

# 15 Russian Federation’s FIMI prior to its Intervention in Ukraine<sup>1</sup>

*Bohdan Yuskiv and Nataliia Karpchuk*

## **Introduction**

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) is a growing political and security challenge to the democratic world in general and Ukraine in particular. Foreign actors trying to manipulate and interfere with the information environment of other states use a variety of constantly evolving tactics, techniques, and procedures, often in combination with cybersecurity and hybrid threats (StratCom, 2021). FIMI is conducted by both state and non-state actors, as well as their proxies. States use FIMI to destabilise foreign countries for their advantage; private companies provide “disinformation for hire” to amplify sensationalist content and to get financial gains (Goldstein and Grossman, 2021). Media channels (broadcasting, press, social media, messenger apps, etc.) are used to disseminate the necessary (dis)information and achieve the desired effect.

For decades, Ukraine’s information space has remained vulnerable to Russian propaganda and manipulation. The historical background has been laid since Ukraine was part of the USSR. Then the RF “information lobby” was formed powerfully promoting Russian narratives. The Soviet era instilled a sense of trust in foreign, and later non-state, channels of information. Probably, this is precisely what determines the attention of Ukrainians to various new communication channels, in particular Telegram. According to the USAID-Internews survey on media consumption (July–September 2022), 77% of Ukrainians prefer social networks to receive the news. In 2021, 20% consumed news from Telegram channels and, in 2022, this share increased to 60% (InMind Research 2022). Telegram has become the main channel for receiving news because it has several practical advantages: it duplicates messages from other channels, delivers news faster than other media, and offers a shortened version of the news. Access to news on the phone is more convenient and easier than on other devices. High-quality media check the reliability of the information, but Telegram bets on efficiency. Accordingly, propaganda, disinformation, and fakes can be easily spread. Television and YouTube actually take their news from Telegram channels which, according to the mentioned survey, displace Viber and WhatsApp.

The share of consumers minding the source of the news they accessed increased in 2022. Concurrently, as compared to 2021, fewer respondents reported paying

attention to whether different points of view were presented. The share of those who were ready to trust their favourite media outlet “by default” had increased. Furthermore, 83% of respondents were aware of the existence of false materials, and most thought they could recognise them. Many people also believed that disinformation was “not a pressing problem”. In 2022, the share of those who came across common disinformation narratives equalled 49%. One in three respondents discussed those narratives with their friends or family. The motivation for information sharing was “just a reason to talk”. There was a decrease in personal consumption of Russian media—only 12% of respondents used them in 2022, and the main reason was to find out “what they are saying about Ukraine” (InMind Research 2022).

In Ukraine, the blocking of Russian Internet resources began in 2017. The President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko introduced additional sanctions against Russia (Poroshenko signed an order, 2017). They required blocking Internet providers’ access to the web resources of VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Mail.ru, Yandex, Kaspersky Lab, DrWeb, the official distributor of IC in Ukraine etc. for three years—450 companies in total. However, Telegram, Viber, and WhatsApp remained outside these restrictions. The new law “On Media” is supposed to ban all TV channels and other media resources originating from the aggressor state, but the entire reform will last for ten years (The Law of Ukraine 2022). The law came into force on March 31, 2023.

### **Inciting truth through disinformation**

Until recently, the term most commonly used in political discourse to identify issues concerning the information manipulation was disinformation, from the Russian word *dezinformatsiya*, deriving from the title of a KGB black propaganda department responsible for producing false information intended to deceive the public opinion (Giusti and Piras 2021, p. 2). Disinformation “can be composed of mostly true facts, stripped of context or blended with falsehoods to support the intended message and is always part of a larger plan or agenda” (NED, 2017). Being neglected for a while by international relations, it has recently been greatly revived because of the RF’s policy of expansion.

For decades, Russia has been fabricating an alternative reality for its citizens and foreign countries. The state’s very existence seems to depend on promoting the regime’s different truth. Being believed is a tool for its survival (Zafesova 2021, p. 108, 110). Russia attempts to impose its truth through state-sponsored disinformation as the basis of special information operations. The digital revolution has provided Russia with new tools and tactics that have put the country at the forefront of global information warfare (Bechis 2021, p.119). The Russian military and political elite see information warfare as an endless state of war that is non-reliant on any *casus belli* but instead is a pillar of a long-term power strategy (Waltzman 2017, p. 4). Researchers from the National Endowment for

Democracy (USA) even coined a new term to denote Russian attempts to exert influence in the information space. “Sharp power” is the ability to wield influence that “pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries”; its form and method might even resemble a “soft power” operation, its main goal is to win over the public opinion of a foreign country and to get leverage in its political system (Cardenal et al. 2017, p. 6). Russia’s “sharp power” influence is “not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centres on distraction and manipulation” (Walter and Ludwig, 2017).

Considering the complexity of hybrid Russian (as well as Chinese) influence, in its 2021 Report, the Task Force on Strategic Communications and the Department of Information Analysis of the EU introduced the new concept of “foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)” which has replaced the concept of “disinformation” (StratCom, 2021). FIMI is a pattern of behaviour that threatens or may negatively affect values, procedures, and political processes. The activity is manipulative and conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Its subjects may involve state or non-state entities, including their proxies inside and outside of their territory. The report acknowledges that FIMI is routinely used to undermine public confidence in the democratic institutions’ legitimacy and efficacy. It may contribute to an increased polarisation within the EU and escalate political violence in conflict-prone regions.

