



Article

# Trust in Anonymous News? How Users Navigate Political News Channels on Russian Telegram

Anna Litvinenko <sup>1,\*</sup> and Anna Smoliarova <sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> Institute for Media and Communication Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, 14195 Berlin, Germany<sup>2</sup> DAAD Center for German Studies, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 9190500, Israel

\* Correspondence: anna.litvinenko@fu-berlin.de

**Abstract:** The paper explores the phenomenon of anonymous news channels on Russian Telegram, which have become increasingly popular in recent years. Drawing on 25 self-confrontation interviews, we answer the following questions: Do users trust anonymous news? If not, why do they keep using this information source? How does a restrictive socio-political context influence users' trust in alternative news sources? Our results show that, in Russia, the concept of trust is linked to the normative democratic understanding of journalistic functions. At the same time, many users believe that trust in media is not at all necessary and develop individual strategies to navigate a "chaos of narratives". The paper discusses Telegram's role in shaping trust or distrust in news.

**Keywords:** trust in media; Telegram; anonymous news; Russia

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, media consumption has undergone a significant transformation marked by noticeably lower trust in mainstream media (Newman et al. 2023). Against the backdrop of eroding media trust, coupled with rising populism and the growing polarization of public communication, citizens increasingly turn to alternative news sources. In authoritarian settings, this dynamic is further intensified by state censorship and many people's need to circumvent this intervention. This article explores the phenomenon of anonymous news channels on Telegram (TG), which have gained popularity among Russian users over the past six years. Political TG news channels with several hundreds of thousands of followers wield influence comparable to the country's leading professional media (Medialogia 2019). The messaging application was officially banned in Russia in 2018, but this ban only increased TG's popularity. Due to its perceived security (Herasimenka et al. 2022), the messaging platform has become popular in restrictive media environments such as Iran, Belarus, and Hong Kong (Al-Rawi 2022). Since the outbreak of the pandemic, TG has also become increasingly popular in Western countries (Newman et al. 2023), especially for fringe communities that often challenge the mainstream discourse (Herasimenka et al. 2022).

The current paper aims to explore the perception of anonymous TG news channels' trustworthiness by their followers. We ask: Why do people use anonymous news channels, and do they trust them? How is this trust related to the understanding of trust in Western media contexts? This explorative study was conducted in 2020, so our conclusions reflect mostly the period before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The study results help elucidate the role of media use in today's Russia, where TG is increasingly important since major foreign social media networks were banned in 2022 (Romir 2022). More broadly, this study explores individual user strategies in the anonymous news environment, contributing to the stream of research on trust in social media news.

The concept of media trust and the challenges of measuring this variable have been thoroughly studied by Western media scholars (Daniller et al. 2017; Strömbäck et al. 2020;



**Citation:** Litvinenko, Anna, and Anna Smoliarova. 2024. Trust in Anonymous News? How Users Navigate Political News Channels on Russian Telegram. *Social Sciences* 13: 180. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13040180>

Academic Editor: Javier Jiménez Amores

Received: 13 December 2023

Revised: 23 February 2024

Accepted: 1 March 2024

Published: 22 March 2024



**Copyright:** © 2024 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Fisher 2016; Arguedas et al. 2023). Conversely, researchers have seldom studied media trust in authoritarian contexts (Tsfati and Ariely 2014; Gainous et al. 2019). Western bias constitutes a significant gap in this research stream (Fawzi et al. 2021), and this oversight is unfortunate because media practices in restrictive contexts are considered “fundamentally different” from their democratic counterparts (Dal and Nisbet 2022, p. 4). While some patterns of social media use are universal, the awareness of state censorship, as well as the lack of transparency and reliable information in public communication, presumably influence the development of users’ trust in news sources.

The Edelman Trust Barometer ranks Russia among the countries with the lowest trust in institutions, including media (Edelman 2019). What exactly do Russians mean by “trust in media,” and do TG users trust alternative news channels more than professional media? How do anonymous news channels establish trust? Our study is based on 25 self-confrontation interviews (Kümpel 2019) with followers of anonymous political news channels on Russian TG. The sample shows a bias toward media-related professions; however, this bias reflects these users’ significant role in the political news landscape on TG (Rubin 2018; Salikov 2019).

In this study’s semi-structured interviews, we asked users about anonymous TG channels’ role in their media diets, the trustworthiness of such channels’ content, and how and why they used these channels. Additionally, we asked participants to access these channels during the interviews while employing a ‘think aloud’ technique. The interviews’ self-confrontation part aimed to allow us to observe and explain users’ interactions with content and understand why news published on anonymous channels merited users’ attention. We also asked interviewees about their general trust in media and their trust in political TG channels particularly.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, we outline the major challenges and outcomes of previous research on trust in media. Then, we introduce the Russian context while focusing on TG’s role in the media environment. Next, we present our methodology and results sections. Subsequently, we discuss TG users’ navigation patterns and the phenomenon of (dis)trust in anonymous news channels, and we contextualize our findings in the broader context of research on trust in media.

## 2. Trust in News in and beyond the Western World

The gradual decrease in trust in media worldwide over recent decades (Newman et al. 2023) has fueled a wide range of studies on this phenomenon (Fisher 2016; Daniller et al. 2017; Arguedas et al. 2023). Recent attempts to conceptualize trust in media have highlighted several challenges in this strand of research (Strömbäck et al. 2020; Prochazka and Schweiger 2019; Majerczak and Strzelecki 2022).

First, no definition of trust has been universally accepted in relation to media (for an overview, see Strömbäck et al. 2020). The notion of trust is often used interchangeably with credibility and trustworthiness, and it is usually linked to an audience’s expectation of fair, accurate, and objective reporting (Kalsnes and Krumsvik 2019). Thus, this understanding is rooted in the normative approach of democratic journalism tradition. The definitional challenge is even further complicated by the different levels of trust in media, which can include trust in a media organization, in media content, or in the institution of media and journalism as such (Pjesivac et al. 2016; Strömbäck et al. 2020).

