, especially in Serbia. However, its impact runs more profound than the actions of pro-Russian media in the region. Rising censorship, state control over media, journalist harassment, and constraints on freedom of speech have contributed to the deterioration of Serbia's media landscape and heightened societal polarisation. Additionally, unresolved tensions surrounding Kosovo's status, lingering scars from the 1990s conflicts, and a lack of national reconciliation further fuel anti-Western sentiments. In this complex environment, Russian propaganda is not merely a driving force but also a reflection of broader political struggles. It becomes not just a subject but an object of influence, wielded as a tool in the ongoing political dynamics.

## VI Conclusion

**In the geopolitical chessboard of the Western Balkans, Russia's presence in Serbia may appear as a mere pawn, overshadowed by the towering figures of Western influence.** Serbia's economic and military connections with Western nations far surpass its engagements with Russia, portraying a reality where the West clearly maintains the upper hand. Even in the realm of soft power, the EU's sway reigns supreme, drawing Serbian youth towards opportunities in the West for education and career advancement. **Upon closer examination, the key pillars of Russia's influence in Serbia do not appear as imposing as they initially seem.**

**Energy dependence, often touted as a cornerstone of Russian leverage, is a shared reality across Europe.** The absence of pipeline gas bans in any of the dozen sanctions packages imposed during the study period underscores the continent-wide reliance on Russian resources. Furthermore, this interdependence is reciprocal, as Russia also requires markets for its raw materials. Similarly, **Russia's stance on Kosovo fails to wield significant influence in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.** As neither a direct participant nor an official mediator, Russia's role is formal at best. **Therefore, claims of a 'Russian invasion of the Balkans' or labelling Serbia as a 'Russian outpost' lack substantive grounding.**

However, in the realm of information warfare, a complex scenario unfolds, revealing Russia's calculated strategy in disseminating Kremlin propaganda throughout Serbia. **The conducted analysis unveils a systematic surge in pro-Russian Telegram channels, weaving a dense web of interconnected nodes.** Nevertheless, despite these orchestrated efforts, Serbia cannot be classified as a focal point of the Kremlin's 'strategic interests.' Notably, Russia has refrained from deploying a tailored strategy to amplify pro-Russian narratives regarding the conflict in Ukraine. Even with access to the largest Serbian Telegram channel run by a prominent Serbian mercenary, Kremlin propagandists have neglected to customise content for the local audience. The case of the 'Dejan Beric' channel serves as a telling example; since April 2022, posts on the channel have been managed by Russian-speaking administrators devoid of Serbian proficiency. Consequently, the channel has disseminated materials riddled with grammatical errors, linguistic nuances, and cultural references that elude the comprehension of the Serbian audience. It highlights a crucial observation: **while Russia harbours an interest in advancing its narratives within Serbia, the region does not occupy a central position in the Kremlin's geopolitical manoeuvres.**

**In shaping Serbia's political narrative, the Kremlin's propaganda machine operates with a strategic precision akin to its information warfare tactics.** A meticulous examination of posts disseminated via the Sputnik Serbia channel during the pivotal 2022 and 2023 Serbian elections unveils a nuanced approach that aligns with the agendas favoured by the ruling elites. During the 2022 elections, a deliberate effort to divert attention from domestic affairs within Serbia was noted, as the channel conspicuously omitted coverage of Serbian-centric issues. Conversely, in 2023, active support for the 'Serbia Must Not Stop' coalition was evident, reflecting a calculated plot to bolster preferred political factions. **However, despite the heated political landscape and the fervent rivalry among parties, the Sputnik Serbia channel refrained from deploying information attacks or spreading disinformation.** In essence, **apart from a notable focus on Russia and the war in Ukraine, the channel's content mirrors that of Serbia's state-controlled media outlets, such as Pink or RTS. This measured approach challenges the notion of active penetration or hybrid warfare, suggesting a more muted role in influencing the regional narrative.**

An analysis of Serbian channels disseminating Russian propaganda, such as 'HaZarder NoVosrbija,' 'Rebellion is the State of Spirit,' and 'Serbs for Russians,' supports this conclusion. These **local actors employ pro-Russian rhetoric for their benefit and utility.** However, once Kremlin propaganda narratives diverge from the channel's ideological framework, they are promptly discarded. For instance, the "HaZarder NoVosrbija" channel's discourse portrays the war in Ukraine conflict as a vehicle aimed

at dismantling the unilateral dominance and hegemony of the Western world. Within this framework, Russia's triumph in this conflict is envisioned as the catalyst for the resurgence of Greater Serbia and the amalgamation of Serbian territories. Thus, initially, he propagated a pro-Russian narrative during the early stages of the conflict in Ukraine. However, as Russia faced setbacks and began to retreat, posts about its actions abruptly ceased.

Hence, Russia's footprint in Serbia can be seen as a form of 'invited intervention.' **Amidst the intricate tapestry of political elites and increasingly strained relations with the EU, Russia emerges as a trump card in Serbia's hand.** Thus, labelling Serbia or its politicians as mere 'Russian puppets' or depicting Serbia as a mere 'pawn of Russian interests' oversimplifies the nuanced reality. The Serbian establishment strategically leverages the narrative surrounding Russian presence and perceived 'threats' to its advantage. **In this complicated landscape, Russian propaganda transcends being merely a driving force; it serves as a reflection of the broader political struggle. It morphs from a mere subject into an object of influence, wielded as a tool in current political dynamics.**

**In the Balkans, the notion of Russian propaganda's pervasive influence has become ensnared in the paradox of the 'illusion of truth': the lie, repeated a thousand times, becomes a reality.** What many attribute to Russia's propaganda grip in Serbia often finds its roots in locally brewed concoctions nurtured and bred within the nation. Serbia's tumultuous history, marked by the scars of the Yugoslav wars, the imposition of sanctions against Yugoslavia, and NATO's Operation Allied Force, became a fertile ground for fostering deep-seated anti-European and anti-NATO sentiments in society. Thus, **Serbia's stance is not merely pro-Russian; it is equally anti-Western**, a sentiment directed towards nations that recognized Kosovo's independence and partook in aggression against Yugoslavia. Crucially, the architects nourishing these sentiments today are not solely Russia's media but rather the Serbian political elites who craft anti-Western rhetoric in their discourse. **Within this framework, Russian propaganda agents are merely one of many voices echoing these narratives. Therefore, the primary victory of the Russian hybrid war in Serbia stems from the shortcomings of the European reconciliation policy.**



## Appendix A

### *Survey on Social Media Engagement: Research on the Use of Telegram*

#### 1. Please specify your age group

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44

#### 2. Are you familiar with Telegram, the social network platform?

- Yes
- No

#### 3. Do you have the Telegram application installed on your phone or computer?

- Yes
- No

#### 4. Do you use telegram in your daily life?

- Yes
- No
- I used it before, but I do not use it anymore

#### 5. If you do not use or have stopped using Telegram, what is the reason for this? (You can choose more than one answer)

- The other social media apps meet all my needs
- There is no content that interests me there
- I am concerned about my data privacy
- I do not have people to communicate with there
- I consider it to have a negative reputation
- I simply do not like it
- Other

#### 6. If you use Telegram, how frequently do you log in to the app?

- Several times a day
- Several times a week
- 2-3 times a month
- Less than 2-3 times a month
- Other

#### 7. What are the primary purposes for which you use Telegram? (Select all that apply)

- Chatting/calls with friends and family
- Consuming content, such as reading news and browsing through content
- Creating content
- For business purposes
- Other

#### 8. What types of channels do you follow on Telegram? (You can choose more than one answer)

- News
- Entertainment
- Educational content
- Science and Technology
- Arts and Creativity
- Gaming
- Politics

- Activism
- Lifestyle
- Business and Entrepreneurship
- Special Interests and hobbies
- Other

**9. Do you use Telegram channels to follow news about the war in Ukraine?**

- Yes
- No
- I do not actively seek news, but I come across them

**10. What is your opinion on the information about the war in Ukraine that can be found in Telegram channels?**

- The information is objective
- The information is pro-NATO
- The information is pro-Russian
- The information is pro-Ukrainian
- Other

**11. Do you believe that Telegram channels are a more relevant source of information and news about national and global politics compared to television and newspapers?**

