



Research Paper

CeMAS study: Conspiracy ideological positioning on the Ukraine war and the role of RT DE on Telegram

Jan Rathje
Miro Dittrich
Martin Müller

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Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a brutal war of aggression against Ukraine in violation of international law. Since the start of the war, more than five million people have fled the country due to the ongoing threat, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) (as of April 24, 2022). Countless attacks on civilians as well as brutal war crimes have been documented.

The war is accompanied by propaganda and disinformation on the part of Russia that have been years in the making. For this reason, the European Union imposed sanctions against the Russian state media outlets RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik/SNA within the EU in early March 2022.

RT and Sputnik/SNA were also banned from Telegram for violating local legislation. The Russian propaganda symbol "Z" has been banned in some German states as condoning the Russian war of aggression.

In responding to the Russian war of aggression, the conspiracy-ideological and far-right milieu became a disseminator of pro-Russian propaganda. This research paper first examines the positioning of this milieu with respect to the war of aggression in the early weeks of the war and then investigates the media most frequently shared on Telegram.

Conspiracy-ideological positioning in the Russian war against Ukraine

The current phase of the Russian war against Ukraine beginning on February 24, 2022 led to numerous reactions within conspiracy-ideological communities on Telegram. An analysis of the ten largest German-language conspiracy-ideological Telegram channels during the first week of the war clearly shows that although the milieu's positioning with respect to the war is not always uniform, the large majority support the position of Russia and Putin.

Position	Telegram channel	Subscribers
1	reitschuster.de	300,120
2	Eva Herman Offiziell	212,822
3	AUF1	196,621
4	GemEINSam stark – JETZT	185,050
5	Freie Medien	176,197
6	Alles Ausser Mainstream	167,907
7	Reiner Fuellmich DE/AT/CH	163,224
8	✘ Oliver Janich öffentlich	160,270
9	Freie Sachsen	148,173
10	Ken Jepsen - Aufklärung und Information	144,215

Figure 1: Top 10 German-language conspiracy-ideological channels on Telegram as of March 11, 2022.

Pro-Russian and war-apologist positions

The majority of the ten channels with the most subscribers positioned themselves on the side of Russia (or Putin) and against Ukraine, or at least against the West.¹ These include the channels of the prominent German-speaking conspiracy theorists Eva Herman, Bodo Schiffmann (*Alles Ausser Mainstream*, lit. “Everything But Mainstream”) and Reiner Fuellmich. The channels of the Saxon fringe political party *Freie Sachsen* (“Free Saxons”) as well as the “alternative” media outlets of AUF1,² *Freie Medien* (“Free Media”) and *Ken Jepsen – Aufklärung und Information* (“Ken Jepsen – Clarification and Information”)³ positioned themselves on the side of Putin. Only the channel *GemEINSam Stark – NOW* (“Toge1her Strong – NOW”) did not take a position within the period of analysis. This could be related to the fact that the channel was founded with the intention of collecting as many subscribers as possible in order to send a signal against compulsory vaccination. Taking a position on the Russian war of aggression could have the potential to split the conspiracy-ideological milieu and possibly lead to an exodus of subscribers. In general, however, it can be noted that the

¹We examined the ten most-viewed posts during the first week of the war from February 24 to March 2, 2022.

² AUF1 is a far-right online TV broadcaster based in Austria.

³The channel is named after the German conspiracy theorist Ken Jepsen, but he himself has no control over the channel and has distanced himself from it.

top ten channels that positioned themselves as being pro-Putin have seen a slight increase in membership since February 24, 2022. A large increase was recorded by pro-Russian channels which had fewer subscribers prior to the war and were not previously among the largest channels of the milieu.

