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Propaganda on Telegram: A comparative analysis of pro-Russian digital media stratification

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Abstract

This memo examines how pro-war Russian-language Telegram channels framed the war in Ukraine and Western actors during peace negotiations over six months after the Anchorage summit of August 2025. Drawing on a corpus of over 500,000 posts from 117 channels, the study moves beyond treating pro-war Telegram as a single propagandistic bloc and instead examines how framing varies across distinct categories of channels. We find that the Telegram ecosystem is stratified along multiple dimensions that do not always align. The channels that produced the strongest political framing of Western actors were not the channels that reached the largest audiences, and different categories favored different rhetoric. Mass-audience news outlets frequently engaged in consistent delegitimization of the West, while independent commentators advanced moral and conspiratorial framing, and military bloggers often used enemy-based language. Across the corpus, the United States and President Trump emerged as central objects of attention, invoked more frequently than either Russian or Ukrainian leadership. The study adds an account of how pro-Western hostility is distributed across forms and categories of propagandistic Telegram messages. We argue that this internal structure has direct implications for how Western governments might contest the Russian information space.

Introduction

On August 15, 2025, more than three years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin met at Joint Base Elmendorf–Richardson in Anchorage, Alaska. The summit, which marked the first visit by a Russian head of state to a U.S. military installation, produced no agreement on a peace process but nonetheless drew worldwide attention. For Western and Russian audiences alike, the event was mediated by digital platforms. In Russia, perhaps the most consequential of these was Telegram, a messaging service that has served as a primary venue for political, military, and journalistic discourse since 2022.

Among the many voices interpreting the summit for Russian audiences was Yuri Kotenok, a war blogger with several hundred thousand subscribers. Writing after the meeting, Kotenok cast it as evidence of Russian resolve against a hostile West. “Old Donnie didn’t mention Russia’s nuclear weapons when commenting on the Anchorage summit results by accident,” he wrote. Referring to Europeans with a homophobic slur, he added, “[Europeans] apparently don’t understand how far they’ve gone in ignoring Russia, rejecting Russia and its values, and opposing Russia. Russia will not yield.”¹

Kotenok is neither the largest nor the most authoritative voice on the platform, yet his post echoes recurring themes in pro-war Telegram messaging, including hostility to Western actors and a preoccupation with the United States. Such commentary has circulated continuously on Telegram, offering real-time insight into an important segment of the rhetoric available to war-supporting Russian audiences. It must not, however, be oversimplified as a single bloc of “pro-Russian propaganda.” The channels examined in this study are united by their support for the war rather than uniform loyalty to the Kremlin. Many of the most strident war bloggers have

¹ Yuri Kotenok (@voenkorKotenok), Telegram post, August 16, 2025, <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/66734>.

publicly criticized the Russian Ministry of Defense and the conduct of the campaign, and some nationalist commentators combine fervent anti-Western rhetoric with open contempt for the regime's handling of the war. Others, including several ostensibly neutral news channels, present themselves as straightforward sources of information while consistently deploying propagandistic framing.

Accordingly, this study investigates variation in rhetoric, political intensity, and language across Telegram. Drawing on a corpus of more than 500,000 posts from 117 channels gathered across six months, we examine how the framing of the war and of Western actors differs across categories of channels, and whether those differences correspond to audience reach. They largely do not. Different categories of channels frame Western actors in different ways and reach audiences of different sizes. The channels that frame them most heavily are generally not the most popular ones.

These findings bear directly on the question of how Western governments might respond. If pro-war commentary about the West is concentrated in particular layers of the Russian information space, and if the United States occupies a central place in that commentary, then Russian audiences are far from indifferent to the United States. This attention could present an opportunity for engagement by Western media outlets.

Theories of Informational Autocracy and Russian Propaganda

This study draws on four bodies of scholarship: work on how contemporary authoritarian regimes govern through information, work on how propaganda operates in networked media environments, work on the origins of Russian anti-Westernism, and empirical work on the

Russian information space and its recent transformation. We review each in turn, and then identify the gap this study addresses.

The first body of work concerns the informational basis of modern authoritarian rule. Guriev and Treisman argue that a distinct regime type emerged after the Cold War, the “spin dictatorship,” based on control of mass media, selective censorship, and the cultivation of a pluralist facade.² Treisman has more recently acknowledged that Russia has moved partially back toward a fear-based model of authoritarian rule, particularly after the full-scale invasion.³ For our purposes, the relevant point is narrower than the debate over regime type. Namely, the state governs partly by shaping what Russians see.

A second body of work specifies how these tactics play out in public discourse. A long line of scholarship, including Ellul, Stanley, and the more recent work of Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, argues that propaganda in networked media works by repeating emotionally charged framings across a decentralized set of channels and intermediaries.⁴ Pomerantsev and Roudakova extend this account to the Russian case, arguing that post-Soviet propaganda often seeks to disorient audiences and erode consensus reality.⁵

A parallel literature in Russian media studies examines the production and reception of pro-state messaging. Notable work includes Oates on the structure of Russian television and its migration online, Mickiewicz on Soviet and post-Soviet audiences, Yablokov on conspiracy

² Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

³ “Putin’s ‘Fear Dictatorship,’” Meduza, July 24, 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/07/24/putin-s-fear-dictatorship>.

⁴ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Knopf, 1965); Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton University Press, 2015); Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁵ Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014); Natalia Roudakova, *Losing Pravda: Ethics and the Press in Post-Truth Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

theory as a tool of Russian political communication, Tolz and Hutchings on state media strategy and the management of national identity, and Asmolov on the mobilization of online publics.⁶ This work traces the dynamics of pro-state messaging, including its production by varied actors operating in different registers and reaching different audiences.

Another body of work concerns the origins of Russian anti-Westernism. Taylor argues that hostility toward the West is a coherent part of what he calls the “code of Putinism,” a mentality composed of statism and anti-Americanism rooted in perceived post-Cold War humiliations.⁷ In Taylor’s account, anti-Western rhetoric serves specific regime functions, including deflecting responsibility for domestic failures. This framework is directly relevant to our data, which consists of anti-Western rhetoric during unusually intense Western engagement with Russia.