The second challenge is measuring trust in media. Surveys usually do not specify what exactly is meant by trust, allowing respondents to decide their own definitions, which might cause methodological confusion—especially in cross-country comparisons (Gainous et al. 2019; Fisher 2016). Some scholars view distinction between trust and distrust as problematic, arguing that there exist different attitudes toward media sources embedded in users’ media practices, which go beyond this dichotomy (Schwarzenegger 2020; Pasitselska 2022). Quiring et al. call for a clear distinction between “constructive media skepticism”, which is associated with higher generalized media trust, and “dysfunctional media cynicism”, which is linked to lower media trust in democratic contexts (Quiring et al. 2021,

p. 3497). [Schwarzenegger \(2020\)](#) suggests the concept “pragmatic trust”, which describes the lived experience of users in their confrontation with media sources. He distinguishes between three interrelated dimensions of individual epistemologies in news consumption: (1) selective criticality, (2) pragmatic trust, and (3) competence–confidence ([Schwarzenegger 2020](#), p. 369). Drawing on his concept, [Pasitselska \(2022\)](#) explores audiences’ media navigation strategies in eastern Ukraine before Russia’s full-scale invasion. Based on focus groups and individual interviews, she distinguishes between three types of verification practices (p. 179). The first is pragmatic trust, which entails relying on sources that are perceived to be ideologically similar. The second is skepticism toward individual news sources despite trust in media as an institution. Finally, the third is distrust of media as an institution and a generally cynical attitude.

The third challenge relates to the word media in the phrase ‘trust in media’ ([Strömbäck et al. 2020](#)), and this difficulty makes the previous two challenges even more complex. What kinds of media do we refer to in the highly diversified context of today’s media environment? Should we now distinguish not only between press, television, and online news portals but also between different social media platforms and search engines as news providers? In the rich media environment, people tend to be exposed to an almost endless variety of information sources with a very little or no knowledge about their background and reputation. [Arguedas et al. \(2023\)](#) have analyzed construction of trust in unfamiliar sources exploring different kinds of cues which help people “more quickly and efficiently judge the trustworthiness of the news” (p. 24), “especially when it came to news from sources they did not habitually use or have significant knowledge about” (p. 10), and concluded that some specific cues were more or less easily noticeable depending on the media context. According to their findings, the variation across countries was less salient than across particular platforms—news websites, social media (Facebook), messaging apps (WhatsApp), and search engines (Google), the usage of which has resulted “in different kinds and combinations of heuristics” (p. 26).

The final challenge relevant to our study is researching trust in media beyond the Western world. The normative concept of trust in media is rooted in the democratic tradition of journalism and linked to the ideal of an informed citizenry. However, journalism’s functions and expectations for news reporting might vary, depending on socio-political contexts ([Hanitzsch 2007](#)). Therefore, the conceptualization of trust in media can be even more challenging in (semi-)authoritarian contexts than democratic contexts. This complication might explain previous related research’s almost exclusive focus on democratic contexts ([Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2019](#); [Fisher 2016](#)), with few exceptions ([Gainous et al. 2019](#); [Tsfati and Ariely 2014](#)). This is unfortunate, in our view, since today’s authoritarian regimes—which usually tolerate a certain degree of press freedom ([Toepfl 2020](#))—present an important context in which to analyze trust in media.

A cross-country analysis of the World Values Survey’s data demonstrated that state ownership of television networks positively correlated with trust in media in democratic societies but was negatively associated with trust in media in nondemocratic societies ([Tsfati and Ariely 2014](#)). A study of Malaysia’s restrictive media environment ([Gainous et al. 2019](#)) associated trust in traditional media with a pro-state political orientation, whereas people with oppositional views tended to trust online news sources.

Moreover, research on post-communist societies has shown that political regimes that have failed to transition to democracy generally cultivate high levels of cynicism toward politics and media ([Pjesivac et al. 2016](#)). In such contexts, people often claim not to trust media but still consume media. For instance, in Russia, only 54% of respondents claimed they trusted television media, while 72% watched television regularly ([Levada 2019](#)). Thus, restrictive media environments constitute ideal cases in which to explore why people consume media they do not trust. This question has also become increasingly important in democracies; however, few studies have scrutinized the phenomenon of media skepticism ([Tsfati and Cappella 2003](#); [Fisher 2016](#)).

Accordingly, our study addresses these gaps in the literature on trust in media by exploring a novel type of media environment—anonymous news channels on TG—in a restrictive political context.

### 3. Media Trust in Russia

When we conducted this study in 2020, the Russian media landscape was highly polarized. It was dominated by state-owned and pro-state media, with bastions of leadership-critical media that existed mostly online (Litvinenko and Toepfl 2019). Given the scarcity of research on media trust in Russia (for an overview, see Alyukov 2022), the majority of data on this topic derives from two principal sources: the independent Levada Center, which has been labeled a “foreign agent” by Russian authorities since 2016, and the state-aligned Russian Public Opinion Research Center (RPORC). Regarding media trust, these centers’ findings largely corroborate each other.

Russian citizens have, over the past few decades, exhibited low levels of media trust, ranking among the lowest in Europe, with only 26% of Russians reporting their trust in the media in 2018 (Edelman 2019). This trust level corresponds with the trend toward media skepticism that is typical of post-communist media environments (Pjesivac et al. 2016). Television has consistently emerged as the most trusted medium, with 52% of Russian citizens in 2020 claiming they trusted television for news. Online news portals ranked second, with a trust level of 24%, far outpacing newspapers and radio, which garnered trust from merely around 10% of respondents (Levada 2020).

The RPORC survey data from 2018 indicate a preference for state-owned media (47%) compared to independent outlets (25%). This finding marks a significant change from 2015, when just 11% of survey respondents favored non-state media. This shift is particularly pronounced among younger Russians (18–30 years old), among whom trust in non-state media (41%) has begun to outpace trust in state-owned media (37%; RPORC 2018). Szostek (2018) researched Russian students’ media consumption, finding that—although respondents might claim not to trust state television networks—their rhetoric tended to reconstruct the so-called strategic narratives transmitted via state media.

In Russia, people also often claim not to trust certain media but still consume them. For instance, in 2019, only 54% of respondents claimed they trusted television media, while 72% watched television regularly (Levada 2019). Thus, Russia’s restrictive media environment constitutes an appropriate case in which to explore why people consume media they do not trust. This question has also become increasingly important in democracies; however, few studies have scrutinized the phenomenon of media skepticism so far (Tsfati and Cappella 2003; Fisher 2016; Quiring et al. 2021).

