

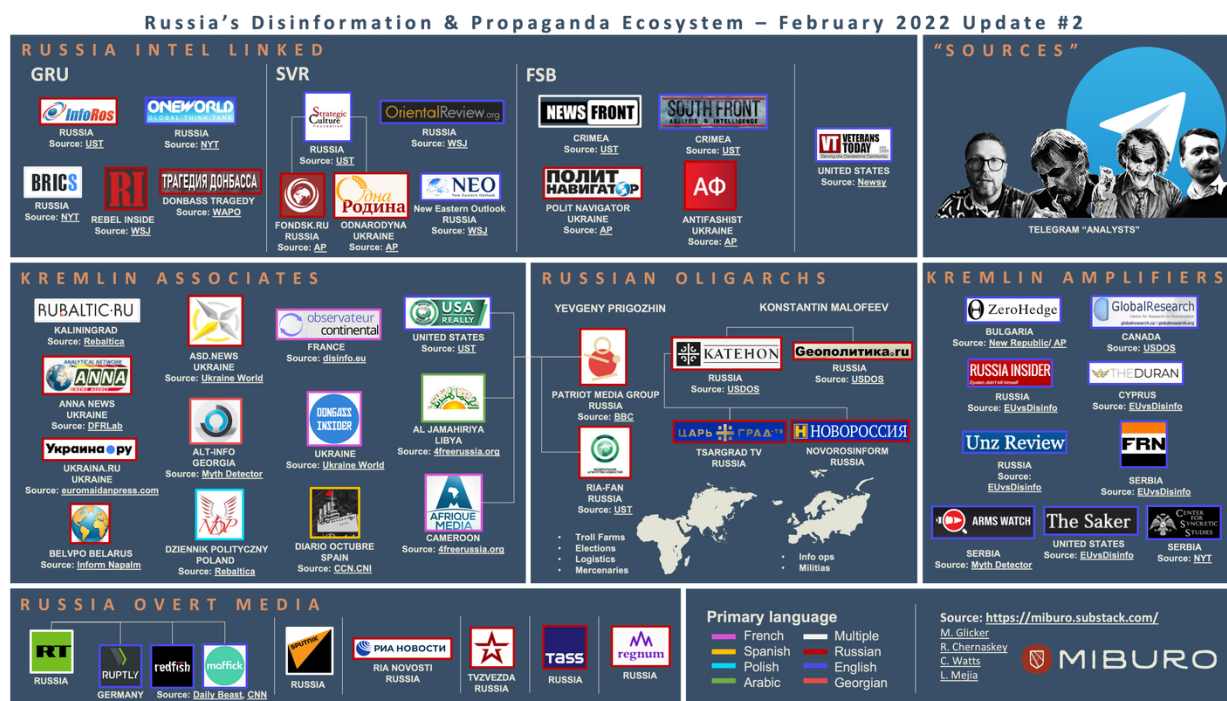
Russia's Propaganda & Disinformation Ecosystem - 2022 Update & New Disclosures

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New revelations and a structural update to our chart

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In April 2021, our team published an overview of the Russian propaganda and disinformation ecosystem—the media networks, outlets, and websites that often toe the Kremlin line, spread Russian propaganda or disinformation, and even, in some cases, take direction from Russian intelligence services or the Russian state.

While our 2021 chart was imperfect, it attempted to outline the environment in which Russian propaganda and disinformation flourish online and target audiences around the globe. In this updated 2022 chart, we've added elements to better reflect several components of Russia's sustained propaganda and disinformation campaigns. The new depiction further illustrates the breadth and depth of outlets linked to Russian intelligence services and offers a global context for the Kremlin's information operations. We've also color-coded each of the outlets' primary language in our chart.

Amid Russia's military buildup at Ukraine's borders and recent reports from the U.S. and allies of Moscow's plans to use disinformation as a pretense for an expanded incursion into Ukraine, we're providing a broader, more comprehensive view of the channels through which such disinformation flows.

What did we learn today?

According to reporting from the Associated Press, U.S. government officials revealed new information about some of the key outlets in the Russian media ecosystem and their connections to Russian intelligence services. Below is an outline of the outlets attributed as having connections to Russian intelligence services, including both Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) and its Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR).