Content-wise, the actions of the Russian government were largely excused: Putin was considered to be merely reacting to years of provocation by the West – and especially by NATO. The AUF1 channel offered a platform for this position through an interview with the conspiracy theorist Christoph Hörstel, the founder of two fringe conspiracy-ideological parties (*Deutsche Mitte* and *Neue Mitte*, “German Center” and “New Center”). Bodo Schiffmann also took up the Kremlin’s disinformation concerning Russia’s alleged “denazification” of Ukraine, claiming that NATO had brought a fascist government to power in Kyiv. He also shared – along with Eva Herman – a piece of disinformation that became a common refrain within the milieu regarding US-funded bio labs in Ukraine, which had similarly been used as a pretense to justify Putin’s attack. These labs were supposedly located on the border with Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea, were said to be funded by the US Department of Defense, and allegedly worked on the development of biological weapons. These claims [have been part of the Russian disinformation campaign for years](#).

Positions against Putin

Notable, although not surprising, is the positioning of the largest German-language conspiracy-ideological Telegram channel, run by Boris Reitschuster, against Russia’s war of aggression. Reitschuster headed the Moscow office of *Focus*⁴ from 1999 to 2015 and wrote several books critical of Putin’s policies. Within the comment section of his own channel, as well as in other conspiracy-ideological channels, he was and is sometimes openly attacked for holding this position.

⁴ A well-known weekly news magazine in Germany, founded as an alternative to *Der Spiegel*.



Figure 2: Bodo Schiffmann turns against Boris Reitschuster due to his position on the Russia-Ukraine war.

Translation: "To Boris Reitschuster:

Some of the reports in recent days lead me to doubt whether it's the same Boris Reitschuster writing articles, or allowing articles to be published under his name, who previously wrote these reports.

I don't know whether he's hoping to get a new ticket to the [German] government press conference here:

But re: Ukraine, Russia and America, it's best to also have a look at Daniele Ganser, Rubikon, Ken FM or Nuoviso.

I think there's just an unwillingness to face the truth here. The warmonger was, and is, NATO. Not Russia and not Ukraine. And of course the mainstream media. What Putin is doing, in my personal opinion, is self-defence.

Dr. Bodo Schiffmann, February 26, 2022."

Many were disappointed and accused him of spreading "mainstream" propaganda or even being part of the conspiracy himself. Reitschuster's channel lost over 10,000 subscribers in the first week of 2022, and by the end of that year, the absolute loss of subscribers had increased by another 5,000. Despite these developments on Telegram, the channel still occupies the top position within the conspiracy-ideological milieu with just over 300,000 subscribers (as of March 11, 2022).