While the FIMI activity conducted by the Russian government and its proxies adapts its messages to the tactical priorities of specific situations, its strategic objective remains to undermine the West and strengthen the Kremlin’s influence in the world. To this end, it is steadily expanding its toolkit to disseminate and strategically amplify its narratives, including combinations of cyber-attacks and leaking of selective and often forged or distorted information. Beyond state-financed media (RT and Sputnik), its international FIMI efforts also employ ecosystems of local proxies and amplifiers, like Telegram channels that, at first glance, are not always recognisable by the audience as supported or financed by the Kremlin (United States Department, 2022).

Whereas other states’ information operations are generally guided by facts, i.e., messages are followed and supported by citations, videos, and photos, their authenticity is scrupulously checked, Russia’s foreign policymakers create “facts” to be broadcast to targeted audiences to achieve strategic objectives (Allen & Moore 2018). In particular, such a special FIMI operation can be focused on “disrupting military and government leadership, misleading the enemy, forming desirable public opinions, organising antigovernment activities, etc. aimed at decreasing the determination of the opponent to resist” (Müür, Mölder, Sazonov 2016, p. 2).

Unlike the concept of “disinformation”, the concept of FIMI is new in terms of scientific understanding. The RF’s war against Ukraine activated the European community in its desire to understand, assess, and effectively counter Russian destructive influence. In addition to the aforementioned StratCom Report

(StratCom, 2021), the issue is analysed by The EU Agency for Cybersecurity claiming that although disinformation is a prominent part of FIMI, the latter emphasises manipulative behaviours (Magonara & Malatras, 2022). The Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (Council of the EU, 2022b) and the July 2022 Council Conclusions on FIMI (Council of the EU, 2022a) both refer to the importance of countering FIMI, hybrid and cyber threats.

This is why, in our opinion, the concept of “FIMI” fits well to describe the entire spectrum of destructive information influence exerted by the RF on citizens and decision-makers of states chosen for the offensive, both in military and informational terms.

### **Research hypothesis and aim**

Adopting the USSR methods, to provide information support for the planned war in Ukraine, the RF used a combination of 1) disinformation as the practice of misinforming or misleading adversaries with false information to slow, degrade, or stop effective responses to an associated Russian activity (Connable et al. 2020, p. 27); 2) deception as the complex of measures to confuse the enemy regarding the presence and disposition of forces, their condition, readiness, actions, and plans (Giles & Seaboyer 2018, p. 10) reflexive control as “a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action” (Thomas, 2016). The underlying goal of these tactics was to alter the enemy’s perceptions, to make him think what the RF wants him to think and do what it wants him to do (Bechis 2020, p. 123).

The operation was aimed at two key audiences: 1) Russian society and advocates of the “*Russkiy mir*” in Ukraine to foster their understanding and support for a future “special military operation” on the territory of Ukraine; and 2) the majority of Ukrainian citizens, the state’s leadership and its military and political elite. In the Ukrainian information space, these messages were broadcast and discussed on various media platforms (not necessarily pro-Russian). Russian narratives were actively promoted by pro-Russian parties. Taking into account the fact that the decision to start a war against Ukraine had already been made in Kremlin circles, we presume that the goal of Russia’s FIMI was to intimidate the political elite of Ukraine and ordinary citizens, to frame any desire to fight as practically “suicidal” and to induce the state leadership and President, in particular, to make decisions in favour of the RF. Obviously, at the same time, this was also the message to the West not to interfere in the war by the RF’s allegedly mighty, highly professional army and not to expose itself to an inevitable defeat in Ukraine.

In this context, the research subject is specified special FIMI operations of the RF, the image of the Russian military forces as the strongest and invincible army in the world on the eve (and in fact during the preparation) of the new

stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war in Ukraine which began on February 24, 2022. The research purpose is to substantiate that in the Telegram channel of the state-owned Russian news agency (RIA Novosti) and in selected pro-Ukrainian and Ukrainian pro-Russian Telegram channels was an RF FIMI operation and to reveal the specifics of its implementation.

### **Data set and methodology**

Ukrainians prefer various Telegram channels as a quick source of information as they have been “spun” as independent of the influence of the authorities precisely due to their encryption technology and the difficulty of blocking them (Hoda, 2020). However, this messaging app structure helps the spread and deeper penetration of disinformation because: Telegram uses end-to-end encryption which is considered one of the safest; it is possible to create a “secret chat” where communication cannot be intercepted since the message is encrypted on the sender’s device and decrypted directly by the recipient’s device (in other channels, chats, and groups, communication is also protected but encryption goes through the server); Telegram rules define only three categories of banned topics: spam and fraudulent messages, promotion of violence, and illegal porn; a user knows nothing about the owners and authors; it is easy to create and fill the channel with posts; and there is a system of instant notifications (Iliuk 2021; Telegram FAQ, 2023). Nevertheless, Ukrainians are attracted to information sources—alternative to official outlets—which position themselves as insiders.

A recent study has analysed InsiderUA—a Ukrainian Telegram channel—unveiling the structure of Ukraine’s strategic communications in the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian war (Karpchuk, Yuskiv, Pelekh, 2022). It covered the first 100 days of a full-scale war. The current study has expanded the list and analysed eight Telegram channels during the year leading to the war.