The overall level of self-censorship among journalists in Russia is rather high, and it has been increasing in the last decade due to restrictions on media regulation (Bodrunova et al. 2021). The ambiguous formulation of media laws and selectivity of their implementation (Vendil Pallin 2017) have led to the rule of so-called ‘invisible red lines’ (Bodrunova et al. 2021); journalists are expected to have “a feeling” of what can (or cannot) be published by a particular media outlet (Schimpfoss and Yablokov 2014). The political system’s lack of transparency, as well as a widespread culture of censorship (including self-censorship), stimulates the spread of conspiracy theories (Yablokov 2018). These factors seem to have fueled the popularity of alternative information sources, including news channels on TG.

### 4. Telegram as a News Source

TG is a social media platform that combines instant messaging, similar to WhatsApp, and the ability to create channels through which to broadcast content. The platform was launched in 2013 by the Russian entrepreneur Pavel Durov, who was forced to leave Russia and—according to the TG website telegram.org—has headquartered the company in Dubai. Durov’s official reason for leaving Russia was his refusal to comply with Russian legislation and disclose the encryption keys for TG users’ data (Li and Kolomychenko 2018). The struggle between Durov and Russian authorities has contributed to TG’s reputation as a

secure alternative messaging platform (Wijermars and Lokot 2022). TG's official ban in Russia in spring 2018, which lasted until summer 2020, unexpectedly fueled the platform's popularity in the country, specifically for TG channels featuring political news (Snob 2018).

Some leading TG news channels were launched by anonymous actors, and users could only speculate as to their identities (Meduza 2016). The outreach of the TG channel Vecherniy Telegram (Evening Telegram) is twice as large as the outreach of the official TG channel of RBK, the most quoted online new media in Russia in July 2022 (Medialogia 2022). However, Vecherniy Telegram's description does not contain any information about the chief editor or other journalists who work for this channel. Particular political TG channels' anonymity first attracted attention toward the end of 2016. One channel was described in a list of interesting TG channels as "the channel of an anonymous author who knows—or pretends to know—how Russian politics works" (Meduza 2016). In 2019, one of the most popular anonymous news channels, Stalingulag (with 366,000 subscribers<sup>1</sup>) was forced to de-anonymize its author as the oppositional blogger Alexander Gorbunov, who was revealed to own the channel and who reported on pressure from state security forces (Pisarev 2019). The author of another popular anonymous news channel, Nezygar (with 344,000 subscribers), remains unknown, although the origin of this source has been subject to much speculation—especially through investigations of its owners' connections with the Kremlin (Rubin 2018). Recent research on Nezygar's content has provided more evidence about the channel's pro-state position across its agenda (Zuykina and Kondiushina 2021). Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the channel has supported the state's side of the conflict, thus proving assumptions about its political orientation to be true.

On the one hand, anonymous news channels' format allows for uncensored discussion. On the other hand, this "anonymous journalism" is largely based on rumors, is not accountable, and can obviously be instrumentalized by the government. In his investigation of TG channels, Kaganskih (2017) quoted an anonymous TG blogger as follows: "It is evident that as a platform Telegram is now more pro-government [...] If somebody had a goal not to allow it to become a center for an oppositional blogosphere, as it once was the case with [the blogging platform] LiveJournal, this goal has been achieved." A recent investigation of the YouTube channel Ostrozhno Sobchak revealed the mechanism through which the pro-state TG channel networks operated (Ostorozhno Sobchak 2022).

So far, few studies have examined TG's role in news dissemination and political communication, and they have mostly focused on countries other than Russia (Ameli and Molaei 2020; Negreira-Rey et al. 2017). In their recent study, Wijermars and Lokot (2022) explored how a platform's image might influence protesters' use of its features. These authors demonstrated how the platform communications have influenced perceptions of TG as a liberating technology and a major platform for protest mobilization during the Belarusian uprising in 2020. Herasimenka et al. (2022) asked whether misleading information sources were more successful in the almost unmoderated environment of TG than professional news sources. These authors demonstrated, using the example of United States-based sources, that the answer was not necessarily affirmative, and they concluded that scholars should instead emphasize "the role of user agency rather than algorithm-based affordances" (p. 9) comparing professional news and disinformation on online platforms.

Russia's case, in which TG news channels' outreach has been comparable for years to the major traditional news outlets' outreach, has remained unstudied by communications scholars. Since this research area is rather new, and both intriguing and methodologically challenging, a range of questions on the use patterns and content of news spread via TG remain unexplored. In our research, we decided to focus on exploring users' attitudes toward anonymous TG news channels and their navigation patterns on TG news channels by answering the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What do Russian TG users mean by "trust in media", and do they trust anonymous news channels on TG?

RQ2: Why do people use news channels that they do not trust?

RQ3: What navigation strategies are used for anonymous news channels on TG?

## 5. Methodology

To answer our research questions, we conducted 25 self-confrontation interviews (Kümpel 2019) with users of anonymous TG news channels. In the following subsections, we describe our data collection and data analysis processes.

### 5.1. Sample

No reliable statistics on political TG channels' average users were available. However, the analysis of circumstantial data, such as journalistic investigations and scientific studies, allowed us to draw some limited conclusions concerning the studied TG channels' audiences. In Russia, media experts have often characterized political news channels' audiences as elitist (Rubin 2018; Salikov 2019). According to previous research, the audience of political TG is rather limited, with journalists, PR specialists, officials, and politicians representing its core (Lyakhovenko 2022; Salikov 2019).

In our study, we invited respondents using (1) announcements on social networks (from our personal accounts and other users' purposefully selected accounts) and (2) announcements on nine TG channels and TG chats. We also used the snowball sampling technique, asking respondents to recommend participation in our study to other respondents. We aimed to obtain a sample of users with diverse ages, genders, and occupations. As a result, we conducted 25 interviews (with 12 male interviewees and 13 female interviewees, aged 24 to 50 years). Respondents' occupations reflected a bias toward media-related professions (10 journalists and seven public relations [PR] specialists). The journalists represented mainstream, oppositional, and specialized media outlets. The other respondents' backgrounds included students, managers, consultants, and civil service representatives.