- Yes
- Mostly yes
- Probably not
- No

**12. Which of the popular Telegram channels in Serbia do you follow? (Please select all that apply)**

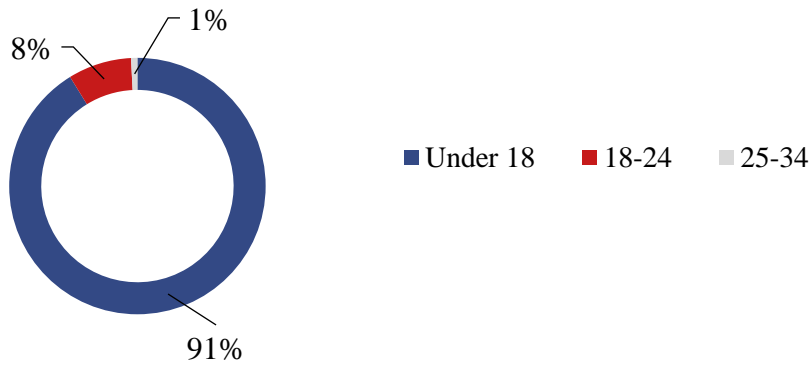
- БУНТ је стање духа
- Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija
- ВОСТОК ВЕСТИ
- Милош Ковић
- Срби за Србе
- СЛОВЕНСКИ МЕДВЕД
- Dejan Beric
- ИСТОЧНА БУДУЋНОСТ
- Vikovic
- 192.rs
- Борбени Ефективи Телеграм-канал
- Сила са Истока
- Other

**13. If you have a favourite Telegram channel, could you please specify which one it is?**

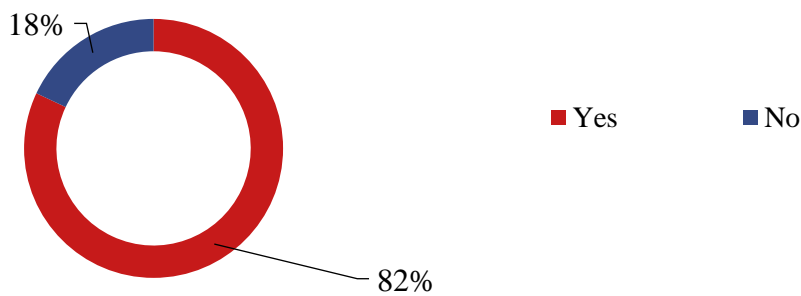
## Appendix B

### Findings from Survey on Social Media Engagement: Investigating Telegram Usage

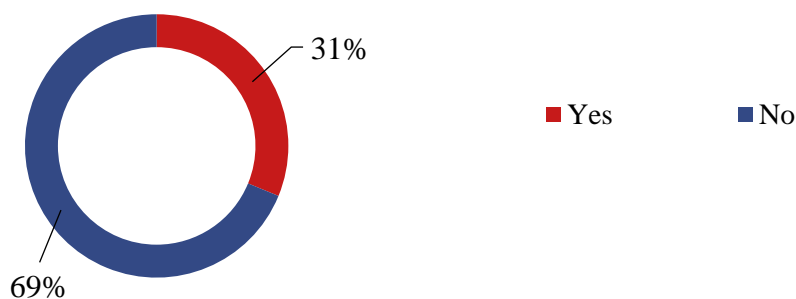
#### 1. Please specify your age group



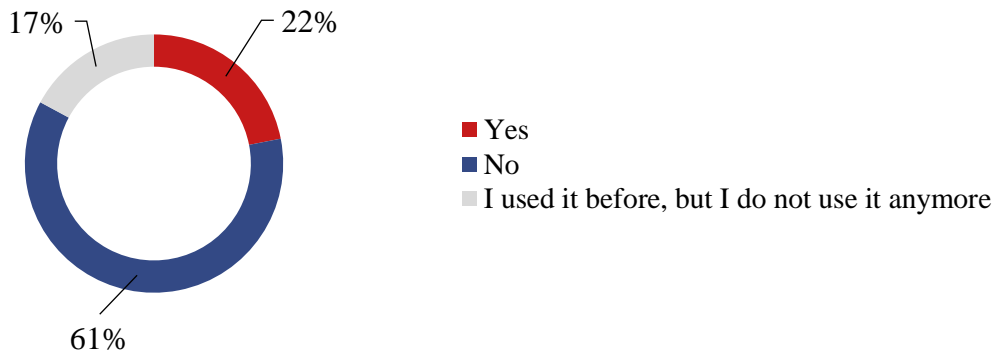
#### 2. Are you familiar with Telegram, the social network platform?



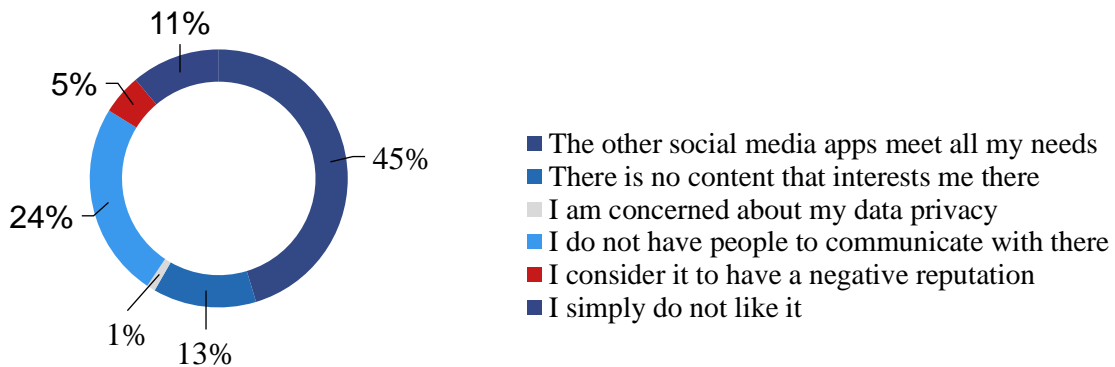
#### 3. Do you have the Telegram application installed on your phone or computer?



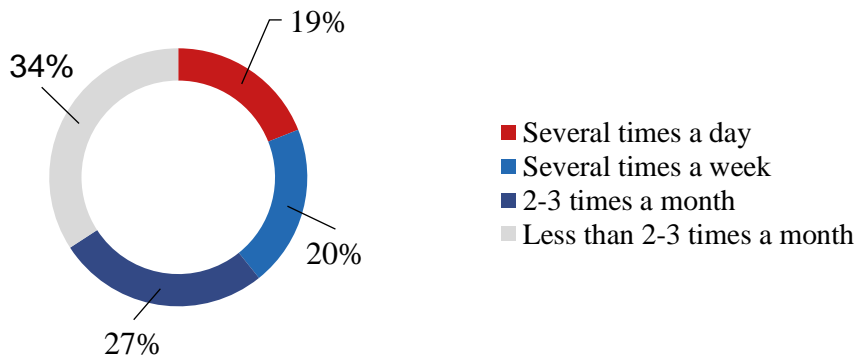
**4. Do you use telegram in your daily life?**



**5. If you do not use or have stopped using Telegram, what is the reason for this? (You can choose more than one answer)**

