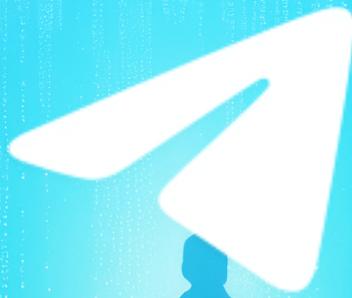


DISINFORMATION ON TELEGRAM IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC: ORGANIZATIONAL AND FINANCIAL BACKGROUND

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INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of the Czech disinformation space¹, the organizational and financial dimensions of disinformation actors have emerged as critical yet underexplored facets. Traditional approaches to combating disinformation have predominantly focused on media monitoring and analysis, leaving a void in understanding how these actors operate, collaborate, and sustain their activities financially. This knowledge is pivotal in devising effective policies and civic outreach initiatives aimed at mitigating the adverse societal impacts of disinformation.

Within this field, the messaging application Telegram has become a hotbed for disseminating disinformation and conspiracy theories. It operates in a relatively unregulated space, facilitating the formation of potentially radicalized communities and serving as a fundraising platform for disinformation actors. Beyond the challenges posed by the lack of regulation, Telegram introduces issues of strengthened echo chambers, non-transparency, and an increased potential for radicalization and hostile state information operations. Telegram, in essence, remains a black box, a platform where the mechanics of the disinformation ecosystem are not well understood.

This report explores the disinformation landscape of Telegram within the context of the Czech Republic, delving into the types of actors, their organizational structures, and financial background, shedding light on their operational methods and funding sources. Additionally, it scrutinizes their cross-platform presence, discerning whether actors exclusively utilize Telegram or extend their reach to other platforms. Furthermore, the report explores the collaborative dynamics among Telegram actors, examining whether they operate independently or engage in partnerships.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this report involved systematic collection, analysis, and understanding of data on the organizational and financial landscape of disinformation channels on Telegram in the Czech Republic. The project initiation involved collection of data from diverse sources to build a comprehensive database of Czech Telegram channels disseminating disinformation². Cooperation was established with the tech company [Gerulata Technologies](#) using their Gerulata Juno tool. This tool was utilized to monitor and analyze Telegram channels, focusing on disinformation content and to uncover connections, assess impact, and understand messaging patterns. It is important to highlight that the report does not determine which channels are problematic, but relies on compiled lists from Gerulata Technologies and sources like [Investigace.cz](#) for reference.

The fundamental aspect of the research involved delving into the funding mechanisms of disinformation on Telegram. Drawing from [PSSI's established methodology](#), we explored sources of income, including voluntary contributions, e-shop operation, ads/brand cooperation, and publishing activities. PSSI also cooperated with investigative journalists from [Investigative Center of Ján Kuciak \(ICJK\)](#) who further contributed to uncovering funding patterns, providing a deeper understanding of the financial modus operandi on Telegram.

¹ PSSI uses the term “disinformation” in the sense of dissemination of false or misleading information with the intention to deceive or mislead, often with the goal of political or economic gain. These can be hostile narratives, hoaxes, or various forms of propaganda that can be linked to foreign information operations, usually from Russia, aiming to undermine democratic institutions and values and the Czech foreign policy orientation. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation>

² The database is available upon request at tkacova@pssi.cz

Data collection primarily occurred during the months of September and October 2023, using Gerulata Juno, and was later expanded to cover the period from January to December 2023 as the tool provided extended capabilities. The analysis focused on Telegram disinformation channels drawing upon the Gerulata Juno database and investigations sourced from Investigace.cz with more than 1,000 subscribers which produced 92 channels for analysis (including 8 Slovak channels with occasional Czech content). Using the Gerulata Juno tool, PSSI's researchers were able to capture posts, comments, meta-data, and source profile information from monitored Telegram channels. The tool (in some cases) helped to uncover the identity of the channels' owners, unveil connections between other actors on Telegram, and identify patterns of coordination among hostile actors. Additionally, its capabilities enabled the recognition of text within images and the generation of transcriptions for video content.