The fourth and final body of work is empirical and more recent. Analysts at NATO’s Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and elsewhere have mapped pro-Russian Telegram channels and the networks that connect them, capturing how content circulates and which channels occupy central positions.⁸ Human rights and policy institutions including the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have documented the ongoing transformation of the Russian information space, including the tightening of state control over digital

⁶ Sarah Oates, “Russian State Narrative in the Digital Age: Rewired Propaganda in Russian Television News Framing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17” (American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, 2014), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2941192>; Ellen Mickiewicz, *Television, Power, and the Public in Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Ilya Yablokov, “Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT),” *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (2015): 301–15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12097>; Vera Tolz and Stephen Hutchings, “Truth with a Z: Disinformation, War in Ukraine, and Russia’s Contradictory Discourse of Imperial Identity,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39, no. 5 (2023): 347–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2023.2202581>; and Gregory Asmolov, “The Transformation of Participatory Warfare: The Role of Narratives in Connective Mobilization in the Russia–Ukraine War,” *Digital War* 3 (2022): 25–37, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42984-022-00054-5>.

⁷ Brian D. Taylor, *The Code of Putinism* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 15–16.

⁸ Ofer Fridman, Laima Venclauskienė, and Viktoras Daukšas, *The Collage of the Kremlin’s Communication Strategy* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, October 2025), 10–23.

communication and the recent block on Telegram.⁹ This work establishes that pro-war Telegram has been a dense and influential network, now highly restricted by the state.

Most of this research has not conducted large-scale analysis of how pro-war Telegram content varies across different kinds of channels. Our contribution is empirical work of a similar kind to the existing mapping literature, extended through more content analysis and comparison across categories of channels. We treat Telegram as a decentralized, emotionally driven ecosystem in which pro-war narratives easily circulate. In the process, we look for relevant nuances and variations. A secondary objective is to observe how the propaganda mechanisms described by theorists and social scientists play out on the platform.

The Russian Information Space

Until recently, Telegram was the dominant platform for political discourse in Russia. At the start of the period studied here, it reported roughly 95 million monthly users in the country, more than WhatsApp and more than the state-promoted alternative, MAX.¹⁰ Government officials, state media, military personnel, and pro-war bloggers all communicated through it. Over the course of the peace negotiations, however, the platform shifted from a dominant position to being blocked altogether.

The platform was not banned outright at first. Instead, regulatory action proceeded by degrees. Roskomnadzor began blocking Telegram voice and video calls in August 2025, citing fraud prevention, and began nationwide throttling of download speeds on February 10, 2026.¹¹

⁹ Alexandra Prokopenko and Andrei Pertsev, “Why Did Messaging App Telegram Fall From Grace in Russia?,” Carnegie Politika, March 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2026/03/russia-internet-telegram-restrictions>.

¹⁰ “Russia: Digital Iron Curtain Falls on Internet Freedom Protection Day,” Human Rights Watch, March 12, 2026, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/03/12/russia-digital-iron-curtain-falls-on-internet-freedom-protection-day>.

¹¹ Guy Faulconbridge, “‘Great Crackdown’: Russia Tightens the Screws on the Internet,” Reuters, March 20, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/great-crackdown-russia-tightens-screws-internet-2026-03-20/>.

The Carnegie Endowment reported in March 2026 that Russian authorities were preparing a full block for April 1, with a State Duma deputy publicly suggesting that Telegram be designated an extremist or terrorist organization.¹² Telegram founder Pavel Durov characterized the campaign as “an attempt to force citizens to switch to a state-controlled app built for surveillance and political censorship.”¹³

The escalation produced an unusual level of opposition from within the regime’s own base. The campaign divided the Kremlin’s political managers, who rely on Telegram for electoral mobilization, from the security services, who view uncontrolled platforms as a threat.¹⁴ Duma parties normally loyal to the Kremlin publicly opposed the blocking. Meanwhile, the Belgorod governor voiced frustration that MAX cannot deliver push notifications for incoming missiles and drones.¹⁵ Pro-war military bloggers and active soldiers also criticized the restrictions, with the pro-Kremlin channel Dva Mayora describing Telegram as “almost the only means of communication in active combat units.”¹⁶

The backlash did not stop the ban. After the April 1 target, Roskomnadzor blocked Telegram across the country by April 10, 2026, cutting access on both mobile and fixed networks, with failure rates reported near 95 percent.¹⁷ The block did not end Telegram’s use. Durov reported that roughly 65 million Russians continued to reach the platform daily through VPNs, and Telegram released an update disguising its traffic as ordinary browser data to frustrate

¹² Prokopenko and Pertsev, “Why Did Messaging App Telegram Fall From Grace in Russia?”

¹³ Durov quoted in “Russia: Digital Iron Curtain Falls,” Human Rights Watch.

¹⁴ Andrey Pertsev, “Blocking of Telegram App Sparks Rare Public Rift Among Russia’s Elites,” *Carnegie Politika*, April 2, 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2026/04/russia-telegram-elite-rift>.

¹⁵ Pjotr Sauer, “Russia’s crackdown on Telegram risks damaging its own army, pro-war bloggers warn,” *The Guardian*, February 11, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/11/russian-crackdown-telegram-app-criticism-soldiers-pro-war-bloggers>.

¹⁶ Sauer, “Russia’s crackdown on Telegram.”

¹⁷ Veronika Sukhanych, “Russia Introduces Full Telegram Ban Nationwide,” *Kyiv Post*, April 10, 2026, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/73690>.

the block.¹⁸ On the front, the Russian army reportedly ordered soldiers to delete the application, despite its established role in battlefield communication.¹⁹ The block thus removed Telegram from its position as Russia's platform for political discourse without totally ending its use. Our corpus was collected during the final months in which Telegram operated as Russia's dominant platform for political discourse.

The state's preferred alternative is MAX, a domestic messaging application developed by VK and mandated for pre-installation on smartphones sold in Russia since 2025. Schools, universities, and state employers have adopted it as the default channel for announcements and official materials.²⁰ MAX is best understood as part of a longer effort to build a state-supervised digital environment, integrating government services and operating under state data-retention and surveillance. By February 2026, MAX reported 77.5 million monthly users, a figure achieved in roughly a year.²¹ Owing to digital safety risks, no MAX content is analyzed in this study.²²

Timeline: War and Peace Negotiations in Ukraine

¹⁸ "Telegram Founder Updates App to Bypass Total Ban in Russia," Kyiv Post, April 12, 2026, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/73784>.

¹⁹ "Russian Soldiers Ordered to Delete Telegram as Nationwide Block Begins," Novaya Gazeta Europe, March 16, 2026, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2026/03/16/russian-soldiers-ordered-to-delete-telegram-as-nationwide-block-begins-en-news>.

²⁰ "Russia: Digital Iron Curtain Falls," Human Rights Watch. See also "Students in Russia are forced to use Putin's national messaging app Max," *The Barents Observer*, December 23, 2025, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/students-in-russia-are-forced-to-use-putins-national-messaging-app-max/442718>.