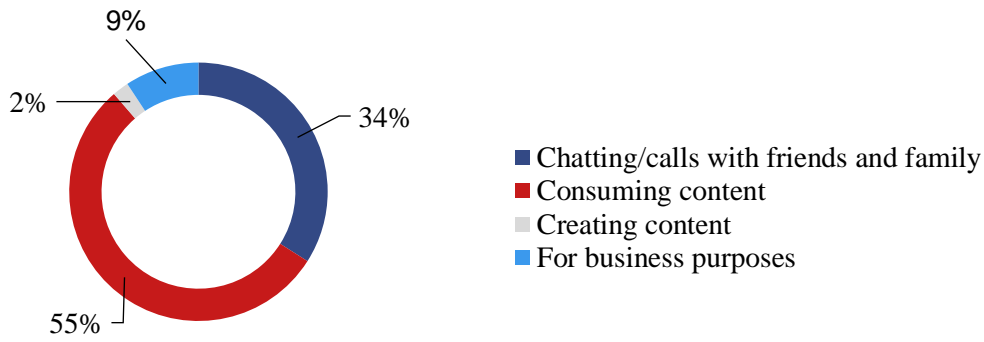


**6. If you use Telegram, how frequently do you log in to the app?**

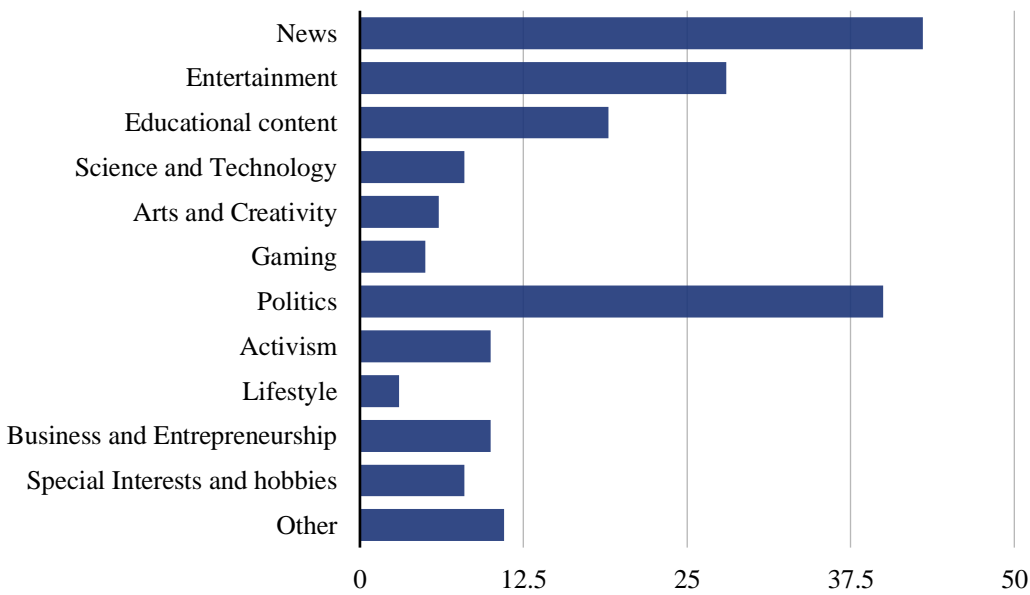




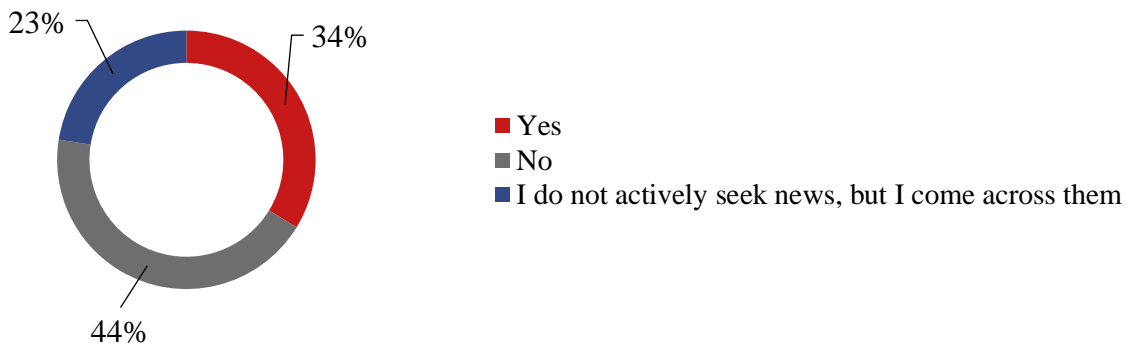
**7. What are the primary purposes for which you use Telegram? (Select all that apply)**



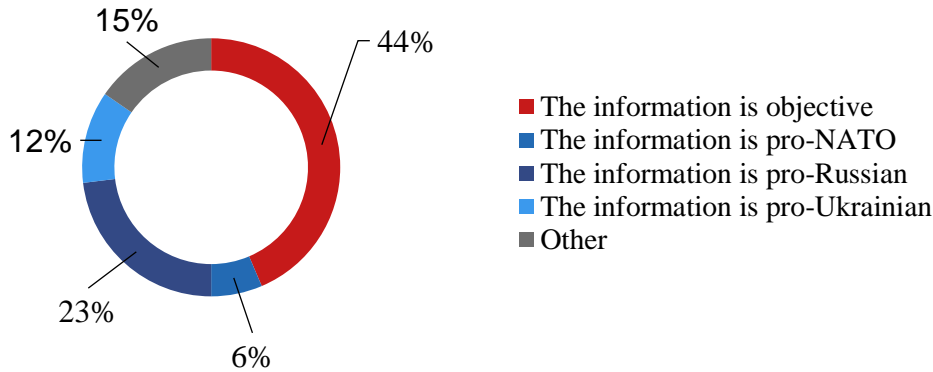
**8. What types of channels do you follow on Telegram? (You can choose more than one answer)**



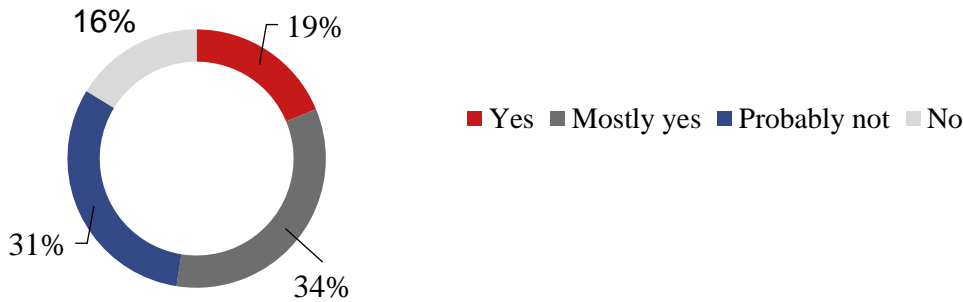
**9. Do you use Telegram channels to follow news about the war in Ukraine?**



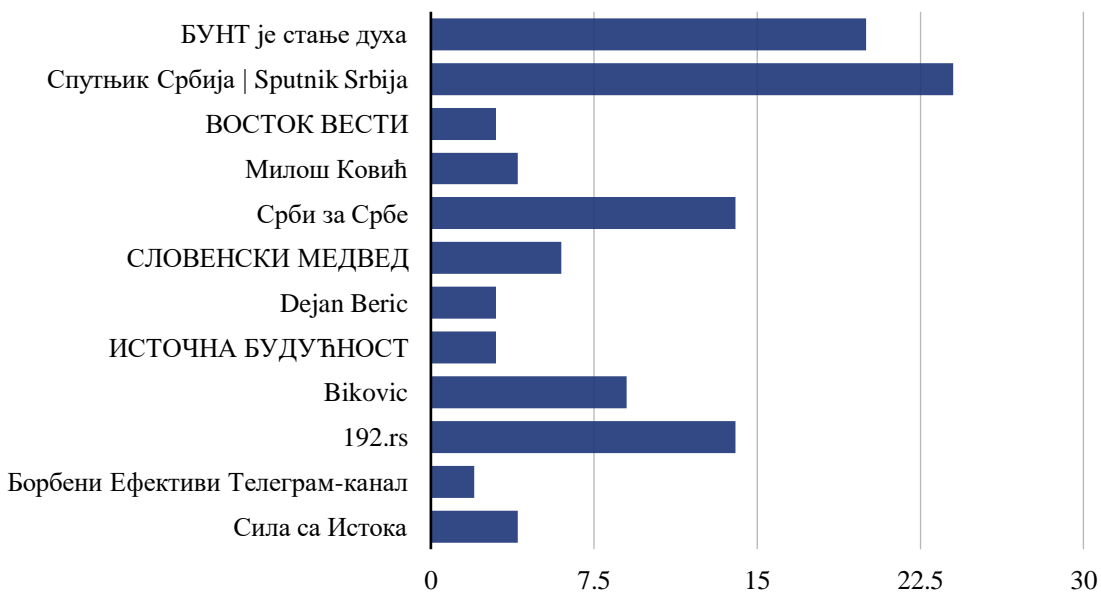
**10. What is your opinion on the information about the war in Ukraine that can be found in Telegram channels?**