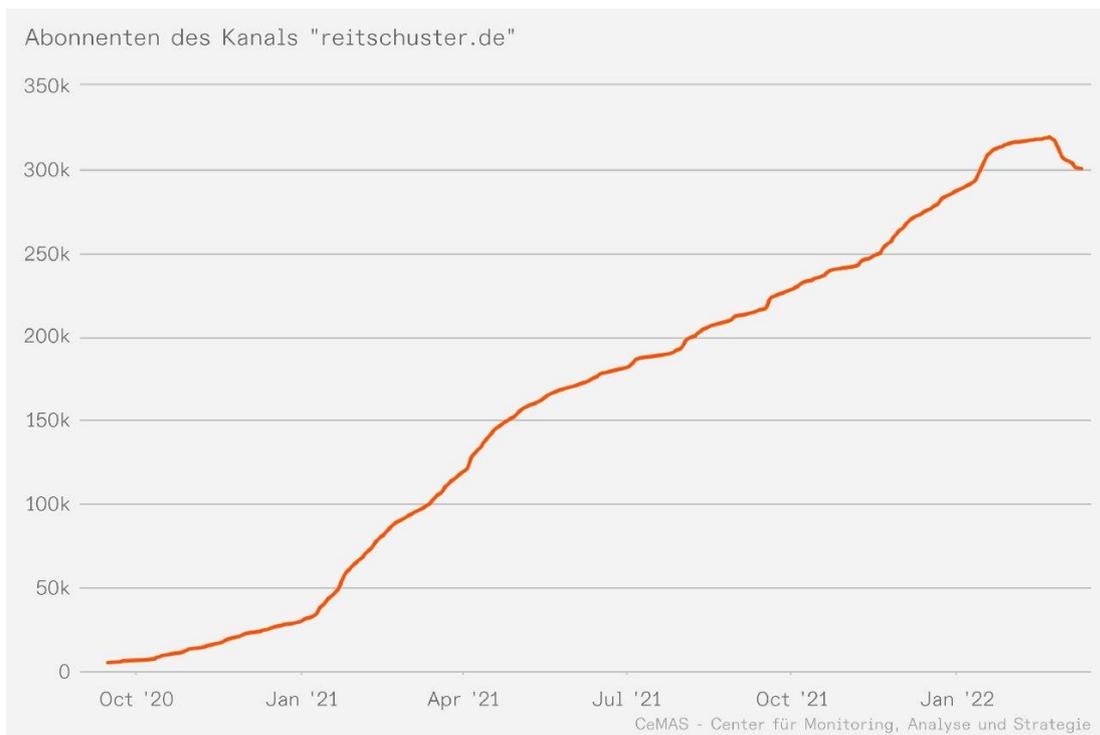


Figure 3: Number of subscribers to the channel reitschuster.de as of March 11, 2022.

Oliver Janich positioned himself against both Putin and Ukraine. He integrated Russia's war of aggression into an anti-Semitic worldview by portraying both state leaders as influenced by Jewish factions and thus part of a Jewish world conspiracy. According to his point of view, the war is being staged, or is merely a territorial dispute within the same global conspiracy group. Of relevance for the dynamics of the overall milieu in this context is that Janich portrayed the Russian far-right intellectual Aleksandr Dugin as part of the Jewish world conspiracy and as a Satanist. This has the potential to create divisions within the milieu, as Dugin's anti-Western Neo-Eurasian territorial planning ideas and his so-called Fourth Political Theory had been positively received and disseminated within the "New Right", especially during the 2010s.⁵ Despite his position against Putin, Janich's statements concerning Russia's war during the period subject to analysis, i.e. the first week of the war, did not lead to any significant decrease or increase in subscribers.

Distraction from COVID-19: The war as part of a great global conspiracy

Oliver Janich is not the only one placing the war in a larger conspiracy-ideological context. Within the milieu as a whole, a very clear connection has been made with the pandemic and related topics concerning the establishment of a New World Order or

⁵See, for example, Salzborn, S. (2014). "Messianischer Antiuniversalismus: Zur politischen Theorie von Aleksandr Dugin im Spannungsfeld von eurasischem Imperialismus und geopolitischem Evangelium." In A. Pfahl-Traughber (ed.), *Schriften zur Extremismus- und Terrorismusforschung: Vol. 8. Jahrbuch für Extremismus- und Terrorismusforschung (I)* (Vol. 8, pp. 240–258).

the poisoning of the population through vaccination. In her most influential post, with 277,532 views, Eva Herman claimed that the war is intended to distract from compulsory vaccinations, as did Bodo Schiffmann and the *Freie Sachsen*. The channels of AUF1 and *Freie Medien* as well as the channels of Bodo Schiffmann, Reiner Fuellmich and Oliver Janich see the war as part of a conspiracy-ideological master plan called the “Great Reset”.⁶ Schiffmann, Janich and Reiner Fuellmich allege that the war is intended to hasten the implementation process that began with COVID-19. In an interview with the conspiracy-ideological “alternative” media outlet Bittel TV on February 28, 2022, Fuellmich even claimed that he perceived no combat actions taking place in Ukraine. The older conspiracy narrative of the New World Order (NWO) is also used by AUF1 and Schiffmann in connection with the Great Reset. In one of the analyzed posts, AUF1 particularly emphasized the role of “globalists” in the conspiracy. The term is an anti-Semitic dogwhistle which is used particularly in conspiracy-ideological and far-right milieus.

