

FIMI Digest



From Russia with Automation



GERMANY | AUGUST 2024 | PUBLIC REPORT



Summary

This report shows that the tactics involving alternative domains for RT channel propagation in the EU, as [outlined](#) by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) in 2022, have persisted and automated for greater efficiency by 2024. Here we also build on the multilayered infrastructure described in "[The Russian Propaganda Nesting Doll](#)," which examines how RT's websites continue to reach European audiences despite two years of EU sanctions.

In the report, we also confirm the trends described earlier in the [NATO Virtual Manipulation Brief 2024/1](#), which we assisted NATO StratCom in preparing. This brief highlights the growing automation capabilities of Russian propaganda. It shows how social media cross-posting and automated content distribution significantly enhance the reach and speed of propaganda efforts without requiring a substantial budget increase.

For this report, we did not aim to map the entire network of websites circumventing European blocks. However, even a quick analysis of servers, IP addresses, registrants, and contacts (where available) reveals a

strategy: Russian actors are attempting to keep disinformation researchers and counter-information teams in a constant state of catch-up. This report aims to contribute to the existing knowledge from other researchers and journalists, offering a broader understanding of how Russia is adapting its information warfare tactics, which could lead to new countermeasures.

Our findings show that the Russian propaganda network has begun using automation to distribute RT content through alternative domains targeting German audiences. We identified 33 such German-language websites. All but one of these websites are accessible from European IP addresses, except being blocked at the time of writing. However, the blocked site is still reachable using free IP masking tools.

Additionally, our analysis revealed at least five actors on German-language Telegram who shared links to these alternative RT domains, along with video streaming services for RT programs. The registrar for these services is Fancy Nerds LLC, a Russian entity registered by Martin Held, an Austrian

Held is a pro-Russian blogger living in Russia. He is known for developing VPN services and providing technical support for pro-Russian activities. His company also serves as the registrar for a conference website of Rossotrudnichestvo, a Russian state organization accused of recruiting foreign nationals for intelligence purposes. In the fall of 2023, Fancy Nerds LLC registered ruwork.org, a site aimed at recruiting German citizens to work in Russia. Rossotrudnichestvo may be using this site for recruitment.

We emphasize the importance of including evidence of specific individuals involved in the technical development of the propaganda network and recruitment tactics. Naming these actors, such as an Austrian citizen involved, is seen as an effective strategy against influence campaigns. Further investigation is needed into websites recruiting foreign nationals.

Findings

The RT alternative domains and their subdomains

In August 2024, using the Osavul software, we detected 24 actors spreading 27 identical messages in German. All of them contained links to the column with criticism of Olaf Scholz's decision to deploy US missiles in Germany first published on the RT website.

The author is Tarik Cyril Amar. In his column he wrote especially for RT, Germany is called a "submissive American vassal". The author views Scholz's actions as a strategic error, driven by a desire to align with U.S. interests, at the expense of Germany's security. He also author argues that this decision was made without public debate and criticizes both the German government and mainstream media for being overly compliant with Washington's wishes, which further erodes Germany's autonomy. Additionally, Tarik Cyril Amar promotes the German populist party BSW.

The detected group of messages that spread the column consisted of 21 Telegram accounts, 2 websites, and 1 Twitter account. However, during further analysis, we found that the group is larger due to the ever-expanding propagandistic network.