We have examined and compared the state-owned Russian agency RIA Novosti ([https://t.me/rian\\_ru](https://t.me/rian_ru)), the Ukrainian agency UNIAN (<https://t.me/unianet>), Dzerkalo Tyzhnia (ZN.Ua) ([https://t.me/znuu\\_live](https://t.me/znuu_live)), InsiderUA (<https://t.me/insiderUKR>), pro-Russian Ukrainian Telegram channels ZeRada (<https://t.me/ZeRada1>), Ukraina.ru ([https://t.me/ukraina\\_ru](https://t.me/ukraina_ru)), Open Ukraine 37# (<https://t.me/OpenUkraine>), and Legitimniy (<https://t.me/legitimniy>). The following factors determined the sampling: 1) Russian RIA Novosti is one of the most powerful RF state channels and presents the position of the political leadership; 2) pro-Ukrainian channels: UNIAN, although a private agency, nevertheless reflects the state policy and it is often quoted in TV news; Dzerkalo Tyzhnia is a recognised most qualitative and responsible media (IMI, 2022); InsiderUA is one of the most popular Telegram political news channels with a clear pro-Ukrainian position; and 3) when selecting Ukrainian pro-Russian channels, we used the list of Telegram channels that, according to the Security Service of Ukraine, are coordinated by the General Staff of the RF (Bohdaniok, 2022).

Then, we chose those with the most subscribers. The number of subscribers and channel citation indexes are given in Table 15.1.

In this study, FIMI operations are characterised by certain properties which are the necessary conditions for their implementation: 1) compliance with the pattern of a special information operation; 2) a multi-agents model of information distribution, i.e., many media (here—Telegram channels) distribute the same/similar messages; 3) a clear strategy of information influence (here it is an increase in the images of the RF' Armed Forces, against the background of a decrease in the images of Ukrainian and Western Armed Forces); and 4) thought-out implementation (several groups of messages): background (history of the Russian army), reports to enhance the image of the RF's Armed Forces, and messages to damage the image of other armed forces (Del Corso et al., 2005; Kleinberg, 2006; Lande et al., 2006; Rakesh et al., 2014).

We consider that, if empirical data (messages) complied with previous criteria, then we would take it as valid FIMI data. Our scrutiny involved two stages: 1) selection of messages from Telegram channels; and 2) analysis of the empirical data compliance with the necessary conditions for the FIMI implementation (Figure 15.1):

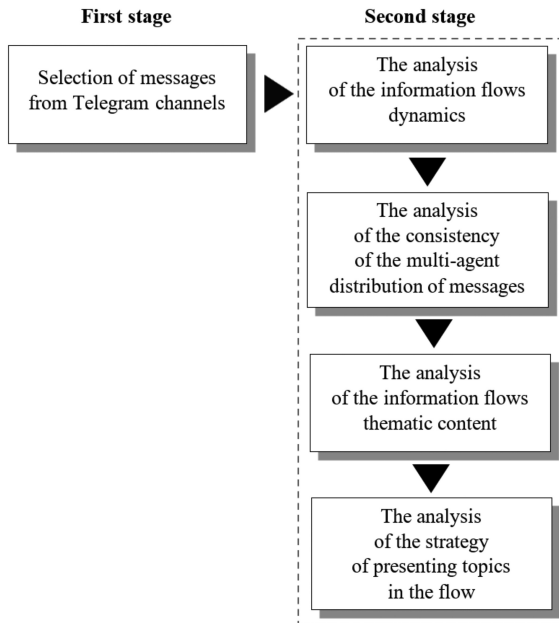


Figure 15.1 The stages of the Telegram channels' analysis.

In the first stage, we read and selected messages from Telegram channels that met the following criteria: 1) publication period—from January 1, 2021, to February 23, 2022; 2) keywords—“army” and “Armed Forces” (in Ukrainian and Russian). Then, the filtered messages were exported to an internal R format for further synthesis and statistical characterisation. The total number of messages meeting these criteria is given in Table 15.1.

Table 15.1 In the second stage, the research process consisted of four parts:

1. The analysis of the information flow dynamics: the studied set of messages of three Telegram channels groups (1) Russian RIA Novosti, (2) pro-Russian, and (3) Ukrainian Telegram channels were considered separate information flows. Each information flow corresponded to a time series which, in turn, consisted of the number of reports published each week of the analysed period.

Information flow dynamics were studied by Kleinberg (2016), Lande et al., (2006) etc. Typical profiles of possible aggressive/offensive information operations were determined; one of the templates is shown in Figure 15.2. It is a generalised presentation of information operations conducted by financial institutions, multinational corporations and states.

The analysis of an information operation time series, like FIMI, shows that a certain “surge” is characteristic for each typical stage of the messages’ dissemination. The graph in general represents a series of waves of smooth growth and decrease phases in the number of messages. The time series curve can have a different shape, i.e. it can have a larger/smaller range of oscillations and be more/less stretched in time, but it clearly shows the sequence of phases: background—calm—“artillery preparation”—calm—attack/trigger of increase. In information attacks, the objects of influence have been predetermined. Planning is based on sufficiently accurate information about these objects. An information attack most often requires some information occasion, its promotion and steps to prevent information countermeasures (Dodonov et al 2021:287).