Conclusion: Pro-Russian positioning from the Vigils to the *Querdenkers*

The Russian war against Ukraine plays a unique role within German conspiracy-ideological milieus. A majority position in favour of Russia and Putin is not surprising, as this has been part of the conspiracy-ideological milieu for years. Russia's initial attack on Ukraine in spring 2014, the results of which included the annexation of Crimea and the secessionist aspirations of the pro-Russian “People's Republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk, resulted in nationwide pro-Russian demonstrations in Germany under the name “Monday Vigils for Peace” (*Montagsmahnwachen für den Frieden*), which can be considered the ideological predecessors of the later *Querdenker* protests.⁷ It was at these vigils that a receptive audience was found for conspiracy theorists such as Kayvan Soufi-Siavash (Ken Jebesen/KenFM/apolut), Jürgen Elsässer (*COMPACT Magazin*), Andreas Popp and Eva Herman (*Wissensmanufaktur*), Heiko Schrang, the band *Die Bandbreite*, or Dieter Dehm who later became – and in fact still are – active in the *Querdenker* movement. Other actors in the current protests made their first major public appearances as part of the Monday vigils, such as the far-right *Reichsbürger* and the anti-Semite Nikolai Nerling (*Der Volkslehrer*, lit. “the People's Teacher”). As with the *Querdenkers*, the composition of the protesters was highly heterogeneous and included those who self-identified as civic activists, right-wing extremists, those who identified as leftists and esoterics, as well as *Reichsbürger* and other sovereignists. In 2014/15, the protesters opposed the official narrative of the war as portrayed by Western governments and the reporting of establishment media

⁶The conspiracy-ideological term “Great Reset” refers to reflections by the lobbying arm of the World Economic Forum on the restructuring of the world economy after the COVID-19 pandemic, which were published by its founder Klaus Schwab and the economist Thierry Malleret in a book of the same title in mid-2020. Since then, this expression has been used as an updated version of the term New World Order (NWO). For a debunking: <https://www.rnd.de/politik/great-reset-was-die-verschwörungserzählung-so-gefährlich-macht-VQ44NE735VF7DPGUPGS7JIOIDY.html>

⁷The *Querdenkers* (lit. “lateral/cross thinkers”) are a protest movement that emerged to protest the COVID-19 public health measures (e.g. lockdowns, mask mandates) and especially the vaccination and testing requirements that emerged in Germany during the pandemic.

outlets, as well as an alleged US world conspiracy, especially on the part of the Federal Reserve Bank, which supposedly held the aim of world domination.

The continuities between the vigils and the conspiracy-ideological protests in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic go beyond the individuals involved. Then as now, the state-funded Russian media RT Deutsch and Sputnik/SNA formed and still form a significant “alternative” source of information for the conspiracy-ideological milieu in Germany. Through its state media, Russia delivers conspiracy narratives, disinformation, and supposedly “suppressed” perspectives that find resonance in their rejection of the official narrative.

Telegram analysis of the Ukraine war: RT DE dominant in the conspiracy-ideological milieu

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine began on February 24, 2022; a war that Russian state media would use to spread their distorted perception of reality throughout Germany as well. On March 2, in response to the proliferation of Russian propaganda, EU Commission sanctions came into force against RT and Sputnik, and internet service providers were required to block their websites. But what role did RT DE’s media offerings play in Germany? A new CeMAS analysis of the most shared links in German-language conspiracy-ideological Telegram channels and groups during the first week of the war illustrates the success of RT DE as well as the relevance of QAnon as an amplifier of Russian disinformation.

The Russian state media outlet RT DE had only begun broadcasting its program via satellite and the Internet in December 2021. On February 1, 2022, the broadcasting of RT DE in Germany was banned as it did not have the required licence; the ban included broadcasting over the internet. RT DE filed an [objection, which was unsuccessful](#), although the actual court case is still pending. RT DE nevertheless continued to broadcast over its website. At the end of February and beginning of March 2022, in response to the war of aggression against Ukraine and the spread of disinformation by RT DE and Sputnik, the Council of the European Union [banned](#) the broadcasting of both of these “alternative” media outlets until the end of the war and the end of disinformation activities in the EU. Since then, RT has suspended its live program within the EU. RT DE was also banned on Telegram in early March 2022 due to [“violations of local laws.”](#) Previously, the channel had gained more than 24,000 new subscribers at the start of the war on February 24, 2022. Before it was blocked, RT DE briefly reached over 111,000 subscribers on Telegram at the beginning of March.