Generally, analyzing disinformation on Telegram poses unique challenges when compared to mainstream platforms like Facebook or X (formerly Twitter). Telegram channels often operate within closed ecosystems, limiting the visibility of disinformation to specific communities. Telegram's design facilitates the creation of anonymous channels with vague names, providing a platform for disinformation actors to operate with increased anonymity and low accountability. Unlike other platforms, Telegram does not have a verified user system, making it challenging to authenticate the identity of channel owners or administrators when not voluntarily disclosed.

That said, some Telegram channels provide information about their owners and administrators, and channel descriptions, offering some insights into the individuals behind the content. Some channels also openly share information about fundraising methods, including links to external platforms, enabling subscribers to contribute financially.

WHAT IS (NOT) TELEGRAM?

Prior to analyzing Telegram in the Czech Republic, it is crucial to delve into the complexity of Telegram in general, drawing insights from Gerulata Technologies' knowledge base. Telegram, founded by the Durov brothers (Russian-born entrepreneurs), offers a cloud-based, end-to-end encrypted platform encompassing messaging, calls, and face-to-face communication. Its banning mechanisms are far less stringent compared to other platforms. Diverse content can be found on Telegram, ranging from propaganda and graphic war videos to illicit trade, cybercrime, crypto discussions, and cricket betting, alongside the presence of neo-Nazi content. The reporting system on Telegram includes child abuse, copyright infringement, fake accounts, illegal drugs, personal details exposure, pornography, violence, spam, and more. Yet, Telegram is marked by a negligent stance toward illicit content, leading to significant [fines](#) from various European courts for its inadequate content moderation practices. When it comes to violent content, Telegram does restrict it, but does not ban/delete it. This means the restricted content/channels do not show up in the users' search and discoverability, but they are still active, and the problematic content can get out to other, unrestricted channels.

Further delving into the nuances of Telegram uncovers specific features that shape the platform. Usernames, case-sensitive and unique, are optional, and users can form groups where the display name is not unique. Telegram encompasses channels with unlimited members, where only admins can post, and basic groups, limited to 200 members, accessible through invite links. Supergroups, with a maximum of 200,000 members, can be private or public. In contrast with other platforms, Telegram [supports](#) the utilization of bots for automating conversations, albeit at the cost of reduced privacy protection for users. Bots, lacking phone numbers, can be interacted with using the /help command. Telegram's privacy measures are less strict, with their servers retaining copies of all unencrypted messages and storing the address book

of every user. Additionally, Telegram collects information such as IP addresses, recipients, and timestamps for each message. Unlike other similar platforms (Signal or WhatsApp), Telegram only encrypts messages using its special “secret chat” option, available only on mobile apps.

In the context of EU regulation of digital platforms, Telegram is not a signatory of the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, nor is it a designated very large online platform (VLOP) according to the Digital Services Act (DSA) provisions. Therefore, the DSA applies to Telegram as of February 17, 2024, by which date the platform is obligated to nominate its representative in the EU. Telegram has indicated its commitment to complying with the DSA, but considering its past lax approach to illegal content, there are concerns about how the platform will implement the EU legislation. Failure to comply with DSA requirements can result in financial consequences, as laid down in member states’ national laws.

Telegram is the third most downloaded messenger app globally after WhatsApp and Snapchat, and boasts 800 million monthly active users, with India, Russia, and the US being its prominent markets in 2023. It does not disclose country-specific user numbers, but in the Czech Republic, an estimated minimum of 10% of Internet users use the platform, according to media expert Josef Šlerka. Telegram rejects selling ads to safeguard user privacy, relying solely on funding from one of its founders, Pavel Durov. The platform adopted a freemium model in June 2022, introducing paid subscriptions that offered enhanced features like increased channel follow limits, faster download speeds, and premium stickers. The platform’s in-app revenue surpassed \$1 million in October 2022.