The dynamics of the information flows may differ from the typical template at a certain moment. Most often, this is a sign of the beginning of another operation, which refers to a narrower topic, or a sign of the division of the initial thematic operation into several lower-level operations. However, the general trend remains.

The greater the coverage of the target audience, the higher the efficacy of the information operation. For this purpose, as many media as possible should be involved in the operation, i.e. it is a model of multi-agent dissemination of information when many media (in our case—Telegram channels) distribute messages with the same/similar content.

Table 15.1 Statistical characteristics of Telegram channels

Telegram channel	Statistics			Number of messages during the research period (January 1, 2021–February 23, 2022)	
	Subscribers	Citation index <sup>2</sup>	Subscribers that read the channel's posts (% of the number of subscribers)	Total number	Messages mentioning the Armed Forces (% of total quantity)
• RIA Novosti	2,608,523	10,635.6	<b>Russian</b> 35%	66,503	337 (0.5%)
• UNIAN	882,838	1,374.5 <sup>3</sup>	<b>Ukrainian</b> 42%	7,085	73 (1%)
• Dzerkalo tyzhny(ZN. Ua)	61,828	462.6	22%	8,318	37 (0.4%)
• InsiderUA	1,427,850	2,349.3	39%	6,688	234 (3.5%)
• Ukraina.ru	225,088	2,914.7	<b>Pro-Russian in Ukraine</b> 32%	22,942	1,546 (6.7%)
• Open Ukraine 37#	191,135	1,594.9	40%	3,810	261 (6.9%)
• Legitimiy	874,899	1,684.7	65%	3,429	31 (0.9%)
• ZeRada	325,417	1,029.7	77%	2,844	52 (1.8%)

Source: Compiled by the authors TGStat data (as of January 31, 2023; TGStat. (2023). <https://uk.tgstat.com/en>).



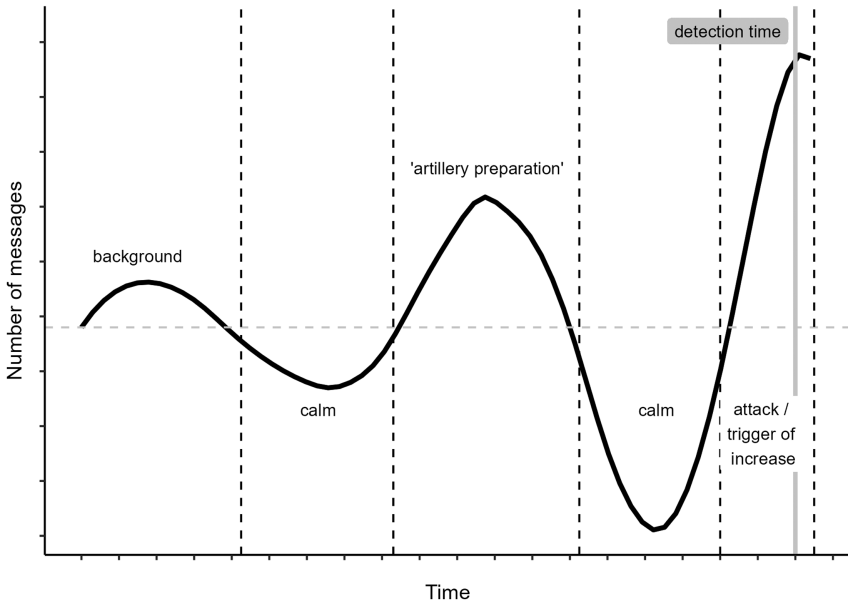


Figure 15.2 Dynamics of the number of messages during information operations (Dodonov et al 2013 : 248).

2. The analysis of the consistency of the multi-agent distribution of messages, i.e., the consistency of the number of messages of the mentioned three groups of Telegram channels in time. Cross-correlation analysis was used (Cryer, 2008) to determine the degree of simultaneity of messages and lag dependencies between series, that is, the influence of one series on another with a delay or lead.
3. The analysis of the information flow thematic content: reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Crosley 2021) was used to identify themes. After thematic coding, the number of messages was calculated on each of the defined topics for each flow; visualisation of the calculations and comparative analysis determined the top priority topics of each group of the researched Telegram channels.
4. The analysis of the strategy of presenting topics in the flow: in our opinion, it is the order that forms the basis of constructing the necessary picture of reality for the successful manipulation of public opinion. In our case, the thematic-temporal structure of the combined flow of the Russian Telegram channel RIA Novosti and the set of pro-Russian channels was studied. Calculations were performed in the R programming language using dplyr, tidyr, tidytext, tidyverse, ggplot2, stats, and other packages.

## Findings

The analysis highlights four instances of FIMI operations against Ukraine and its Armed Forces on the eve of a full-scale war.

### *The first evidence*

The charts below present the dynamics of messages for each group of Telegram channels (Figure 15.3).

A simple comparison of the graphs above shows almost full compliance of all three flows with the typical template of the information operation in Fig. 15.2. The graph of the Russian Telegram channel initially shows a distinct surge from week 8 to week 14 (a background is formed) and then the dynamic curve gradually stabilises. Starting from week 29, and through week 52 (the end of 2021), there are several discrete surges, which can be understood as a multi-stage “artillery preparation”. The following brief period of calm, from week 53 to week 56, then turns into a rapid information attack.