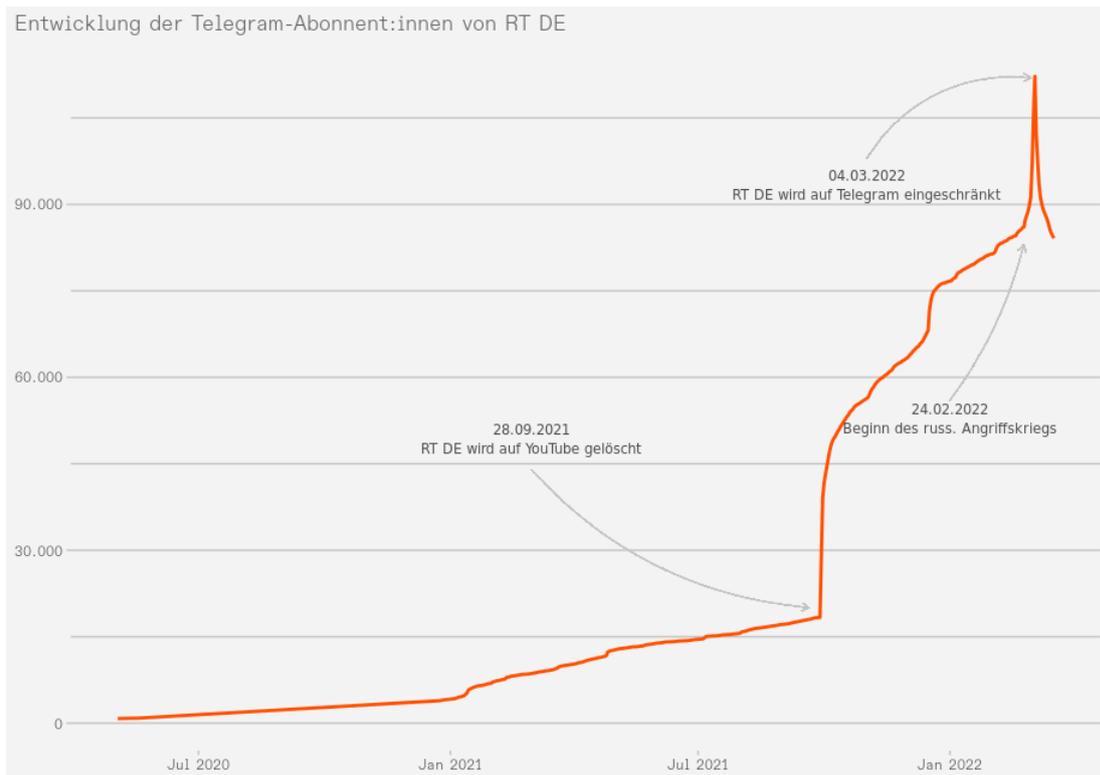


Figure 4: Evolution in Telegram subscribers of RT DE up to March 18, 2022.

This further restricted RT DE's distribution channels. According to the German news program *Tagesschau*, YouTube had already removed the broadcaster at the end of September 2021 due to the spread of disinformation regarding COVID-19.

Viral disinformation: RT DE was the most-shared news site on Telegram

In order to understand the role of RT DE as a propaganda tool in Germany, the most-shared media outlets on Telegram were examined during the first week of the war. The analysis of the most-shared links in the first week of the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine in German-language conspiracy-ideological Telegram channels and chat groups shows that RT DE was the milieu's central source of information. In one week, more than 5,770 links to de.rt.com were found in the analyzed posts from 1,982 channels and 1,539 groups of the conspiracy-ideological and far-right spectrum on Telegram. Among the mainstream media outlets, the most commonly shared within the milieu were *Die Welt* and *BILD*.