- **Odnarodyna** is a Russian-language outlet publishing content highly critical of Ukraine that has infrastructure overlap with the Strategic Culture Foundation, which was sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department in April 2021 and outed as controlled by the SVR. According to these revelations, Odnarodyna is also linked to Russia's SVR, through its owner Vladimir Maksimenko, who is director of the Strategic Culture Foundation. U.S. officials said that Maksimenko "met with SVR handlers multiple times since 2014."
- **Fondsk**, the Russian-language version of the SVR-linked Strategic Culture Foundation, is also under Maksimenko and Strategic Culture Foundation's control, tying it to Russia's SVR as well.
- Both **Antifashist** and **Politnavigator** are Russian-language news sites directed by the Russian FSB. Both outlets target the Ukrainian information environment, spreading pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation designed to destabilize domestic Ukrainian politics. According to U.S. officials, direction from FSB also includes what *cannot* be published: "the managing editor of Antifashist allegedly was directed at least once by the FSB to delete material from the site."

Russian Foreign Intelligence (SVR)-linked outlets are built to last

New U.S. government disclosures reveal the SVR's interest in connecting like-minded parties around the world in a common pro-Russian worldview. Vladimir Maksimenko—alleged by the U.S. government to be managed by SVR handlers—as head of the internationally oriented English-language Strategic Culture Foundation, its Russian-language sister site Fondsk, and Russian-language anti-Ukraine outlet Odnarodyna, seeks to solidify domestic Russian audience views on Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukraine while influencing foreign audiences to buy into the same pro-Kremlin viewpoint. These narratives are then republished by websites like popular English-language financial

news site Zero Hedge. Maksimenko's actions to achieve audience unity are not limited to the internet, as he also appears at events in the physical world as a representative for Strategic Culture.

Russia's domestic intelligence (FSB) zeroes in on Ukraine

Recent revelations show the FSB is responsible for the bulk of Russian activity targeting domestic Ukrainian politics and cyber infrastructure—and according to these disclosures, the agency's information operations are no different. Both Antifashist and Politnavigator primarily target the domestic political environment in Ukraine, and both focus on those residing in occupied Ukrainian territories. While the two websites are not well-known to Westerners, inside Russia they both register among the top-cited Russian news sites in January 2022.

NewsFront—despite being removed from numerous social media platforms multiple times following 2021 sanctions stemming from its connections to the FSB—continues to distribute its content across platforms including both Facebook and VKontakte (VK). These disclosures reiterated NewsFront's ties to Russian intelligence, noting that FSB officers directed NewsFront head Konstantin Knyrik to “write stories specifically damaging to Ukraine's image,” and that Knyrik had been “praised by senior FSB officers for his work.”

Russia's Military Intelligence (GRU) is still active, too

Meanwhile, *The Washington Post* revealed last week that the GRU registered the website donbasstragedy.info, an outlet dedicated to framing the Ukrainian military for alleged war crimes, a favored recent hobby horse of the Russian media. This effort by the GRU represents more of the same: low-quality efforts to push a tired message. While the narrative of a “Ukrainian genocide” has permeated the Russian mainstream and fringe media of the West, there is no indication the effort of donbasstragedy.info had anything to do with the story's spread.

What's new in the Russian media landscape

In this update, we've added several new categories to our map of Russia's Disinformation & Propaganda Ecosystem, which includes several elements of particular importance amid increasing tensions with Ukraine:

- **“Sources”**: The Russian media environment, from overt state-run media to covert intelligence-backed outlets, is built on an infrastructure of influencers, anonymous Telegram channels, and content creators with nebulous ties to the wider ecosystem. Content is the lowest common denominator in the global information war, and these sources are the fuel for the system on a daily basis.

- **Russian Oligarchs:** Russian financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has expanded his operations and collected media assets both inside of Russia and abroad, particularly in Africa. We've also added several media properties associated with "God's Oligarch," the sanctioned businessman Konstantin Malofeev, which are of particular note given Malofeev's previous role in partially financing the 2014 invasion of Ukraine.
- **Kremlin Associates:** These are outlets regularly amplifying pro-Russia, pro-Kremlin narratives and themes. Many of these outlets have ties to known Russian influence agents who have been exposed and documented by researchers, activists, and governments. This list is far from exhaustive but reflects a sample of the global reach of this system.

What we have yet to see is the media system in its entirety converge on a single topic or narrative that has larger staying power. Partially, this is because most of Russia's state-linked media assets are simply unaware of what exactly will happen next. In the absence of further order, they do what is needed to sustain an audience: produce a high volume of content.

That high volume means that websites with higher reach sometimes pick up content that originated on sites with ties to Russian intelligence services. For example, according to the Associated Press, U.S. officials also noted that Zero Hedge "published articles created by Moscow-controlled media that were then shared by outlets and people unaware of their nexus to Russian intelligence."

Today, as Russia threatens an expanded incursion into Ukraine, we know significantly more than when Russia illegally annexed Crimea in 2014. As the light continues to shine on the shadowy people and outlets advancing Putin's disinformation, we'll continue to update our understanding of how the Kremlin seeks to subvert democracies worldwide. Stay tuned.



A guest post by

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