Pro-Russian Telegram channels promptly assist the Russian ones, almost simultaneously duplicating their messages and feeding them with their

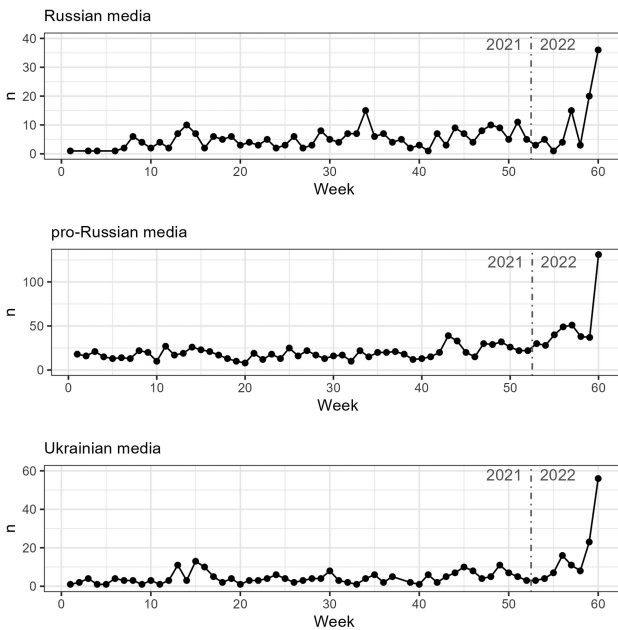


Figure 15.3 Dynamics of information flows of Russian, pro-Russian, and Ukrainian Telegram channels.

information flows. Specifically, the first surge also begins in the 8th week (with a very slight decrease in the number of publications in the following weeks) and continues until the next significant surge in week 43. After a brief (by the number of messages) period of calm, the channels actively join the information attack. Their information attack even precedes the attack (lag-delayed publications are added to the new messages) of the Russian channel, being both active by the start of the Russian military offensive against Ukraine. The state-owned Russian channels must at least maintain the image of not being in favour of the war. Instead, pro-Russian channels receive instructions to cover certain topics (the Security Service of Ukraine claims such supervision) and to prepare the basis for subsequent Russian messages. In addition, quite often such pro-Russian messages resemble violent fantasies of extremists, whereas the background of messages from the RF looks balanced and objective.

Ukrainian Telegram channels, to a certain extent, duplicate the behaviour of Russian and pro-Russian ones, showing a distinct lag of surges. This is a defensive position, i.e. they need time to respond; as they do not set the mode in this operation. Firstly, the number of publications in response is much smaller; and secondly, the first surge takes place as early as week 13. Subsequent surges are also delayed to week 30, against the Russian surge of week 29, and week 49, against the Russian week 34. Then surges follow with a lag of one week.

The analysis clearly shows a sign that a purposeful FIMI operation has been conducted against Ukraine through Russian and pro-Russian Telegram channels. A counteraction is reflected in Ukrainian Telegram channels.

### *The second evidence*

The consistency of messages, in terms of the number of publications between three groups of Telegram channels, is shown in the correlograms in Figure 15.4. The dependence of information flows was assessed using autocorrelation showing which past values are most useful for predicting future values. The autocorrelation function (ACF) is a function of estimating the autocorrelation coefficient depending on the time lag (delay/lead) between stationary time series.

Figure 15.4 presents the estimation of the cross-correlation of information flows as stationary time series depending on lagged leads/delays. Cross-correlations with the value of lag variables 0, -1, or +1 are essential and statistically significant (values go beyond the dotted blue interval). This proves that the maximum delay in the number of messages (reaction to other groups' posts) between flows is one week and with a very small value of the mutual correlation coefficient. Reports made as a reaction to other publications are made within the same week.

The mutual correlation between the time series of Russian and Ukrainian Telegram channels' publications with a lag of 0 is quite high (0.79). Correlations

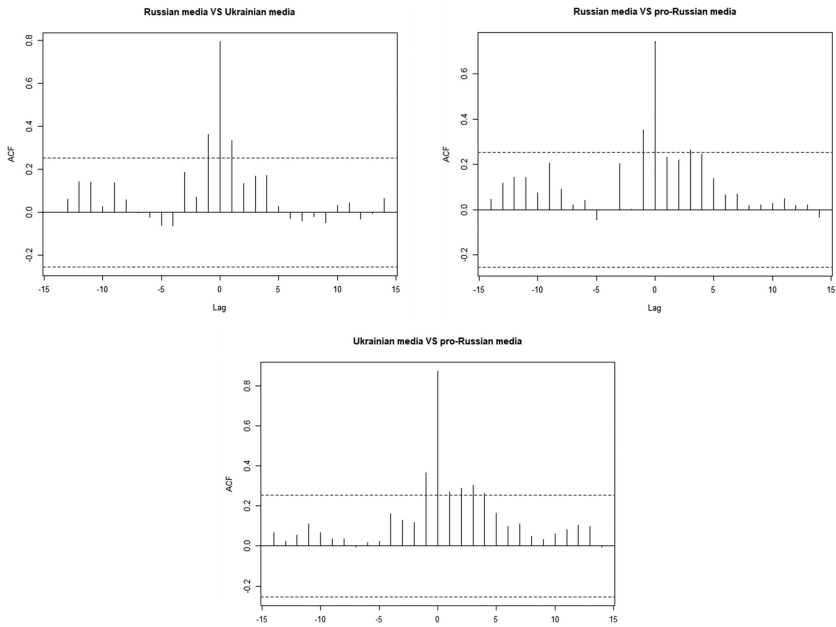


Figure 15.4 Results of cross-correlation analysis of the number of publications between three groups of Telegram channels

with a delay of one week of Ukrainian Telegram channels are very insignificant (0.33), as well as a lead of one week (0.36).