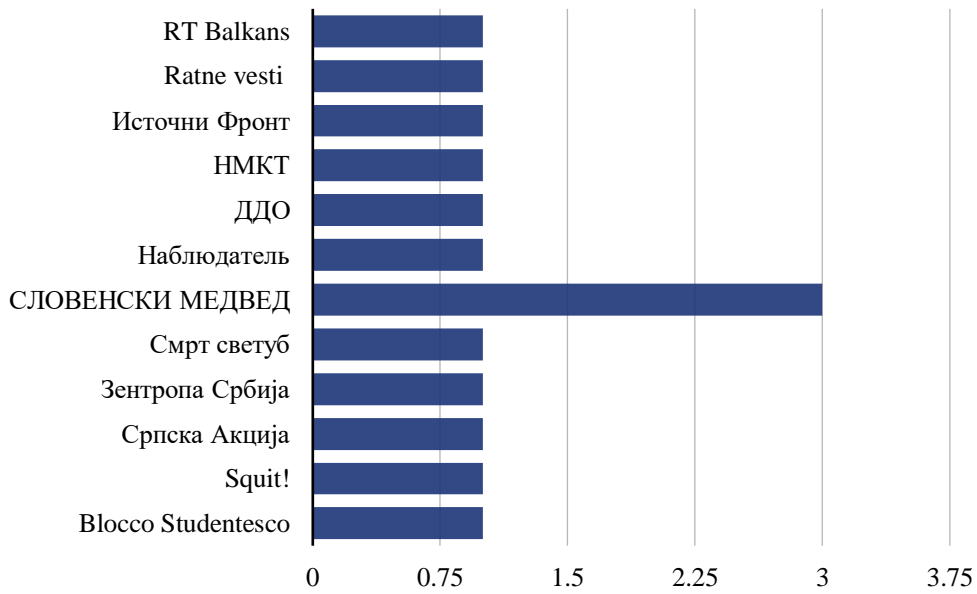


**11. Do you believe that Telegram channels are a more relevant source of information and news about national and global politics compared to television and newspapers**



**12. Which of the popular Telegram channels in Serbia do you follow? (Please select all that apply)**



**13. If you have a favourite Telegram channel, could you please specify which one it is?**

## Bibliography

- Adam Kowalski, "Disinformation and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine Threats and governance responses", *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, 2022.
- Agon Maliqi, "Russian Information Warfare in the Balkans: How Identity and Religion are Instrumentalized in the Kosovo-Serbia Dispute", *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs*, 2023.
- Alexey Salikov, "Telegram as a Means of Political Communication and its use by Russia's Ruling Elite", *Politologija*, 2019.
- Aljazeera, *Serb official visits Moscow, calls sanctions EU 'hysteria'*, 2022.
- Anadolu Agency, *Russia calls on Kosovo, US, EU to stop 'provocations,' respect Serbs in Kosovo*, 2022.
- Anadolu Agency, *Russia, Serbia vow to strengthen military cooperation*, 2021.
- Anadolu Agency, *Ukraine's accession to NATO 'fundamental threat' to Russia's security, says Putin*, 2023.
- Andrew Alimov and Filipović Aleksa, "Russian-Serbian relations — challenges and perspectives", *Society, environment, development*, no. 4, 2018.
- Andrzej Kozłowski, "Disinformation in Poland on the war in Ukraine», *Fundacja im. Kazimierza Pułaskiego*, 2022.
- Antidot, *Response from the East: Invasion of Kremlin media in the Balkan*, 2018.
- Arel, Dominique, Jesse Driscoll, "Regime Change (Maidan)", 2022
- Artem Patalakh, "Emotions and Identity as Foreign Policy Determinants: Serbian Approach to Relations with Russia", *Chinese Political Science Review*, no. 4, 2018.
- ARTICLE 19, *Russia: Telegram block leads to widespread assault on freedom of expression online*, 2018.
- Associated Press, *In Serbia, pro-Russia is seen as the winning election stance*, 2022.
- Associated Press, *Russian media campaign falsely claims Bucha deaths are fakes*, 2022.
- Associated Press, *Thousands accuse Serbia's ruling populists of election fraud at a Belgrade rally*, 2023.
- Associated Press, *Outlawed app emerges as key tool for Russian protesters*, 2019.
- Asya Metodieva, "Russian narrative proxies in the Western Balkans," *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 2019.
- B92, *'I love Russia - because I love Serbia,' says Serbian PM*, 2018.
- B92, *Ako koristite Telegram, morate znati ove trikove*, 2022.
- Balkan Insight, *At Pro-Russian Balkan Rallies, a Who's Who of the Far-Right*, 2022.
- Balkan Insight, *Donbass Brothers: How Serbian Fighters Were Deployed in Ukraine*, 2018.
- Balkan Insight, *Serb Volunteers Answer Call to Fight in Ukraine*, 2022.
- Balkan Insight, *Serbia Arms Experts Query Value of Russia's 'Gifts'*, 2016.
- Balkan Insight, *Serbia Backs UN Resolution Against Russian Annexations in Ukraine*, 2022.
- Balkan Insight, *Serbian Far-Right Group to Hold Pro-Russia Rally*, 2022.
- Balkan Insight, *Sniper's Video Shows Serb Volunteers Training to Fight Ukraine*, 2022.
- Balkan Insight, *Suspicion in Serbia after Opposition Leader Meets President*, 2022.
- Balkan Insight, *Telegram Shuts Serbian 'Revenge Porn' Groups Exposed by BIRN*, 2023.
- Balkan Insight, *The 'Awakening': American Right-Wing Extremist Finds Allies in the Balkans*, 2022.



- Balkanska bezbednosna mreža, *U modernizaciju Vojske Srbije od kraja 2016 do danas uloženo oko 830 miliona evra*, 2019.
- Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, "Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security", 2003.
- BBC News na srpskom, *Izbori u Srbiji 2023: Šta znači tišina pred glasanje*, 2023.
- BBC, *Iran protests: Telegram under fire as Tehran clamps down*, 2018.
- BBC, *Montenegro jails 'Russian coup plot' leaders*, 2019.
- BBC, *Russia election: Hundreds rally against Putin in Moscow*, 2011.
- BBC, *LinkedIn blocked by Russian authorities*, 2016.
- Bennett Clifford and Helen Powell, "Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram", *The George Washington University Program on Extremism*, 2019.
- Blic, *"MIGOM" na F-35: Ovako izgleda najgora noćna mora NATO generala*, 2017.
- Blic, *Danas se rešava ključno pitanje. Vučić sa Putinom u Sočiju pregovara o ceni gaza za Srbiju, a na stolu su još četiri bitne teme*, 2021.
- Blic, *Horor na Telegramu. Otkrivena grupa u kojoj se dele pornografski snimci dece, objavljena i slika golog petogodišnjaka kom muškarac postavlja jezivo pitanje*, 2021.
- Blic, *Policija: Izdat nalog UKP-u da istraži slučaj objave fotografija i snimaka na Telegramu, krivci će biti nađeni i kažnjeni*, 2021.
- Blic, *Skandal. Na aplikaciji za dopisivanje pojavile se grupe u kojima se nude kokain, spid i drugi narkotici: Reklamiraju se čak i na autobuskoj stanici*, 2021.
- Blic, *Sramnu grupu na telegramu napravila devojka?! Jeziv čet u kom učestvuje više 26.000 ljudi i deli intimne fotografije devojaka iz Srbije nije jedini, tužilaštvo istražuje više ovakvih grupa*, 2021
- Blic, *Telegram uvodi pretplatu: Teret im finansiranje oglašivača, ovim potezom žele da ga izbegnu*, 2022.
- Blic, *Ugašena sramna grupa "perverzije Balkan"?! Jezivi čet u kojem je učestvovalo 48.000 članova, objavljivali intimne fotografije i snimke devojaka*, 2023
- Boban Stojanović and Aleksandar Ivković, "Alternative Report on the Position and Needs of Youth in the Republic of Serbia", *National Youth Council of Serbia*, 2022.
- Branislav Stanicek and Anna Caprile, "Russia and the Western Balkans. Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference", *European Parliamentary Research Service*, 2023.
- Branislav Stanicek and Anna Caprile, "Russia and the Western Balkans. Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference", *European Parliamentary Research Service*, 2023.
- Branislav Stanicek and Simona Tarpova, "China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans", *European Parliamentary Research Service*, 2022.
- Branislav Stanicek, "Russia's influence in the Western Balkans", *European Parliamentary Research Service*, 2022.
- Brian Whitmore, "September 24, 2011: The Day That Changed Russia", *The Atlantic*, 2012.
- Center for Preventive Action, "War in Ukraine", 2024.
- Center for Western Balkans Studies, *Why Serbs don't want to die for Russia*, 2024.
- Charlie Warzel, "The World's Most Important App (For Now)", *The Atlantic*, 2023.
- CNN, *Hamas 'social media following has skyrocketed since its attack. America is powerless to stop it*, 2023.
- CNN, *What is 'revenge porn' and are there laws to protect you? Here's what you need to know*, 2021.
- Council of the European Union, *EU imposes sanctions on state-owned outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's broadcasting in the EU*, 2022.
- CTV News, *Serbia likely to get pro-Russian nationalist government*, 2012.