Position	Number of shared links	News page:
1	5,772	de.rt.com
2	2,229	report24.news
3	2,051	welt.de
4	2,020	kopp-verlag.de
5	1,951	uncutnews.ch
6	1,541	epochtimes.de
7	1,431	bild.de
8	1,299	n-tv.de
9	1,275	wochenblick.at
10	1,210	anti-spiegel.ru

Figure 5: List of the ten most-shared establishment and “alternative” news sites within German-language conspiracy-ideological Telegram channels and groups during the first week of the war in Ukraine.

QAnon channels and groups shared links to RT DE particularly often

The German-language domain of RT DE was most often shared within its own Telegram channel (175 times), which is not particularly remarkable. The following ten channels include both high-reach channels, such as the channel operated by Eva Herman (currently second place within the overall environment) or Schubert's *Lagemeldung* (“Status Report”), as well as microchannels with subscriber numbers in the low three digits. It is striking that 70 percent of the channels that shared links to RT DE can be attributed to the conspiracy-ideological QAnon submilieu (places 1 to 3 and 7 to 10).

	Links to RT DE	Subscribers	Telegram channel
0	175	84,137	RT DE
1	106	33,933	QANONYMOUS KANAL DEUTSCHLAND ✓ 🌐 USA Patriots United
2	90	6,032	17News17 📄
3	78	10,596	Folge dem Plan
4	57	51,526	Schuberts Lagemeldung - Stefan Schubert Offiziell
5	56	213,760	Eva Herman Offiziell
6	45	12,057	KOPP Report
7	41	243	QAnon-Kanal 1
8	41	2,063	✗ RalphBernhardKutza
9	37	162	QAnon-Kanal 2
10	37	6,949	Hammer News (Nana Albert)

Figure 6: Table of German-language conspiracy-ideological channels which most frequently shared links to the domain of RT DE in the first week of 2022. As of March 18, 2022.

The analysis of the top Telegram chat groups also shows that most links to RT DE were shared within the broadcaster's own comment section. The ten subsequent groups in which RT DE was most frequently shared include *AlternativeMedien* in first place, in which automated links to RT DE were shared mostly by a bot. The following places are occupied by the chat groups of the channels of the conspiracy theorist Bodo Schiffmann (*Alles Ausser Mainstream Links und Medien / KEINE CHATS* (2), the “alternative” media outlet Uncut-News (3), and the journalist and former head of the Moscow office of *Focus*, Boris Reitschuster (4). In contrast to the channels, among the chat groups that shared links to RT DE, only three groups could be assigned to the QAnon submilieu (in places 5, 6 and 8).

Content of the RT DE links with the widest reach

After analyzing the channels and groups that shared links to the domain of RT DE, the content of the most frequently-shared links was analyzed. At the top of the most-shared links to RT DE on Telegram were those to the live program of the broadcaster on the Internet (275 times) as well as to its continuously-updated live ticker on the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine (197 times). For the content analysis, the following ten most-shared links to articles on RT DE were taken into account.

All ten of the analyzed links from RT DE with static content during the period of analysis dealt with different topics relating to the war. Five out of ten of the most shared links were opinion articles, while the remaining RT contributions included four reports on other topics (rising energy prices, RT's ban within the EU) as well as an interview with Maria Sakharova, the spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Within RT DE's most-shared reports concerning the war in Ukraine, two made a connection to COVID-19. The most-shared article (165 times) highlighted that after the start of the war of aggression, and in contrast to Russia and Belarus, Ukraine was no longer classified as a high-risk area by the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) "overnight". In addition, the German government had supposedly promised rapid support for the reception of refugees. RT DE also noted the low vaccination rate in Ukraine. The article encourages the interpretation that the RKI arbitrarily determines its classifications according to political interest.

