

How Telegram Channeled Russia's Political Intrigue

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September 05, 2017



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In January this year, Russia's state-run television channel Rossia-24 aired a special [report](#) featuring an anonymous political blogger. His face was concealed behind a black mask and his voice artificially altered.

Appearing on a wall-to-wall screen in front of a guest panel, the blogger explained he wasn't interested in reaching a mass audience. He was publishing for a niche demographic of political specialists and Kremlin insiders.

"We think of it as our responsibility to inform critical observers," the blogger, who called himself NeZygar, said. "We don't publish in the traditional blogosphere. We publish for those who understand and can evaluate."

In the months leading up to the interview, NeZygar had won notoriety for publishing

scandalous insider information about the inner workings of the Kremlin. The scoops were published entirely on Telegram, an instant messaging service similar to WhatsApp or Viber. Some of it even turned out to be true.

After the program aired, NeZygar mocked Rossia-24 on Telegram for airing an imposter. “[I’m] surprised,” he [wrote](#). “I don’t give interviews. I don’t like balaclavas. I don’t know a Pankin or a Bankin,” he said parodying the presenter’s name. “And I don’t want to.”

Whether NeZygar gave the interview or not, his cameo hurled into the spotlight a new phenomenon revolutionizing political gossip — anonymous bloggers spilling the beans on Telegram, the secret messaging service with Russian roots.

A Controversial Start

Telegram was launched by Russian entrepreneur Pavel Durov in 2013 when he was CEO of VK, Russia’s largest social network. In 2014, he was forced from VK and announced soon after that he was fleeing Russia.

Meanwhile, however, he had been working on an encrypted messaging service. It rivaled popular messengers like WhatsApp, while promising to protect users from third party interference.

Related article: [How Telegram Became the Durov Brothers' Weapon Against Surveillance](#)

Durov’s Telegram, which brands itself as sleek and fast, boasted 6 million active users in January this year. Its end-to-end encryption has made it popular in countries criticized for invasive surveillance and strict control over the internet, including Iran and Russia.

After Telegram refused to register with a state database of “disseminators of information” it came under increasing pressure. Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) said in May that the terror cell behind April’s St. Petersburg metro bombing used Telegram to mastermind their plan.

In what could have become a protracted faceoff between Durov and the Kremlin, Telegram announced it would comply with Roskomnadzor in June, with the caveat that they would not share users’ personal data.

Russian Channels

Telegram’s “Channels” feature, introduced in 2015, was a new way of broadcasting messages to a wide audience. The channels had no additional functions or frills, including “Likes” or comments. Simplicity was key.

Soon, they became essential to Russian news outlets and public figures who broadcast news, analysis and entertainment to millions of Telegram users. Even as government officials in Russia move to impose greater control over the internet and messaging services, they are reportedly among Telegram’s most loyal users.

“I had to join Telegram, because government officials insisted on communicating on that platform,” political scientist Yekaterina Schulmann told The Moscow Times. “Russian officials see Telegram as safe and they actively use it for private correspondence.”

But it is the anonymous political intrigue channels, like NeZygar’s, that have the upper echelons of Russia’s political sphere flocking to Telegram. “These channels are targeting the political class working within Moscow’s Garden Ring — governors and their entourage,” says political analyst Abbas Gallyamov, referring to the location of Russia’s main political institutions, such as the Kremlin, White House and State Duma.

NeZygar

The most popular anonymous political commentator on Telegram is NeZygar (Not Zygar). Since his cameo on state television in January, the channel’s following has jumped from 14,000 to 55,000 followers.

Named after Mikhail Zygar, a political journalist and author of “All the Kremlin’s Men,” a best-seller based on comments from Kremlin insiders, the channel is popular for high-stakes predictions on Russia’s political landscape.

NeZygar’s keystone prediction was the [resignation](#) of the head of Russia’s Federal Guard Service, or FSO, Yevgeny Murov in May 2016, which NeZygar called months in advance.

Some speculate the channel is run by Dmitry Kovalenko, the senior figure at the Renova business group. Other candidates are popular blogger Arseny Bobrovski and, ironically, Mikhail Zygar himself.

However stirring the predictions, NeZygar routinely misses the mark and the channel’s description contains a disclaimer warning “all information requires additional verification.”

Metodichka

Metodichka (Russian for Rulebook) was founded in August 2016. It publishes confidential documents, quotes and political commentary to 30,000 followers. Unlike NeZygar, Metodichka readers can contact the channel’s curators via a separate Telegram account to share tips or leaks.

Metodichka won notoriety in April for publicly [shaming](#) Kaliningrad governor Anton Alikhanov. In photos published in the local press, the channel spotted what it said were neo-Nazi badges on the governor’s coat in a scandal that seriously damaged Alikhanov’s reputation.

The channel’s overt criticism of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and its favorable take on State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin has led to some speculate whether Volodin’s entourage are behind the channel.

Out in the Open

Other anonymous channels, Karalulny, Akitilop and Temnik, mimic NeZygar and Metodichka but fall short both in the popularity and quality of their scoops.

Some prominent political commentators, whose channels are not anonymous, have also chosen Telegram as their platform. Political analyst Leonid Davydov runs Davydov.Index, named after his program on RBC TV. His Telegram channel has been advertised on [billboards](#) and evolved into a full-fledged [website](#).

Another prominent consultant, Yevgeny Minchenko, communicates with clients via Telegram and curates an expert-oriented channel called “Politburo 2.0” where he discusses the balance of power within Russia’s elite.

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Minchenko told The Moscow Times he was asked to do so by friends in Russia’s political elite, who are suspicious of U.S.-based social platforms. ”‘We don’t want to register on Facebook, ’” Minchenko cited them as saying. ”‘We don’t want this publicity.’”

“On Facebook, you read what the algorithm shows you, what Mark Zuckerberg wants you to read,” Minchenko added. “Telegram is convenient, you read what you’re interested in.”

Exercise caution

But the overall value of Russia’s anonymous Telegram channels shouldn’t be exaggerated, Minchenko says. Most have actually produced relatively few insights that turned out to be based in fact. And their following, however influential, is still relatively small.

“It’s just gossip on a new technological level,” Schulmann agrees, adding that, “If you don’t trust everything, and don’t see every message as a revelation and ultimate truth, these channels can be useful in a certain way — more information is always good.”

Gallyamov predicts Russia’s obsession with the Telegram channels will fade once the novelty wears off.

“The political class is craving for the unknown, something emotionally new. It’s all the same faces but there’s a new schtick,” he told The Moscow Times.

“But Russian politics itself is boring and over-regulated, There is no room to swing a cat.”

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/09/05/how-telegram-channeled-russias-political-intrigue-a58668>