²¹ "Russia: Digital Iron Curtain Falls," Human Rights Watch.

²² Teplitza of Social Technologies, "Chto my uznali o messendzhere 'Maks': 7 sposobov ego slezhki za pol'zovateliymi" [What we learned about the 'MAX' messenger: 7 ways it surveils users], September 3, 2025, <https://te-st.org/2025/09/03/chto-my-uznali-o-messendzhere-maks-7-sposobov-ego-slezhki-za-polzovateliymi/>.

The six months that opened with the Anchorage summit produced a sequence of meetings and plans that form the backdrop to the corpus analyzed here. We summarize the events briefly, in chronological order.

The Anchorage summit on August 15, 2025, was the first occasion of the period. Trump and Putin met at Joint Base Elmendorf–Richardson without Ukrainian representation. No joint communiqué was issued, and Ukrainian officials were briefed afterward.²³

On November 19, 2025, Axios published the text of a twenty-eight-point U.S.–Russian peace plan drafted by Trump envoy Steve Witkoff, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, and presidential adviser Jared Kushner, reportedly following consultations with Kremlin negotiator Kirill Dmitriev.²⁴ The plan required Ukraine to cede additional Donbas territory beyond Russia’s battlefield gains, amend its constitution to renounce NATO membership, cap its military at 600,000 personnel, and extend a general wartime amnesty. Special Representative Keith Kellogg resigned shortly after the plan became public.²⁵

In December 2025, following meetings at Mar-a-Lago and multilateral consultations in Berlin with Starmer, Macron, and Merz, Zelenskyy announced on December 24 a twenty-point counter-plan incorporating European and Ukrainian revisions and stated that ninety percent of a deal had been agreed.²⁶

Direct trilateral negotiations began on January 23, 2026, at the Al Shati Palace in Abu Dhabi under Emirati mediation. A second Abu Dhabi round on February 4 produced a prisoner

²³ Angela Stent, “Beyond the Alaska Summit,” Brookings Institution, August 21, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/beyond-the-alaska-summit/>.

²⁴ Barak Ravid and Dave Lawler, “Scoop: Read Trump’s full 28-point Ukraine-Russia peace plan,” Axios, November 20, 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2025/11/20/trump-ukraine-peace-plan-28-points-russia>.

²⁵ Humeyra Pamuk and Gram Slaterry, “Trump’s Ukraine envoy Kellogg to leave post in January, sources say,” *Reuters*, November 19, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/trumps-ukraine-envoy-kellogg-leave-post-january-sources-say-2025-11-19/>.

²⁶ Max Rego, “Zelensky: US, Ukraine Negotiators Agreed to ‘90 Percent’ of 20-Point Peace Plan,” *The Hill*, December 28, 2025, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/5664936-zelensky-trump-negotiations/>.

exchange of 314 individuals, 157 per side, the first such swap in five months.²⁷ This was the only concrete outcome of the six-month process. The corpus analyzed in this memo covers this full sequence. U.S. and Israeli military action against Iran has since diverted attention from the process.²⁸

Methodology

Data collection was conducted through a combination of systematic database searches and snowball sampling. Channel discovery relied on TGStat.ru, a prominent Telegram analytics platform, with channels initially filtered by thematic categories such as “Politics” and “News.” A portion of the sample was further guided by the work of Ivan Filippov, an analyst specializing in pro-war Telegram ecosystems, whose identification of high-visibility channels within the Z-segment of Telegram served as a curated entry point for the initial sample. Additional channels were subsequently identified through cross-references and reposts within already-selected channels, allowing the dataset to grow organically while remaining thematically coherent. The resulting corpus covers a specific six-month period from August 1 to February 1.

Channel selection was made with deliberate attention to ideological range. To ensure adequate representation of explicitly pro-war voices, which risked being underrepresented through database filtering alone, a targeted search on TGStat.ru was conducted using content-based criteria, identifying channels whose posting patterns and thematic focus demonstrated consistent alignment with pro-war discourse. This was an intentional corrective to capture the fuller spectrum of narratives circulating within pro-Russian online spaces, rather than

²⁷ Jaroslav Lukiv, “Ukraine and Russia exchange 314 prisoners after trilateral talks with US,” BBC News, February 5, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62np09q711o>.

²⁸ “Ukraine peace talks,” House of Commons Library, April 2026, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10411/>.

clustering around any single ideological tendency. Analysis was limited to the text of posts, excluding attached media or images.

Importantly, while the entire corpus consists of channels that generally support the war effort, they are not treated as a uniform pro-Kremlin bloc. The ecosystem includes highly institutionalized actors, like state journalists and government spokespeople, alongside independent military observers and nationalist bloggers. Historically, some of these independent actors have publicly clashed with official Kremlin military management over the conduct of the war, and some of the most virulent anti-Western rhetoric has come from nationalist commentators critical of the regime's military strategy.

One notable constraint on the dataset was the EU-wide blocking of three official Russian state media channels, which could not be accessed or analyzed. Given their direct relevance to questions about state-aligned messaging and its relationship to independent pro-Russian channels, their absence represents a limitation of the study.

The full corpus totaled over 500,000 posts across 117 Telegram channels, all of which had at least 11,000 subscribers (Fig. 1). Prior to analysis, the corpus underwent multi-stage preprocessing where unreadable or unknown messages were identified and removed. Our quantitative analysis then consisted of three main components: exploratory frequency analysis, dictionary-based framing analysis, and contextual topic modeling. For the initial frequency analysis stage, the text was lemmatized using an automated algorithm, reducing each word to its base form to enable accurate baseline frequency counting, and tokenized to preserve the sequential structure of the text. This exploratory step allowed us to identify the most common words and dominant actors, highlighting structural patterns that were not always anticipated beforehand.