- Danas, "*Telegrami*" lažnih vesti za Zapadni Balkan, 2022.
- Danas, *Ko su troje odbornika koji su prešli u SNS: Odavno napustili Zavetnike i POKS*, 2022.
- Danas, *Miloš Jovanović o tome zašto je NADA glasala u GIK-u kao SNS: Dosta mi je fatamorgana opozicije, naprednjaci su pobedili na izborima*, 2022.
- Danas, *Savo Manojlović dobio na sudu Informer, Novosti i još dva režimska tabloida*, 2024.
- Danas, *Šta da radite kada vam je naloženo da fotografirate listić ili učestvujete u "bugarskom vozu"*, 2020.
- Daniel Bush, "No Modest Voices: Social Media and the Protests in Belarus", *Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies*, 2020.
- Daniel Tsvetanov, "Gazprom signs a contract for the construction of the second string of Turkish Stream. What's next?", *ENERPO Journal*, 2017.
- David Clark, Andrew Foxall, "Russia's Role in the Balkans – Cause for Concern?", *Henry Jackson Society*, 2014.
- Dejana Saric, Pierre Morcos, "The War in Ukraine: Aftershocks in the Balkans," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2022
- Delfi knjižare, *Svedok ruskog proleća*, 2024.
- Demostat, *Demostat: Građani prepoznaju EU kao najvećeg donatora i investitora, emotivno više vezani za Rusiju*, 2022.
- Derventa Cafe, *Mr. Željko Asentić: De/populacija, demografija i demokratija*, 2021.
- Deutsche Welle, *Djindjic's ideas live on*, 2013.
- Deutsche Welle, *Russia's influence overshadows Serbia's election*, 2023.
- Dietram A. Scheufele, David Tewksbury, "Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models", *Journal of Communication* 57.
- Dimitar Bechev, "Hedging Its Bets: Serbia Between Russia and the EU", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2023.
- Dimitar Bechev, "Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans", *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, 2019.
- Dinko Gruhonjić, "Serbia's Media Caught Between Putinophilia and the New World Reality", *ResPublica*, 2022.
- Donald N. Jensen, Angela Howard, "How Russia's Military Bloggers Shape the Course of Putin's War", *United States Institute of Peace*, 2023.
- Douglas D. Heckathorn "Snowball versus respondent-driven sampling", *Sociological methodology*, no. 41 (1), 2021.
- Dragana Bajić and Wouter Zweers, "Declining media freedom and biased reporting on foreign actors in Serbia. Prospects for an enhanced EU approach", *Clingendael Institute & European Policy Centre*, 2020.
- Dániel Harangozó, "A Balancing Act? Serbia's Military Neutrality: Concept and Implementation", 2021.
- Ediye Basse, "Fragile States Index Annual report", *The Fund for Peace*, 2023.
- Elena Ponomareva and Dmitry Krykanov, "Balkan Breath of Beijing (Strategy and Tactics of Chinese Presence in the Western Balkans)", *ПОЛИТИЯ* no.1(96), 2020
- Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics," 2001.
- Etos, *Svedok ruskog proleća – uspomene iz Donbasa*, 2022.
- Euractiv, *Russia accuses West of fomenting trouble in Serbia*, 2023.
- Euractiv, *Thousands of Serbs march in support of Russia in Belgrade*, 2023.

- Euractiv, *Zoran Zivkovic, Prime Minister of Serbia*, 2003.
- Euronews Albania, *The battle with Russia's disinformation campaign in North Macedonia*, 2023.
- Euronews, *Serbia appoints pro-Russian politician as new spy chief*, 2022.
- EuroNews, *War in Ukraine: which European countries host the most refugees?*, 2023.
- European Commission, *Digital Services Act: Application of the Risk Management Framework to Russian disinformation campaigns*, 2023.
- European Conservatives and Reformists Group, *Bosnia and Herzegovina at high risk of becoming a failed state*, 2022.
- European Western Balkans, *RT Balkan assists Serbian regime in discrediting findings of foreign election observers*, 2023.
- European Western Balkans, *The narrative of the "new Maidan" an old tool of Serbian authorities to discredit anti-regime protests*, 2023.
- Evgeni Moyakine and Alexander Tabachnik, "Struggling to strike the right balance between interests at stake: The 'Yarovaya', 'Fake news' and 'Disrespect' laws as examples of ill-conceived legislation in the age of modern technology", *Computer Law & Security Review*, vol. 40.
- Exit News, *Russia Lauds Strategic Partnership with Serbia*, 2021.
- Eyes Wide Shut. Strengthening of Russian Soft Power in Serbia – Goals, Instruments and Effects, *Center for Euro-Atlantic studies*, 2016.
- Facebook, *Srbi Za Srbe*, 2024.
- Finance, *Lukoil se je umaknil iz tekme proti Petrolu*, 2007.
- Florian Bieber, "Serbia's Staged Balancing Act", *Georgetown University in Washington DC*, 2023.
- Forbes, *Инфотеррористы. У пророссийских Telegram-каналов в Украине уже 4,2 млн подписчиков, а на рост потрачено всего \$850 000. Как так получилось?*, 2022.
- France 24, *Russian offensive inspires golden age of military bloggers*, 2023.
- France24, *Serbian minister visits Moscow, accuses EU of 'anti-Russian hysteria'*, 2022.
- Gazeta.ru, *Война против Telegram: неожиданный итог*, 2018.
- Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson, "How Many Interviews Are Enough?: An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability", *Field Methods*, no. 18(1), 2006.
- Human Rights Watch, *Russia Criminalizes Independent War Reporting, Anti-War Protests*, 2022.
- Human Rights Watch, *Russia: Veto Law to Restrict Online Freedom*, 2014.
- Human Rights Watch, *Telegram Loses Free Expression Battle to Russian Authorities*, 2018.
- Human Rights Watch, *Russia: New Legislation Attacks Internet Anonymity*, 2017.
- Idel.Реалии, *Kosovo and Donbas: what can and cannot be a precedent for Russia*, 2022.
- iFreedomLab: *Лаборатория свободного интернета, Полная история регулирования интернета в России: от 80-х и до наших дней*, 2023.
- Insider, *A Russian Telegram channel is claiming to fact check the Kremlin's war on Ukraine. It's actually spreading disinformation to hundreds of thousands of followers*, 2022.
- Інститут масової інформації, *YOUTUBE BLOCKS 442 PRO-RUSSIAN CHANNELS AT UKRAINE'S REQUEST*, 2022.
- Ilker Etikan, Sulaiman Abubakar Musa, Rukayya Sunusi Alkassim, "Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling", *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics* 5(1), 2016.
- Informer, *Putin dolazi i donosi raketni sistem 'Pancir': Srbija postaje jedina zemlja u ovom delu Evrope, koja ima tako moćno oružje!*, 2018.

Instagram, *XO Србу за Србе*, 2024.

James Surowiecki, "The Wisdom of Crowds", 2005.

Jelena Subotić, "Europe Is a State of Mind: Identity and Europeanization in the Balkans." *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no.2, 2011.

John Gerring, "What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good For?", *American Political Science Review* 98, no.2, 2004.

Joseph S Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, 2008.

Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development, *Kosovo Disinformation Alerts. Russian Media*, 2020.