There is a similarity between Russian and pro-Russian Telegram channels. The cross-correlation coefficient with a lag of 0 shows a relatively high level (0.74) and the lead of pro-Russian Telegram channels by one week gives a cross-correlation of 0.35.

Likewise, the cross-correlation coefficient between Ukrainian and pro-Russian Telegram channels with a lag of 0 is 0.87; the delay of pro-Russian Telegram channels gives an insignificant correlation (0.36). Here, however, there is the lead of the pro-Russian information flow with lags of two and three with a significant but slightly smaller cross-correlation: 0.29 and 0.30, respectively.

We should emphasise that these conclusions do not contradict the conclusions of the of the previous necessary condition verification as the surges in information flows for three Telegram channel groups differed greatly. In fact, the concept of “surges” implies significant changes in the number of publications compared to previous weeks while the correlation of time series implies a constant, even insignificant, reaction to any changes in information flows. Thus, from the data, it looks like the RF information activities in the media space are agreed upon and coordinated.

**The third evidence**

The thematic content of the Telegram channels information flows attempts to frame the perception of reality. The conducted analysis indicates the prevalence of certain topics in the messages (Figure 15.5 (a), (b), (c)):

1) Regarding the RF army:

- RIA Novosti—the RF state-owned agency Telegram channel—pays the most attention to messages about the RF’s newest weapons which are admired and bought abroad; the second position is occupied by general messages concerning the Russian army (in particular, appointments to the posts of generals, COVID-19 in the army, medical examination in the army, rules of conscription into the army). The purpose seems to be making the topic of the army present in the media space, even when there is no real occasion. On the third position, there are reports on the greatness, heroism and “salvation” role of the USSR army in WWII and the publication of previously secret materials that indicate the brutality and atrocities of the Japanese, German, and OUN/UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army/Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists) armies, as well as that of the Baltic countries. The thematic analysis shows a

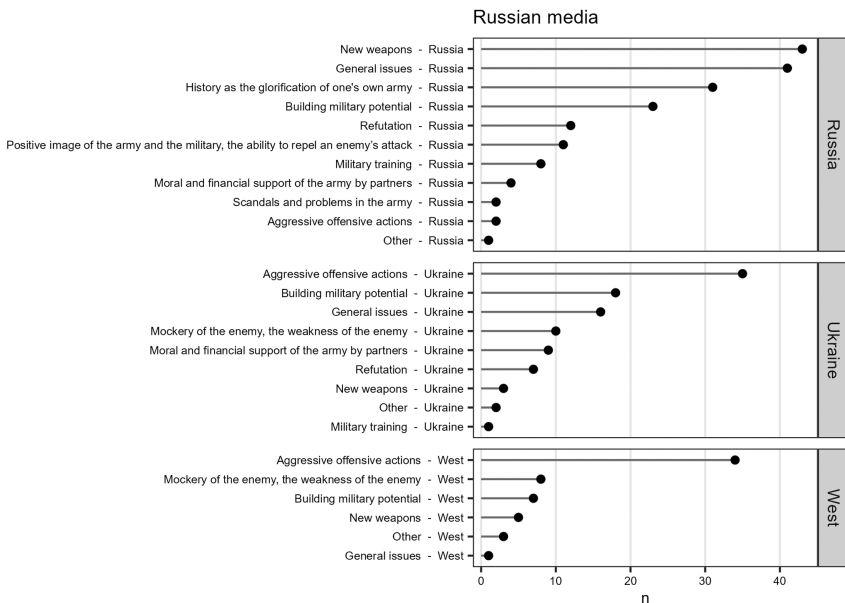


Figure 15.5 (a). The thematic content of the Russian Telegram channel (RIA Novosti).

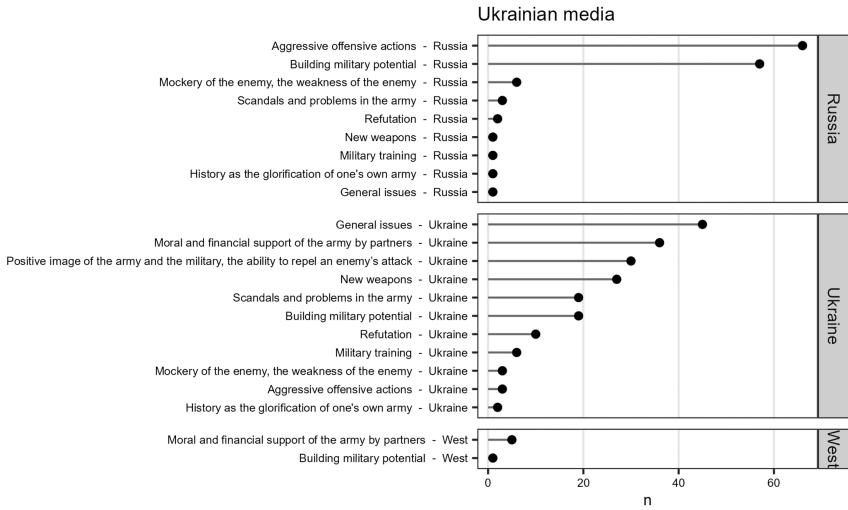


Figure 15.5 (b). The thematic content of Ukrainian Telegram channels information flows.