TYPES OF ACTORS AND THEIR ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

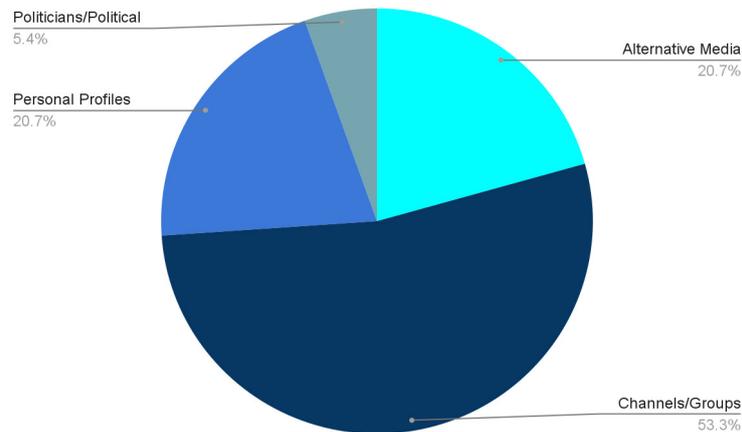
Disinformation on Telegram is a dynamic landscape characterized by a plethora of actors spanning various sectors of society. What sets Telegram apart from other platforms in this regard is that it promotes extremist content, graphic images of violence, and alleged images directly from the (Ukrainian) war front circulate freely. Channels engaging with this type of content (mostly pseudo-news sources) often adopt a unique appeal, positioning themselves as exclusive news sources, daring users to explore narratives not found elsewhere. Furthermore, in certain channels, there was a trend of sharing videos that would be allegedly deleted on Facebook (or other platforms). Additionally, these channels actively encouraged their subscribers to share the Telegram channel on other platforms (e.g., on Facebook), emphasizing a preference for Telegram as a source of information over other platforms.

Several individuals employ a **strategy of utilizing multiple channels on Telegram**, typically maintaining two or three channels simultaneously. These channels may include personal accounts bearing the individual’s name or channels associated with their projects and affiliations with various organizations or associations (e.g., David Formánek and his channels *Otevři svou mysl - Open Your Mind*, *Otevři svou duši - Open Your Soul* and *CZ kulový blesk zpravodajský kanál - CZ Ball Lighting News Channel*).

Analyzing the data, PSSI’s researchers recognize four categories that summarize the diverse range of entities contributing to promotion of disinformation on Telegram. The first category includes **Alternative Media (19)**, which frequently operate primarily as websites. The second category includes broadly themed **Telegram Channels/Groups (49)** (comprising channels such as pseudo-news sources, channels of civil society organizations, or those with “regional” or esoteric names, distinct from channels named after individuals with often vague names (but not exclusively anonymous)), covering various topics such as war and various conspiracies. The third category consists of **Personal Profiles (19)**, indicating the presence of individual profiles, pointing to the role of personal influencers or content creators, while the fourth category involves **Politicians or Political Movements (5)**, suggesting a limited presence of political figures or

movements using Telegram as a platform for communication and outreach. The graph below illustrates the share of each category.

Graph 1: Basic Categorization of the Actors on Czech Telegram



Upon delving deeper, these categories can be further classified based on criteria such as anonymity, organizational background, and topic focus. This additional categorization encompasses **anonymous channels** with vague or unclear names, posing challenges in attribution (*Svoboda 365 (Freedom 365)*, *neČT24* (opposing mainstream Czech Television), or *Selský rozum (Common Sense)*) and introducing complexity by hindering efforts to understand their motivations and affiliations. The choice of names, such as “freedom” or “common sense,” suggests a departure from mainstream labels, potentially appealing to audiences seeking alternative perspectives. The **regional focus of channels** like *Morava* (Moravia—a Czech region) or *Česká kotlina* (Czech Basin) leverage geographical proximity to establish emotional connections with audiences. Additionally, these channels might strategically employ neutral names, potentially aiming to attract individuals who might otherwise be skeptical of alternative news sources by appearing more regionally focused and familiar.