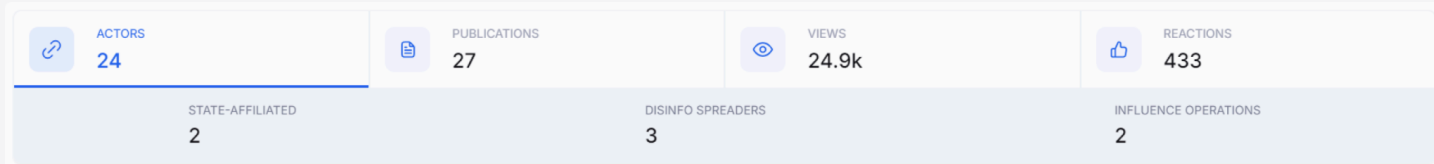


Figure 1: Message group metrics, screenshot from the Osavul software

All the messages from the group contained 9 links to websites, 6 of which are alternative domains¹ of the RT website in Germany [sanctioned](#) in the EU since March 2022. They post the same content with all the RT attributions. Also, there in the group were detected links to a [pravda-de\[.\]com](#) website and 2 more pseudo-German outlets. This tactic of using alternative domains of the RT first time was described in 2022 by ISD².

¹ websites had different URLs that resolve to official RT IP addresses

² RT Articles are Finding their Way to European Audiences – but how?., ISD

However, our attention was also drawn to the identical URL address part after the alternative domain/subdomain for all the detected links. The same URL is also characteristic of 2 other websites in the group, which mimic German news resources. Moreover, all publications on RT alternative domains were made at the same time – August 4, 2024, at 1:18 PM. All this is evidence of the automatic posting of content from the same admin panel.

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https://dert.online/meinung/214446-deutschland-malt-sich-freudig-zielscheibe/  
https://freeassange.rtde.life/meinung/214446-deutschland-malt-sich-freudig-zielscheibe/  
https://test.rtde.tech/meinung/214446-deutschland-malt-sich-freudig-zielscheibe/  
https://freedert.online/meinung/214446-deutschland-malt-sich-freudig-zielscheibe/  
https://rtnewsde.pro/meinung/214446-deutschland-malt-sich-freudig-zielscheibe/  
https://de.rt.com/meinung/214446-deutschland-malt-sich-freudig-zielscheibe/
```