KoSSev, KP: *Preparations completed, Serb citizens entering Kosovo to be issued a declaration sheet starting from August 1st*, 2022.

Kurir, *Bože pravde grmelo Moskvom: Vučić i Putin položili vence i cveće uz himnu Srbije na Crvenom trgu*, 2018.

Kurir, *Ovako rusi tamane islamiste: u jednom udaru u Siriji likvidirano 200 džihadista*, 2021.

Kurir, *Počeli radovi na deonici Sremska Rača-Kuzmin Predsednik Vučić: Ovo je još jedno veliko delo koje ostaje iza nas*, 2022.

Kurir, *Predsednik Vučić otkrio: Makron rekao da Ukrajina neće u EU pre Srbije*, 2022.

Kurir, *Vučić bio u Kikindi, Opovu i Padinskoj Skeli: Brinućemo o Srbiji, vama i vašoj deci! Hoćemo sami da čuvamo svoje nebo*, 2022.

Kurir, *Vučić odbio ucenu: Tražili su da Srbija prizna Kosovo! To nećemo da prihvatimo ni po koju cenu!*, 2022.

Kurir, *Vučić poručio u Paraćinu: Na izborima se glasa za ozbiljnost i odgovornost! Idemo da ih pobedimo ubedljivije nego ikada*, 2022.

Kurir, *Vučić posle sastanka sa nemačkom ministarkom odbrane: Imali smo sadržajne i otvorene razgovore! Srbija čuva mir i stabilnost*, 2022.

Kurir, *Vučić predstavio predizborni program: Ukoliko mi ukažete poverenje, boriću se za vas i za našu Srbiju, zajedno možemo sve*, 2022.

Kurir, *Vučić sa Patrijarhom: Na jesen stiže mnogo teže stanje nego u vreme Drugog svetskog rata, ovo u životu nisam*, 2022.

Kurir, *Vučić: Dobio sam svoje prisluškovane razgovore, to se zaista desilo, verujem u državne institucije! Hrane ćemo imati dovoljno*, 2022.

Kurir, *Vučić: prosečna plata može da dostigne 750 evra do kraja godine! Imaćemo tešku zimu*, 2022.

Kurir, *Vučić: Zašto nisu pokazivali prazna kolica ubijene srpske dece!?*, 2022.

Lea Gerster, Richard Kuchta, Dominik Hammer and Christian Schwieter, "Telegram as a Buttress: How far-right extremists and conspiracy theorists are expanding their infrastructures via Telegram", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2022.

Lenta.ru, *В Роскомнадзоре назвали сроки победы над Telegram*, 2019.

Lenta.ru, *В России разблокировали Telegram Роскомнадзор два года боролся с мессенджером, но миллионы россиян все равно им пользовались*, 2020.

Lenta.ru, *Кремль завел канал в Telegram*, 2022.

Maksim Yeniseyev, "Telegram, stifled in Russian and Iran, gains popularity in Central Asia", *Caravanserai*, 2018.

Mark Galeotti, "Do the Western Balkans face a coming Russian storm?", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2018.



- Marta Szpala, "Russia in Serbia – soft power and hard interests", *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, 2014.
- Marta Szpala, "Serbia: the forced abandonment of Russian oil", *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, 2022.
- Maxim Samorukov, "Last Friend in Europe: How Far Will Russia Go to Preserve Its Alliance With Serbia?", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2022.
- Maxim Samorukov, "Why Is All Quiet on Russia's Western Balkan Front", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2022.
- Maxwell E. McCombs, Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media", *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2, 1972.
- Mediascope, *Аудитория Telegram. Отчет по данным Mediascope*, 2023.
- Medium, *World Leaders, War & Digital Diplomacy on Telegram*, 2022.
- Medium, *How pro-Kremlin Telegram channels influence Ukrainian parliamentary decisions*, 2020.
- Meduza, *В телеграме — сотни "военкоров" и кремлевских пропагандистов. Зачем читать эти каналы — и как не сойти с ума в процессе чтения? Объясняет исследователь Z-набликов Иван Филиппов*, 2023.
- Meduza, *Российские власти за несколько дней разгромили весь медиа-рынок. Вот как это выглядит Печальный список*, 2022.
- Ministry of defence Republic of Serbia, *Agreement on defence signed between Serbia and the Russian Federation*, 2013.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Transcript of Remarks and Replies by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Media Questions at Joint Press Conference Following Talks with Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic, Belgrade, April 19, 2011*, 2011.
- Mirza Buljubašić, "Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE", *Radicalisation Awareness Network*, 2022.
- Mondo Internazionale, *Russia's "information warfare" against the "West" in Serbia and the Western Balkans*, 2022.
- N1, *FM Dacic, BIA director Vulin attend conference in Moscow*, 2023.
- N1, *Head of Russia's FSB awards former Serbian intelligence chief Aleksandar Vulin*, 2023.
- N1, *Pink TV faces charges over Vucic's refrigerator stunt*, 2022.
- N1, *Protests against COVID passes in Serbia*, 2021.
- N1, *RT programme coming to Bosnia from 2024, Simonyan confirms*, 2023.
- N1, *Vucic at MSC 2023: Serbia criticised for not introducing sanctions on Russia*, 2023.
- Nedeljnik, *Šta u ruskom vojnom govoru znači "teret 200", a šta "teret 300"?*, 2022.
- Nigel Walker, "Conflict in Ukraine: A timeline (current conflict, 2022-present)", 2023.
- Nikola Mladenović, Dušan Dostanić, "Odnos srpskih stranaka prema Rusiji od XIX do XXI veka", 2022.
- Nina Poussenkova, "The Global Expansion of Russia's Energy Giants", *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2010.
- Novosti, *Први резултати избора у београду: снс најближи формирању градске власти*, 2022.
- Nportal, *Први резултати београдских избора: нико нема већину*, 2022.
- openDemocracy, *Russia's war influencers get their audience with Putin*, 2023.
- Patricia Moy, David Tewksbury, Eike Mark Rinke, "Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing", *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, 2016.
- Patrick Savage, "Russian Social Media Information Operations: How Russia Has Used Social Media to Influence US Politics", *American Security Project*, 2017.

- Paul Stronski and Annie Himes, "Russia's Game in the Balkans", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2019.
- Paul Stronski, "Russia in the Balkans After Ukraine: A Troubling Actor", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2022.
- Petar Djukić and Darko Obradović, "The fate of the Western Balkans regional security subcomplex - the necessity of regional cooperation", *Security Science Journal* 1, no. 2, 2020.
- Pia Lamberty and Lea Frühwirth, "Pro-Russian Disinformation and Propaganda in Germany: Russia's full-scale Invasion of Ukraine", *Center for Monitoring, Analysis and Strategy*, 2023.
- Pink, *Predsednik Vučić posle razgovora sa Šolcom: Prvi put smo od Evrope čuli da se traži međusobno priznavanje. Onoliko koliko vi volite teritorijalni integritet Ukrajine, toliko Srbija voli svoj teritorijalni integritet!*, 2022.
- Pogled, *Ексклузивно: БУНТ.цз са инстаграма се на тренутак преселио на информативни портал Поглед*, 2020.
- Politico, *EU balks at adding Russian gas pipeline ban to sanctions package*, 2023.
- Prague Morning, *Czechia Imported Over 60% of the Gas from Russia in January*, 2024.
- President of Russia, *Meeting with President of Serbia Tomislav Nikolic*, 2013.
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Dodik Travels To Moscow For Meeting With Putin Ahead Of Elections*, 2022.
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Russian State's RT Media Group Starts Online Project In Serbian*, 2022.
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Serbian Far-Right Leader Arrested After Nationalists Try To Storm Presidency In Belgrade*, 2023.
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Serbian Right-Winger Says Vagner Ties Could Help If There's 'Conflict In Kosovo'*, 2022.
- Radio Slobodna Evropa, *'Telegrami' lažnih vesti za Zapadni Balkan*, 2022.
- Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Desničarska organizacija Obraz zaobišla ustavnu zabranu*, 2020.
- Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Kako su proruski i ruski Telegram kanali širili dezinformacije o Kosovu*, 2022.
- Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Sve uloge srpskog plaćenika Dejana Berića*, 2019.
- Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Uporišta Kremlja u novom sazivu Skupštine Srbije*, 2023.
- Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Zahtev za javnim brojanjem glasova na protestu u Beogradu*, 2022.
- Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Zašto je dozvoljen skup antimigrantskih desničara u Beogradu?*, 2020.
- Republika, *Prvi rezultati izbora u beogradu: sns ipak najbliži formiranju gradske vlasti*, 2022.
- Reuters Pictures, *Photographer: Tatyana Makeyeva*, 2018.
- Reuters, *Russia says EU candidate status for Ukraine, Moldova will have negative consequences*, 2022.
- Reuters, *Russia's supreme court designates Ukraine's Azov Regiment a 'terrorist' group*, 2022.
- Reuters, Serbia, *Gazprom sign deal for South Stream storage*, 2010.
- Richard Kraemer, "Serbia on the edge", 2022.
- Richard Shapiro, "Serbian and Russian Relations: The Future Implications for Serbia's Accession to the European Union", 2018.
- Roberto Belloni, "Serbia between East and West: ontological security, vicarious identity and the problem of sanctions against Russia", *European Security*, 2023.
- Rossiyskaya Gazeta, *The allied troops of the Russian Federation, the DPR and the LPR entered the city limits of Artemovsk*, 2022.
- RT Balkan, *Александар Лукић*, 2024.