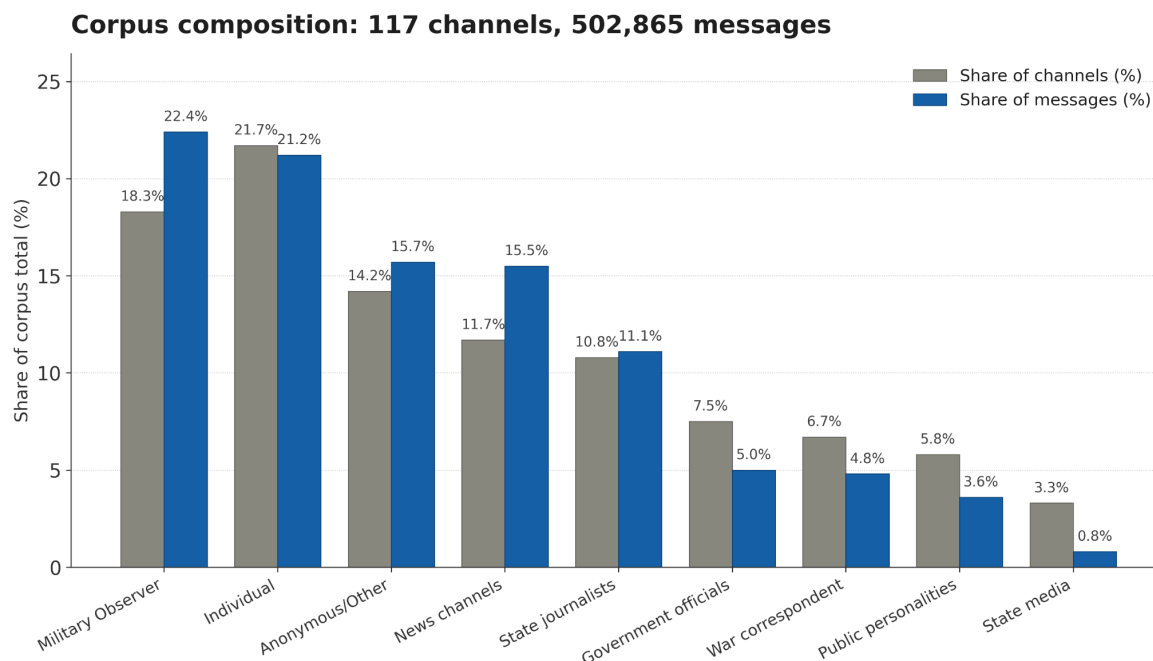


Fig. 1 A breakdown of the message corpus composition.

Note: Some data visualizations were produced with assistance from Claude AI.

Each post was additionally assigned a normalized virality score to enable meaningful engagement comparisons across channels of varying sizes. Rather than relying on raw view counts, which would systematically favor larger channels, the score was calculated relative to the median view count of posts within the same channel. This normalization ensured that the virality metric captured the relative resonance of a given post within its own audience, providing a more reliable basis for cross-channel comparison and identifying which narratives gained unusual traction.

To enable systematic analysis of how Western actors were represented across the corpus, a custom framing dictionary was developed and applied to the preprocessed text. The dictionary is organized into three analytical layers: targets, frames, and derogatory rhetoric.

Targets refer to the geopolitical actors whose representation is being tracked. The target list was derived rather than predetermined: the ten most frequently mentioned countries in the

corpus were identified, and these formed the basis of the target categories. Venezuela was excluded despite appearing among the top results, as its mentions were unrelated to the peace process. The final target list includes Ukraine, the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, and Denmark. An additional category of “Collective West” was included to capture generalized references to the Western bloc, including NATO, the phrase “collective West,” and the sardonic expression “respected partners” (уважаемые партнёры), a well-established ironic register in Russian political discourse used to mock Western actors. Each target was represented by multiple lexical variants, including names of prominent political leaders (such as Donald Trump) when they were clearly functioning as representations of the broader state actor.

Frames aimed to capture the rhetorical modes through which these targets were characterized. The frame categories included hostile/enemy framing, catastrophization, conspiratorial framing, information manipulation, moral decay, ridicule, delegitimization, weakness and dependency, and triumphalism. The dictionary detected framing through co-occurrence: when a target term and a frame term appeared within a ± 3 word window of one another, the instance was counted as a characterization of that target through the specific frame. This windowed approach allowed the dictionary to capture associative rhetoric across the varied and informal register of Telegram posts.

The specific lexical items within each frame category were selected on the basis of researcher judgment and domain knowledge of Russian political discourse, rather than through a formal codebook or inter-rater reliability process. This is an acknowledged limitation. The absence of a systematic selection procedure means that the boundaries of each category reflect interpretive choices reliant on the researchers’ expertise. That said, this approach is consistent

with established practice in qualitative-computational hybrid research, where domain-specific knowledge is often the most reliable guide for constructing a culturally grounded lexicon, particularly in a context like Russian Telegram, where meaning is heavily dependent on register, irony, and intertextual reference.

A particular strength of the dictionary is its exclusive use of regex-based pattern matching rather than automated lemmatization. Crucially, lemmatization was only omitted during the dictionary matching stage. We deliberately chose to bypass lemmatization for this phase because Russian political discourse — especially on Telegram — contains heavy linguistic variations, slang, abbreviations, ironic forms, and context-dependent word forms that are routinely distorted or oversimplified by automatic tools. Instead, we manually incorporated multiple word forms and spelling variations directly into the regex scripts to maximize recall while preserving semantic nuance. This approach introduces an unavoidable limitation: despite extensive efforts to map alternative forms, it is impossible to guarantee that every relevant linguistic variation is captured, meaning some instances of framing could remain undetected.

The third layer tracks derogatory rhetoric through a separate set of target-specific dictionaries. These capture slurs, nicknames, and dehumanizing substitutes used in place of neutral country or actor names, such as *укроп*, *хохлы*, or *укропейх* in place of “Ukraine,” or *пиндосы* and *америкосы* in place of “the United States.” This layer is independent from the neutral target layer, meaning the dictionary can distinguish between channels that refer to actors by their standard names and those that consistently deploy loaded substitutes. Systematic use of derogatory language is a marker of ideological positioning that would be obscured if neutral and derogatory mentions were conflated.

Finally, to complement the dictionary analysis and capture broader, latent thematic structures that keyword dictionaries might miss, we implemented topic modeling using the BERTopic framework (v0.17.0), which combines transformer-based BERT embeddings with dimensionality reduction and density-based clustering to identify semantically coherent topics within large text corpora.²⁹ Unlike traditional methods such as LDA or NMF, BERTopic relies on contextual document representations, allowing it to capture thematic relationships that extend beyond simple keyword co-occurrence. This approach allowed us to automatically cluster the 500,000-post corpus into distinct topical groups, providing a nuanced view of the background narratives that contextualize the framing patterns.

Findings

Mentions of Key Leaders

While it is no surprise that pro-war Russian Telegram channels are hostile toward the West, surveying the ecosystem shows that this hostility is not distributed evenly. To map these differences, we tracked how often channels mentioned three central political figures — Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Volodymyr Zelenskyy — and normalized the counts per 1,000 messages for each channel category (Fig. 2).