Furthermore, there are **channels presenting themselves as pseudo-news sources** (*neČT24* or *MG - Zprávy 24/7 bez cenzury MG - News 24/7 Without Censorship*), adopting either vague names or acronyms to present themselves as reliable news sources. Several of these channels focus their content on the war in Ukraine, adopting strongly pro-Russian narratives (*Operace Z - OPičákovy frontové svodky (Operation Z - OPičák’s Frontline Summaries)*, *Maršal Malinovskij*), although some of their posts are also dedicated to war in the Middle East. The majority of the channels mentioned above are **exclusively present on Telegram**, lacking any other platform presence, utilizing the platform’s lack of regulation to propagate their pro-Russian messaging and disinformation efforts. In terms of potential extremist messaging and calls for action, these channels often share videos discussing alleged consequences of COVID-19 vaccination, portray Ukrainians as Nazis, express admiration for Russia, and showcase anti-government posts. They also criticize the European Union and present a positive view of the past regime in Czechoslovakia, mostly encouraging their audience to spread and share such content.

Several channels on Telegram are linked to established **disinformation websites** (*CZ24*, *AC24*, *Aeronet*, *Incorrect*, or *Protiproud*). These channels primarily use Telegram for quick notifications of new posts, sharing content directly from associated websites, with a predominant focus on widespread distribution rather than disseminating extremist material. Telegram also hosts a diverse array of **Czech politicians**,

politically engaged individuals, and political movements, spanning from far-right (Ivan David) to far-left (Petr Cvalín) affiliations, with some having connections to Russia, such as the pro-Kremlin marginal party *Aliance národních sil* (Alliance of National Forces) led by Vladimíra Vítová who was used as an expert by the official representation of the Russian Federation in the Czech Republic.

Telegram also provides space for profit-driven actors, so-called **disinformation businessmen**³ (Ondřej Tanistra, Pavel Zítko (also presidential elections hopeful in 2023), or Renáta Reindlová). This category underscores the intersection of financial interests with the dissemination of disinformation. These actors promote their business by using disinformation.⁴ Another category encompasses **civil society organizations and activists** (Zlatý špendlík (Golden Pin), Svobodné radio (Free radio), Srdcem pro vlast (A Heart for the Motherland), and Společenství legitimních věřitelů České republiky (Community of Legitimate Creditors of the Czech Republic) which suggests a collaborative effort to shape narratives around civic freedom, though some, like the Community of Legitimate Creditors of the CZ, advocate for the restoration of Czechoslovakia. The content on these Telegram channels is largely non-exclusive, often cross-posted on various platforms, sharing material from associated websites or other Telegram channels.

Channels centered around **esotericism**, astrology, and alternative worldviews also can be found on Czech Telegram, suggesting the existence of a community intrigued by non-mainstream and unconventional perspectives (e.g. Renata Bernardi (owns channels TV Šaligrad and Cvrčky nežeru (I don't eat crickets)), Michal Shark or Symbolic Thinking T. Micic). Esoteric content on the Czech Telegram platform stands out, with its prevalence differing from broader social media trends and appearing more as a Slovak phenomenon. Moreover, there are channels like Česko-Slovenská domobrana (Czecho-Slovak Militia) or Česi a Slováci na Telegramu (Czechs and Slovaks on Telegram) that are **targeting both Czech and Slovak audiences**. However, it appears that these channels are predominantly operated by Czech individuals. This cross-border nature of disinformation efforts underscores the interconnectedness of information dissemination across national boundaries, and it is visible on Telegram more than on other platforms.

Last but not least, Telegram serves as a **fertile ground for the dissemination of conspiracy theories**, challenging the legitimacy of mainstream information sources. Channels like *Absurdní svět* (Absurd World) actively engage in spreading narratives that question global organizations, world orders, and alleged cover-ups, reflecting a broader trend of distrust in public institutions.

Presence on Other Platforms

The landscape of Telegram channels extends beyond, with many content creators strategically diversifying their presence across various online platforms. From video-centric platforms (YouTube, Rumble, or Odysee) to social media giants (Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter)), these channels use diverse ecosystems to disseminate and monetize their content.

Video platforms emerge as the primary choice for Telegram actors expanding their reach. YouTube, Rumble, and Odysee serve as popular outlets for sharing video content, reflecting the emphasis on visual storytelling and information dissemination. This aligns with the broader trend in the digital landscape, where video content continues to dominate user engagement. Notably, Rumble distinguishes itself with

³ PSSI identifies four business models of the Czech disinformation landscape: *Preachers, Businessmen, Healers, and Esoterics*.