- RT Balkan, *Несторовић: У Београду смо тас на ваги, "Србија против насиља" прави атмосферу Мајдана*, 2023.
- RT на руском, *Любовь к России мне привили дедушки: сербский снайпер — о деревенской жизни после войны в ДНР*, 2020.
- RT на руском, *На конференцији RE:UNION саопштили о созданију учредитељног комитета Хришћанској правозащитној миссији*, 2023.
- RT, *RT promo: hall of fame*, 2024.
- RT, *Serbian-language RT Balkans goes online*, 2023.
- RTS, *Sve je Rusija, osim Kosova, Kosovo je Srbija*, 2015.
- Ruski dom, *Игор Дамјановић одликован почасним знаком "За пријатељство и сарадњу"*, 2023.
- Samet Dalipi, Nazim Haliti, Naser Shabani, "Peace in Balkans: Behind Serbian-Russian Policy of Peace with Thorns", *Universum International College*, 2023
- Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them", *European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 2021.
- Sarkis Darbinian, Ekaterina Abashina, and Artem Kozliuk, "Blackscreen.Report", *Роскомсвобода*, 2020.
- Saumya Garg, Sheryl Selouan, "Social Media Privacy: Facebook's acquisition of WhatsApp," *Queen Mary University of London*, 2021.
- SeeNews, *Bulgarian LPG Trader Kalvacha's Serbian Unit Eyes Building Petrol Stations in Serbia, Montenegro*, 2007.
- Senica.ru, *В Србији открило се представителство Донецкој Народној Републици*, 2014.
- SimilarWeb, *Rating of top apps*, 2023.
- Sonja Biserko, Izabela Kisic, "How is Russia locally perceived on both societal and political levels in Serbia?", *Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia*, 2023.
- Sonja Biserko, Izabela Kisic, "How is Russia locally perceived on both societal and political levels in Serbia?", *Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia*, 2023.
- Spiro Kioussis, "Explicating Media Saliency: A Factor Analysis of New York Times Issue Coverage During the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election", *Journal of Communication*, March 2004.
- Sputnik Србија, *На овој апликацији не могу да вас шпијунирају, а можете да читате нецензуриране вести*, 2023.
- Sputnik Србија, *Џафери почео седницу на албанском*, 2017.
- Sputnik Србија, *Први резултати избора у Београду: СНС и СПС имају већину*, 2022.
- Srbija Danas, *Niš postaje vojni centar Balkana! Gleda pravo na Kosovo! Lazanski: Strateški važno! Ameri paniče: Ruska baza?*, 2019.
- Stars and Stripes, *Russian peacekeepers leave Balkans*, 2003.
- Statista, *Most popular global mobile messenger apps as of January 2023, based on number of monthly active users*, 2023.
- Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, *2022 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings*, 2023.
- Stefan Vladislavljev, "Steel Friendship — Forging of the Perception of China by the Serbian Political Elite", *Prague Security Studies Institute*, 2021.
- Stefano Passini. "The Facebook and Twitter revolutions: Active participation in the 21st century", *Human Affairs*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2012.
- Strahinja Subotić and Miloš Janjić, "Serbia at the crossroads between the West and the East", *European Policy Centre*, 2020.

- Svetlana S. Huntley, "Russian Legislation on the Protection of Children Against Sexual Abuse and Sexual Exploitation: A Review", *International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children*, 2013.
- Talas, *Proruski narativ u srpskim medijima – Zašto su domaći mediji emotivniji od ruskih?*, 2019.
- TASS, *Russia's telecom watchdog may block Telegram messenger in Russia*, 2017.
- Telegram, *Borba.info*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Boris Malagurski*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Dejan Beric*, 2024.
- Telegram, *iNFOMAX.mk*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Rat u Ukrajini | Rusija - NATO*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Satelita vesti! (без цензуре!)*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Slovanský Svet*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Ustanak za ustanak Srbije*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Антивоенная Сербия / Российское демократическое общество*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Антиглобалисти Србије*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Балканская сплетница*, 2024.
- Telegram, *БУНКЕР*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Војска Републике Српске*, 2024.
- Telegram, *ВОСТОК ВЕСТИ*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Зечеви са Косова и Метохије*, 2024.
- Telegram, *ИН4С - информативни портал*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Канал: Вести из Русије 24/7*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Конзервативни покрет "Наши"*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Кормило Србија званични канал*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Милица Ђурђевић - Телеграм канал*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Мило Божовић - Телеграм канал*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Не дамо Косово!*, 2024.
- Telegram, *НОВИ СВЕТ*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Нови Стандард | Novi Standard*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Правблог Sr*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Приштински корпус*, 2024,
- Telegram, *РАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO*, 2024.
- Telegram, *РАТ*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Република Српска Крајина*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Република Српска*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Россия и Сербия*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Руски бар Подгорица*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Самопоштовање*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Сербия - Новости*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Систем вредности | Sistem vrednosti*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija*, 2024



- Telegram, *Срби за Русе | Србы за русских*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Срби за Србе*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Србија | Русија. Најновије вести са фронта*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Србија-Русија*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Србска Акција*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Српска Част*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Српски Инат*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Српско-руско братство*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Хорватия-Новости*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Црна Гора Српска Спарта*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Црногорски Универзализам*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Черногория Прямая Линия Z*, 2024.
- Telegram, *Зентрона Србија*, 2024.
- Telemetrio, *Rating of Telegram Channels in the Country of Serbia*, 2023.
- Texty, *Telegram Occupation. How Russia Wanted to Breed a Media Monster, but Ended up with a Paper Tiger*, 2022.
- TGStat, *# тк Борбени Ефективи [БЕФ]*, 2024.
- TGStat, *Telegram channels and groups catalog*, 2024.
- TGStat, *БУНТ је стање духа*, 2024.
- TGStat, *Бунт — наш пут*, 2024.
- TGStat, *Зентрона Србија*, 2024.
- TGStat, *Народна Патрола*, 2024.
- TGStat, *РАТ УЖИВО | RAT UZIVO*, 2024.
- TGStat, *Сила са Истока*, 2024.
- TGStat, *Списак српских канала*, 2024.
- TGStat, *Спутњик Србија | Sputnik Srbija*, 2024.
- TGStat, *Срби за Русе | Србы за русских*, 2024.
- TGStat, *Срби за Србе*, 2024.
- TGStat, *ХаЗардер HoBocрбија*, 2023.
- TGStat.ru, *Dejan Beric. Incoming and outgoing mentions*, 2024.
- The Associated Press, *Russia cracks down on dissenting media, blocks Facebook*, 2022.
- The Associated Press, *Russian defense minister visits Serbia amid Balkan tensions*, 2020.
- The Bell, *Война и мир в Telegram. Как патриотические каналы захватывают соцсеть Павла Дурова*, 2022.
- The Christian Science Monitor, *Russia ends visa-free travel with Turkey in escalation over plane downing*, 2015.
- The Diplomat, *China and the Budapest-Belgrade Railway Saga*, 2020.
- The Geopost, *Serbian mercenary Beric fights alongside Putin's army*, 2022.
- The Guardian, *'Troll factory' spreading Russian pro-war lies online, says UK*, 2022.
- The Guardian, *A success for Kremlin propaganda: how pro-Putin views permeate Italian media*, 2023.