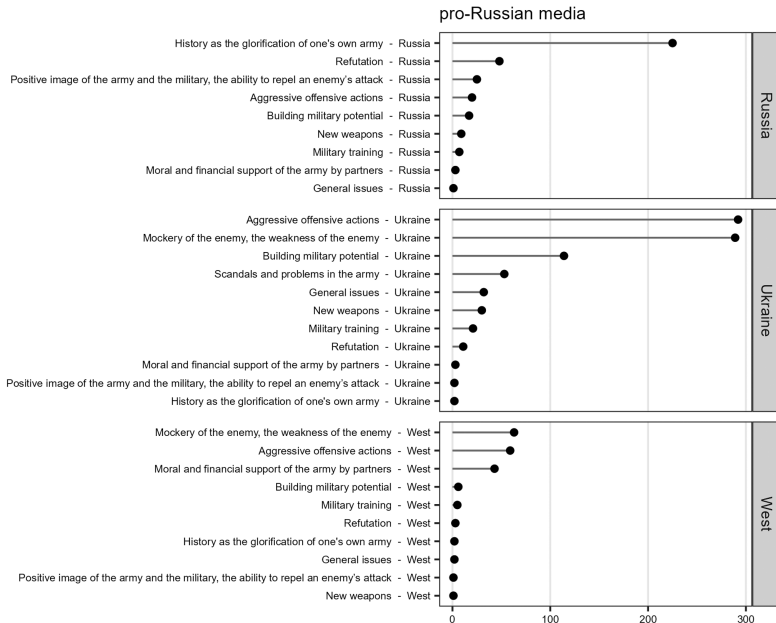


Figure 15.5 (c). The thematic content of pro-Russian Telegram channels information flows.

purposive manipulation of historical facts. Reports about the positive image of the RF modern army are quite a few (they occupy the sixth position);

- Pro-Russian Telegram channels (ZeRada, Ukraina.ru, Open Ukraine 37# and Legitimniy): the top theme is devoted to the historical greatness of the Tsarist Russian army and the army of the USSR, the RF army being their “rightful successor”. These messages are more emotionally elated than those of RIA Novosti and demonstrate absolute admiration for the Russian army at various historical periods. Concurrently, a clear message is noticeable: “The Russian army is a noble saviour army”. The second position is occupied by refutations about the RF potential attack on Ukraine (this topic is in the fifth position in RIA Novosti);
- Pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels (UNIAN, Dzerkalo Tyzhnia (ZN.Ua), InsiderUA): the RF aggressive offensive actions and its military capacity building.

## 2) Regarding the Armed Forces of Ukraine:

- RIA Novosti: aggressive offensive actions and development of the military capacity of Ukraine’s Armed Forces. The third position is occupied by general issues concerning the army of Ukraine. Taken into context, these topics do not seem accidental but serve a clear purpose: to prepare for the next information confrontation during a full-scale war while maintaining the information presence of the Ukrainian army in the media space;
- Pro-Russian Telegram channels (ZeRada, Ukraina.ru, Open Ukraine 37# and Legitimniy): almost the same number of messages depict, on the one hand, the Ukrainian Armed Forces as an aggressive entity, and, on the other hand, there is a constant mockery at everything related to the army of Ukraine. The third position is occupied by messages on the development of the Armed Forces military capacity and the fourth position refers to scandals in the army. This “vacillation” simultaneously pursues two goals, i.e. to intimidate its pro-Russian audience with the aggressive army of Ukraine while, on the other hand, portraying the Armed Forces of Ukraine as a ridiculously weak entity against the background of the RF glorified army. This paradox can be explained by a range of factors: the will to confuse the audience and make it doubt common sensical reality which is a typical technique of Russian propaganda and disinformation tactics; the need to strive to “capture” a wider audience and demonstrate the higher image of the Russian army while degrading the image of the Ukrainian army;
- Pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels (UNIAN, Dzerkalo Tyzhnia (ZN.Ua), InsiderUA): the main topics refer to general issues, partners’ moral and financial support of the army, the construction of a positive image of the Armed Forces and the ability to resist the enemy’s attacks, new weapons.

3) Regarding the West:

- RIA Novosti focuses on the aggressive nature of the West;
- pro-Russian Telegram channels pay little attention to the West, but their messages emphasise the opposite: mocking the West, and then demonstrating its aggressive nature;
- pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels: there is quite a small number of messages and they focus on the moral and financial support of the Armed Forces of Ukraine by the West (Figure 15.5 (a) Figure 15.5 (b) Figure 15.5 (c)).

Open demonstration of the power of the Russian army is derived implicitly: in reports about the historical past of the Russian army, reports that negatively position the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and the West in general. Thus, the frame “The RF Armed Forces are the army of liberators and victors” is constructed by the Russian state-owned RIA Novosti and pro-Russian Ukrainian Telegram channels, and this lays the foundations of how the RF Armed Forces will be perceived in the year leading to the war.