⁴ One of the examples is Pavel Zítko, whose business ventures include the sale of various products (e.g. a “miracle” hair dryer priced at €399), and the promotion of non-existent cryptocurrencies.

higher monetization options compared to YouTube, making it an attractive choice for smaller content creators seeking increased financial opportunities.

Channels extend their reach through established social media platforms like Facebook (more than a half of the channels) and X (formerly Twitter). This amplification strategy enhances content visibility and facilitates interaction with a broader audience. On the other hand, podcast platforms (Spotify, Apple Podcasts or SoundCloud) are not particularly popular among these actors (used only by 5% of the examined actors). To a smaller extent, nine Czech Telegram channels extend their reach to VKontakte - the Russian equivalent of Facebook, tapping into this platform's specific user base. Some channels also establish their own websites (including e-shops), creating digital hubs that provide centralized access to their content.

However, there are still about 20% of the examined channels that lack a presence on other platforms. Primarily, these channels position themselves as news sources, delivering uncensored and unbiased news. However, a closer look reveals that many of these channels predominantly focus on content related to the war in Ukraine, often disseminating pro-Russian propaganda. This observation underscores the prevalence of such narratives within channels operating exclusively on Telegram, emphasizing the platform's role in facilitating the spread of specific geopolitical perspectives and information biases.

A limited number of channels, which are active on other platforms, occasionally share links from those platforms in their Telegram channel posts (e.g., Facebook or YouTube), encouraging users to join them. In contrast, certain channels criticize these platforms and also others, labeling them as "Western," and praise Telegram as the only platform free from Western influence.

Connections

Combining manual channel searches and analysis with the use of Gerulata Juno, which can visualize networks using the built-in Explorer tool, enabled the uncovering of connections among the monitored channels.

While some actors, like *Přátelé Ruska* (*Friends of Russia*) group and *Svoboda 365* (*Freedom 365*) channel, frequently appear in the sharing networks of multiple channels, others operate more independently. The collaborative trend suggests a certain level of coordination, where channels amplify and reinforce each other's narratives, with few instances of channels operating independently. Telegram serves as a central hub for disinformation, but its connections extend beyond the platform. Channels like *CZ24 News* and *AC24* bridge the Telegram space with forums, chats, and websites, creating a multi-platform presence. This interconnectivity underscores the adaptability of disinformation actors, seamlessly navigating between Telegram and other online spaces to maximize their impact.

A notable trend is the prevalence of channels functioning as aggregators and amplifiers rather than content creators. The emphasis on sharing content, often from external sources, suggests a strategic approach focused on disseminating specific narratives rather than original content creation. Personal connections and affiliations between individuals also play a crucial role in shaping narratives and influencing audiences.

organization called the National Militia. The organization is [mentioned](#) as a risk in the reports of the Czech security institutions and is known, for example, for the opening of a fake consulate of the Donetsk People's Republic in the Czech city of Ostrava

InfoDefenseCZE, a Czech mutation of the international channel InfoDefense with multiple language mutations and a call for volunteer translators, also unfolds with potential ties to pro-Russian affiliations. The channel began to take shape in the aftermath of the February invasion. LeMonde's [insights](#) shed light on the origins of InfoDefense that can be traced to the concerted efforts of a group of volunteers responding to the call of Yury Podolyak, a pro-Russian Ukrainian blogger facing sanctions in his country.

Another potential case of Russian influence on Czech Telegram is also evident through the channel of *Jakub Zieba*, a student studying in Russia. His channel aims to introduce and popularize Russia, attempting to showcase what life allegedly looks like in the country.

In general, the Czech Telegram landscape is marked by several anonymous channels posing as pseudo-news sources, purportedly reporting on the war in Ukraine while disseminating pro-Russian propaganda. This phenomenon underscores a broader issue with Telegram as a platform, as its functioning facilitates (hidden) foreign influence, raising concerns about the platform's tendency to manipulate and disinformation campaigns.

TOP CHANNELS BASED ON PERFORMANCE

This chapter focuses on the top-performing Telegram channels based on the metrics of user interactions, content production, and data peaks, offering insights into trends and dynamics within the platform.