- The Guardian, *Founder of V Kontakte leaves after dispute with Kremlin-linked owners*, 2014.
- The Guardian, *Rio Tinto lithium mine: thousands of protesters block roads across Serbia*, 2021.
- The Guardian, *Russia blocks access to Facebook and Twitter*, 2022.
- The Guardian, *Tensions rise at Kosovo border as number plate row escalates*, 2021.
- The Guardian, *Serbian president accuses Russia of spy plot involving army*, 2019.
- The Hacker News, *Telegram Agrees to Register With Russia to Avoid Ban, But Won't Share User Data*, 2017.
- The Hill, *How to stop Russia's second front in the Balkans*, 2023.
- The Hill, *Reopen Democracy, Russia's Telegram ban is just the start of the battle over online anonymity*, 2018.
- The Hill, *Report: Russia says terrorists used encrypted messaging service Telegram to coordinate attack*, 2017.
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, 2023.
- The Moscow Times, *Prosecutors Call for Closure of Navalny Anti-Corruption V Kontakte Group*, 2014.
- The Moscow Times, *Russian Authorities to Launch 100 Anonymous Telegram Channels Ahead of Election*, 2017.
- The Moscow Times, *V Kontakte Founder Flees Russia, Claims Persecution*, 2014.
- The New York Times, *Inside the Russian Troll Factory: Zombies and a Breakneck Pace*, 2018.
- The New York Times, *Iran Lives on This App*, 2018.
- The Wall Street Journal, *The Russian Billionaire Selling Putin's War to the Public*, 2022.
- The Washington Post, *Russian blogger law puts new restrictions on Internet freedoms*, 2014.
- The Washington Post, *How the founder of the Telegram messaging app stood up to the Kremlin — and won*, 2020.
- Tihomira Doncheva, "Tracking Russia's Narratives in the Western Balkan Media", *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, 2020.
- Top war, *The origin of the terms "cargo 200", "cargo 300" and others: facts and versions*, 2020.
- TV Happy, *Aktuelnosti - Ukrajina gubi na frontovima — Konacno se uvidja da je zapad nasamario Kijev*, 2022.
- TV tropes, *Animation / Leopold the Cat*, 2024.
- U.S. Department of State, *GEC Special Report: Russia's Pillars of Disinformation and Propaganda*, 2020.
- Ukrainian World Congress, *UWC honours tenth anniversary of Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity*, 2023.
- Vijesti online, *Kremlin: The authorities in Montenegro will bear responsibility for their anti-Russian attitude*, 2016.
- Vox Ukraine, *Propaganda Diary 2022-2023: VoxCheck presents the database of Russian propaganda in the European mass media*, 2023.
- Vsevolod Samokhvalov, "Russia in the Balkans: Great Power Politics and Local Response", *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 2, 2019.
- Vuk Vuksanovic, "Russia Remains the Trump Card of Serbian Politics", *Carnegie Moscow*, 2020.
- Vuk Vuksanović and Marija Ignjatijević, "A quasi-arms race: Serbia and Croatia", *Belgrade Centre for Security Policy*, 2021.
- Wall Street Journal, *Putin's New Strategy: Laying Claim to Traditional Values*, 2022.

- Walter Kemp, "Crooked Kaleidoscope Organized Crime in the Balkans", *The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime*, 2017.
- Walter Lippmann, "Public Opinion", 1998.
- World Intermediary Liability Map, *Federal Law No. 97-FZ (Bloggers Law)*, 2014.
- World Intermediary Liability Map, *Federal Law № 374-FZ On Amending Federal Law "On Combating Terrorism" And Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding The Establishment Of Additional Counter-Terrorism Measures And Public Security*, 2016.
- World Intermediary Liability Map, *Federal Law № 398-FZ, on Amending Federal Law on Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection, December 28, 2013*, 2014.
- World Population Review, *Telegram Users by Country*, 2023.
- Wouter Zweers, Niels Drost, Baptiste Henry, "Little substance, considerable impact. Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro", *Clingendael Institute*, 2023.
- Yelena Ponomareva and Miroslav Mladenović, "Multi-vector approach as a way out of the impasse of strategic vulnerability", *Comparative politics Russia*, vol.11, 2020.
- Yoshiko M. Herrera and Devesh Kapur, "Improving Data Quality: Actors, Incentives, and Capabilities", *Political Analysis* 15, no. 4, 2007.
- Zabaykal'skiy rabochiy, *We have one homeland*, 2022.
- Zaks.ru, *'Единая Россия' договорилась о сотрудничестве с Сербской прогрессивной партией*, 2010.
- ZDNET, *Facebook, Gmail, Skype face Russia ban under 'anti-terror' data snooping plan*, 2014.
- Žarko Petrović, "Russian – Serbian Strategic Partnership: Scope and Content," *The International and Security Affairs Centre*, 2009.
- Балканист, *Российская нефтяная компания расширяет свою сеть в Северной Македонии*, 2021.
- Ведомости, *Стоимость рекламы в новостных Telegram-каналах в 2022 году выросла в 4,4 раза*, 2023.
- Военный Эксперт, *Эксклюзив: документальный фильм "Война снайпера"*, 2019.
- Град Градишка, *Демографија*, 2024.
- Громадянська мережа ОПОРА, *Медіаспоживання українців в умовах повномасштабної війни. Опитування ОПОРИ*, 2022.
- Единая Россия, *Единая Россия" проводит Международную межпартийную видеоконференцию "Глобальные вызовы XXI века: межпартийное измерение*, 2021.
- Зарубежнефть, *Фокус на опережающие тренды*, 2020.
- ИА Хакасия, *Как Кириенко приручил Незыгаря и откуда растут ноги "Методички"*, 2018.
- Настоящее время, *Тролли: ЖЖ, бешеный принтер, Потупчик. ХОЛИВАР. ИСТОРИЯ РУНЕТА №5*, 2019.
- НОВОСТИ, *RT Balkan informativna služba je pokrenula reklamnu kampanju "Protrljaj oči!"*, 2023.
- Новости, *Корак по корак: Како да је инсталирате и користите - Уз апликацију "Телеграм" брзо до актуелих информација*, 2022.
- ПРОЕКТ, *Телега из Кремля. Рассказ о том, как власти превратили Telegram в телевизор*, 2018.
- Радио Свобода, *80% крупных политических телеграм-каналов поддерживают войну*, 2022.
- Радио Свобода, *Глава кремлёвской группы телеграм-блогеров получила государственную награду*, 2019.
- РАСЕН, *Славјаносербија: земља војничког братства*, 2023.
- Российско-Балканский Диалог, *Вышел первый номер журнала "Балканский дипломат"*, 2023.

Российско-Балканский центр делового сотрудничества и культуры, *В Иваново открылся Российско-Балканский центр делового сотрудничества и культуры*, 2022.

Российско-Балканский центр делового сотрудничества и культуры, *В Калининграде откроют представительство Российско-Балканского центра делового сотрудничества и культуры*, 2023.

Российско-Балканский центр делового сотрудничества и культуры, *В Санкт-Петербурге откроют представительство Российско-Балканского центра делового сотрудничества и культуры*, 2023.

Российско-Балканский центр делового сотрудничества и культуры, *Подписано соглашение о гуманитарном сотрудничестве между Национальной библиотекой Пожеги и Российско-Балканским центром делового сотрудничества и культуры*, 2023.

Руски Дом, *Трибина "СВО уживо"*, 2022.

СРБИН.ИНФО, *Дођите–потресно: Изложба фотографија 'Деца Донбаса' у Београду*, 2019.

Српски покрет Двери, *Вошко Obradović na Jalti: Krim je Rusija, Kosovo je Srbija*, 2018.

Хронограф, Берих: *Кијев је хтео да се преда још у априлу – Американци им нису дали*, 2022.

Центр међународног сотрудничества 'Российско-Балканский Диалог', *В Србском Ресурсном Центре в Белгороде состоялся День памяти жертв агрессии НАТО*, 2017.