### 5.2. Self-Confrontation Interviews

For the current paper's purposes, relying only on users self-reporting about their attitudes toward TG news channels and use patterns would have been insufficient. For this reason, we included a self-confrontation element in the interviews. According to Kümpel (2019), "the self-confrontation interview method can be conceptualized as a combination of systematic observation, retrospective think-aloud protocols, and (qualitative) interview techniques" (p. 174). This method usually implies "a small(er) number of participants" (Kümpel 2019, p. 174; see also Lim 2002).

Using concrete examples of news pieces, the method allowed us to observe users' actual interaction with anonymous sources and discuss their rationales for trusting or distrusting these sources.

Following the procedure described by Kümpel (2019), we followed these steps:

- (1) Giving task: Participants were asked to share the names of anonymous TG news channels they followed. Further, they either shared a view of their computer desktop (if they used TG on their desktop) or used their smartphone to read posts from the channels. In the latter case, the interviewer opened the same channel on their desktop. Each participant was asked to read recent channel posts for approximately 15 min in the way in which they habitually read them, and they were also asked to comment on these updates with any remarks that came to mind. We suggested that interviewees consider the following questions in their comments: "Why is this news piece interesting to you?", "Do you like the writing style?", "Is this information trustworthy? Why?", and "Is it clear to you where this information comes from?"
- (2) Observation: The interviewer observed each respondent and referred to an observation protocol that noted what they should address in the interview.
- (3) Self-confrontation: After participants had finished reading, the interviewer asked them to comment on their reading session, based on the observation protocol. Key areas of interest included the following questions: Why did participants choose

particular news pieces and skip others? Why did they choose to click on links to sources, and did this clicking change their perception of a piece's trustworthiness? Why did they read a piece even if they would not describe it as trustworthy? Did they know, or could they guess, to whom the channels they had just read belonged? What was, in their opinion, the channel creator's aim in sharing this information?

- (4) Semi-structured interview: After the self-confrontation task, a semi-structured interview was conducted to obtain a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions of anonymous TG news channels' trustworthiness, as well as their personal navigation strategies while using TG news channels. The relevant questions in the interview guide addressed three main topics: (1) participants' media diets and TG's role in them; (2) the understanding of the notion of trust in media; and (3) trust (or distrust) in anonymous TG news channels and the motivation to use them.

The interviews were anonymous and conducted in Russian by the authors during July and August 2020. These sessions were facilitated partly through Zoom and partly in person, typically lasting around an hour each. After completing 25 interviews, we concluded that our sample had achieved theoretical saturation.

### 5.3. Limitations

Our study faced several limitations rooted in its scale and exploratory nature. First, we had to use primarily our own network of contacts, announcements on TG channels, and a snowball sampling technique to contact anonymous TG channel users. Since no reliable statistics were available concerning the studied channels' audiences, it was difficult to estimate whether our sample represented these channels' average audiences. We could use only circumstantial data for these estimations. This evidence supported our assumption that a bias toward media-related professions among our respondents reflected these professions' predominance among the users of the TG channels that we analyzed. Pertinently, however, our results mostly represent a rather well-educated audience's use of the studied channels, making it impossible to generalize about a broader audience.

Second, desirability bias could have influenced respondents' answers. To reduce this bias, we observed the interviewees' process of navigating these news channels during the study's self-confrontation interviews. However, the chosen method is also limited. Conclusions drawn from this approach may not apply fully to real-world social media usage due to several reasons (Schmid et al. 2023; Lim 2002).

## 6. Findings

Below, we present the findings of our self-confrontation interviews, according to our inquiry's key areas: (1) the concept of trust in media; (2) reasons for trust (or distrust) in anonymous news on TG; (3) motivations for reading anonymous news channels; (4) why people use news channels they distrust; and (5) individual navigation strategies on TG.

### 6.1. The Concept of Trust in Media

When asked whether they trusted information on anonymous news channels, 10 respondents answered that they trust this information, and 15 answered that they did not. In explaining their understanding of trust, the majority of respondents linked trust to democratic standards of journalism, including objectivity, impartiality, fact-checking, and independence. Many respondents also mentioned providing different points of view and impartiality as reasons for trusting particular media. Reliability was also mentioned often as a criterion for media's trustworthiness. The respondents further elaborated upon the reliability concept, including professionalism, fact-checking, the presence of links to sources, or the inclusion of any details that would allow for the cross-checking of information. Moreover, several respondents said a channel's reputation was important, particularly whether a channel had not been "caught in a lie" and had self-corrected its mistakes.

The respondents' overall level of media skepticism was high: seven respondents answered that they did not trust any media at all. These respondents claimed that media

could not be trusted as an institution or told us that they had to cross-check information from different sources in order to obtain a relatively trustworthy understanding of events. The respondents argued that they could believe “anything else but not media” (male retiree, 47 years old) or that “they do not have any need to trust particular media outlets” (male television journalist, 40 years old). Several respondents said that only certain people can be trusted but not media.

“Should I trust the media at all? I trust my family, my friends, and as for media, I just cross-check information from different sources”. (Female journalist, 38 years old)

Several respondents expressed the idea that one should use media as one information source and then check and analyze the information themselves. These respondents came from different professional backgrounds: journalism, business, and universities.

### 6.2. *Reasons for Trust (or Distrust)*

Respondents mentioned several reasons for their trust in anonymous TG channels. The most frequent of these answers can be categorized into the following three groups: (1) trust based on information’s perceived trustworthiness; (2) “conditional trust”, accompanied by the critical monitoring of content; and (3) interpersonal communication as a reason for trust. Some respondents who trusted anonymous TG channels considered information from these channels to be accurate because, in their view, it usually corresponded with information from other news sources. Other respondents who trusted anonymous TG channels admitted that they tried to critically assess information and use other sources to cross-check information. These respondents relied on their abilities to distinguish facts from opinions and to analyze information. They reported that they constantly compared information from many sources, assessed channels’ trustworthiness, and were ready to “withdraw their trust” at any time. Several other respondents who trusted anonymous TG channels referred to other people—colleagues or professional journalists—who used information from anonymous channels, which suggested to these respondents that this information must have been trustworthy.