*The fourth evidence*

In the first set of evidence, we claimed that pro-Russian Telegram channels promptly assist the Russian one by duplicating its messages or creating the background for the next RF information throw. We have merged the information flows of the RIA Novosti and pro-Russian Telegram channels and their thematic-temporal structure demonstrates the strategy of presenting topics in information flows (Figure 15.6):

- Throughout the entire special FIMI operation, the Russian army’s history and its military are unquestionably glorified;
- The army’s positive image has a certain regularity, yet the coverage is not significant;
- On average, one to three (maximum) messages refer to the latest weapons, and the highest number of messages (nine) on this topic appear on week 34 (August 2021—that was the time when the results of the military-technical forum “Army 2021” were presented, mainly about the concluded contracts for the production and sale of Russian weapons);
- Refutation of the RF’s potential attack on Ukraine is rarely present in the Russian Telegram channel, but it is often mentioned from week 47 onward (November 2021) in pro-Russian channels, reaching up to six messages in January 2022;
- The “surge” of reports concerning the RF’ potential aggressive actions, its military capacity building and training falls on the week before the attack on Ukraine.



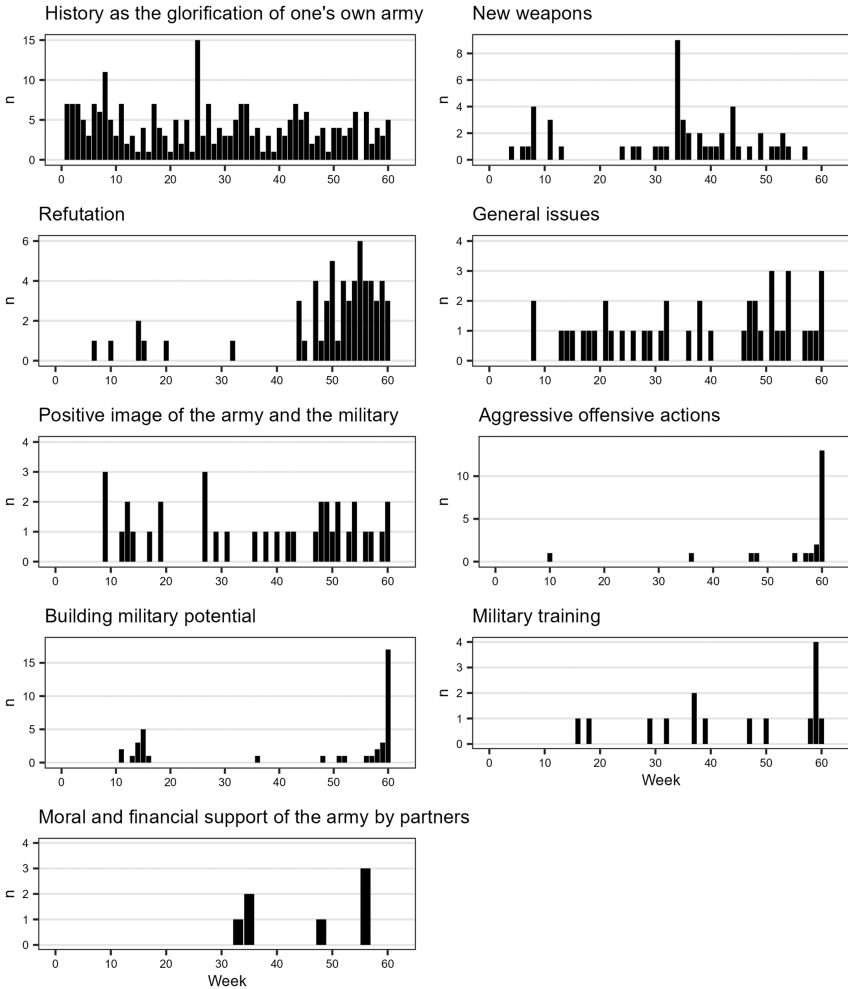


Figure 15.6 Thematic and temporal structure of Russian and pro-Russian Telegram channels.

In other words, the thematic and temporal structure of Russian and pro-Russian Telegram channels forms the background of the general perception of the RF Armed Forces as a historically invincible army. Simultaneously, they do not focus directly on the army’s modern military activity. We assume that was done on purpose to lull the vigilance of Ukraine and the West (it was important for the RF as Western intelligence services reported on a potential Russian attack on Ukraine). And only on the eve of the invasion, the number of reports concerning the “military readiness” of the Russian army increase.

## Conclusion

On the one hand, the hypothesis about the implementation of a special FIMI operation by the Russian Federation is confirmed, but on the other hand, we expected that this operation would be more straightforward and loud, instead, it turned out to be more subtle, although definitely intrusive. Obviously, this is how the “soft impact” of this FIMI operation manifests itself. We may conclude that this FIMI is a sign of the RF’s “sharp power” aimed to distract, manipulate the public opinion, and to influence the political and information environments in Ukraine.

## Notes

- 1 This study was conducted in the framework of the Jean Monnet Module “EU Strategic Communications: Counteraction to Destructive Influences” ((№ 101047033 ERASMUS-JMO-2021-MODULE).
- 2 The citation index is calculated based on the analysis of all mentions of the channel including reposts and mentions of the channel’s publications in other Telegram channels.
- 3 Data as of August 2022. Currently, TGStat does not show data for this channel.

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