At the **forefront of influential channels**, based on the number of subscribers, is CZ24 News, channel of a well-known disinformation website, operating as a news aggregator. Noteworthy are its potential ties to China, indicated by declared institutional background in Hong Kong and potentially Chinese bank account manager (Jie Liang), as Investigative Center of Jan Kuciak found out. Channels such as *Absurdní Svět* (*Absurd World*), *neČT24*, and *Selský Rozum* (*Common Sense*) are key examples of maintaining anonymity, perpetuating conspiracy theories and disinformation. Their content spans a spectrum, from discussions about the war in Ukraine to pro-Russian narratives, challenging established viewpoints and amplifying alternative perspectives. In the wake of the COVID-19 era, individuals like David Formánek (*Otevři svou mysl*) and Tomáš Lukavec (*Zákony Bohatství - Laws of Wealth*) have risen to prominence. While Formánek has multiple projects and channels across Telegram, Lukavec not only provides online courses and events but also contributes to the Slovak disinformation portal *Infovojna* (*InfoWar*). Investigative Center of Jan Kuciak further found out that Lukavec claims that he has trained and organized workshops for managers of well-known companies such as Seznam.cz, Commercial Bank, OVB, Marks & Spencer, RE/MAX, T-Mobile, and he teaches at several universities. Moreover, he interviewed conspirators like Scott Ritter who, [according to](#) Slovak police, started writing comments for Russia Today in December 2019.

When examining the number of interactions over the past year (from January 1 to December 2023), five channels, mostly falling under the categories of anonymous, posing as pseudo-news sources, and pro-Russian (*CZ24 News*, *neČT24*, *Selský Rozum* (*Common Sense*), *Český list* (*Czech Letter*) (the only one with known background), and *Absurdní svět* (*Absurd World*)) have surpassed the one-million mark, with two channels exceeding three million interactions.

Table 1: List of Channels with Most Interactions including Content and Reactions (from January 1 to December 1, 2023)

	Name	Content	Interactions	Reactions
	CZ24.NEWS (cz24news)	36k	3.618M	3.618M
	neCT24 (neCT24)	29.74k	3.09M	3.09M
	Selský Rozum (selskyrozum)	23.12k	1.449M	1.449M
	Český List (LussiList)	24.28k	1.277M	1.277M
	Absurdni svet (absurdnisvet)	12.17k	1.236M	1.236M

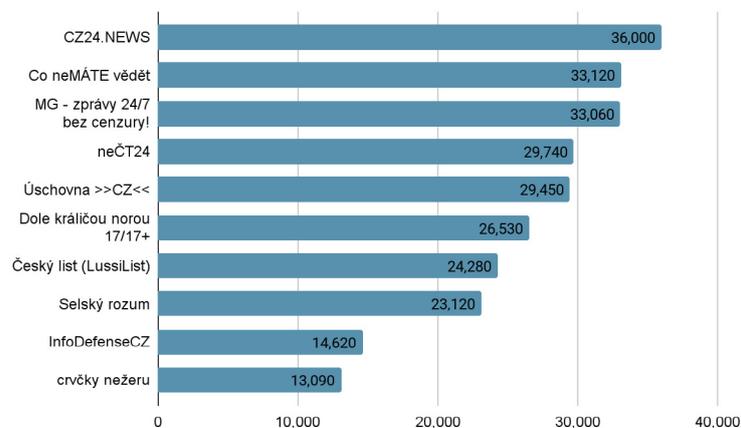
Below is a graph presenting data peaks of top channels, including their respective colors, according to the table above. Posts having the most interactions were posted only on one channel, rather than shared across multiple channels. This suggests that there was no unifying topic or event whose posting correlated with the largest measured interactions. For instance, the CZ24 News channel stood out with a post asking for financial support and providing instructions on how to bypass the blocking of alternative media.

Graph 2: Data Peaks of Top Channels with Most Interactions (from January 1 to December 1, 2023)



When looking at the content output of the top 10 channels during the same period, it reveals a different pattern. The CZ24 News website’s anonymous pseudo-news channel had the most interactions and content, but other channels with the most interactions varied in terms of content. Overall, they all share the feature of being mostly anonymous pseudo-news sources.