```
https://now-news.de/de/deutschland/deutschland-malt-sich-freudig-eine-zielscheibe-auf-den-ruecken/  
https://linkezeitung.de/2024/08/05/deutschland-malt-sich-freudig-eine-zielscheibe-auf-den-ruecken/
```

Subsequent analysis of the various site IDs found that all of the alternative domains in our group have the same Google Tag Manager for the root domains and some of the subdomains on our list. The same Google Tag Manager³ [was used](#) by another 27 RT domains and subdomains in Germany in different periods between February 2023 and August 2024. Thus, we counted 33 websites in general (all the list is in Asset 1).

Moreover, all the 33 revealed websites are using automated posting for all of their materials not just the mentioned column by Tarik Cyril Amar. 32 websites are available from the EU without any VPN services. During the report writing, one of the domains was banned in the EU, but it continues to be accessible with any free RU VPN.

The number of such subdomains can grow exponentially. Detecting all of them without access to registrar accounts requires a variety of solutions, which may include a mixed approach of automation and hours of manual labor. In this report, we did not aim to describe all possible

³ Google Tag Manager is a tag management system that allows you to set up and manage tags on your site without changing your website's code. To use Tag Manager, you add 2 snippets of code to each page of your website, - Google Help

alternative domains and their subdomains. We are primarily interested in describing the technique itself since the use of automated posting greatly scales the entire propagandistic network.

A Google search for the exact title of a column by Tarik Cyril Amar with a European IP returns 3 removed results and about [30 non-blocked](#) ones with links to other resources that at first glance are not directly associated with RT, but some of them include links to alternative RT domains that we have found. No direct links to RT-related sites from our list were found in Google's results. However, extensive [research](#)⁴ by the Alliance for Securing Democracy at GMF, the University of Amsterdam (UvA), and ISD has shown how such content is successfully distributed through the infrastructure of seemingly unrelated websites.

In response to a legal request submitted to Google, we have removed 3 result(s) from this page. If you wish, you may [read more about the request at LumenDatabase.org](#).

Figure 2: Removed Google search results for the Tarik Cyril Amar 's column

⁴ The Russian Propaganda Nesting Doll: How RT is Layered into the Digital Information Environment

Links to Rossotrudnichestvo and Fancy Nerds LLC

We also found ties to some specific actors who could help provide technical support for such Russian propaganda automation. 5 posts from the group, in addition to the already mentioned links to alternative RT domains, distributed links to the [Russian VPN Service](#) and to the RTDE Live Service loobloo[.]tv. The Live Service also includes recordings of Putin, Zakharova, and other propaganda content. loobloo[.]tv website was [registered](#) in September 2023 in Krasnodarskiy Krai to the Russian legal entity Fancy Nerds / [ООО Фэнси Нердс](#). The entity was [registered](#) by an [Austrian citizen](#) living in Russia Held Martin Norbert / Хельд Мартин Норберт in 2021.

The screenshot displays WHOIS data for the domain LOOBLOO.TV. It includes the registrar (Cloudflare, Inc.), query time (23 Aug 2024), registration date (13th September 2023), update date (19th August 2024), and expiry date (13th September 2025). The registrant contact information is redacted for privacy, with the company name listed as 'ooo Fancy Nerds' and the country as 'Russian Federation'.

Figure 3 and 4 subsequently: date of registration and name of the registrant

There are 3 more websites [registered](#) to Fancy Nerds according to its WHOIS data: [welcome2russia\[.\]org](#), [ruwork\[.\]org](#), and [mainstream\[.\]news](#). The last one is one more pseudo-German news outlet with pro-Russian narratives, while the other two show Martin Held's ties to the state organization Rossotrudnichestvo, and are the real reason for mentioning Held in our report.