²⁹ Maarten Grootendorst, “BERTopic: Neural Topic Modeling with a Class-Based TF-IDF Procedure,” arXiv preprint arXiv:2203.05794 (2022), <https://arxiv.org/abs/2203.05794>.

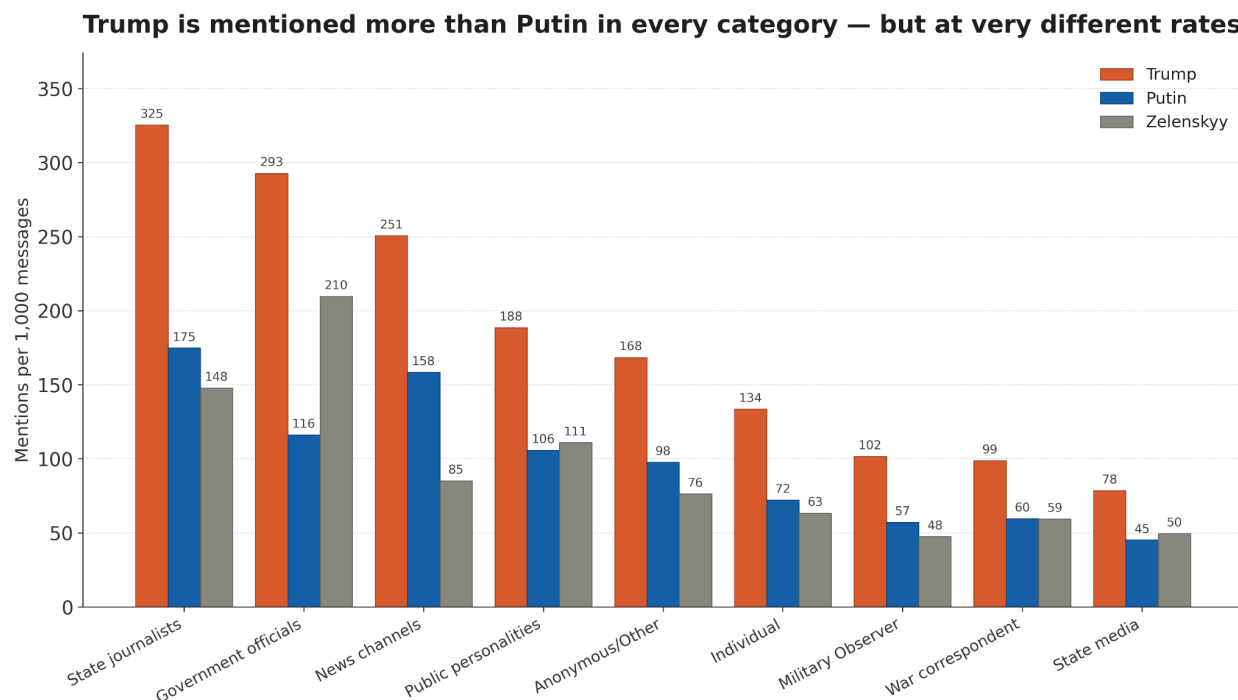


Fig. 2 Rate of mentions of key leaders by category.

The data highlights an immediate trend: across every single category, Donald Trump and the United States take center stage, drawing far more consistent rhetorical focus than either the Russian or Ukrainian leadership. However, the intensity of this focus drops off depending on the channel's target audience. We find a clear gradient where highly ideological, niche actors like State Journalists (325 mentions/1k) and Government Officials (293 mentions/1k) fixate heavily on high-level Western politics. Meanwhile, operational, boots-on-the-ground categories like Military Observers (102 mentions/1k) and War Correspondents (99 mentions/1k) spend far less time on geopolitical figures, focusing instead on immediate battlefield updates.

Audience Size vs. Rhetorical Intensity

By pairing our political framing metrics with actual subscriber data, we found the channels within our corpus that use the most intense political framing are often the ones with the smallest audiences (Fig. 3).

The categories with the densest political framing are not the categories with the largest audiences

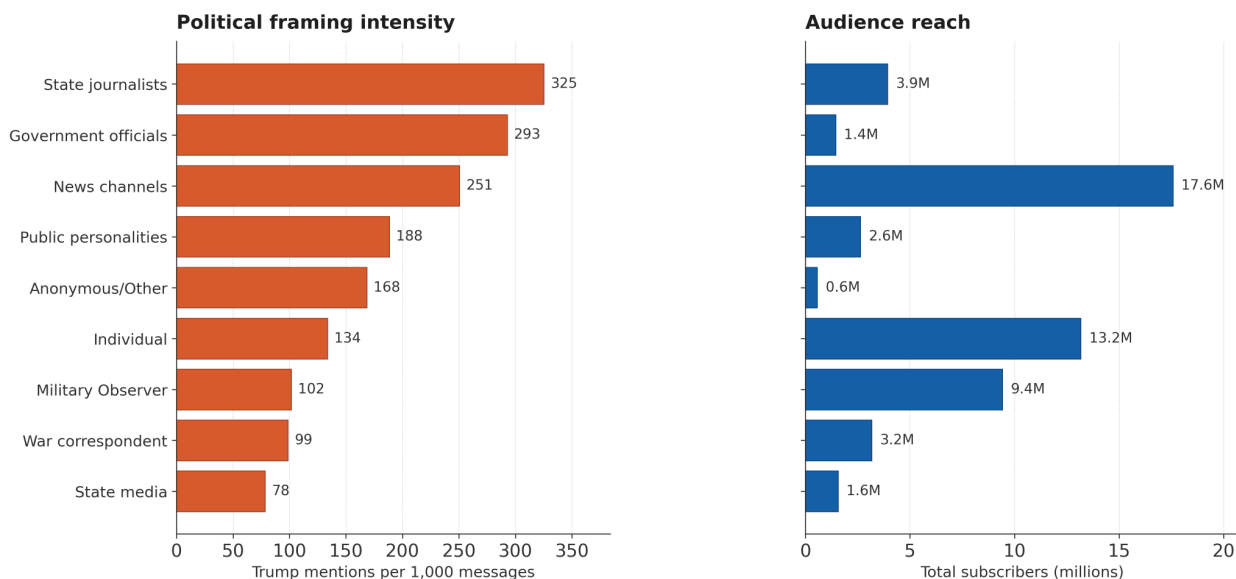


Fig. 3 A comparison of categories' political intensity and audience reach.