Respondents who mistrusted anonymous channels mostly criticized these channels’ anonymity. This group’s answers were relatively emotional: one respondent called anonymous channels “garbage dumps where anyone can write anything and not be held responsible for a lie” (male student, 23 years old). Anonymous channels’ lack of responsibility was mentioned several times. Some respondents stressed the importance of knowing who provided information so that they could estimate the level of “competence of authors, as well as their independence and journalistic ethics.” Distrust was also explained by the lack of knowledge about the bias of TG channels’ owners.

The majority of respondents reported a transformation in their attitude toward TG news channels over time. Respondents observed changes in news channels’ content and assumed ownership changes—even if the owners’ names were unknown. Several respondents mentioned that, over time, they realized that anonymous channels were instrumentalized or commercialized.

### 6.3. *Motivation for Reading Anonymous News Channels*

The most popular motive for reading anonymous channels was exposure to different political opinions, followed by access to news and mistrust in mainstream news sources. The other three popular motives were immediate access to news, interest in new communication technologies, and entertainment.

Several respondents told us that they read anonymous channels to follow different positions and opinions. These TG users were interested in observing various interpretations of events. Some of these respondents mentioned that anonymous channels provided them with alternative information that allowed for a deeper understanding of current events.

Additionally, several respondents explained their motives for distrusting mainstream media as follows: they used anonymous channels as a tool to control and assess information from mainstream mass media.



“For me, it is interesting to see what is excluded from the mainstream discourse”.  
(Male PhD student, 31 years old)

Four respondents stated that they read anonymous TG channels to get news faster than other people. Almost all respondents highlighted the entertaining, often ironic style of TG posts. They also said that they appreciated TG news channels’ informal style. Some users mentioned that they read anonymous channels to “have a laugh” when they were bored.

Most answers revealed a rather pragmatic attitude toward news on TG. Most respondents stated that they used TG news channels to complement other news sources.

#### 6.4. Why Users Read News Channels They Do Not Trust

Through our interviews, we specifically examined the motivations of users who did not trust anonymous news channels yet continued to use them. Many such respondents perceived TG channels as news digests and news aggregators. For some of these respondents, TG channels helped identify new experts or interesting sources because they featured many reposts (communication between channels) and because channels often participated in debates with each other. A freelance journalist (female, 24 years old) said that, when state-owned media dominate the media landscape, anonymous channels run by oppositional actors provide information that is excluded from mainstream media.

Moreover, TG channels might attract attention to an important story that a user would not otherwise learn about: “In this case, I will search for more information” (female freelance journalist, 24 years old). A male sociologist, aged 28 years, admitted that even if he did not trust a channel, that channel could influence his attitudes toward some new makers.

“I understand that, even if I do not trust, I still read it, and it can influence me. For example, a post says, ‘Of course, it’s obvious to everyone,’ and I think, ‘Well, yes. It seems obvious, although I had not thought about it before.’ That is, my overall opinion can change even though I do not trust them [TG channels]”. (Male political consultant, aged 37 years)

Meanwhile, journalists and political scientists often said they aimed to monitor “a bulldog fight under a rug” and analyzed information struggles between different groups of elites (at both the federal and regional levels).

“I read them [the channels] to be aware of what is coming. They [authorities] conduct reconnaissance while preparing new laws. Businesspeople often read TG “to get signals””. (Female journalist, 38 years old)

PR specialists monitored competitors’ commercial use of TG channels. According to respondents from PR backgrounds, TG was considered an effective tool for promoting information and encouraging public resonance. This benefit made TG a useful tool for these respondents to stay updated on competitors’ actions.

Regardless of their trust levels, anonymous TG channel posts often offered grounds for discussions, at least with friends. TG channels, which often used ironic or sarcastic writing styles, also served as entertainment.

#### 6.5. Individual Strategies to Navigate TG Channels

Most often, TG users had learned about anonymous channels from reposts on other TG channels. The other popular ways to join a channel were recommendations from friends, colleagues, or mass media.

During this study’s self-confrontation interviews, we observed patterns in how users read TG channels. All interviewees scrolled channel feeds rather quickly and did not read all posts. The decision to read a post depended on interviewees’ interests and quick assessments of posts’ quality. To assess post quality, interviewees used their own individual strategies. For instance, some did not read reposts from other channels, assuming that reposts were paid content. For most respondents, links to external sources signaled post quality, suggesting that information could be verified and merited their attention. Only 5 of the 25 interviewees clicked on these links to view the original sources. Most respondents

did not critically assess the quality of external sources. Some interviewees searched posts for details that could help them fact-check information themselves—such as hyperlinks, politicians' names, and titles of legislative proposals. A male political scientist, aged 37 years, did not limit his efforts to checking information using open sources but told us that he sometimes sent information requests to other experts or stakeholders.

Almost all interviewees also mentioned that they suspected, or were sure about, a commercial interest or political bias in several posts. Journalists and PR specialists analyzed a channel's possible reasons for publishing particular news, trying to read "between the lines", while representatives of other professions rarely discussed such analysis and, when asked about it, answered that they did not know which actors could be behind a certain publication. Several interviewees expressed agreement with opinions presented in an anonymous channel while reading them. The questions asked during the self-confrontation interviews revealed that, in these cases, interviewees were less motivated to double-check information—even if a post did not include an external link or other evidence of trustworthiness that interviewees mentioned for other posts.

Generally, interviewees reported that they spend a considerable amount of time (up to several hours a day) using TG. They read news posts while waiting for messages in conversations on TG messenger or "killing time in a queue". Several respondents mentioned that they felt tired and overwhelmed by information on TG channels and that, at some point, they had decided to limit their time spent reading TG channels. Five interviewees reported that they unsubscribed from several anonymous channels because they had realized the channels were instrumentalized by different actors and replete with rumors that were ultimately revealed to be false.

"It is a garbage bin of narratives, and it takes an effort to find your way in it".  
(Female journalist, 38 years old)

Several interviewees reported that they started to focus only on niche news channels that reported news in their area of expertise, such as environmental news. In these niche areas, these respondents were more comfortable using anonymous news channels in that they could much better assess information's trustworthiness.

The majority of interviewees noted generally very high cognitive stress as a result of using TG as a news source. This stress was due to the enormous amount of anonymous information in these channels.

## 7. Discussion

Our findings show that the perception of media trust among Russian TG news channel users largely correlates with a normative democratic approach to media functions. TG users expect trusted media to be accurate, to present different aspects of a story, and to have good reputations. At the same time, a significant number of users claimed that media should not be trusted per se and that only certain reputable journalists deserve credit.