The screenshot shows the Reverse Whois results for the company 'ooo Fancy Nerds', listing 4 domain names. The table below summarizes the data shown in the screenshot.

NUM	DOMAIN NAME	REGISTRAR	CREATED	UPDATED	EXPIRY
1	loobloo.tv	CloudFlare, Inc.	13 Sep 2023	19 Aug 2024	13 Sep 2025
2	ruwork.org	CloudFlare, Inc.	19 Sep 2023	20 Aug 2024	19 Sep 2025
3	mainstream.news	CloudFlare, Inc.	21 Nov 2023	26 Nov 2023	21 Nov 2024
4	welcometorussia.org	CloudFlare, Inc.	12 Oct 2023	17 Oct 2023	12 Oct 2024

Figure 5: All the domains registered to the Fancy Nerds

[welcome2russia\[.\]org](https://welcome2russia[.]org) is a conference for foreigners who want to start living in Russia. It was first held in October 2023. It opened with a speech by a representative of the Russian state-owned company Rossotrudnichestvo, Elena Shlineva, with the topic “The role of Rossotrudnichestvo in matters of resettlement of citizens living abroad to the Russian Federation”. Rossotrudnichestvo has been repeatedly accused of finding foreigners for Russian intelligence (1, 2, 3).

Martin Held was also a speaker at the very first conference. He was presented as a founding member of the [Moya Rossiya](#) community and the same name [Telegram channel](#). Held`s topic at the conference sounds like “What professionals can expect in Russia and what Russia expects from professionals”. At the same time, the data of another website registered to Held`s Fancy Nerds may point to his closer ties to Rossotrudnichestvo.

[ruwork\[.\]org](https://ruwork[.]org) is a website for recruiting German citizens to work in Russia. When forwarding this link to any of the messengers, you can also see the name of the website author – Martin.

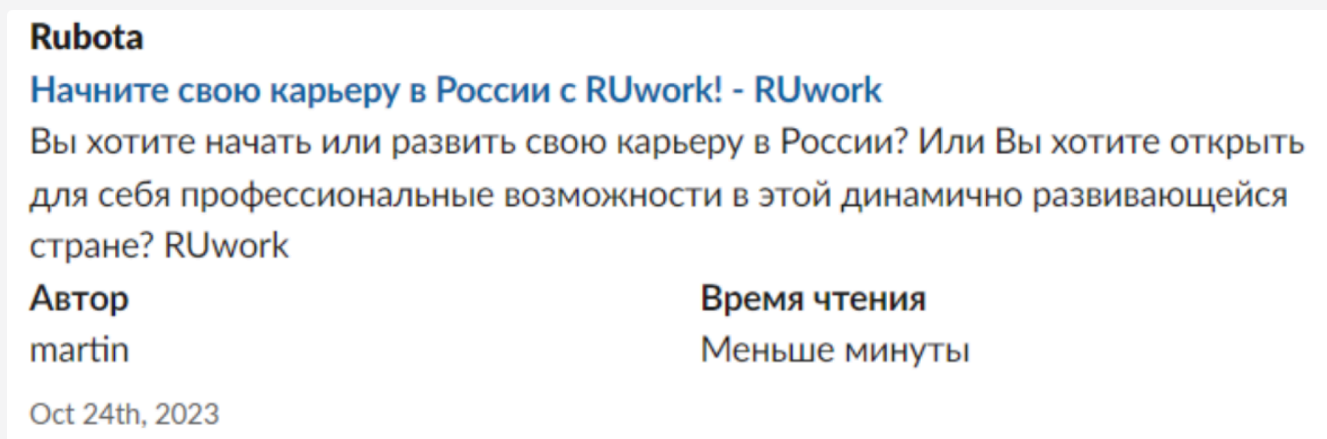


Figure 6: A screenshot of a message with cached link data about the website author

This site is a kind of zombie site, as ISD calls them, i.e. the domain previously existed and performed the usual similar function. According to the [web archive](#), in its current form as a recruiting site for German citizens, ruwork[.]org was [launched](#) in November 2023, a month later than the Rossotrudnichestvo conference.

Since 2017 Martin has also been a founder of another Russian legal entity Hero/[Герой](#). The director there is Held Anna, and both of them [have](#) 50% of the entity. The company specializes in

data processing activities and the provision of information hosting services. The Hero and Fancy Nerds have already been the subject of attention of European researchers and journalists as technical supporters for RU VPN Tester and pro-Russian actors donations ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)). There is also an Austrian legal entity, [Fancy Nerds](#). Its website [was active](#) from 2021 to spring 2024. There are still existing social media accounts of the company with Held's and his employee's photos ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#)). We think that the activity of ruwork[.]org should be investigated further for possible recruitment of foreign citizens for Rossotrudnichestvo and Held's participation in this process.

Asset 1

GTM-G-E6MR68Q42X Google Tag Manager usage and history according to builtwith[.]com

Domain	First Detected	Last Detected
rtde.live	June-22	August-24
rtde.team	June-22	August-24
rtde.xyz	June-22	August-24
rtde.life	June-22	August-24
rtde.tech	June-22	August-24
rtde.site	June-22	August-24
rtde.me	June-22	August-24
rtde.website	June-22	August-24
rtde.world	June-22	August-24
test.rtde.me	February-23	February-23
meinungsfreiheit.rtde.life	February-23	March-24
freeassange.rtde.me	February-23	February-23
pressefreiheit.rtde.me	April-23	April-23
test.rtde.xyz	April-23	April-23
fromrussiawithlove.rtde.word	April-23	April-23
fromrussiawithlove.rtde.life	May-23	May-23
gegenzensur.rtde.world	May-23	May-23
pressefreiheit.rtde.website	August-23	August-23
freede.tech	September-23	August-24
freeassange.tech	September-23	July-24
freedert.online	September-23	August-24
test.rtde.site	December-23	February-24

test.rtde.live	February-24	February-24
test.rtde.life	February-24	February-24
de.rt.com	April-24	April-24
dert.site	May-24	August-24
dert.online	May-24	August-24
dert.tech	May-24	August-24
rtnewsde.tech	May-24	August-24
rtnewsde.online	May-24	August-24
rtnewsde.site	May-24	August-24
rtnewsde.pro	May-24	August-24
rtnewsde.com	June-24	August-24