As the data shows, general “News Channels” have a massive footprint, pulling in 17.6 million total subscribers across just 15 channels. Yet their political intensity sits at a moderate 251 mentions per 1,000 messages, largely because political narratives are diluted by standard, day-to-day news reporting. We see a similar pattern with “Individual Commentators” (13.2 million subscribers; 134 mentions/1k) and “Military Observers” (9.4 million subscribers; 102 mentions/1k). The heaviest concentration of political messaging remains among State Journalists and Government Officials, who blast out intense political content at high rates but address a smaller, self-selected audience (3.9 million and 1.4 million subscribers, respectively).

Distinct Vocabulary Profiles

This internal division of roles becomes even clearer when considering the vocabulary these channels use. By normalizing the most frequent two-word phrases (bigrams) across each sector, we can see that different channel types rely on entirely distinct linguistic styles to describe the war and foreign policy.

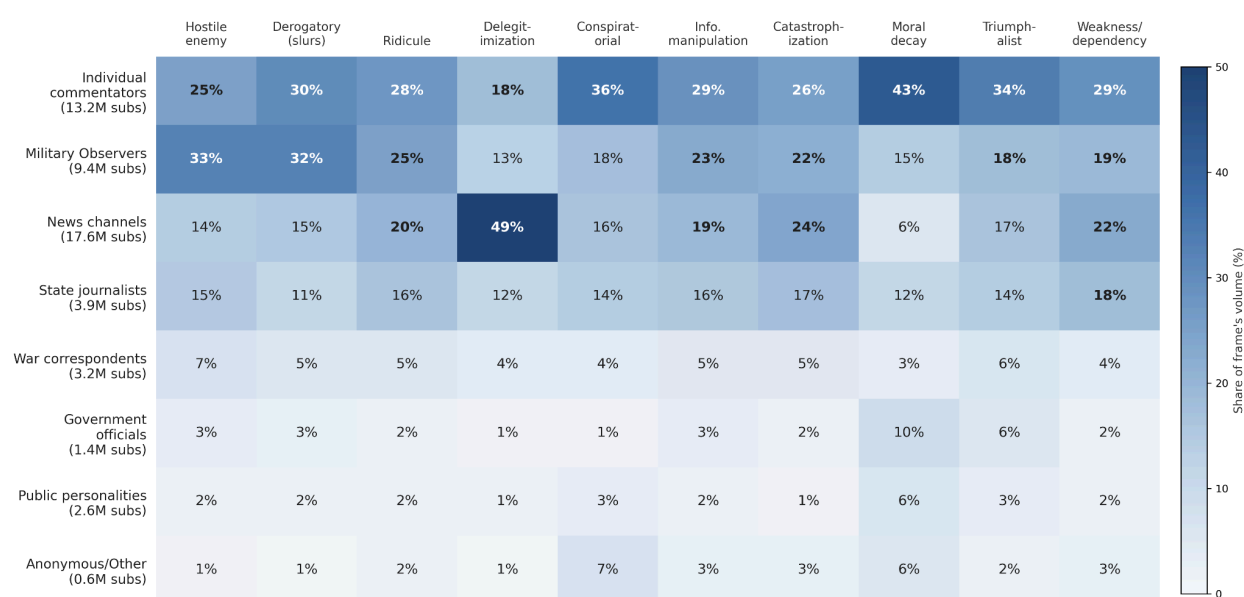
- **State Journalists:** This group focuses on high-level geopolitics. Their top bigrams focus almost exclusively on elite leaders and bargaining, led by “*Donald Trump*” (62/1k), “*Vladimir Putin*” (63/1k), and “*President of the U.S.*” (35/1k).
- **News Channels:** This group mixes state narratives with mass-market filler. While anti-Western tropes appear (“*Donald Trump*” at 26/1k and “*Russia-U.S.*” at 14/1k), they are constantly broken up by domestic, non-political terms like “*criminal case*” (16/1k), alongside frequent updates about hospitalizations and airline disruptions.
- **Government Officials:** The vocabulary here is defined by bureaucratic scripts and legal compliance. The single most frequent bigram in this layer is the legally mandated disclosure “*foreign agent*” (99/1k), followed by institutional fixtures like “*Russian Ministry of Defense*” (71/1k) and patriotic phrases like “*strength of Russia*” (50/1k).
- **Military Observers:** This layer skips high-level political talk entirely in favor of technical, tactical language. Aside from standard institutional references like “*Russian Armed Forces*” (71/1k), posts are dominated by practical battlefield descriptions: “*populated locality*” (34/1k), “*Geran/Gerbera drones*” (28/1k), “*Kharkiv region*” (21/1k), and “*combat operations*” (20/1k).

Distribution of Rhetorical Frames

To understand how anti-Western rhetoric functions, we tracked the distribution of specific rhetorical frames across 11 key foreign targets (including the U.S., EU, Ukraine, and major European states). Measuring the volume of these frames reveals distinct approaches to anti-Western rhetoric across actors (Fig. 4).

Who does what kind of framing of all targets?

Each column shows the share of that frame's volume coming from each category. Columns sum to 100%. All 11 tracked targets included (Ukraine, USA, EU, "the West", and 7 European countries).



Based on full corpus framing data across all 11 tracked targets and 116 channels.

Fig. 4 A breakdown of different categories' share of the rhetorical frames represented in the corpus.

The distribution shows that different channel archetypes employ some rhetorical styles disproportionately:

- **News Channels:** General news outlets produce nearly half (49%) of all Delegitimization framing across the entire 500,000-post corpus, identified by our dictionary-based

approach. By framing Western policy as hypocritical, weak, or illegitimate under the cover of objective news delivery, they make state propaganda palatable to a broad public.

- **Individual Commentators:** This group accounts for 43% of Moral Decay framing and 36% of Conspiratorial framing. Because they do not have to follow official institutional rules, these commentators focus on emotional triggers, reframing geopolitical events as cultural warfare or secret plots.
- **Military Observers:** Military blogs drive the conversation when it comes to the Hostile Enemy (33%) and Derogatory Slurs (32%) frames. This suggests a tendency to keep anger high, using frontline updates to reinforce a sharp distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them.’

Tailoring Rhetoric to Specific Foreign Targets

While channel types have distinct styles, the tone also pivots dramatically depending on the specific country under discussion (Fig. 5).