In another article, RT DE spread a rumor concerning US-funded bio labs in Ukraine that were supposedly working on biological warfare agents, which had also been widely shared within German-speaking conspiracy-ideological milieus. This rumor and its spread on Twitter was simply reported by RT DE without criticism.⁸ At the end of the article, RT DE attributed the origin of the rumor that the US was working on biological and chemical weapons on the Russian and Chinese borders to "speculation" by Nikolai Patrushev, the Secretary of the Russian Security Council. He had supposedly said this in an interview in response to the question of whether China had deliberately caused the pandemic. Through this quote, RT made a connection to COVID-19 and provided it with the authority of a senior Russian official. In addition, RT reports ranked among the top ten most-shared links regarding rising energy prices due to the war, as well as the banning of RT and Sputnik within the EU.

In the opinion articles, which, according to RT DE, do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editors, the position was clearly in favour of Putin and against the West and Ukraine. In particular, the various authors took up the false information initially put forward by Russia concerning a supposed genocide in eastern Ukraine that had allegedly taken place since 2014. They accused the West of completely ignoring these atrocities from the Ukrainian side.⁹ Another topic of the opinion articles supported the Russian narrative concerning the "denazification" of Ukraine. In their contributions, the various authors emphasized the Ukrainian far-right Azov Regiment, which was formed in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and has since been

⁸On March 11, 2022, Russia made these allegations at a specially-convened emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, where they were dismissed as propaganda by the United States, Britain and France. <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/amerika/un-russland-biowaffen-101.html>

⁹The International Court of Justice had ruled in mid-March 2022 that there was no substantial evidence of genocide at the time, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/igh-zu-ukraine-103.html>.

[integrated into the Ukrainian National Guard](#). The regiment and the associated movement played and continue to play an important role for certain segments of European and international right-wing extremism, and it also maintains [contacts within Germany](#). Putin used the Azov Regiment as an excuse to portray the whole of Ukraine as fascist, a point of view which the authors took on. One author wrote that the Azov Regiment “sets the rules of the game” in Ukraine and prevents the formation of a “real” opposition. She implied that there was a collaboration between the Ukrainian government and the far-right regiment – reflecting the Kremlin’s argument – but did not want to say whether this was out of fear or out of conviction. The existence of Azov in Ukraine is [quite problematic](#), but the authors of the most-shared opinion articles on RT DE used the regiment as part of propaganda to justify Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine in violation of international law.

Another opinion piece claimed that the shots fired by snipers at protesters back on the Maidan in 2014, which contributed to the decision to oust pro-Russian President Yanukovich, had already been part of a false flag operation.¹⁰ The pro-Western-oriented Ukraine had therefore been built on a lie.

The most-shared “alternative” media during the first week of the war

The final part of this analysis provides a brief overview of the other most-shared internet domains of “alternative” media beyond RT DE.

¹⁰False flag operations are actions or events that have taken place or are supposed to have taken place “under a false flag”. An example of a real false flag operation is the attack on the radio station Gleiwitz on August 31, 1939, which was alleged to have been carried out by Polish guerillas, but was actually carried out by SS members. Along with other events, it served as a pretense for the German invasion of Poland the next day. Conspiracy ideologues allege that terrorist attacks, such as the Islamist attacks of September 11, 2001 in New York or of November 15, 2015 in Paris were false flag operations carried out in order to justify restricting the rights of the population.

	Number of shared links	“Alternative” media outlet	Attribution
1	5,772	de.rt.com	Russia
2	2,229	report24.news	Austria
3	2,020	kopp-verlag.de	Germany
4	1,951	uncutnews.ch	Switzerland
5	1,541	epochtimes.de	International
6	1,275	wochenblick.at	Austria
7	1,210	anti-spiegel.ru	Russia
8	1,203	tkp.at	Austria
9	1,188	reitschuster.de	Germany
10	717	auf1.tv	Austria

Figure 7: Table of the top ten “alternative” media outlines according to the number of links shared in the first week of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine.