Graph 3: Number of Content of top 10 Channels with Most Content (from January 1 to December 1, 2023)



FINANCIAL BACKGROUND

In general, approximately 62% of the examined channels use at least one funding source to support their activities. While some channels explicitly outline account information for direct voluntary contributions, many provide options for financial support through alternative platforms. The primary funding streams are voluntary contributions, advertisements, entrepreneurial activities, e-shop, and instances where channels leverage multiple funding sources.

Voluntary contributions serve as a significant funding source (45% of analyzed channels), occurring through both transparent and non-transparent accounts. Both types of accounts often feature in channel descriptions or as pinned messages. A notable trend is the option for direct donations via Telegram, facilitated by the platform's "donate" button. This streamlined approach allows users to contribute seamlessly, enhancing the channels' financial resilience.

Beyond voluntary contributions, channels diversify their revenue streams through advertisements, predominantly hosted on external websites. E-shop activities, including sale of books and other merchandise, further contribute to the financial ecosystem. Advertisements contribute to the financial model of certain channels, particularly those affiliated with disinformation websites (*Protiproud*, *Otevři svou mysl - Open Your Mind*, or *Incorrect*). Revenue generated through ads contributes to the funding pool for these channels.⁶

Many channels also strategically expand their digital footprint by exploring membership models on platforms like YouTube and other (video) monetization platforms such as Oddyssee and Rumble. The allure of higher monetization options on platforms like Rumble incentivizes content creators, offering an alternative or complementary space to engage with audiences and generate revenue. Some Telegram channels also explore alternative platforms such as HeroHero as another platform offering monetization opportunities.

However, in general, the actors start their Telegram channels not primarily for financial gains but utilize other platforms and activities to raise funds. Telegram's appeal lies mainly in its minimal regulation and transparency, as it does not mandate public disclosure of channel ownership details. Consequently, it

⁶ One of the examples is disinformation website *Protiproud* which, according to PSSI's earlier [study](#), generated 133,414.58 CZK (€ 5,500) per month from automated advertisements based on data from April to June 2023).

predominantly serves ideological and propagandistic objectives. Simultaneously, it indirectly contributes to financial benefits by drawing new followers to other profit-generating platforms utilized by disseminators of disinformation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Telegram serves as a fertile ground for the propagation of conspiracy theories and alternative narratives, presenting a significant challenge for regulators and policymakers. What sets Telegram apart from other platforms is the free circulation of extremist content, graphic images of violence, and alleged images directly from the war front. Channels engaging in this content, mostly pseudo-news sources, often create an appealing image, positioning themselves as exclusive news sources that dare users to explore narratives not found elsewhere.

Based on the categorization of Czech Telegram channels, broadly-themed channels, including pseudo-news, and those with “regional” or esoteric names, distinct from individual-named channels, dominate the disinformation space, covering topics ranging from war to conspiracy theories. Alternative media, personal profiles, and political movements also play significant roles. Telegram’s design, allowing anonymous channels with vague names, hinders attribution. Some channels deliberately use ambiguous names to attract audiences seeking alternative perspectives, posing a challenge in understanding motivations and affiliations.

When it comes to financial motivations, most actors utilize various funding sources, but Telegram is not their primary platform for fundraising. Voluntary contributions are a major funding source, facilitated by Telegram’s “donate” button. Channels also diversify revenue through advertisements, e-shop sales, and memberships on external platforms like YouTube. Generally, Telegram channels are initiated not primarily for financial gain, serving ideological purposes with the platform’s low regulation, and concurrently acting as a conduit to attract new followers to other monetization platforms used by disinformation actors. As indicated, channels strategically extend their reach to video platforms (YouTube, Rumble), social media (Facebook, X), podcasts, and even VKontakte platform.

While some channels operate more autonomously, there is a prevalent trend of collaboration, with channels amplifying each other’s narratives and creating a cohesive disinformation ecosystem. This collaborative environment is marked by shared content, references, and affiliations. As indicated, many channels act as aggregators, emphasizing the sharing of content over original creation. Personal affiliations also play a crucial role, shaping narratives and influencing audiences. Furthermore, some channels exhibit potential ties to Russian influence.