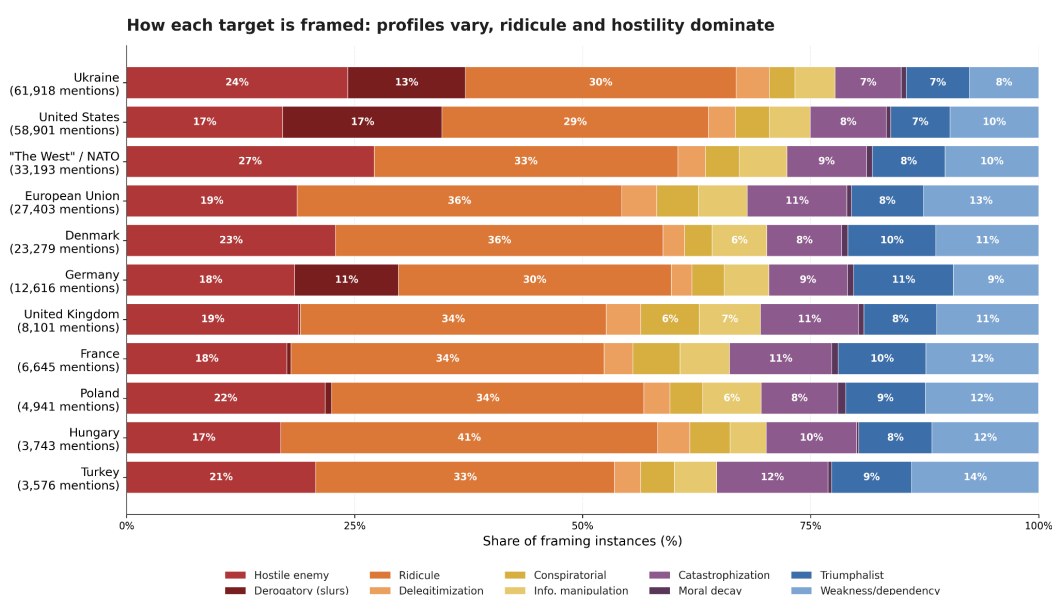


Fig. 5 Foreign actors' shares of rhetorical framing instances.

Examining individual target profiles, distinct thematic strategies stand out:

- Abstract blocs like “*The West*” / *NATO* (33,193 mentions) draw the highest rates of raw Hostile Enemy framing at 27%. They are framed strictly as geopolitical adversaries, making them an abstract boogeyman in domestic defense narratives.
- By contrast, the *United States* (58,901 mentions) triggers a much more varied attack pattern. While Ridicule remains high (29%), the US draws the single highest level of Delegitimization framing (17%) among major state targets. Such rhetoric frames American institutions as fundamentally fraudulent, corrupt, or hypocritical.
- *Ukraine* expectedly absorbs a massive share of raw hostility (24% Enemy, 30% Ridicule), but European states are handled with tailored local hooks. For instance, countries like *Hungary* are frequently hit with extreme Ridicule (41%), localized themes, or variations in framing depending on how their current foreign policy aligns or diverges from Moscow.

Identifying High-Efficiency Outliers

Across the 117 channels we tracked, the vast majority of engagement is highly predictable and tied to base subscriber numbers. However, when we map view counts against typical channel size, clear “efficiency outliers” emerge (Fig. 6), such as “The World Today with Yuriy Podolyaka.”

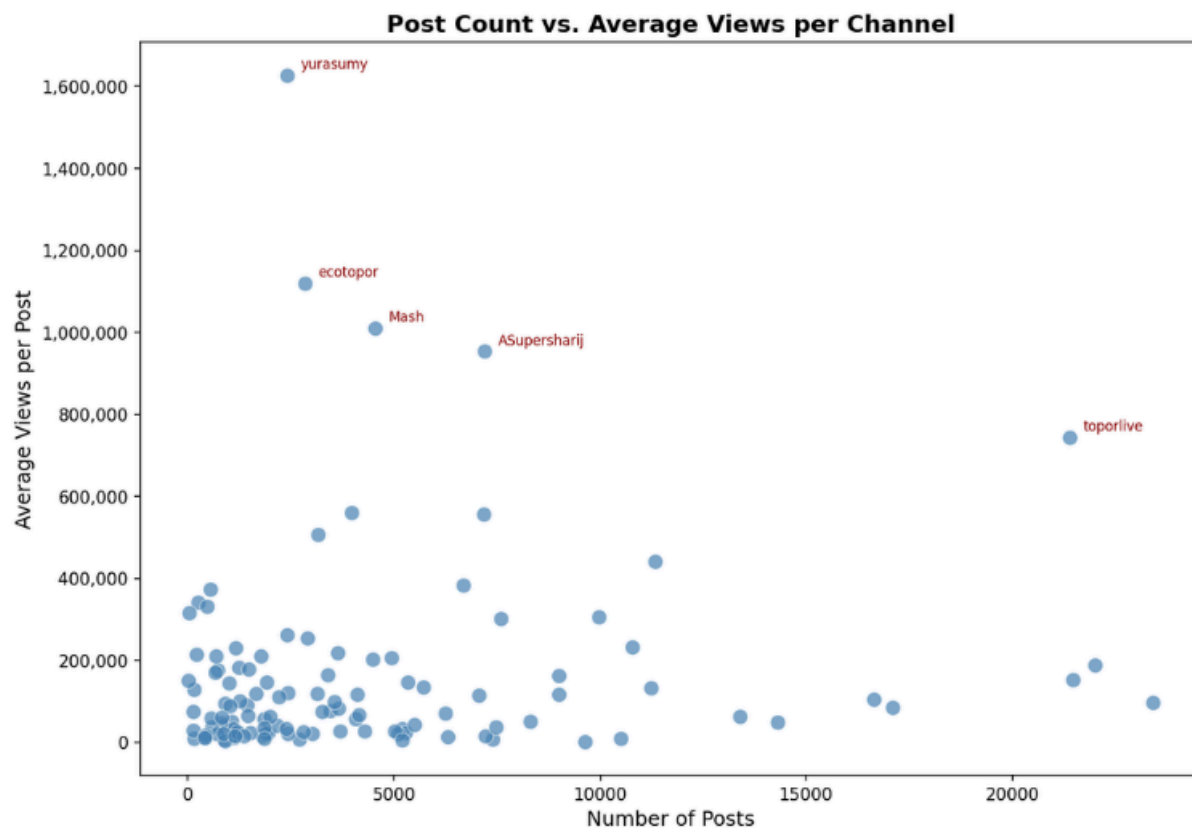


Fig. 6 Mapping channels' average views per post by number of posts.

These high-efficiency channels are 'wildcards' of the Telegram ecosystem. While major news outlets build audiences simply by aggregating content, these outliers are often less active channels that pull in massive view spikes when their posts are forwarded across the platform. These channels may function as important amplifiers of narratives across the ecosystem.