In addition to the actors whose links had already been most widespread in the milieu on Telegram before the 2021 federal election in Germany, the domains of the KOPP publishing house, anti-spiegel.ru and the Austrian blog tkp.at have been added.¹¹ It is striking for the time period that only two of the ten most-shared “alternative” media outlets are primarily based in Germany, four in Austria, two in Russia, one in Switzerland, and one internationally.

The KOPP publishing house has been spreading disinformation, right-wing esotericism, conspiracy theories and right-wing populist rhetoric for decades.¹² At the beginning of the 2010s, Eva Herman briefly hosted a news program for the publisher's online portal.

The Anti-Spiegel website has been operated by the author and blogger Thomas Röper, who is based in St. Petersburg, since at least 2018. He spreads disinformation and conspiracy theories on his website. Röper is openly supportive of Putin and

¹¹Not among the ten most-shared “alternative” media outlets were, in comparison, journalistswatch.com, tichyseinblick.de and tagesereignis.de. The analysis for the month leading up to the German federal election in 2021 can be found here: <https://cemas.io/publikationen/die-bundestagswahl-2021-welche-rolle-verwoerungsideologien-in-der-demokratie-spiele/die-bundestagswahl-2021-welche-rolle-verwoerungsideologien-in-der-demokratie-spiele.pdf>

¹²cf. Hunger, A. (2016). „Gut vernetzt – Der Kopp-Verlag und die schillernde rechte Publizistenszene.“ In S. Braun, A. Geisler & M. Gerster (eds.), *Strategien der extremen Rechten* (pp. 425–437). Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-01984-6_19

[published a book of his speeches in 2018](#). Anti-Spiegel operates a broadcast on the conspiracy-ideological NuoViso Internet portal.

The Austrian blog tkp describes itself as a “blog for science & politics” as well as an “editorial network”. The main person behind the blog is the physicist Peter F. Mayer. In terms of content, tkp offers the usual mix of conspiracy-ideological articles about the pandemic and the government measures to contain it, as well as contributions directed against NATO and Ukraine.

Conclusion: RT DE plays a major role in the conspiracy-ideological milieu

This short analysis illustrated the role that RT DE in particular plays in the conspiracy-ideological milieu in Germany. RT DE was by far the most-shared media source in the first week of the war in the relevant channels and groups on Telegram.

Conspiracy theorists spread in part unfiltered propaganda from the Kremlin and thus become an important source of Russian disinformation, at least within their own milieu.

Method

The data for the analysis were collected in the first week after the start of the war in Ukraine, i.e. in the period from February 24 to March 3, 2022. The source was the continuously-updated CeMAS dataset of selected Telegram groups and channels from the conspiracy-ideological milieu. The analytical process was based on the analysis of media reception during the German federal election in 2021. The procedure comprises three steps: data extraction, data cleaning and data evaluation.

In the first step, all Telegram messages from the given period containing at least one link were identified. Using a Python script, the external links were then extracted from the messages for further analysis.

During data cleaning, the links were parsed in order to be easier to compare. For this purpose, frequently used URL shorteners were replaced by their target links (e.g. bit.ly, tinyurl.com or kurz.rt.com). Furthermore, missing schemas (HTTP) were added, Google amp links were converted, some subdomains were removed (e.g. www. and m. for mobile versions), alternative domains of the same websites were merged (e.g.youtu.be to youtube.com) and known query parameters were removed for tracking (e.g. utm_source or fbclid).

For the analysis, these “cleaned” links were used to determine the most common domains, and for selected media and platforms, the most common links were selected for a qualitative analysis. For links from RT, the number of shares of these messages in Telegram channels (excluding forwards) were also recorded in order to be able to estimate their reach.

A total of 118,193 posts containing links were analyzed, drawn from 3,521 channels and groups. In the prepared data were telegra.ph (1,314 links), Opera News (175 links) and



Upday (47 links) pages, which served as intermediary links to other content. These were not able to be considered in the analysis.

Sources

Telegram