Although the application does not **amplify** content algorithmically, there is clear evidence not only in the Czech Republic that disinformation and even extremist content thrive on this platform. Telegram has evolved into a **blend** of a messaging and a social media platform, posing an alternative to platforms like WhatsApp, Signal, or even Facebook. Given its relatively small production team, the app also lacks the capacity and willingness to effectively moderate content from its rapidly expanding global user base. Telegram positions itself as a free speech alternative, resulting in minimal platform guidelines and violation of EU regulation (already fined by several European courts). While the app bans explicit calls to violence and reportedly removes such content, it has gained a reputation for allowing hateful content to go largely unchecked, despite occasional efforts to address specific instances (e.g., January 6 United States Capitol attack).

Telegram is here to stay, as well as the argument for its limited regulation, which needs to be taken into consideration when thinking about how to counter disinformation on this platform. Based on our findings, we provide recommendations as follows:

— **Systematic Monitoring and Analysis, and Development of Analytical Tools:**

To enhance the effectiveness of monitoring, it is crucial to conduct in-depth research that delves into the features of the disinformation ecosystem on Telegram. This includes understanding its impact on audience extremization, discerning its structural nuances for disinformation actors, and comprehending its role in radicalization and the spread of extreme content. By systematically analyzing Telegram's unique functions and role within the broader ecosystem, researchers can unravel its specific contributions and appeal to actors already engaged on other platforms. This comprehensive investigation should aim to answer critical questions, such as how Telegram complements existing platforms, attracts disinformation efforts, and potentially amplifies radicalization through factors like bot activity and fake accounts. At the same time, investments in research and development of analytical tools specifically designed for investigating disinformation on Telegram needs boosting. This includes enhancing existing tools and creating new technologies to track and analyze disinformation networks. It is important that tech companies cooperate with researchers and other experts during the development of such tools to ensure their maximum suitability for this very particular field of analysis. Moreover, it is essential to train such tools in languages other than English. In the context of Telegram, Slavic languages are of particular importance.

— **Educational Campaigns:**

Public awareness campaigns to educate users about the risks associated with consuming information on Telegram should be launched, and the platform's tendency to disinformation and the importance of cross-referencing information from multiple sources emphasized. These campaigns should specifically address the risks of disinformation on Telegram. Focused on the challenges within the platform, the campaigns would cover the basics of working with information and be led collaboratively by relevant stakeholders (including governmental bodies and research institutions). Using various media channels, the outreach aims to educate users about Telegram's distinct risks.

— **Advocacy for Enhanced Regulation and Oversight on Telegram:**

Given Telegram's role as a significant platform for disinformation, regulatory measures should be explored to mitigate its adverse effects. Policymakers should collaborate with technology companies to exert necessary pressure on Telegram, including also cooperation with civil society to develop and implement effective regulatory frameworks that address disinformation. Advocating for higher accountability on the side of Telegram is a big challenge and will require big negotiating power. Therefore, opportunities should be sought on a higher level, for example EU-wide. It remains to be seen how (and if) legislation like the EU Digital Services Act will impact Telegram, and if it proves itself as a way forward. In cases of platforms with a track record of insufficient illegal and problematic content moderation, like Telegram, sanctioning based on the principle of repeated offense can be a suitable approach.

— **Enforce Existing Regulations:**

Sometimes it is more practical to encourage and enforce existing regulations rather than push for new ones. Although Telegram tends to just restrict extremist content outreach rather than take it down, [cases from abroad](#) show the restriction can make content views drop even by 70%. These restrictions can provide the opportunity for the first step in limiting problematic content

on Telegram. However, this is still mainly applicable for extremist, explicit violent content rather than disinformation itself, but these two often go hand in hand.

— **Additional Pressure from App Stores:**

Regulation of extremist content might indeed be the gateway to tackling other types of problematic content, such as disinformation and conspiracy theories, that often accompany it. Alongside pressure from governments and law enforcement, entities like Google or Apple should also leverage their ability to restrict the app's availability in their app stores to address the platform's passivity in moderating problematic content, which can be a breach of Google Play and Apple Store's terms of service.