The study's findings add to the understanding of pragmatic trust in media (Schwarzenegger 2020). They indicate that anonymous news users consume news not necessarily out of trust but as a means of orienting themselves and maintaining at least an illusion of understanding in situations that lack transparency. Users develop individual navigation strategies through "a chaos of narratives".

Our self-confrontation interviews showed that people in media-related professions deploy, more deliberately, strategies to analyze and check information. Some of other respondents also tried to cross-check information from different sources using both traditional media and alternative sources. In other words, people who do not trust media take on some functions that are usually attributed to journalists, consciously engaging in the news selection process. Although the overwhelming majority of our respondents perceived themselves as media-literate, they exhibited a lack of critical engagement with and verification of information, paralleling trends that have been observed in Western contexts (Schwarzenegger 2020). Even the verification practices of journalist respondents were

rather casual and not thorough, exemplifying the competence–confidence logic described by [Schwarzenegger \(2020\)](#).

Almost all the respondents reported high cognitive stress linked to an overwhelming amount of information that they could not trust on TG news channels. Such cognitive stress due to abundant information has been discussed in previous studies of democratic contexts (see, for instance, [Dahlgren 2018](#)). However, it seems to present an even more acute challenge for audiences in authoritarian contexts.

The entertaining aspect of media consumption emerged as a significant factor for using anonymous news channels. Despite their overall proclaimed distrust, the respondents highlighted anonymous news channels' entertainment value.

Only a few respondents, who reported that they did not trust anonymous TG news channels, critically commented on the possible outcomes of exposure to such information. They said they still unconsciously considered this information when assessing their country's political situation. Future research should explore the media effects of the news that people consume even if they perceive this news to be untrustworthy.

Our findings add to the stream of research on media skepticism and highlight the relevance of Fisher's question (2016) of whether, in the "post-truth era", citizens' media trust is at all desirable or whether they should instead develop basic critical attitudes toward all kinds of sources. This question seems especially relevant for restrictive media environments where the exclusion of certain information from public discourse leads to rumors and the manipulation of information. However, the behavior of the respondents that we observed aligns more with strategies of overall distrust and media cynicism than with media skepticism in its constructive form ([Quiring et al. 2021](#)). This underscores the importance of further exploring the specifics and effects of these two different epistemic approaches, which are often lumped together under the umbrella of media skepticism.

Contrary to our expectations, interpersonal communication played a rather minor role in building trust in anonymous TG channels. This finding contradicts the results of previous studies on democratic societies that have found interpersonal sharing practices to be important in establishing trust in news posted on social networks ([Sterrett et al. 2019](#)). This difference might be explained by the overall low level of social trust in Russia's context, as well as by specifics of TG affordances.

We observed that many respondents linked their attitudes toward and interests in TG news channels with the platform's reputation, which has changed over time from an oppositional alternative to a platform instrumentalized by different actors, including pro-state actors. This observation adds to the stream of research on platform dependence (see, for instance, [Stockmann and Luo 2019](#); [Wijermars and Lokot 2022](#)), and future research could elaborate upon this finding.

Moreover, macro-level contextual factors seem to play an important role in establishing trust in alternative news environments. This finding supports previous studies' results ([Gainous et al. 2019](#)). In Russia, TG highlights two effects of source anonymity in a restrictive media environment. On the one hand, it empowers people and provides an opportunity for uncensored discussions. On the other hand, it gives the state an effective tool to "garden publics" ([Toepfl 2020](#)) and stabilize authoritarian rule ([Gunitsky 2015](#)). Thus, during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, TG has been playing the role of both an important enclave for critical voices banned from Russia and of a Russian state propaganda tool.

## 8. Conclusions

The findings of our exploratory study emphasize the complexity of navigating and understanding trust in uncertain environments such as anonymous news channels. Since our sample was limited to well-educated individuals, predominantly media-related professionals, broadening this approach to include a more diverse range of TG users could provide deeper insights into the strategies that users employ on TG channels.

As TG grows in popularity as a news source in many countries, more studies are needed to explore news consumption across the platform's national segments. Understand-

ing how trust in TG news sources is formed under extreme conditions, such as armed conflicts, is an important research objective. Additionally, our findings underscore the need for further research on how contextual factors—including political and social environments, as well as platform affordances—influence the dynamics of media trust, distrust, media skepticism, and media cynicism.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, A.L.; methodology, A.L. and A.S.; interviews, A.L. and A.S.; interview transcription and data analysis: A.S.; data curation, A.L.; writing—original draft preparation, A.L.; writing—results description: A.S.; writing—review and editing, A.L. and A.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** All stages of our study, from participant recruitment to data analysis, were conducted in strict adherence to EU data protection regulations and upheld the highest ethical standards of scientific research. An Institutional Review Board review was specifically waived, following the established protocols at our universities.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The datasets presented in this article are not readily available due to reasons of anonymity. The interview guide is available upon request.

**Acknowledgments:** We thank the anonymous reviewers of this paper's previous versions for their insights and suggestions, which helped us improve the manuscript. The publication of this article was funded by Freie Universität Berlin.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> TG channels' subscriber numbers were collected in August 2020.