Temporal Patterns in Audience Engagement



Fig. 7 Dynamics of weekly average views per publication across the corpus

Beyond the structural variation across channel categories, the corpus also reveals meaningful temporal patterns in audience engagement. Figure 7 plots the average views per post across all 117 channels on a weekly basis from August 2025 through January 2026. Engagement fluctuates sharply in response to external events, and these fluctuations illuminate which moments in the timeline had the greatest audience attention. The following interpretations are suggestive rather than definitive.

The initial peak is the highest point in the entire corpus, at approximately 170,000 average views per post, coinciding with the Anchorage summit of August 15, 2025 and its immediate aftermath.

The mid-to-late October spike plausibly corresponds to a cluster of overlapping events: the announcement and rapid collapse of the proposed Budapest summit, and concurrent U.S. threats to supply Ukraine with Tomahawk missiles. Whether any single event or the convergence of several drove the elevated engagement cannot be determined from the aggregate data alone.

The November plateau in average views per post is one of the more difficult features of the data to interpret. Unlike the sharper spikes elsewhere in the corpus, which align more with discrete diplomatic events, the sustained elevated engagement in November does not point to a single obvious cause. That said, the period coincided with a dense news environment, including diplomatic developments around the 28-point peace plan and escalating U.S. pressure on Kyiv.

A further complication is that the sharp late-October trough immediately preceding the November plateau could reflect platform disruption rather than audience disengagement. On October 22, Roskomnadzor restricted access to Telegram in approximately 34 Russian regions, affecting voice calls and text messaging.³⁰ If the October dip was partly technical in origin, the November recovery could reflect audience adaptation through VPNs and workarounds as much as a shift in the news. These possibilities are difficult to disentangle from aggregate data alone.

The final and most dramatic spike in the corpus occurs in the first week of January 2026. On January 3, the United States launched a special military operation in Venezuela that resulted in the capture of President Nicolás Maduro.³¹ The operation was immediately framed by pro-war Telegram channels as confirmation of U.S. imperialism and served as a direct illustration of the hostile and enemy framings that these channels had been applying to the United States throughout the study period. The Venezuela operation thus produced the highest engagement spike since Anchorage, temporarily reversing the declining trend.

Recommendations

³⁰ “Telegram and WhatsApp Access Restricted in 34 Russian Regions,” Moscow Times, October 22, 2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/10/22/telegram-and-whatsapp-access-restricted-in-34-russian-regions-monitors-a90903>.

³¹ Aimee Ortiz, Hannah Ziegler, and Yan Zhuang, “What We Know About Maduro's Capture and the Fallout,” New York Times, January 3, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/03/world/americas/venezuela-maduro-capture-trump.html>.

Several implications follow from our findings. The first concerns Western counter-information work. Efforts directed at combating Russian propaganda should not only focus on the most prominent commentary channels, such as major state television figures. Our data suggests this targeting reaches a smaller share of the Russian audience than the mass-audience news outlets that combine large reach with consistent delegitimization of Western actors. A counter-information strategy oriented toward the forms and platforms that Russians increasingly read would address this mismatch.

The second concerns the platforms on which Western messaging reaches Russian audiences. Our findings suggest that Russian audiences respond intensely to U.S. actions regardless of how those actions are framed. The centrality of the United States and President Trump in pro-war Telegram discourse further indicates that Russian audiences are not indifferent to the United States. On the contrary, they encounter the United States constantly through hostile or delegitimizing framings. Western governments should not underestimate the potential interest in American politics and culture that this attention reveals. This represents a potential opening. Outlets such as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, whose mandate is to address such audiences, remain underdeveloped on the platforms where Russian audiences gather. Revitalizing the competitiveness of these outlets on Telegram and its successors would fill an informational vacuum.

The third concerns the existing institutional infrastructure of Western counter-information work. Organizations such as the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga and EU-supported counter-disinformation initiatives have built expertise on the Russian information space. They should work toward substantive participation in the information environment they study, with expanded capacity to engage Russian audiences directly.

The fourth concerns the work of independent Russian-language journalism. Outlets in exile, including Meduza, Proekt, and Novaya Gazeta Europe, continue to produce serious reporting for Russian-speaking audiences under difficult conditions. Sustaining and expanding support for these outlets, including support for their distribution on Telegram and other digital platforms used by Russian audiences, is a low-cost investment in the alternative information ecosystem.

A final implication concerns timing. The April 2026 block of Telegram in Russia closes an important window that Western researchers have had into the pro-war Russian information space since the full-scale invasion. Telegram has not disappeared from Russian use, but the population now reaching it through VPNs is smaller and resisting state restrictions. The state's preferred destination, MAX, is a far more closed environment. Policymakers should act based on recent Telegram data research now, before access diminishes further.

Future Research Directions

Several extensions to this work are worth pursuing, although the April 2026 block of Telegram in Russia will affect future research.

A first extension concerns audience reactions. The analysis presented in this memo measures what is said on pro-war Telegram, but not necessarily how users engage with it. Systematic work on the 'demand side' would help identify what kind of rhetoric receives the most engagement and why.

A second extension concerns MAX, the likely site of future propaganda activity. Direct research on MAX content is difficult and presents real security concerns, as the application

functions partly as a surveillance tool. Whether MAX can be studied from a controlled environment remains an open methodological question.

A third extension concerns Telegram following the recent block. The platform has not disappeared from Russian use. Millions of users continue to reach it daily through VPNs, and Telegram has released technical updates to frustrate the block. The resulting population of users may be self-selecting, as reaching Telegram now requires effort, technical knowledge, and a willingness to disobey the Russian state. Future research should examine how the composition of the audience changes under these conditions.

Conclusion

This study analyzed over 500,000 posts from 117 pro-war Russian Telegram channels during the six months that followed the Anchorage summit. Rather than treat these channels as a single propaganda bloc, it sorted them into categories and conducted a comparative analysis.

The categories differ in three respects. They vary in their relationship to the Kremlin: support for the war is near-universal, but loyalty to the government is not, and some channels combine pro-war positions with open criticism of the regime. They vary in rhetoric, as mass-audience news outlets concentrate on delegitimizing Western actors, independent commentators on moral and conspiratorial framing, and military bloggers on direct enemy-coding. Finally, they vary in reach. The channels within our corpus that frame Western actors most heavily are generally not the ones with the largest audiences. Across all categories, the United States and President Trump are the most frequent objects of attention, named more often than Russian or Ukrainian leadership.

These patterns reflect a stratified information space. Given the April 2026 block of Telegram in Russia, our corpus captures this space during the final months of its full operation. Variation across the corpus is the study's central finding and the basis of our recommendations to counter domestic Russian digital propaganda.

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