## References

- Al-Rawi, Ahmed. 2022. News loopholing: Telegram news as portable alternative media. *Journal of Computational Social Science* 5: 949–68. [CrossRef]
- Alyukov, Maxim. 2022. Making sense of the news in an authoritarian regime: Russian television viewers' reception of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. *Europe-Asia Studies* 74: 337–59. [CrossRef]
- Ameli, Saied R., and Hamideh Molaei. 2020. Election Journalism: Investigating Media Bias on Telegram during the 2017 Presidential Election in Iran. *Digital Journalism* 8: 975–91. [CrossRef]
- Arguedas, Ross Amy A., Sumitra Badrinathan, Camila Mont'Alverne, Benjamin Toff, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. 2023. Shortcuts to trust: Relying on cues to judge online news from unfamiliar sources on digital platforms. *Journalism* 14648849231194485. [CrossRef]
- Bodrunova, Svetlana S., Anna Litvinenko, and Kamilla Nigmatullina. 2021. Who is the censor? Self-censorship of Russian journalists in professional routines and social networking. *Journalism* 22: 2919–37. [CrossRef]
- Dahlgren, Peter. 2018. Media, Knowledge and Trust: The Deepening Epistemic Crisis of Democracy. *Javnost—The Public* 25: 20–27. [CrossRef]
- Dal, Aysenur, and Erik C. Nisbet. 2022. Walking Through Firewalls: Circumventing Censorship of Social Media and Online Content in a Networked Authoritarian Context. *Social Media+ Society* 8: 20563051221137738. [CrossRef]
- Daniller, Andrew, Douglas Allen, Ashley Tallevi, and Diana C. Mutz. 2017. Measuring Trust in the Press in a Changing Media Environment. *Communication Methods and Measures* 11: 76–85. [CrossRef]
- Edelman. 2019. Edelman Trust Barometer. Global Report. Available online: [https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-01/2019\\_Edelman\\_Trust\\_Barometer\\_Global\\_Report.pdf](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-01/2019_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report.pdf) (accessed on 10 January 2024).
- Fawzi, Nayla, Nina Steindl, Magdalena Obermaier, Fabian Prochazka, Dorothee Arlt, Bernd Blöbaum, Marco Dohle, Katherine M. Engelke, Thomas Hanitzsch, Nikolaus Jakob, and et al. 2021. Concepts, causes and consequences of trust in news media—a literature review and framework. *Annals of the International Communication Association* 45: 154–74. [CrossRef]
- Fisher, Caroline. 2016. The trouble with 'trust' in news media. *Communication Research and Practice* 2: 451–65. [CrossRef]
- Gainous, Jason, Jason P. Abbott, and Kevin M. Wagner. 2019. Traditional Versus Internet Media in a Restricted Information Environment: How Trust in the Medium Matters. *Political Behavior* 41: 401–22. [CrossRef]
- Gil de Zúñiga, Homero, Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu, Trevor Diehl, María Gómez Patiño, and James H. Liu. 2019. Trust in Institutional Actors across 22 Countries. Examining Political, Science, and Media Trust Around the World. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* 74: 237–62. [CrossRef]

- Gunitsky, Seva. 2015. Corrupting the Cyber–Commons: Social Media as a Tool of Autocratic Stability. *Perspectives on Politics* 13: 42–54. [CrossRef]
- Hanitzsch, Thomas. 2007. Deconstructing journalism culture: Toward a universal theory. *Communication Theory* 17: 367–85. [CrossRef]
- Herasimenka, Aliaksandr, Jonathan Bright, Aleksi Knuutila, and Philip N. Howard. 2022. Misinformation and professional news on largely unmoderated platforms: The case of telegram. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 198: 198–212. [CrossRef]
- Kaganskih, Andrei. 2017. How I Was Covered with Anonymous Telegram Channels [Kak ya Obmazyivalsya Anonimnymi Telegram–Kanalami]. Batenka.Ru. Available online: <https://batenka.ru/protection/telegram/> (accessed on 1 September 2017).
- Kalsnes, Bente, and Arne H. Krumsvik. 2019. Building trust: Media executives’ perceptions of readers’ trust. *Journal of Media Business Studies* 16: 295–306. [CrossRef]
- Kümpel, Anna Sophie. 2019. The Issue Takes It All? Incidental news exposure and news engagement on Facebook. *Digital Journalism* 7: 165–86. [CrossRef]
- Levada. 2019. Russian Media Landscape 2019: Television, Press, Internet and Social Networks [Rossiyskiy Media–Landshaft 2019: Televidenie, Pressa, Internet i Sotsial’nye seti]. Available online: <https://www.levada.ru/2019/08/01/21088/> (accessed on 15 December 2023).
- Levada. 2020. News Sources and Media Trust [Istochniki Novostey i Doverie SMI]. Available online: <https://www.levada.ru/2020/02/27/istochniki%E2%80%93novostey%E2%80%93doverie%E2%80%93smi/> (accessed on 27 February 2020).
- Li, Irina, and Maria Kolomychenko. 2018. Due to the Threat of Blocking, Telegram has Become the Fastest Growing Instant Messenger [Iz–za ugrozy blokirovki Telegram stal samym bystrorastushchim messendzherom]. RBC.ru. Available online: [https://www.rbc.ru/technology\\_and\\_media/19/12/2017/5a37ca449a794754b1c07cd9](https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/19/12/2017/5a37ca449a794754b1c07cd9) (accessed on 19 December 2017).
- Lim, Sun. 2002. The Self–Confrontation Interview: Towards an Enhanced Understanding of Human Factors in Web–based Interaction for Improved Website Usability. *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research* 3: 162–73.
- Litvinenko, Anna, and Florian Toepfl. 2019. The “Gardening” of an Authoritarian Public at Large: How Russia’s Ruling Elites Transformed the Country’s Media Landscape After the 2011/12 Protests “For Fair Elections”. *Publizistik* 64: 225–40. [CrossRef]
- Lyakhovenko, Oleg I. 2022. Telegram channels in the system of expert and political communication in modern Russia. *Galactica Media: Journal of Media Studies* 4: 114–44. [CrossRef]
- Majerczak, Przemysław, and Artur Strzelecki. 2022. Trust, media credibility, social ties, and the intention to share towards information verification in an age of fake news. *Behavioral Sciences* 12: 51. [CrossRef]
- Medialogia. 2019. Rating of Telegram Channels Since January 2019. Available online: <https://www.mlg.ru/ratings/socmedia/telegram/> (accessed on 18 September 2021).
- Medialogia. 2022. Rating of News Media Quotations on Social Media. July. Available online: <https://www.mlg.ru/ratings/media/socmedia/11427/> (accessed on 24 July 2023).
- Meduza. 2016. 12 Newsrooms in 5 Years: How the Russian Authorities Decimated a News Industry. Available online: <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2016/05/18/12%E2%80%93newsrooms%E2%80%93in%E2%80%935%E2%80%93years> (accessed on 18 May 2016).
- Negreira-Rey, María-Cruz, Xosé López-García, and Lara Lozano-Aguiar. 2017, April. Instant messaging networks as a new channel to spread the news: Use of whatsapp and telegram in the Spanish online media of proximity. In *World Conference on Information Systems and Technologies*. Cham: Springer, pp. 64–72. [CrossRef]
- Newman, Nic, Richard Fletcher, Kirsten Eddy, Craig T. Robertson, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. 2023. Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023. Available online: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023> (accessed on 12 February 2024).
- Ostorozhno Sobchak. 2022. Infiltrating, Blocks and Processing. How the Authorities Use Telegram for Propaganda [Posevy, bloki i otrabotka. Kak vlast’ ispol’zuyet Telegram dlya propagandy]. Available online: <https://youtu.be/GY-eE5yiDDw?si=A4Toy3VLkzLT0m4W> (accessed on 1 March 2024).
- Pasitselska, Olga. 2022. Better ask your neighbor: Renegotiating media trust during the Russian–Ukrainian conflict. *Human Communication Research* 48: 179–202. [CrossRef]
- Pisarev, Denis. 2019. The Scandalous Critic of the Authorities “Stalingulag” Is no Longer Anonymous [Skandal’nyy kritik vlasti «Stalingulag» bol’she ne anonim]. Nezavisimaya. Available online: [https://www.ng.ru/politics/2019-05-02/100\\_stalingulag20519.html](https://www.ng.ru/politics/2019-05-02/100_stalingulag20519.html) (accessed on 2 May 2019).
- Pjesivac, Ivanka, Katerina Spasovska, and Iveta Imre. 2016. The Truth Between the Lines: Conceptualization of Trust in News Media in Serbia, Macedonia, and Croatia. *Mass Communication and Society* 19: 323–51. [CrossRef]
- Prochazka, Fabian, and Wolfgang Schweiger. 2019. How to Measure Generalized Trust in News Media? An Adaptation and Test of Scales. *Communication Methods and Measures* 13: 26–42. [CrossRef]
- Quiring, Oliver, Marc Ziegele, Christian Schemer, Nikolaus Jakob, Ilka Jakobs, and Tanjev Schultz. 2021. Constructive skepticism, dysfunctional cynicism? Skepticism and cynicism differently determine generalized media trust. *International Journal of Communication* 15: 22.
- Romir. 2022. How Russian Media Consumption Has Changed Since February 2022 [Kak izmenilos’ mediapotrebleniye rossiyan c fevralya 2022]. Available online: <https://romir.ru/studies/kak-izmenilos-mediapotreblenie-rossiyan-c-fevralya-2022> (accessed on 19 August 2022).

- RPORC. 2018. Journalists and Media: Trust and the Societal Roles [Zhurnalisty i SMI: Doverie i rol' v obschestve]. Available online: <https://fom.ru/SMI%E2%80%93internet/14138> (accessed on 23 November 2018).
- Rubin, Michael. 2018. Telegram from Kremlin [Telega iz Kremlya]. Projekt. Available online: <https://www.proekt.media/narrative/telegram-kanaly/> (accessed on 23 November 2018).
- Salikov, Alexey. 2019. Telegram as a Means of Political Communication and its use by Russia's Ruling Elite. *Politologija* 3: 83–110. [CrossRef]
- Schimpfoss, Elisabeth, and Ilya Yablokov. 2014. Coercion or conformism? Censorship and self-censorship among Russian media personalities and reporters in the 2010s. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 22: 295–311.
- Schmid, Ursula Kristin, Anna Sophie Kümpel, and Diana Rieger. 2023. The Remote Self-Confrontation Interview Method: Gaining Insights into Users' Perceptions of Digital Media Content from a Distance. *American Behavioral Scientist* 00027642231205768. [CrossRef]
- Schwarzenegger, Christian. 2020. Personal epistemologies of the media: Selective criticality, pragmatic trust, and competence-confidence in navigating media repertoires in the digital age. *New Media & Society* 22: 361–77. [CrossRef]
- Snob. 2018. "We Were Taught to Be Free". Authors of Anonymous Telegram-Channels about the Life after the Blockage of the Messenger. Snob. Available online: <https://snob.ru/selected/entry/136325> (accessed on 12 April 2018).
- Sterrett, David, Dan Malato, Jennifer Benz, Liz Kantor, Trevor Tompson, Tom Rosenstiel, Jeff Sonderman, and Kevin Loker. 2019. Who Shared It?: Deciding What News to Trust on Social Media. *Digital Journalism* 7: 783–801. [CrossRef]
- Stockmann, Daniela, and Ting Luo. 2019. Authoritarian deliberation 2.0: Lurking and discussing politics in Chinese social media. In *Digital Media and Democratic Futures*. Edited by Michael X. Delli Carpini. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 169–95.
- Strömbäck, Jesper, Yariv Tsfati, Hajo Boomgaarden, Alyt Damstra, Elina Lindgren, Rens Vliegthart, and Torun Lindholm. 2020. News media trust and its impact on media use: Toward a framework for future research. *Annals of the International Communication Association* 44: 139–56. [CrossRef]
- Szostek, Joanna. 2018. News media repertoires and strategic narrative reception: A paradox of dis/belief in authoritarian Russia. *New Media & Society* 20: 68–87. [CrossRef]
- Toepfl, Florian. 2020. Comparing Authoritarian Publics: The Benefits and Risks of Three Types of Publics for Autocrats. *Communication Theory* 30: 105–25. [CrossRef]
- Tsfati, Yariv, and Gal Ariely. 2014. Individual and Contextual Correlates of Trust in Media Across 44 Countries. *Communication Research* 41: 760–82. [CrossRef]
- Tsfati, Yariv, and Joseph N. Cappella. 2003. Do People Watch what they Do Not Trust?: Exploring the Association between News Media Skepticism and Exposure. *Communication Research* 30: 504–29. [CrossRef]
- Vendil Pallin, Carolina. 2017. Internet control through ownership: The case of Russia. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33: 16–33. [CrossRef]
- Wijermars, Mariëlle, and Tatiana Lokot. 2022. Is Telegram a "harbinger of freedom"? The performance, practices, and perception of platforms as political actors in authoritarian states. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 38: 125–45. [CrossRef]
- Yablokov, Ilya. 2018. *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet World*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Zuykina, Kristina, and Olessia Kondiushina. 2021. Manipulative methods of representing Moscow city дума elections on social networks [Manipulativnye metody reprezentatsii vyborov v Mosgordumu v sotsialnih setyah]. *Bulletin of Perm University. Political Science* 15: 84–96. [CrossRef]

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.